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Poison

The Ever-Present, Hidden Threat

How do you remain vigilant against an almost imperceptible danger? In the face of modern terrorism, for example, we have adopted a variety of security gestures from parading around in socked feet in public airports to removing trash receptacles in busy urban spaces. We do these things to expose an otherwise hidden area or to remove a potential hiding place. The invisible and unknowable is threatening.

The same was true for poisoning in early modern Europe. Prior to chemical tests for various substances in the body, it was difficult to protect against poisoning or even to know if someone had been poisoned. Poison was a stealth weapon – one that did not require brute strength and might be performed without consequence of retaliation or punishment if the man or woman administering it was skilled.

In this state of perpetual unknowing, poisoning was a major theme of premodern life in Europe. Certainly, poisoning is also cited in ancient and medieval history as well. But what made the »culture of poisoning« in Europe distinctly early modern was that it coincided with behavioral changes with regards to privacy and the ability to observe others.[1] With the development of table manners in early modern Europe, it became easier to observe others at a meal. Table settings became more regular and dining implements more specialized so that each diner would have their own set of cutlery, glasses, and plates and demarcated personal space, opening the visual field for monitoring deviation from expected behaviors.[2] (Fig. 1) This increased the opportunity for gestures of hierarchical distinction and decreased the opportunity to slip a harmful substance into a diner's food or drink.[3]

Palace architecture also shifted in line with the early modern culture of poison. The Tudors built small, privy kitchens below their royal apartments, thus limiting contact with outsiders and reducing the distance between the kitchen and the consumer, which brought the added benefit of serving warm food.[4] In the early eighteenth century, dining over the kitchen became more common and corresponded to the specialization of palace spaces with a designated »dining room« in contrast to the earlier »great hall« in which collapsible tables were relocated as needed.[5] The invention of the »flying table« (*table volante*) enabled yet more convenience in the conveyance of food directly from the kitchen to the lap of the diner by mechanically lifting the set table from the kitchen to the privy rooms.[6] The flying table was fixed in place with the accompanying gears and lifts, which further fixed the dining room (Fig. 2).

The most notorious poisoning crisis in early modern Europe, the so-called *Affaire de Poisons*, involved some 400 suspects of high and low birth in and around Versailles from 1676 until 1682. When it was suspected that the accusation against a noblewoman, the Marquise de Brinvilliers, was not an isolated incident, King Louis XIV established an investigative commission with the chief of the Paris police. The investigation ended when it reached the king's inner circle when his mistress,

1 This is a term used by Emma Spary in her talk, »Poisons and Secrets: The Court, the King, and the Problem of Drug Knowledge in Late Seventeenth-Century France.« Lecture presented at the Intoxicating Spaces Lectures Series, February 17, 2021.
2 Babelon et al., *Versailles et les Tables Royales*.

3 See, for example, the classic Sociology study of manners and modernity by Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*.
4 Herman, *The Royal Art of Poison*, p. 9.
5 Bencard, *Notes on the Table*, p. 242. The first use of the term »dining room« in Rosenborg castle in Copenhagen, for example, was in 1718.
6 Ibid. Mogens credits the first flying table to the Danish court astronomer, Ole Rømer, who designed it to accommodate the lame King Christian V, p. 255.

Fig. 1 **Abraham Bosse:** ***Le Festin des chevaliers du Saint-Esprit*****, etching, 1634**

Madame de Montespan, was accused of using love potions on the king himself. Recently, Emma Spary has argued that the real danger of Madame de Montespan's use of occult potions was that they threatened Louis XIV's monopoly on knowledge and undermined the myth of Louis XIV's independent decision making.[7]

Italy was considered the center of knowledge about poisons. The Medici Duke Cosimo I had his own *fonderie* in the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence from whence he experimented with alchemical medicines and sent antidotes as gifts to other European elites.[8] Alisha Rankin has published a book about how the culture of observation and experimentation in poisons and their antidotes in the sixteenth century was a precursor to the development of scientific method in the seventeenth. In other words, overcoming the fear caused by medical ignorance drove an increased vigilance about the body and potential contaminants.

