

Sanguis versus *Cruor* in Seneca's and
Shakespeare's Tragedies.
An Etymological Perspective*

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Abstract:

Propensity for murder co-exists, by virtue of the conflict of opposites, with the need of perpetuating the human race. This etymological study, illustrated with examples from Seneca's and Shakespeare's tragedies, reveals the dual nature of blood that symbolises not only the positive aspects of life – *sanguis*, but also man's negative inclinations which lead, through the act of killing, to *cruor* (gore), the proof of murder itself.

Keywords: *sanguis* – *cruor*, *blood* – *gore* opposition, vital fluid, bloodshed

Propensity for murder co-exists, by virtue of the conflict of opposites, with the need of perpetuating the human race. The conflict between the two extreme human features, one generating life, the other ending it, reveals the dual nature of blood: indispensable for life, it is a symbol of sacrifice and death, poison and cure at the same time.

This etymological study, illustrated with examples from Seneca's and Shakespeare's plays, reveals the dual nature of blood that symbolises not only the positive aspects of life – *sanguis*, but also man's negative inclinations which lead, through the act of killing, to *cruor* (gore), the proof of murder itself.

The *sanguis*-alive/*cruor*-dead opposition supports the idea that although blood “is considered the essence of life, a means of expressing death and a symbol of life” or sometimes even the place where man's and animals' souls live (Evseev, 2001: 164), although it represents “all that is beautiful, noble, generous and elevated” (Chevalier; Gheerbrant, 1982: 843), the negative components of blood are at least as strong and fascinating as its commonly assigned positive values.

Form an anatomical perspective, blood is the vital red fluid that runs through our veins. However, the word acquires other meanings as well

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and such meanings are frequently used and attested in the dictionaries of the Romanian language: “origin”, “descendants”; “sacrifice”; “animal breed or disease”; “cruelty”, “murder”.

The Romanian word *sânge*, which is derived from the Latin *sanguis*, and its English equivalent *blood* are prolific words that have produced a large number of phrases and idioms: bad blood (*dușmănie*), blue blood (*sânge albastru*), call of the blood (*glasul sângelui*), innocent blood (*sânge nevinovat*), young blood (*sânge tânăr*), blood brother (*frate de sânge*) blood ties (*legătură de sânge*), in cold blood (*cu sânge rece*), to make blood boil (*a-i fierbe sângele în vine*), make blood run cold (*a-ți îngheța sângele în vine*), to have a rush of blood to the head (*a i se urca sângele în obraz*), to shed blood (*a vărsa sânge*), to be in someone’s blood (*a avea ceva în sânge*), to get blood out of/from a stone (*a scoate apă din piatră seacă*), to have blood on one’s hands (*a avea mâinile pătate de sânge*), to spit blood (*a scuipa foc*) blood is thicker than water (*sângele apă nu se face*), etc.

Blood-shedding, either by murder, or by suicide, is as old as blood-letting, which was practised at the beginnings of medicine. The two have totally different purposes, since the former kills, while the latter heals. While the flow of blood through the human body to its final destination, the heart, is not a voluntary process, though it may explain human actions and reactions, blood-shedding is a deliberate act and, whatever its reasons, it has always been indictable.

The etymological dictionary of the Latin language, when explaining the entry *sanguis*, *-inis*, mentions its archaic form, *sanguen* (Ernout; Meillet, 1951: 1046). This was used, for instance, by the poet Ennius, in *Annalium Liber I*, where he praised Romulus, in whose veins ran the blood of gods: “O pater, o genitor, o sanguen dis oriundum”¹. The two French authors identify three acceptations of *sanguis*, illustrated with examples taken from various sources, to which we have added quotations from Seneca’s and Shakespeare’s plays.

1. **Blood, the vital fluid**; “uir sanguinum”: “Uirum sanguinum et dolosum abominabitur Dominus”² (*Psalms* 5, 7); “Uiri sanguinum oderunt simplicem”³ (*Proverbs* 29, 10); “Uae ciuitati sanguinum”⁴ (*Ezechiel* 24, 6).

