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Potions, Poisons and "Inheritance Powders": How Chemical Discourses Entangled 17th Century France in the Brinvilliers Trial and the Poison Affair.

Erika Carroll

The trial of the Marquise de Brinvilliers for poisoning her father and her two brothers has long attracted the attention of historians as a prelude to the more famous Affair of the Poisons two years later. At the Marquise' execution, famed seventeenth-century chronicler Madame de Sevigné commented that her "ashes were to the winds, so that we shall breathe her, and ...we shall develop a poisoning urge which will astonish us all."[1] Madame de Sévingé's prediction was correct; France did develop a "poisoning urge" as a result of a growing interest in chemicals. Chemical knowledge was spreading and hysteria along with it. The hysteria surrounding the Affair of the Poisons mimicked that of the witch hunts occurring across Europe and in the New World, and eventually it came to embody both. While there was a large group of legitimate medical practitioners in Paris, charlatans and quack-doctors had an extensive enough understanding of chemical and herbal compounds as well.[2] It was these charlatans that crossed the line into "fantastical crimes," as Louis XIV stated in the Edict of 1682. The fact that so many people were involved with creating, using and dealing poisons in Louis XIV's France shows that much more was known about the nature of poison and medicaments at the time than many historians have heretofore suspected. In order to explore the nature of the knowledge of poison during the trial of the Marquise, this paper will explore the records from her trial and the medical works on which the knowledge of those involved in this trial were most likely based. The Brinvilliers trial and subsequent poison affair were direct consequences of a change in government policy that resulted in the wider distribution of knowledge regarding chemical poisons and, consequently, a greater possibility to take advantage of them.

Historians have thus far overlooked the study of the role of poisons in the Marquise' trial. While previous historians have chosen to approach this topic through trial records, I will focus on the knowledge of poisons through medical treatises. Early 20th century historians Frantz Funck-Brentano and Hugh Stokes argue that the Marquise de Brinvilliers was born with evil intent in her veins, while Virginia Vernon attributed her malicious actions to the environment in which she was raised. Later historians Lynn Wood Mollenauer, Jeanine Huas and Anne Somerset chose to focus their research on the way in
which French society viewed her trial, which two years later led to the scandalous Affair of the Poisons. In Mollenauer’s *Strange Revelations: Magic, Poison, and Sacrilege in Louis XIV’s France*, she uses the Brinvilliers trial to set up the Affair of the Poisons. The main focus of her research is on the way in which Louis XIV's court got caught up in the frenzy and ended up as a catalyst. However, she fails to uncover what led to the initial frenzy, and how those who created and sold the poisons were able to obtain the information and knowledge required to do so. While the aforementioned historians discuss the Marquise de Brinvilliers and her trial, most of these discussions merely skimped the surface, offering an account of events instead of an analysis. They approached the trial as social history, as intellectual history, as psychohistory, as women’s history and legal history.[3] There is, however, a gap in the literature on the Marquise de Brinvilliers. Historians have overlooked the role and nature of poison at the time of the Marquise’s trial, as well as the government’s failure to maintain order and control over chemical regulations.[4] Varying explanations have been offered in regards as to why the whole affair occurred; from competition amongst the nobility in Louis XIV's court, to personal reasons for poisoning family members. However, my research demonstrates that the change began to occur when the French government, under Louis XIV, began to relax regulations involving chemical experimentations. In *The Medical World of Early Modern France*, L.W.B Brockliss specifically states that the histories of apothecaries and pharmacopoeias are subject areas that are "crying out for more attention."[5] This medical approach to the Brinvilliers trial and Poison Affair offers a refreshing take on the ordeal.

On the sixteenth day of July in 1676, Marie Madeleine D'Aubray, Marquise de Brinvilliers, knelt at the great doors of Notre Dame Cathedral, barefooted in a white shift, a noose about her neck and a flaming torch in hand to recite the *amende honorable* for poisoning her father and her two brothers.[6] Frail and terrified, de Brinvilliers recited:

I recognize that wickedly and for vengeance I poisoned my father and my brothers and attempted to poison my sister in order to obtain their goods; I apologize to God, to the King and to the justice.[7]

Her confessor, Abbé Pirot, remained at her side until the blade of the executioner's sword struck the wooden block.[8] While she confessed her sins to the Abbé in her final hours, she adamantly refused to implicate any others beyond Godin de Sainte-Croix, her infamous lover, and LaChaussée, the lackey they paid to slip poison into her brothers' meals.[9] However, several people who were witnesses to the execution swore they heard her say that if she were to name all of the people that she knew were involved with poisons, more than half of the King’s court would be implicated.[10] Just a few short years later, countless others would be implicated, swallowing Louis XIV's court up in a frenzy of suspicion, superstition, and murder.