An episode of suspected poisoning in the court of the »Great« Elector, Friedrich Wilhelm, of Brandenburg-Prussia (r. 1640–1688) likewise shows the measures people would go in order to illuminate hidden dangers. The death of an otherwise healthy electoral prince inspired a posthumous vigilance to expose an imagined threat. Suspicions turned inward at court as well as outward to engage lay investigators in the surrounding countryside.[9] The investigation left a paper trail of minutiae witnesses observed of the young Prince Ludwig's final

7 Spary, *Poisons and Secrets*.
8 Herman, *The Royal Art of Poison*, p. 26.

9 In May, a magistrate out in the countryside outside of Berlin sent an account of a vagrant Italian Catholic who aroused suspicion by talking about the prince's death while drunk. He was apprehended by the local authorities but died in jail before he provided any useful evidence. *Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preussischer Kultur Besitz* (hierafter GStA PK) BPH Rep. 35 Nr. 334 Acta betr.: die vermeintliche Vergiftung des Markgrafen Ludwig, 1687.

Fig. 2 *Tischlein-deck-dich,* Dining room, r. 9, Linderhof Palace

Fig. 3 Caspar Netscher: *Markgraf Ludwig von Brandenburg,* oil on canvas, ca. 1682

days. Through their accounts, we can recreate the moments that roused suspicions and which they thought worth relaying.

During Holy Week 1687, the twenty-one-year-old Margrave Ludwig of Brandenburg-Prussia (Fig. 3) fell ill and died just over a week later in his apartments in the city palace in Potsdam. The medical report, signed three days after his death, determined poisoning as the cause.[10] On the same day of the doctors' assessment, Friedrich Wilhelm (Fig. 4) called a commission of his privy councilors Thomas von dem Knesebeck, Joachim Ernst von Grombkow, and Eberhard Freiherr von Danckelmann to investigate. The commission took their charge, »in order to discover the real truth, or at least to completely discharge the Christian princely conscience on the matter.«[11]

The commission's questioning centered on the domestic servants of Ludwig and his wife, Luise Charlotte (neé Radziwill (Fig. 5)), in Potsdam and Berlin. The protocol began with general questions about the prince's typical health, those with close access to him, the onset and development of his last illness, and whether the prince himself had voiced any suspicions. Then, in the nineteenth of forty questions, the examiners asked, »Who was frequently around the prince the last time he was in Berlin, particularly of the Catholic religion?«[12] The other specifics they asked are: when was the last time the prince went hunting and did he get drunk then, how he was dressed when he went hunting, what did the witness know about a *Pommes de Chine* that the prince supposedly ate, and who made him coffee? Clearly, the commission already had some hunches.

Besides offering a wealth of detail about quotidian court life, taken together, the accounts offer a timeline from the onset of symptoms through the flurry of accusations in the aftermath of Ludwig's death. On Maundy Thursday Ludwig was reportedly healthy in Berlin although he did not eat breakfast. Friday, he reportedly ate waffles in his wife's room as he did frequently. They were prepared by a »Dutch woman,« named Frau Bent, who also prepared him coffee either on Thursday or Friday. When asked whom they suspected, one witness answered, »that Dutch woman,« without further explanation.

At lunch and dinner on Friday, Ludwig held an *ordinair Taffel,* which might have exposed him to poisoning from many people. Three witnesses reported that he started complaining of health problems on Friday. One said that he felt »strange« (*wunderlich*) early, went to the bathroom and felt better, but was then sick again in the evening. Another witness had heard that Ludwig had had difficulty going to the bathroom in the night. Friday was also the night that the *Mundschenk,* Egidig Strupff, brought Ludwig oranges sent by *Kuchenmeister* Christian, but no one saw him eat them until Saturday.

10 Pribram, *Urkunden und Actenstücke,* p. 1367, footnote 2. Medical Report copy in Vienna.
11 GStA PK Rep. 35 Nr. 334 Acta betr. Die vermeintlichen Vergiftung des Markgrafen Ludwigs 1687.
12 Ibid.