2. **Bloodline, ancestry**: “sanguine coniuncti”: “per quam sanguine coniunctis”⁵ (Cicero, *De Inventione*); “... sanguine coniunctos retinere”⁶

¹ “Oh, Father, oh Creator, oh blood from the blood of gods”

² “the violent and deceitful Yahweh detests”

³ “The bloodthirsty hate the honest”

⁴ “Disaster is in store for the bloody city”

⁵ “those connected by blood ties”

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(Sallustius, *Bellum Iugurthinum*); “ut saeuiret ipse in suum sanguinem”⁷ (Titus Livius, *Ab urbe condita*);

3. **A symbol of force**, a meaning with which *sanguis* has always been used: “O nimium potens quanto parentes sanguinis uinclo tenes natura”⁸ (Seneca, *Phaedra*).

According to Ernout and Meillet, in the written language of the Roman classical era and Empire, only *sanguis* was used, but the Roman forms preserved *sanguen*. *Sanguis* generated the following derivatives and compounds, mostly nouns and adjectives, whose explanations, given in brackets, are based on the Latin-Romanian dictionary by Gheorghe Guțu:

- *sanguineus* (full of blood, bloody, of the colour of blood), *consanguineus* (of the same blood, related; brother, sister; *consanguinitas* – blood relation): “Martis sanguineas quae cohibet manus”⁹ (Seneca, *Medea*), “et saeua bella Marte sanguineo gerant?”¹⁰ (Seneca, *Phaedra*).

- *sanguinalis* and *sanguinarius* (bloodthirsty, bloody), from which *Sanguinaria canadensis*, the bloodroot, derived its name:

- *sanguinolentus/sanguilentus* (“bloodstained, bloody”): “sanguinolenta Bellona manu”¹¹ (Seneca, *Agamemnon*);

- *sanguinosus*: “sanguine”, used by Caelius Aurelianus in his medical texts;

- *sanguino*, *-as*: “to bleed”, used in the Roman Imperial period;

- *sanguiculus*, in Pliny Maior’s works, or *sangunculus*, in Petroniu’s *Satyricon*, chapter LXVI: “blood pudding” or “black pudding”;

- *sanguisuga*: “leech”, a compound that substituted *hirudo* in Pliny’s time, and *sansūgia*, a result of haplology;

- *exsanguis* (“bloodless”, “lifeless”, “dead”, “pale”), *exsanguinatus* – used in the introduction to *De architectura*, by Vitruvius: “exsanguinata et exsucata”¹² – and *exsanguinesco*; also found in Seneca’s plays: “omnis frigido exsanguis metu uenator horret”¹³ (*Phaedra*).

Having been used in all the Latin-speaking territories, the noun *cruror*, *-oris* had a specialised meaning, that of “gore”, “thick blood

⁶ “connected to you by blood”

⁷ “against those of the same blood”

⁸ “O nature, so potent mistress, you hold parents and children with very strong ties of blood”

⁹ “she who holds back the bloody hand of Mars”

¹⁰ “fight savage battles with bloody Mars?”

¹¹ “Bellona’s bloody hand”

¹² “bloodless”

¹³ “the hunter feels a chilling fear”

falling from a wound” or “clotted blood”, “pool of blood”, as opposed to “blood” which runs in the body. At first, **cruor** might have meant “raw, bloody meat”, but in Latin this meaning was covered by the noun *caro* (Ernout; Meillet, 1951: 272).

The noun *cruor* produced the following derivatives: *cruentus* (“bloody”, “cruel”), which in turn led to *cruentō, -ās* (“to spill blood”, “to stain”, “to defile”, “to hurt deep inside” – a figurative meaning) and *incruentus* (“no blood-shedding”). Gh. Guțu also explains the adjective *incruentatus* (“not stained by blood”). Seneca wrote about “cruentis manibus”¹⁴ (*Medea*) or “cruenta Tyndaris”¹⁵ (*Agamemnon*).