In 1666, Louis XIV urged the Faculty of Medicine to assemble in order to discuss the "merits" of antimony, once banned for its deadly properties. On the 16th of March, the Faculty of Medicine agreed to overturn its ban.\[11\] It was deemed legal to carry and sell, and it would seem that many people took advantage of its poisonous properties just in time for the Affair of the Poisons to break out.\[12\] With chemical knowledge more easily accessible, more people took advantage of the knowledge being set out before them. Making dangerous chemicals readily accessible was one of Louis XIV's greatest mistakes. This relax in regulations enabled average people to compound their own medicines, and, consequently, poisonous ones.

There were many native apothecaries, trained and untrained, in France at the time, especially in the capital where the royal court was located. Many foreign apothecaries also came to work in France, bringing with them their knowledge and techniques. Swiss chemist Christopher Glaser, who was mentioned during the Brinvilliers trial, was a key figure in introducing easy chemical preparations for the average man. Madame de Brinvilliers confessed that Glaser had been one of Sainte-Croix's principal suppliers as well as his teacher.\[13\] This was startling for the court, as Glaser was a man of great esteem.\[14\]

The king's personal physician, Monsieur Vallot, appointed Christopher Glaser, apothecary to Louis XIV and the Duke d'Orleans, to teach public Chemical Lectures and Preparations at Le Jardin de Roi.\[15\] Prior to obtaining his post in the Royal Gardens, Glaser obtained a degree in pharmacy and medicine and opened up a shop and laboratory in the faubourg St. Germaine called "La Rose Rouge."\[16\] In 1672 Glaser published a treatise on mineral compounds entitled Traité de la Chymie after winning approval from the royal authorities to do chemical experimentations in a laboratory of his own.\[17\] An earlier edict of 1551 had made it illegal to operate a laboratory and experiment with metals without the permission of the king and verification by the civil authorities.\[18\] However, the governing officials at the time were very interested in practical works involving minerals and, as a result, granting permission for this type of experimentation was "the rule rather than the exception."\[19\] In the preface to his work, Glaser comments on the quality of previous works on chemistry. Instead of writing a treatise that was incomprehensible to the average man, he chose to write in a straightforward manner that would be intelligible to ordinary people wanting to perform similar experiments. Glaser noted that others involved in:

High Chymistry ...seem that they wrote with an intent to be understood, yet they have penned things so obscurely, that they gave us no grounds to question whether they uttered realities ...and taken pleasure to perplex mens minds, and to cast them into Labyrinths.\[20\]
Glaser's treatise was approachable to anyone who could read and anyone who had access to the proper equipment could reproduce his experiments.

In fact, the Marquise de Brinvilliers' lover and accomplice, Sainte-Croix, had attended some of Glaser's lectures at Le Jardin de Roi. However, the compounds that Sainte-Croix needed in order to make poisons could have been found in his treatise too, as Glaser clearly describes the process of creating both red and white arsenic in chapter XIX of the Traité de la Chymie. During a conversation with her confessor, the Marquise acknowledged that she was aware of the poisons found in Sainte-Croix's secret laboratory. She admitted to knowing neither their compositions nor their antidotes, only that during one visit she had seen "a reddish liquid and a whitish liquid." However, when submitted to water torture, she confessed that the poisons might have been composed of arsenic mixed with toad's venom and that she did not believe Sainte-Croix had made them without the help of Glaser.

In Glaser's chapter on arsenic, he warns that, while many have success with using the topically, "some are bold to make use therof inwardly, which I advise not, because nature furniseth us with other remedies enough, less dangerous, and more safe." In the section on white arsenic, he warns the experimenters to cover their crucibles "with another crucible with a hole pierced through the bottom, through which the venomous vapours may pass away." It is known that Sainte-Croix died while performing such a dangerous experiment; he dropped his mask momentarily and the noxious fumes quickly overwhelmed and killed him. It is possible that he was compounding arsenic and sulfur, which produces noxious fumes.

While Glaser never explicitly mentions the use of any of his medicaments as poisons, if his book ever fell into the wrong hands, it would definitely provide useful information to those who wanted to make use of the compounds he describes in this way. He warns against both the inward and outward uses of vitriol, another common poison, "by reason of the violent vomitings which it causes." While many of his prescriptions are supposed to induce mild "upwards and downwards" purges in order to balance out the humours, this would only be the case if the dosage prescribed was followed, and Glaser clearly notes the correct dosages. The straightforward way in which Glaser explains his preparations made it quite accessible for people who would manipulate its uses for purposes other than healing.