Fig. 4 Jan Mijtens: *Kurfürst Friedrich Wilhelm von Brandenburg und seine Familie*, oil on canvas, 1666

Saturday is the day when the history books claimed the poisoning took place.[13] Multiple witnesses reported that Ludwig ate an orange and then had a drink of coffee and complained immediately afterwards of stomach pains. Frau Bent may have made the coffee, but one witness said that a chambermaid brought the water and Ludwig himself made the coffee, which many in the room drank without becoming ill. On Easter morning, a breakfast soup was prepared by Frau Bent and the Duke of Holstein sent Ludwig scrambled eggs. The prince complained of poor sleep and of feeling unwell. He took *Sekt* and rosemary elixir for his stomach pains and after he came out from the first sermon of the day, he asked for his bed to be made if he did not have to attend church again in

13 Pöllnitz, *Memoiren.*

the afternoon.[14] By two accounts, Ludwig himself claimed the orange made him sick.

That night, Ludwig called the *Leibarzt,* Martin Willich, to him and complained again of poor sleep. On Tuesday, he could hardly urinate without pain (*vor großem Shriden*) and around that time the Duke of Holstein was heard to have said it was poison. On Wednesday, the Freiherr von Danckelmann visited Ludwig (a young man he had known intimately for his whole upbringing) and brought another *Leibarzt,* Dr. Weiß, the younger, with him. At this point, Ludwig's body was bloated on his right side. On Thursday, the doctors gave him opium, which apparently helped him sleep but did not decrease the pain. On Saturday evening, blue and red spots appeared on his throat and his chest reddened. In the night, Ludwig started foaming at the mouth and breathing heavily (*singultus exeriret)*.

None of the *deponents* give an account of Ludwig's passing on Monday, but the French ambassador, François de Pas, Comte de Rébenac, described it in the most stirring terms to Louis XIV dated April 12 (new calendar).[15] He claimed that the young prince was melancholy in general because he was mistreated by his father and Ludwig had once claimed that his father would be the death of him. When he actually did fall ill, according to Rébenac, the doctors had so little knowledge of Ludwig's illness that they told the elector he was just imagining it. The day before he died, Ludwig asked for his father to come and see him, »to kiss his hand one last time.«[16] But the elector, convinced his illness was a chimera, reproached the young man for his weakness and did not attend him as he felt that if he visited, it would only strengthen Ludwig's belief that the illness was real and make him worse. An hour before Ludwig expired, the doctors entered the elector's room and joked with him that the prince would be in a condition to come and tell him himself of his death. When Ludwig died three rooms away from him, Friedrich Wilhelm did, however, display a tremendous amount of regret and grief. The shock of his passing likely added to the credibility of poisoning.

Furthermore, a culture of poison already existed at this court; in family lore and daily thought. An earlier succession crisis was supposedly caused by poisoning. Elector Joachim II died in 1571, followed shortly thereafter by his brother, who left no heir. In that case, a Jewish man was scapegoated as the perpetrator.[17] There are two known instances of suspected poisoning in the Great Elector's own life: in 1638, he and his father, Elector Georg Wilhelm, were at odds with one another. When Friedrich Wilhelm caught the measles after a banquet in Spandow, he suspected his father's closest advisor, Adam von Scharzenberg (1583–1641), was trying to kill him.[18] Again in 1642, Friedrich Wilhelm was warned of a danger of poisoning if he went on a diplomatic trip to Warsaw (he went anyway and did not fall ill).[19]

Poisoning was also clearly not far from the elector's mind when his son, Karl Emil, died in 1674 just shy of his twentieth birthday. Karl Emil's guardian, the Privy Council President Otto von Schwerin, had written a few weeks prior to his death to warn him of the dangers of employing a French chef while on campaign against Louis XIV's army in Alsace.[20] The diarist Dietrich Sigismund Buch reported that when the elector heard the circumstances of Karl Emil's death, he exclaimed, »God forbid, he received any poisoned bites« and then continued for a long time on the subject.[21] Karl Emil's body was transported back to Berlin for an autopsy. The examiner went to great lengths in his report to emphasize that the prince's death was *not* caused by syphilis and to explain away the inflammation of his genitals (which might hint at why no commission was formed in that case to investigate the death further).[22]