The following words are based on the root **cru-*:

1. *crudus*, an adjective that suggested both the state (“bloody”: “horrent admotas vulnera cruda manus”¹⁶, Ovid, *Epistulae ex Ponto*, Book III) and the action (“he/she who sheds blood”: “crudum uirum esse”¹⁷, Plautus, *Truculentus*); a further derivative is the adjective “cruel” (“crudus et leti artifex”¹⁸, Seneca, *Phaedra*). Besides “bloody”, *crudus* also meant “raw, not cooked”, and with this meaning it was used as an antonym of *coctus* (“cooked”). The other meanings of *crudus*, “undigested” and “not digesting”, produced *cruditas* (“indigestion”). Other derivatives of *crudus* (“bloody”) are the verbs *crudesco* (“to become more violent”), *incrudesco* (“to become cruel”) and *recrudesco* (“to worsen”, “to reburst”);

2. *crudelis* (“merciless, cruel”), which replaced *crudus*, and the noun *crudelitas* (“cruelty”);

3. *crudarius*: “argenti vena in summo reperta crudaria appellatur”¹⁹ (Pliny Maior, *Naturalis historia*, Book 33).

The *sanguis-cruor* distinction occurs in Lucretius’s Book II of *De rerum natura*: “quod genus e nostro com missus corpore **sanguis**/emicat exultans alte spargitque **cruorem** [emphasis added]”²⁰; or in Seneca’s plays: “manet noster sanguis ad aras: assuesce, manus/stringere ferrum carosque pati/posse cruores – sacrum laticem percussa dedi”²¹ (*Medea*), sau: “hospitum dirus stabulis *cruorem*/praebuit saeuis tinxitque

¹⁴ “bloody hands”

¹⁵ “cruel daughter of Tyndarus”

¹⁶ “the fresh wound shivers when touched by the hand”

¹⁷ “he is a cruel man”

¹⁸ “a bloody man and skilful torturer”

¹⁹ “the silver vein that is closest to the surface is called «crudaria»”

²⁰ “Blood flowing from our bodies, spurts in strong jets”

²¹ “my hand, learn to let my own blood flow on the altar, to draw the sword and shed beloved blood. I have sacrificed the sacred stream”

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crudos/ultimus rictus *sanguis* aurigae [emphasis added]²² (*Agamemnon*). What is most interesting in the last example is the presence of the derivative *crudos*, besides *sanguis* and *cruor*. When describing the labours of Hercules, Seneca used three words of the same semantic field in two successive lines, as they suggest, more powerfully in Latin than in English, violence and cruelty and create a picture that is meant to terrify the eyes as well as the mind.

An intermediate Latin word between *sanguis* and *cruor* is the feminine noun *sanies*, *-ei*, with two acceptations (Ernout and Meillet, 1951: 1046–47). The first is that of bloody discharge from wounds, a fluid between blood (*sanguis*) and pus (*pus*, *tabum*); the term appears in *De medicina*, Book V, Chapter 26, a specialised medical text by Celsus: “Ex his autem exit *sanguis*, *sanies*, *pus*. *Sanguis* omnibus notus est: *sanies* est tenuior hoc, uarie crassa et glutinosa et colorata”²³ [emphasis added]. The second acceptation, more common in literature, is the snake venom or any other fluid resembling *sanie*. In *Medea* by Seneca, the old nurse, when describing the prelude of Medea’s terrible revenge, says: “Mortifera carpit gramina ac serpentium/*saniem* exprimit”²⁴ [emphasis added].

Gh. Guțu translates *sanies* with “1. discharge, pus, drooling”; 2. yeast, juice.” The derivatives of *sanies* are the adjective *saniosus* (“full of *sanies*, “purulent”) and the verb *exsanio*, *-as* (“to fester, to suppurate”), both medical terms used in the Imperial period (Ernout and Meillet, 1951: 1047).