The Mémoire du Procez, one of the Brinvilliers trial documents, provides speculation about the poisons used to kill the men of the D'Aubray family. The text explicitly states that the poison was concealed within a bouillon and then given to the intended victim. The poison was said to have caused violent vomiting, a horrendous pain in the stomach, and a "strange heat" in the bowels. Monsieur D'Aubray was so harshly affected by the poison that he was forced to abandon his affairs in Paris and leave to convalesce in the countryside. Since the Marquise de Brinvilliers followed him under the false pretenses of caring for her sick...
father, she was able to continue administering small yet fatal doses of the poison, causing him extreme pain until the moment of his death.[31] Following the death of the Marquise' brother, the Lieutenant Civil, the family's doctor Sieur Bachot made her own observations on the patient:

It appears that after three days of fire, the Lieutenant Civil lost weight, dried up, lost his appetite, vomited frequently, and felt a burning within his stomach. When the body was opened up in the presence of the surgeons Duvaut and Duprez, & the Apothecary Gavart, they found the stomach to be black and falling to pieces, and likewise, the duodenum was gangrene and burned, which was caused by poison or corrupt humeurs, which can sometimes cause the same effects as poison.[32] Just three months later, the second D'Aubray brother succumbed with the same symptoms.[33]

The Mémoire du Procez goes on to discuss the contents of the cassette, a small wooden box, which was found inside Sainte-Croix's hidden laboratory at the time of his death.[34] Within the box was a letter giving instructions to whoever should find it in the event of his untimely death.[35] The contents were to be given to the Marquise de Brinvilliers.[36] In a separate sealed packet were eight smaller packets marked with the different types of chemicals they contained. In these packets they found sublimate, vitriol Romain, vitriol calciné, prepared vitriol, corrosive sublimate powder, and opium.[37] In addition to the packets, they found a square phial containing a clear liquid. A doctor on scene, Doctor Moreau, said that he did not recognize it but would examine it further.[38] Another phial was also found containing a clear liquid with whitish sediment at the bottom. The police continued to uncover pots of prepared opium, a rock identified as "pierre infernelle", and some regulus of antimony.[39] Within the cassette were six sealed packets that Sainte-Croix mentioned should be "brulez en cas de mort", or "burned in case of death", along with twenty-four letters addressed to "la Dame de Brinvilliers."[40] It is said that one of the packets was inscribed "Mon Confession" and that others contained "plusieurs secrets curieux."[41] It seems strange that the police would have thrown this out, knowing that he was a criminal and was operating an illegal laboratory; however, that is just what they did.

Christopher Glaser and Nicolas Lemery, a chemist who studied briefly under Glaser, both discuss the various forms of arsenic in their respective late seventeenth-century treatises.[42] Glaser opens his chapter on arsenic with a brief discussion on the different types: "the first white which keeps the name Arsenick; the second yellow, named Orpiment; the third red, called Realgar, or Sandarack."[43] Each was composed of large quantities of sulfur and caustic salts. The types of sulfur, red or white, determined the strength of the arsenic as well as its form.[44] Lemery noted that white arsenic was found to be "le plus fort" of the three different types of arsenic.[45] Both chemists agreed that inward use was not recommended as it was a dangerous purgative that would induce violent vomiting.[46] Glaser specifically advises that while the "Regulus, Caustic Oil, Liquor, and fxt powder" forms of arsenic have been used as outward remedies with

success, "some are bold to make use thereof inwardly, which I advise not, because nature furnisheth us with other Remedies enough, less dangerous, and more safe." [47] Vitriol, another chemical compound found amongst Sainte-Croix's belongings, is "a Mineral Salt near of kin to Roche Alum, but containing in it some Metallick substance, especially Iron or Copper." [48] Like arsenic, vitriol was known to cause "violent Vomitings" and was to be used only as an eye treatment, or for outward use. [49] Vitriol Roman is thought to have gotten its name from the green-colored salts used in its composition. [50]

Sublimate refers to the sublimation of mercury with other chemicals. Sublimation is the process by which a solid is turned into a gas without going through a liquidation phase. In the case of Corrosive Sublimate, after the sublimation process, "you will find the Mercury Sublim'd to the top of the Gourd, which must be broken, to separate that which is fair and Crystallin." [51] The sublimate of mercury was said to cause dehydration, a symptom associated with the poisoning of Monsieur D'Aubray. [52] Nicolas Lemery and Christopher Glaser both described antimony as a mineral consisting of sulfur with a nature similar to metal. [53] Regulus of Antimony was a composition of a pound of antimony, twelve ounces of Tartar of Montpelier, and five ounces of nitre. [54] It was a popular diaphoretic (a drug that induces perspiration), however it was also known for being "a strong Vomitive." [55]