The final consideration for why poison was considered in the illnesses of Friedrich Wihelm's sons by his first marriage is to look to the doctors; the medical professionals who had diagnosed poisoning as the cause of death so shortly after they had claimed Ludwig wasn't even sick. Rébenac blamed the doctors for inciting the scare by trying to cover up their own ignorance of Ludwig's illness by quickly carrying out their autopsy and report without a surgeon or outside physician in attendance. Furthermore, he believed that the elector himself fanned the flames of panic and that if he had not given credence to the poisoning verdict, the rumors would have quickly dissipated.[23]

Consultation with modern doctors also confirms that a cause of poisoning was unlikely, given the symptoms.[24] More likely causes of death include scarlet fever, typhus fever, a kidney stone that became a kidney blockage resulting in *septicemia* (a bacterial infection in the bloodstream), a ruptured appendix that became septic, a problem in the upper liver, or a blockage in the gallbladder that turned septic. If the prince

14 Sekt, here, likely meant a sweet wine from the Canary Islands or elsewhere in Southern Europe (probably not a sparkling wine, as is indicated by the word today). Art. Sekt. In: *Deutsches Wörterbuch von Jacob Grimm und Wilhelm Grimm* and art. Sekt, Sec, Trockenbeerwein. In: *Appetit-Lexikon,* p. 188.
15 Fehling, *Urkunden und Actenstücke,* p. 1213–1215.
16 Ibid, p. 1214.
17 Escher, *Kurfürstentum Brandenburg,* p. 285.
18 Heinrich, *Geschichte Preussens,* p. 92. Orlich, *Geschichte des preußischen Staates im siebzehnten Jahrhundert,* p.48 and Prutz, *Aus des Großen Kurfürsten Letzten Jahren,* p. 178.
19 Orlich, *Geschichte des preußischen Staates im siebzehnten Jahrhundert,* p. 74.
20 Ibid p. 538f.
21 »Gott gebe, daß er nicht einige vergiftete Bissen bekommen.« Buch, *Tagebuch,* p. 52.
22 GStA PK BPH 35 Nr. 33 Bericht der Ärzte über Krankheit und Ableben des Kurpr. Karl Emil 1674. Thanks to Prof. Brad Bouley for assistance translating the Latin autopsy report.
23 Fehling, *Urkunden und Actenstücke,* p. 1214. Considering the drama in his account, it is surprising that historians have not questioned Rébenac's interests. Wintzingerode and others portray Rébenac as an unbiased, third-party witness, when in fact, he had personally experienced the destructive power of poisoning rumors during the *Affaires de Poisons.* Rébenac's older brother, Antoine de Pas, Marquis de Feuquière, was embroiled in the suspicions at Louis XIV's court. The Marquis and his cousin, the Duc de Luxembourg (both prominent officers in Louis XIV's army) were accused of occult practice and, among other things, of employing the services of a magician to poison people. The Marquis was eventually jailed, put on trial, and acquitted. Neither he nor other high-status members of the French nobility received redress for the damage the accusations might have done to their reputations and therefore livelihoods. See Somerset, *The affair of the poisons,* pp. 181–187, 223–225, and 338.
24 Thanks to Dr. Claire West of the University of North Carolina for the pro bono medical consultation. The diagnosis of scarlet fever was mentioned by Christopher Clark, Iron Kingdom, p. 103 and Fleckfieber, which I translated as »typhus« was mentioned in the German literature, see for example, Großmann, Jugendgeschichte Friedrichs I, p. 39.

Fig. 5 Jacques Vaillant: *Prinzessin Luise Charlotte von Radziwill (1667–1696), Markgräfin von Brandenburg mit dem Bildnis ihres Gatten, des Markgrafen Ludwig*, oil on canvas, 1688

was sick with typhus or one of these other illnesses, eating and drinking acidic things like coffee and oranges would have caused a flare up.