Lexically, the Romanian language does not distinguish *sanguis* from *cruor*. Both are translated as *sânge* (“blood”), and their different acceptations are rendered as the translator feels right. Here are some examples from Seneca’s tragedies: “iustior numquam focus/datus tuis est sanguis, arqutenens dea”²⁵ (*Phaedra*); “sanguinem extremæ dapes/domini uidebunt et cruor Baccho incidet”²⁶ (*Agamemnon*); “ad hauriendum sanguinem inimicum feror”²⁷ (*Hercules furens*).

Unlike Romanian, English makes a difference between the equivalent of *sanguis* – *blood*, which generated not only a rich word family consisting mostly of compound adjectives, but also a long list

²² “he gave his horses to drink the gore of guests, and the blood of their king last stained their jaws”

²³ “Blood, *sanies* and *pus* are discharged from wounds. Everybody knows what blood is; *sanies* is thinner than blood, but it may vary in stickiness and colour”

²⁴ “She picks up deadly herbs and squeezes out the snakes’ venom”

²⁵ “Never has blood been shed more justly on your altar, o goddess with a bow”

²⁶ “At the end of the banquet, gore shall fall into the wine”

²⁷ “I am ready to drink blood from my enemy’s chest”

of phrases and idioms – and *gore*, the equivalent of *cruor*. Lady Macbeth says: “make thick my *blood*; /Stop up the access and passage to Remorse”, while Macbeth speaks about: “their daggers/Unmannerly breeched with *gore*” [emphasis added] (Shakespeare, 2002: 326).

Blood (*blod* in Old English), is derived from the proto-Germanic **blodam*. *Blood* was preferred to **krew*, which might have meant “blood flowing out of the body”. Ernout and Meillet point out an obvious connection of **krew* with *cruor*, which led to *kruvi*, a term that was borrowed and established in the Baltic and Slavic languages with the meaning of *sanguis*. The same authors specify that most frequently the words meaning “blood” have an obscure origin and belong to the neuter gender, as does the Latin archaic form *sanguen*, and it is the masculine noun *sanguis* that had a surprising evolution (Ernout; Meillet, 1951: 46).

The noun *gore*, which today means blood flowing from a wound mainly in violent situations, was *gor* in Old English and meant “dirt, filth”. It has an uncertain origin and the acceptance of “clotted blood” and “blood shed in a battle” developed around the 16th century. Currently, the English verb *to gore* means “to wound”, but it is used in connection with animals that may cause wounds with their tusks or horns; it might be related to the Scottish term *gorren*, meaning “to stab”, or *gar*, meaning “spear” in Old English. The adjective *gory* describes an extremely bloody event.

A “red” statistics of *sanguis* and *cruor* in the four Senecan tragedies from which this study has quoted reveals that the former and its derivatives are more frequent than the latter. Nevertheless, the most brutal images focus on the fluid of death, the gore that defiles the heroes’ motherland or, on the contrary, gives the heroes the chance to redeem themselves. The striking visual images in Seneca’s and Shakespeare’s tragedies focus on *cruor*, since *cruor* stains the water (as *sanguis* sometimes stains the killing had), the field and, most of the times, the altar. Sometimes, *cruor* only alludes to the abominable deed: *fraternus cruor* (“brotherly blood”) is the blood of Absyrtus, Medea’s brother, whom she killed and threw into the sea, defiling its waters, while *gemini monimenta cruoris*²⁸ (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book IV) alludes to Nessus’ blood that Hercules received as a gift, a love potion from his wife. Other times, *cruor* spurts from Prometheus, in an image as shocking as the scene in which Medea chops her own children.

The three-word sequence in *Agamemnon*, “betrayal, death, blood”, is a universal summary of both Seneca’s and Shakespeare’s tragedies. *Sanguis*, the seed of the plot, anticipates betrayal and turns into *cruor*

²⁸ “A memorial of our twin deaths”

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through death, while *cruor* becomes climax and denouement at the same time.

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