Many of the testimonies from the trial reflected the evidence found in the laboratory, as well as what the Marquise had divulged to her confessor. While some witnesses merely affirmed the poisonous relationship between the Marquise de Brinvilliers and Sainte-Croix, others were able to provide incriminating detail. In the Mémoire du Procez, the role of LaChaussée, the Valet to the Lieutenant Civil, was discussed in detail. LaChaussée became well acquainted with the Marquise de Brinvilliers and Sainte-Croix, enough so that they shared with him their secrets and their confidence. [56] He would become their lackey, delivering the poison to the Lieutenant Civil. He was arrested on the 24th of March 1673, interrogated and later executed for his part in the poisonings. [57] His Testimony was taken following la question while he was lying upon a mattress in the interrogation room. [58] It was said that thirty minutes after LaChaussée had completed the question, he told Monsieur le Rapporteur that "Sainte-Croix had told him that he was given the poisons by la Dame de Brinvilliers in order to poison her brothers: that he was to put poison in their water, their bouillon, some reddish liquid in his wine, and a clear liquid in their tarts." [59] LaChaussée's testimony matched that of the Marquise. In regards to the poisons used to kill her father and her two brothers, they both knew only that there was a reddish liquid and a clear or white liquid. [60]

There were several more witnesses that filed testimonies against the Marquise de Brinvilliers. [61] One testimony came from Sergeant Clüet, who claimed that he had seen LaChaussée work as an advisor to Monsieur D'Aubray while in the service of Sainte-Croix. At one point he overheard Sainte-Croix tell the Marquise that there would be trouble if Monsieur D'Aubray discovered that LaChaussée was secretly working for both of them. [62] Another witness, Edme Huet, recalled seeing Sainte-Croix paying daily
visits to the Marquise de Brinvilliers, bringing with him the small wooden cassette. In the cassette were two little boêtes with a sublimate powder and a paste. The poisons were undeniable to Edme Huet, as she was the daughter of an apothecary. An apprentice studying under Glaser also gave his testimony. Laurent Perrette said that the Marquise had stopped by Glaser's shop in St. Germaine to pick up a medicament that he had created for Glaser. He mentioned that it was something for the head; however, he said it could have been a poison. Another witness, a lady in the house of the Marquise de Brinvilliers, told that after the death of Monsieur D'Aubray, LaChaussée went to speak to the Marquise. She also said that Briancourt had told LaChaussée that the Marquise had asked him to kill innocent men, and that he lived in fear of being poisoned.

The witnesses were not the only people discussing the Marquise and Sainte-Croix. As the first trial of a documented serial poisoner, the Brinvilliers trial garnered much public attention. Famed seventeenth-century chronicler, Madame de Sévigné, wrote numerous letters to members of her inner-circle as the trial unfolded. While much of their correspondence was comprised of idle gossip, the gossip was largely responsible for the frenzy that Paris soon found itself in concerning poisons and poisoners.

Madame de Sévigné first mentioned the Marquise in a letter to her acquaintance, Madame de Grignan, on the 29th of April in 1676:

Mme de Brinvilliers is not as happy as I am, she is in prison. She is managing pretty well. Yesterday she asked if she could play piquet because she was bored. Her confession has been found. She tells us that at seven she was no longer a virgin, that she went on in the same way, that she had poisoned her father, her brothers, one of her own children and herself, but this was only in order to try out an antidote.

It is not known where Madame de Sévigné received her information. She lets on as if she were directly involved with the trial; however, it could only have been mere speculation. Both the trial records and the Marquise' confession to Abbé Pirot, lend to the conclusion that the Marquise de Brinvilliers never dealt directly with the poisons. While some documents suggest that she may have poisoned her daughters as well as her husband, giving them an antidote in instant regret, the trial evidence does not support this theory. Madame de Sévigné then remarks that, "Medea had not done as much. She admitted that this confession was in her own hand (a very silly thing to do), but says she was in a high fever when she wrote it, that it was an act of lunacy, and extravagance that could not be taken seriously." The fact that the Marquise de Brinvilliers was a member of the upper-class made the accusations against her all the more scandalous, and as a result, at the tip of the tongues of the Parisian elite.
Within the same correspondence, Madame de Sévigné wrote to Monsieur de Grignan. At the end of her note to him she mentioned that her husband had something to add about how "Mme Brinvilliers tried to kill herself." Monsieur de Sévigné recounted, "she had shoved a stick, guess where? Not in her eye, not in her mouth, not in her ear, not in her nose, not in the Turkish place - guess where? Anyway, she would certainly have died had not help come promptly." After this brief account, he casually changes topics as if they were discussing something as minor as the weather. Most of the exchanges that mention the Marquise de Brinvilliers carry on in this same manner: a brief sentence or two and then on to the next gossip.