Emma Spary rightly described the situation with regards to the numerous poisoning scares at court: ignorance breeds fear. Concurrent with the increasing tensions at this court, the *Leibärzte* were attempting to regulate their profession with a new medical edict. The efforts began in the 1660s and Friedrich Wilhelm approved the edict in 1685. This officially gave the members of the new *Collegium Medicum* the authority to dictate who could practice medicine in Brandenburg. It was difficult to convince people of superior medical authority however, if they could not even identify the symptoms of a serious illness in an otherwise healthy young person. The verdict of poison offered a way to deflect from their ignorance and distance themselves from responsibility in the death, because it was death by »unnatural causes.«

In this framework of both the European and the Brandenburg-Prussian cultures of poison and the support of the medical »authorities,« it starts to become apparent why poisoning was a credible cause of Ludwig's death. These sources also allow us to see how suspicions with regards to poisoning developed. Danckelmann claimed he suspected poisoning right away when he saw what he thought was an unusual illness. He noted the doctors disagreed with him because they thought the fever would be stronger. Only one, a Dr. Conis, mentioned poisoning and was contradicted by the other doctors. Danckelmann also related that Ludwig himself thought it was possible he was poisoned but claimed he was not »important enough« to be targeted!

Like the doctors and the elector, some of the other witnesses only suspected poisoning *after* Ludwig's death. Luise Charlotte's *Hofmeisterin* claimed that she did not suspect anything until the illness lasted longer than three days. Others suspected poisoning, but had no other information or likely suspects. The hunter, Friderich Hennerich, claimed he had actually warned the prince about oranges, but Ludwig had responded, »You are a fool – it won't harm me!«[25] Luise Charlotte's equerry said he heard from someone he referred to as, »the little Trockimsky« that others had eaten the oranges, so whatever Ludwig had, it wasn't from them.

There is one more element to the »unheimliches Flüstern« caused by the supposed assassination attempt: pre-existing biases and interests, which is why it is telling to explore the suspects and consider why they were targeted.[26] Although Rébenac and the *Protocol* related that suspicion fell on a long list of people, there were three, in particular, who stand out. Foremost are the Duke and/or Duchess of Holstein who are named twenty-four times by the witnesses in the protocol. Mostly they are cited as people whom Ludwig held in confidence, dined with frequently, or otherwise spent a great deal of time with, particularly the duchess. Two witnesses mention a »small staircase« or »small tower« that the prince would use, the first claimed not to know whom Ludwig visited when he used those stairs, but the other witness said he used them to visit the Duke and Duchess of Holstein. Perhaps the hiddenness of the place of encounter was reason enough for concern. Witnesses noted the great care and attention (usually away from the eyes of others) that the Duchess gave Ludwig in his illness.

Rébenac, too, mentions the suspicion they inspired at court: »the people's suspicions are attached to two or three people, one falling directly on the Electoress, by means of the Princess of Holstein, her niece, who was recently in this court.«[27] The Duke and Duchess were both close relatives of Electoress Dorothea; Luise Charlotte (1658–1740) was the daughter of her sister and another relative of theirs, Ernst Günther von Schleswig-Holstein-Sonderburg-Augustenburg (1609–1689).[28] She lived for a time with her aunt in Berlin where she, too, married a close relative, Friedrich Ludwig von Schleswig-Holstein-Beck (1653–1728). A much later (and questionable) account claimed the Duchess herself presented Ludwig with a poisoned orange at a ball in revenge for him spurning her in marriage.[29] It could not have helped the rumors against them that the pair had already departed for Denmark by the time the *Protocol* was taken.[30]

25 »Ihr seid ein Narr, es schadet mir nicht.«
26 Droysen, *Geschichte der preussischen Politik*, p. 557.
27 Fehling, *Urkunden und Actenstücke*, p. 1214f.
28 Wintzingerode, *Schwierige Prinzen*, p. 23f.
29 Pöllnitz, *Memoiren*, p. 4.
30 GStA PK Rep. 35 Nr. 334 Acta betr. Die vermeintliche Vergiftung des Markgrafen Ludwigs 1687, Protocol.

Distrust had been building between the children of Friedrich Wilhelm's first marriage and those with Dorothea and grew to a fever pitch with the heir apparent, Friedrich, after Ludwig's death. Friedrich became ill shortly after Ludwig's death and feared poisoning as well. He sought support from foreign courts with strained political relations with Brandenburg, including those in Hannover, the Hague, and Vienna.[31] He fled Berlin, for his Aunt Hedwig Sophie's protection in Hesse-Kassel and then later, even more to the chagrin of their rival in the north, to his in-laws, the Duke and Duchess of Brunswick-Lüneburg. Friedrich stayed away until his father cut off his income and Danckelmann was able to negotiate a reconciliation.

