

LW2 Pursuing Injustice Through Truth in Conjecture: The Hunt for a Scapegoat During an Ancient Pandemic

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Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will have a better understanding of the importance of pursuing justice through scientific evidence without any cultural or social bias.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by analyzing a historical trial as an illustration of the importance of scientific evidence-based investigation and prosecution, significant especially when social factors can influence the case.

Between 1629 and 1631, a massive outbreak of bubonic plague struck the north of Italy, in particular Milan and the neighboring cities. Alessandro Manzoni described the social impact of this pandemic in the historical novel, *The Betrothed (I promessi sposi)* in 1827.¹ During the preparation of his book, the author collected data that he published later in the monographic essay, *History of the Infamous Column* (*Storia della Colonna Infame*).² In this paper, Manzoni recounts the trial against two alleged plague-spreaders, held responsible for the pestilential contagion through mysterious substances.

On June 21, 1630, the commoner Caterina Rosa spotted the health commissioner, Guglielmo Piazza, going close to the buildings' doors and walls in Vetra Street. She believed that he was anointing the walls with a dark substance to spread the plague. That accusation was later confirmed by one of her neighbors, Ottavia Bono.

The police misinterpreted some ink stains on the walls as the pestilential ointment and arrested the suspect "smearer" (*untore*), whose hands appeared stained. Piazza, subjected to interrogation and torture, denied the accusation. Only under the pressure of the inquisitors, who promised him impunity and freedom, did Piazza confess to having received the pestilential ointment from Giangiacomo Mora, a local barber who also sold balms and potions that he claimed cured disease.

An inspection of Mora's house was conducted only after his arrest, and the investigators discovered traces of a mysterious unguent. Even if Mora explained the harmless nature of the preparation, which was a mixture of ash and boiling water used to wash clothes, the judges and experts appointed by the court identified the balm as a pestilential potion capable of spreading the plague.

The trial continued, based on the use of torture rather than an actual search for evidence. The violent methods led the two accused to contradict their statements several times and finally confess the non-existent guilt to end the atrocious physical and psychological tortures. They also accused five alleged accomplices in a desperate attempt to save their lives, having faith in the investigators' groundless pledges.

Finally, the court decreed the death sentence for all the unjustly accused, and the execution took place on August 2 by the breaking wheel after parading the accused through the city' districts, where they had their "guilty" hands amputated. Mora's house-shop, allegedly the place where the poisonous ointment had been produced, was demolished. A pillar, known as the "Infamous Column," was erected in that location as an enduring memory of the punishment incurred by those spreading the plague.

The monument was only removed in 1778 and recognized as a testimony of infamy no longer charged to Mora but to those who had committed a colossal injustice.

Alessandro Manzoni intended to underline the mistake committed by the judges and the abuse of their power, which trampled every form of human common sense, driven by an utterly unfounded conviction and by a fear linked to the terrible environment caused by the epidemic.

Under a historical and forensic perspective, it is essential to understand how the pandemic killed approximately half of the Milanese population and put the people under immense stress, already scared by an unknown and merciless disease. The fear fed the diffusion of popular superstitions that were used in an attempt to rationalize the mysterious disease. Ordinary people were identified as responsible, usually picking them from ethnic and other minorities; at other times, supernatural forces were invoked. One of them is the *nachzerer*, the shroud-eating vampire who spread the plague from the grave through demonic action.

The goal of this research is to describe the risk of an unfair trial when the investigation and judgment are influenced by social environments, stressful factors, media, and public opinion. This presentation also stresses the importance of a trial based on scientific evidence and the reliability of investigations sustained by scientific research, training, and forensic standards.

Reference(s):

1. Alessandro Manzoni. *The Betrothed (I promessi sposi)*. 1827.
2. Alessandro Manzoni. *History of the Infamous Column (Storia della Colonna Infame)*. 1840.

Trial, Pandemic, Evidence-Based Investigation