Just a few days later, on May 1st, she wrote another letter to Madame de Grignan stating, "Here people are talking of nothing but the speeches and doings of the Brinvilliers woman." Where, initially, she had referred to the Marquise de Brinvilliers as, "Mme Brinvilliers," she had now been demoted to "the Brinvilliers woman" in an attempt to separate her from their circle. In another conversation, her cousin remarked, "If all the bad cooks in Paris were seized, the prisons would soon be overflowing!" Not everyone took the Brinvilliers trial seriously - yet.

Gossip and correspondences, such as those written by Madame de Sévigné, show how the Brinvilliers trial was a popular topic of conversation. The most well-known letter from Madame de Sévigné is the one in which she recounts the execution of the Marquise de Brinvilliers, at which she was present. On the 17th of July in 1676 she wrote:

Well, it's all over and done with, Brinvilliers is in the air. Her poor little body was thrown after the execution into a very big fire and the ashes to the winds, so that we shall breathe her, and through the communication of the subtle spirits we shall develop some poisoning urge which will astonish us all ...never has such a crowd been seen, nor Paris so excited and attentive.

Her prediction was eerily accurate. All of France was taken with a poisoning frenzy. No one knew who to suspect: upper-class, lower-class, men and women were all capable of being a poisoner. Now that one had succumbed to the poisoning hysteria, countless others would soon be on trial for the lives. One perplexing issue without any explanation is why the Marquise de Brinvilliers was the only one accused that refused to implicate anyone besides her immediate accomplices. She repeatedly said, "Half the people I know - people of quality - are involved in this same kind of thing ...and I could drag them all down along with me, should I decide to talk ..." Those who were charged later during the Affair of the Poisons were quick and ruthless in their accusations.

Primi Visconti, had his own comments to make about the sudden poisoning frenzy. He reflected, "Lots of people who knew nothing about poisoning started to learn all about it ...and it's different here in France: elsewhere people use it to take revenge on their enemies, but here they use it against their father or..."
mother...or to arrange a new marriage for themselves." [75] Like Madame de Sévigné's cousin, Primi Visconti comments on the immediate panic when anyone comes down with a slight stomach-ache: "As soon as anyone gets a stomach-ache, he says he's been poisoned, and they arrest all the cooks and servants." [76]

In his Memoires on the times of Louis XIV, the Duc de Saint-Simon comments on the autopsies of the Dauphin and the Dauphine. It was believed by many that poisons had caused their deaths:

When the body of the Dauphin was opened, everybody was terrified. His viscera were all dissolved; his heart had no consistency; its substance flowed through the hands of those who tried to hold it; an intolerable odour too, filled the apartment. The majority of the doctors declared they saw in all this the effect of a very subtle and very violent poison, which had consumed all the interior of the body, like a burning fire. [77]

The findings of the autopsy are reminiscent of the findings of the autopsy done on the D'Aubray brother by Duprez and Gavart. In both cases, the insides were found to be falling to pieces, or were dissolved.

News of the poison trial reached as far as England, with many esteemed people from England present at the execution of the Marquise de Brinvilliers. One Sarsfield wrote a letter to Secretary Williamson about the execution. After a brief description of the execution, he mentioned that 400 or 500 archers and sergeants escorted her to the Place de Grève, and "all Paris was to see her pass by, not forgetting our English ladies of the best quality here." [78] He makes a passing reference to the printed catch-penny sheets that were sold in the streets: "...her death was declared up and down, printed, here, as she passed by though not yet dead." [79]

In 1873, unedited documents from the archives of the Bastille dating 1679 through 1681 were released to the public. [80] The entirety of the documents consisted of material relating to the Affair of the Poisons trials. The documents open with the interrogation of Catherine Monvoison, known to all as "La Voisin." La Voisin was a diverness with an impressive list of clientele, comprised mostly of members of the upper-class. [81] When simple charms were not enough to satisfy her clients, she resorted to much more dangerous means, oftentimes including poisons. She practiced medicine (mostly midwifery), procured abortion, and provided love powders and poisons. [82] She was not the only person operating in this occupation. La Voisin had a bitter rivalry with fellow divernesses: La Grange and La Bosse. It was during their interrogations that La Voisin was also implicated in the Affair of the Poisons and arrested in 1679.