Throughout the summer of their disagreement, they left a correspondence, which shows attempts on both sides to repair the relationship, but with Friedrich insisting that he would not return to Berlin until his safety was assured.[32] It is not specified in those letters if he saw the threat from his mother-in-law, but others reported that Friedrich spoke openly about suspecting her while in Hanover and his mother-in-law wrote in a letter about the *poudre de succession,* implying Dorothea was using poisoned powder to secure her sons' inheritance at the expense of the elector's children by his first marriage. These fears were not ungrounded, Friedrich Wilhelm had revised his testament to break up his holdings and leave only a small portion of his holdings to Friedrich. Mistrust was a prerequisite, not a result, of this kind of accusation.

Unsurprisingly, this »succession crisis« is the aspect of the poisoning narrative that has been of most interest to Prussian historians. Ben Marschke recently wrote that the Prussian narrative of the »rise« of Brandenburg-Prussia has generally obscured succession crises like this one and the sustained threats of the authority of the »absolute« Hohenzollern ruler from their own dynasty.[33] According to Marschke, this episode is not anecdotal but belies »serious dynastic problems.« In contrast to how others, notably Friedrich the Great two generations later, assess the »Great Elector« and his immediate successor Friedrich, Friedrich Wilhelm certainly did not intend to be the founder of a consolidated Prussia. If his last testament had been followed, the various holdings of Brandenburg-Prussia would have been broken up among all his male heirs. As a new elector, Friedrich III went against his father's wishes and mounted a coup to keep the lands under his sole control. The story of distrust reached back to the 1670s, but since the death of Ludwig, as Heinrich Gerd put it in 1981, »the atmosphere at court was poisoned.«[34]

A Polish envoy was next in the number of times mentioned by witnesses (eight). He had recently been hunting with Ludwig in Potsdam and Ludwig had borrowed a sabel from him and had taken a sip from his bottle of Hungarian wine. The hunter Hennerich related that the two often went hunting together. At the last hunt, many witnesses related that there was heavy drinking, but Ludwig very rarely drank to excess and did not at that last outing either. What motive might the Polish ambassador have had? One theory is that he killed Prince Ludwig in order to free the wealthy Louise Charlotte to marry the heir to the Polish throne and claim her valuable estates in Poland for the crown. They had indeed attempted a marriage alliance before she had married Ludwig, which the Catholics in her extended family had advocated for vociferously. Poland reportedly had put many obstacles to the union between Ludwig and Luise Charlotte.[35] On a related note, Ludwig's half-brother, Philip, was also put forward as a suitor for the newly widowed Luise Charlotte.

The third suspect was a mysterious »Tristan,« of whom there is no mention in other sources. What comes out in the depositions is that he was a Frenchman and a Catholic who had been particularly close with Ludwig and, for an unknown reason, had been banned from court. However, the *Page* Fürstenberg related in his addended written deposition that he had secretly fetched Tristan many times and Ludwig has received several gifts from Tristan including a writing tablet, cheese, a chamber pot, sugar, a rapier (*Degen*), and 10 Thaler.[36] The *Kammerdiener* Johannes Heßig, who gave one of the more detailed accounts also mentioned a busy exchange of letters between Tristan and Ludwig as well as gifts of art and money (including 600 Thalers at New Year's). But, according to Heßig, the correspondence ceased after Ludwig had a tiff with Tristan. A motive perhaps?

In 1897, Hans Prutz published a list of gifts that Electoress Dorothea had received from the French around the same time with the implication that she was being courted for swaying the elector's opinion in the conflicts between the emperor and Ludwig XIV.[37] Heinrich Jobst Graf von Wintzingerode holds that the attention to Dorothea's French gifts were seen as a mark of national treason by the Borussian historians like Prutz.[38] Perhaps these secret gifts from Tristan were similarly a »soft diplomacy« effort by the French or perhaps just tokens of a dear, but forbidden, friendship. The *Mundschenk* Egidig Strupff corroborated that by answering, when asked if he had any suspicions, that »he just knew about the French who had come to beg favors of the prince.« Heßig tied this specific suspicion to the French culture of poisoning and perhaps to a reputation that France had gained during *L'Affaire des Poisons* when he said, »The French were bad, they could make all kinds of poison that would last for 1, 2 or 10 years!«