During La Voisin's interrogations, she relayed to La Reynie that "Some women asked if they would not soon become widows, because they wished to marry some one else; almost all asked this and came for
no other reason ...and asked to be ridded of some one.”[83] Those who sought La Voisin’s services were after poison. The interrogators also asked her about the magician and performer of black masses, Lesage, as well as the alchemist Blessis. It was known that Lesage and Blessis were both connected to La Voisin, investing money in her experimentations to create the philosopher’s stone.[84]

Throughout the interrogations of La Voisin, as well as Lesage and Blessis, countless names were mentioned in connection to the vast poisonous "Underworld of Paris". The sheer number of people that they had dealt with is incredible.[85] One person that La Voisin mentioned was Gautier, the Captain-Major of Soissons, whom she says had dealt with both Sainte-Croix and "his woman", the Marquise de Brinvilliers.[86] Then, on the 21st of November, 1679, Louvois, the interrogator, asked La Voisin about the death of Du Parc. [87] Jean Racine was a prominent French dramatist and member of the académie française.[88] His "retirement" was also a popular source of gossip. However, La Voisin was the one who pointed him out. During a particular interrogation session, on the 21st of November, La Voisin claimed that throughout Du Parc’s "disease", Racine kept his distance and also refused to let her stepmother and her children visit her at l’Hôtel de Soissons.[89] It was believed that Racine had a wife that he kept secret from Du Parc, and that when she found out she was extremely jealous. However, Racine’s acclaim within the court and the rest of the country protected him, and this aspect of the case was never investigated.

The Affair of the Poisons resembles the witch-hunts both nature and in theory. It came to the attention of the crown that many female members of the court were paying visits to magicians, fortune-tellers, divernesses, and necromancers. While some women saw these visits as harmless pass-times, other women sought out solutions to secure a better standing in court (by poisoning their competition). The Secretary of State, Colbert, stated that, "If all the people who had gone to have their fortunes told or to purchase good-luck charms were to be brought to trial, the century would not be long enough to see the end of the affair!"[90] By 1681, the Lieutenant-General of Police admitted that there were "one-hundred and forty-seven prisoners in the Bastille and Vincennes ...all engaged in the poison traffic and in sacrilegious and impious practices."[91]

Louis XIV began to realize that the whole poison ordeal was quickly spiraling out of control and that he had to do something to regain order. Louis XVI’s Edict on various crimes made it clear that the crown did not endorse the hysterical belief in witchcraft or sorcery. The edict clearly declares all "diviners, magicians, & enchanters ...imposters."[92] Louis XIV warns that:

There is a surprising number of ignorant and gullible people who were engaged with vain curiosities and passing superstitions, superstitions that are impious and sacrilegious. And with a fatal leak of engagements, those who have the most evidence against the conduct of these deceivers should bring
the criminal to the end of the spell, turning them in, and add the poison to the list of impious and sacrilegious. With these practices having come to our knowledge, we will employ all possible means to make it stop, and stop by suitable means, stop the progress of these detestable abominations.[93]

Louis XIV saw the necessity in reinstating old ordinances while adding new precautions. He openly condemns all who poison and infect the minds of the nation through discourses and other sacrilegious works.[94] In addition, anyone who uses, compounds or distributes poisons will be punished according to the law, whether or not the intended victim dies or not.[95] Louis XIV also called for the display of all poisons that not only cause abrupt and violent death, but those that slowly alter the health and cause disease.[96] This edict passed a law, which required doctors, surgeons and apothecaries to carry certification containing their name and residences as well as all of their possessions, along with a signature from a judge or notaire (notary) and two witnesses. In addition, all minerals had to be clearly labeled, along with their uses and properties. The ban on laboratories without explicit consent was now also being reinforced.[97]

Louis XIV’s Edict for the Punishment of Different Crimes specifically covered the new laws regarding all variations of arsenic, "Realgar, Orpiments and Sublimate, which are dangerous in all of their forms."[98] In fact, an entire article of the edict was dedicated to arsenic, as it had clearly become too easy to abuse.[99] Article VII stated that henceforth, "only merchants who lived in cities could sell and trade (arsenic), and even then, it could only be sold to doctors, apothecaries, surgeons, goldsmiths, dyers, Marshals and other public officials."[100] As stated in article VII, it was only legal to possess arsenic if "by their professions, they were obliged to employ it."[101] The properties, quantities and purposes of the arsenic must be clearly labeled and there must be proper certification for all arsenic in possession.[102] Grocers, drapers and other merchants residing in towns and villages were ordered to continually submit their minerals to their local Guard Merchants and Apothecaries in order to set a price. If they did not comply, they would immediately be fined and faced with corporal punishment.[103]

The widely available herbals and chemical treatises written by men such as Christopher Glaser and Nicolas Lemery greatly increased the accessibility of pharmacological knowledge in late seventeenth-century France. Chemical understanding was far more available than anyone has generally realized. During the Poison Affair, La Voisin commented that there were roughly 400 undocumented practitioners dealing poison and potions as pharmacists in Paris alone. The well-publicized trial of the Marquise de Brinvilliers almost certainly added to this knowledge and may have actually made the Affair of the Poisons, which emerged soon after, much more likely.
Surgeons, physicians, physician-barbers, épiciers, and apothecaries were some of the varying types of medical practitioners in Paris at the time of the Brinvilliers trial and Poison Affair.

See also:


Agnès Walch, *La Marquise de Brinvilliers*, (France: Perrin, 2010).


Amende honorable: The portion of a condemned criminal's sentence in which they are to appear before the doors of a church, led by the executioner, bare-footed and stripped down to a shirt, a lit torch (weighing two pounds) in hand and a noose about the neck to beg God's forgiveness for their crime/s.

Original text: "Je reconnois que méchamment et par vengeance j’ay empoisonné mon père et mes frères et attenté a l’empoisonnement de ma soeur pour avoir leur biens: dont je demande pardon a Dieu, au Roy et a la justice."

Abbé Pirot was with the Marquise de Brinvilliers in the final days leading up to her execution. He heavily documented the time he spent with her, including her confession to him. He published his observations in *La Marquise de Brinvilliers. Récit de Ses Derniers Moments*. It provides an intimate account of her final days, as well as her final hours.


One of the reasons that Louis XIV was adamant about overturning the ban on antimony is that it had been used to cure him of a recent illness. He did not have the foresight to understand the ramifications it would have at this time.


Original text: "...de l'eau rougeatre & de l'eau blanchatre."


Ibid, 53.

Ibid, 141.
A bouillon was (is) a common type of soup or broth in France.

Original text: "Il paroit que les trois derniers jours du feu Lieutenant Civil il a maigrit, il dessecha, il perdit l'appetis, vomissoit souvent, brûloit dans l'estomach, & ayant été ouvert en presence de luy de Duvaut, Duprez Chirurgiens, & Gavart Apoticaire, ils on trouvé l'estomach tout noir, s'en allant en morceaux, & pareillement de duodenum, le gangrené & brûlé, le quelle altérations a ê té causée par poison ou humeur qui se corrompt quelquefois jusques au point de faire le mê smes effets que le poisons."

From: [Factum. Brinvilliers, Marie-Madeleine d'Aubray (1630-1676 ; marquise de)]Mémoire du procès extraordinaire contre la dame de Brinvilliers, prisonnière en la Conciergerie du Palais... [Texte imprimé]. - (S. l. n. d.). - In-4 ° , 631-632.

A cassette was an old French term for a small box or cabinet.

Original text: "le premiere est le blanc, qui retient le nom d'Arsenic; le second est le jaune, nommé Orpiment; le troisiéme est rouge, nommé Realgar, ou Sandaraque ..."


Translations: "My confession", and "Many curious secrets."

Original text: "& mesmes quelques-uns ofent s'en servir interieurement, ce que je ne nous fournit assez d'autres remedes moins dangereux & plus asseurez."


Original text: "...et un sel mineral, approchant de la nature de l'Alum de roche, mais contenant en soy quelque substance metallique, & sur tout de fer ou de cuivre."


Ibid, 251.


Ibid, 175.


Ibid, 175.


Ibid, 637.

La Chaussée was executed before a crowd on the Place de Grève. As his sentence prescribed, he was "attached and bound, spreadeagled, on a wheel, and there pounded to death, his bones broken by blows with stones or bastinadoes."

[Factum. Brinvilliers, Marie-Madeleine d'Aubray (1630-1676 ; marquise de).] 1676


People were submitted to the question in order to draw out a confession.

Monsieur le Rapporteur: the person appointed to investigate, or take account of the confession.

[Factum. Brinvilliers, Marie-Madeleine d'Aubray (1630-1676 ; marquise de)]

Mémoire du procès extraordinaire contre la dame de Brinvilliers, prisonnière en la Conciergerie du Palais... [Texte imprimé]. - (S. l. n. d.). - In-4 ° , 638.