Beyond the suspicions falling on French and Catholics, a more general xenophobia is detectable in the deposition, for

31 Eventually, Friedrich and his wife went to visit her family in Hanover, which greatly angered Elector Friedrich Wilhelm, who was in a dispute with the elector of Braunschweig-Lüneburg. Emperor Leopold I also offered Friedrich Wilhelm asylum and the Viennese ambassador in Berlin reported that the French party sought to take advantage of the disputes. Pribram, *Urkunden und Actenstücke,* p. 1367.
32 See Prutz, *Aus des Großen Kurfürsten Letzten Jahren.*
33 Marschke, *The Crown Prince's Brothers and Sisters,* p. 130.
34 Heinrich, *Geschichte Preussens,* p. 125.
35 Pufendorf et al., *Friederich Wilhelms des Grossen,* p. 433, 934.
36 GStA PK Rep. 35 Nr. 334 Acta betr. Die vermeintlichen Vergiftung des Markgrafen Ludwigs 1687, Protocol, Lit. A des Pagen Fürstenbergs schriftliche *Deposition.*
37 Prutz, *Aus des Großen Kurfürsten Letzten Jahren,* p. 367–369.
38 Wintzingerode, *Schwierige Prinzen.*

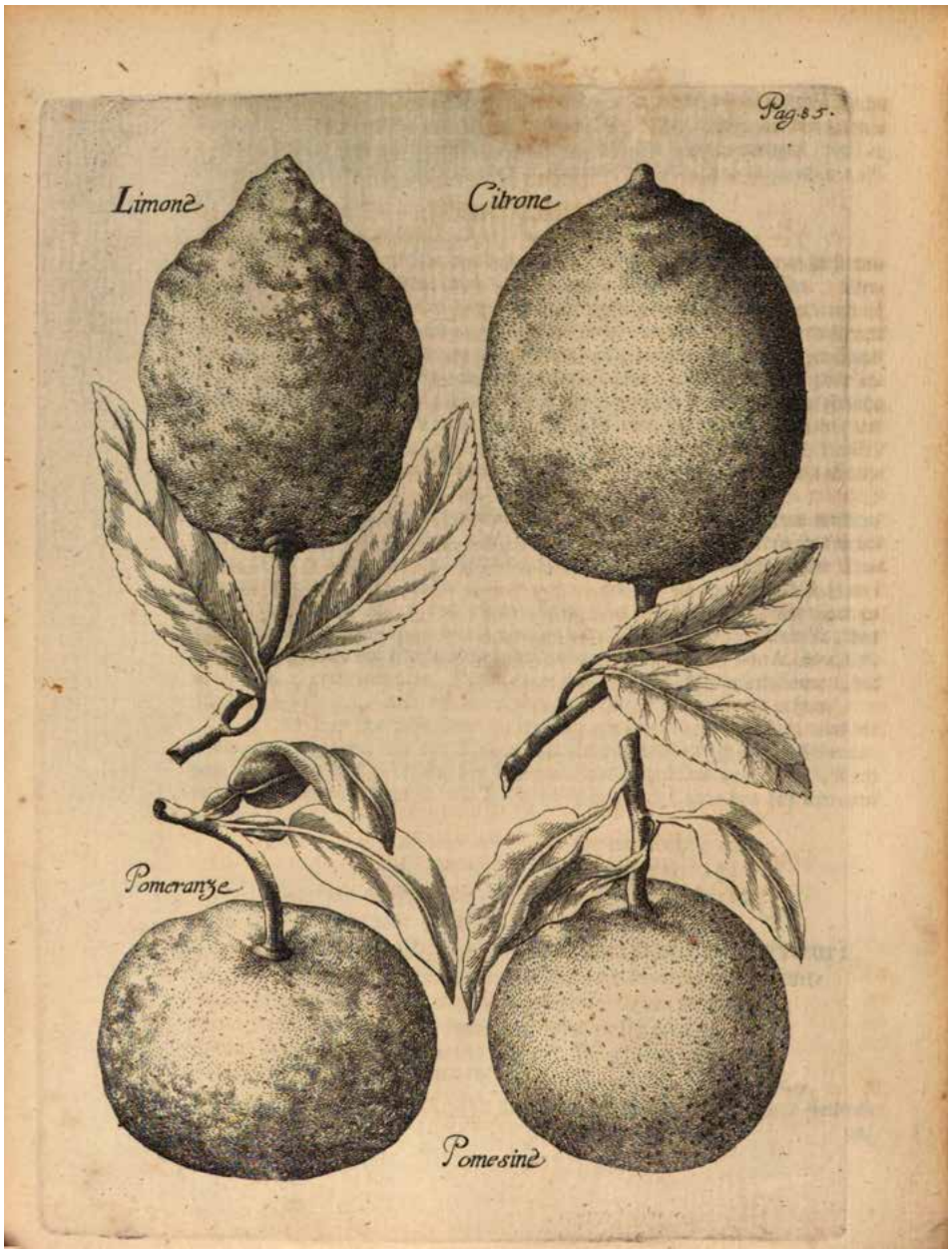

Fig. 6 *Pomesine (Pomme de Chine)*. **In: Elsholtz, Johann Sigismund: *Diaeteticon*, Brandenburg, 1682, p. 85**

example, in the naming of »that Dutch woman« and her waffles. The xenophobia translated to the suspected means of poisoning as well. The depositions refer specifically to a *Pommes de Chine* (bitter orange) (Fig. 6), whose name alone signals its exoticness not just with the indication of a Chinese origin, but also in the fact that it is a French term. The other most frequently mentioned (and therefore suspected) consumable in the protocol is coffee-like the *Pommes de Chine*, a foreign and rather novel consumable in Brandenburg-Prussia. In other European contexts, coffee was cited in relation to poisoning because its strong taste and smell might mask a poison.[39] Across the medieval and early modern periods, poisoning was »a crime of the other« and cases often conclude with scapegoating outsiders.[40]

In the saga of Prussian dynastic history, Ludwig is known for his death and its aftermath more than anything he did in life. This episode has been romanticized by eighteenth and nineteenth-century accounts and is still greatly misunderstood by contemporary historians. In his recent history of Friedrich Wihelm's descendants from his second marriage (in other words, the Margraves of Brandenburg-Schwedt), Wintzingerode attempts to rescue Electoress Dorothea from