[Factum. Brinvilliers, Marie-Madeleine d'Aubray (1630-1676 ; marquise de)]


Laurent Perrette demeurant chez Glaser Apoticaire, dépose qu'il a vû souvent une Dame venior chez son Maître, menée par Sainte-Croix: Que le Laquais lui dit, c'est la Dame de Brinvilliers, qu'il partir sa tête que c'étoit du poison qu'il venoient de faire à Glaser: quand ils laissent leur Carrosse à la Foire de Saint Germain"

[Factum. Brinvilliers, Marie-Madeleine d'Aubray (1630-1676 ; marquise de)]

Mémoire du procès extraordinaire contre la dame de Brinvilliers, prisonnière en la Conciergerie du Palais... [Texte imprimé]. - (S. l. n. d.). - In-4 ° , 641-642.
Original text: Marie de Villeray Demoiselle suivante de ladite Dame de Brinvilliers, dépose que depuis la mort de d'Aubray Conseiller, LaChaussée vint trouver ladite Dame, & luy parla en particulier. Que Briancourt luy a dit que ladite Dame fais mourir d'honnêtes gens, qui devoient servir d'appuy à ses enfans; qu'il prenoit tous les jours de l'Orvietan de peur d'être empoisonné.

[68] Ibid, 186.
[69] Ibid, 187.
[70] Ibid, 187.
[71] Ibid, 189.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Memoirs of Louis XIV by the Duke of Saint-Simon, Volume 8, Chapter LX.(http://www.gutenberg.org/files/3875/3875-h/3875-h.htm#2HCH0060)
[79] Ibid.
[81] There exists no clear definition of the term diveness, however, Anne Somerset describes it as, "One who divines, predicts or conjectures; to discover by guessing, intuition, inspiration or magic". Somerset, Anne, The Affair of the Poisons: Murder, Infanticide, and Satanism at the Court of Louis XI, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004), 3.
[87] Marguerite-Thérèse de Gola (stage-name Mademoiselle du Parc) was a famed actress and dancer of the 17th century. She was the star of Molière's company until she suddenly left to join Racine's company at the Hôtel de Bourgogne. This was the result of a bitter feud between Molière and Racine. Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal. Archives de La Bastille Documents Indédites: Règne de Louis XIV (1679-1681), Paris: A. Durand et Pedone-Lauriel Libraires, 1873, 50.

Original text: "Du Parc devait avoir été empoisonnée, et que l'on en a soupçonné Jean Racine; le bruit en a été assez grand; ce qu'elle a d'autant plus lieu de présumer que Racine a toujours empêché qu'elle, qui était la bonne amie de la Du Parc, ne l'aït vue pendant tout le cours de la maladie dont elle est décédée, quoique la Du Parc la demandât toujours; mais quoiqu'elle y allât pour la voir, on ne l'a jamais voulu laisser entrer, et ce par l'ordre de Racine, ce qu'elle a su par la belle-mère de la Du Parc, appelée mademoiselle de Gorle, et par les filles de la Du Parc, qui sont à l'hôtel de Soissons, qui lui on marqué que Racine était cause de leur Malheur."


Original text: "Devins, Magiciens, & Enchanteurs ...imposteurs"

Original text: "Ils auraient surpris diverses personnes ignorantes ou croyantes qui s'étoient insensiblement engagées avec eux en passant des vaines curiosités aux superstitions, et des superstitions aux impiétés et aux sacrilèges. Et par une funeste fuite d'engagements, ceux qui se sont le plus abandonnés à la conduite de ces Seducteurs se feroient portez à cette extrémité criminelle d'ajouter le malefice et le poison aux impiétés et aux sacrilèges, et pour l'accomplissement de leur méchantes predictions. Ces pratiques étant venuës à notre connoissance, nous aurions employé tous les soins possible pour en faire cesser, et pour arrêter par des moyens convenables le progrès de ces détestables abominations."

Original text: "Shall be punished by sentences like those who are convinced to served and venesices of poison, or whether death ensued or not ineither, as also those who are convinced of having made or distributed poison to poison."

Original text: "Qu'il ne soit permis qu'aux Marchands qui demeurent dans les Villes d'en vendre, et d'en livrer eux-mêmes seulement aux Medecins, Apothicaires, Chirurgiens, Orphevres, Teinturiers, Maréchaux et autres personnes publiques ...

Original text: "Qui par leurs professions sont obligez d'en employer ..."