39 Herman, *The Royal Art of Poison*.

40 Collard, *Crime of Poison in the Middle Ages*, p. 17.

the lingering historical taint of the titles of »evil stepmother« and the »Berlin Agrippina.«[41] Wintzingerode paints the story of Ludwig's suspected poisoning to be a baseless fantasy created long after by the gossipy sensationalist, the Freiherr von Pöllnitz, and nothing more than »Hofklatsch.«[42] But, just because von Pöllnitz is not a trustworthy historical source for 1687, does not mean we should dismiss the story. Gossip is revealing; not about Ludwig's actual cause of death, but about how this particular society dealt with a threat they could neither control nor confirm.

The investigating commissioners did not present a judgement in their protocol and there were no further investigations on the part of the elector. In its attempt to »discover the real truth,« the commission instead offered the opportunity to further »other« members of court who were already on the margins (namely, Catholics and foreigners). The only action taken on the part of the elector was to instruct the other young princes not to host any foreign guests and to order that all their food be prepared only by the *Mundschenk* and all drinks tasted by him personally.[43] This action would, of course, have only protected the electoral family from an outside danger. The true danger of poisoning was internal, intimate, and ultimately unknowable. The ignorance evoked by poison's secretive nature fanned the flames of panic at this court. But these fears grew in fertile ground: the circumstances for distrust were already established at this court to make poisoning believable. Ignorance and powerlessness generally incite people to clamp down harder in an attempt to protect themselves. In the context of early modern Europe, the fear of poisoning, whether real or unfounded, exposed the vulnerability of even the so-called »absolute« rulers.

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41 Wintzingerode, *Schwierige Prinzen*.
42 Wintzingerode, *Schwierige Prinzen*, p. 41–43.
43 Vehse, *Geschichte der deutschen Höfe seit der Reformation*, p. 282.

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