

Opinion
about the cause of death
of Mylady the Countess
Cornelia
Zangari ne' Bandi
of Cesena
expounded in a letter
to Sir Count Ottolino Ottolini
by Giuseppe Bianchini,
Canon of Verona
second edition

Verona, 1733

For Pierantonio Berno Bookseller in the Via de' Lioni.
With permission of my superiors

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Sir Count,

I have conceived the idea, most learned Sir, to give you a faithful report of a strange and lamentable decease, which has taken place on the evening of the 14th of March of the current year 1731, in Cesena, which has filled the souls of the citizens of this place with a severe fright and horror. This event is now inciting the sharpest minds of Italy into heavy speculation about the origin of this death. It is not my intention to range myself among those who have, as they should, a great knowledge and such a very strict concept of nature, that it is easy for them to investigate; indeed, by means of a careful investigation or repeated experiences they remove the most arduous difficulties and render as if

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it were the evidence of the truth as it were palpable to our minds. As I have some oversight, it suffices for me that some people, who cannot believe the account because they act as if it is a chimaera dreamt about by some bizarre mind, are enlightened. Even if they think that it is true (because now there is no more room for doubt) and resort to supernatural miraculous causes, they frankly dare to claim that these caused the dire case of the incinerated lady, instead of recognizing that it is a legitimate effect of nature itself. It sometimes happens that nature produces some quite extravagant things that almost surpass our human capacity. But still, if the eye of the intellect penetrates into matters, then one finds easily that nature never transgresses the rules of the true mechanical laws that were imposed on her by the Divine Maker.

[Some descriptions of cases, namely the Paris woman and the Polish cavalier, taken from the literature, are skipped. On page VI, line 2 this translation continues:]

On the basis of these and several other cases of true deadly fires inside the human body, which I will faithfully list at the end of this letter how they happened and what is the matter with them, you, Sir Count, may form a balanced judgment if I rely on both the true and the untrue. Indeed, you are very talented in this kind of natural sciences, besides being a literate man and knowledgeable about

the most serious and Sacred Sciences. Already from your youngest years, when you stayed in Rome with my uncle Monsignor Francesco Bianchini – I preserve the sweetest memories of him – I know that you enjoyed these studies so much that you quite often testified about them in private and public Academies. In order to best investigate the rarest discoveries of the modern Philosophers (your uncle told me this quite often while he was praising you thousandfold for your sharp and rare ingenuity) you subjected everything to tests, to assure yourself in the best possible way that the experiments worked.

So I may hope that you have the patience to read in this letter, which I feel honored to send to you, some tentative considerations on the above mentioned

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very dire case of the pious Lady of Cesena. I have put them into writing a few days ago, in my spare time, after having read the report that Dr. Giuseppe Antonio Mondini from Bologna sent to Father D. Ippolito Bevilacqua of the dominicans of Monteoliveto, in order that the famous Marquis Maffei – honor and pride of our country – would deign to promulgate what he in his wisdom had philosophized on such an event. So it would be an incorrect idea to tell you in my turn what I think, before I exactly write down for you all circumstances of the event. But because the event is told in Venice and also in other countries in different ways, it is my opinion that I must absolutely reveal it here, exactly as the above mentioned Sir Mondini sent it to us.

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ACCOUNT
of the dire event that occurred at the death
of Signora Countess Cornelia Bandi
from Cesena in the night of
March 14 of the year 1731.

Signora Countess Cornelia Bandi had reached the age of 62 and has led an exemplary and laudable life. On the 14th March she was going about her usual affairs at home, without there being anything new, either in words or in facts. When the evening had come and the Sir Count, her son, had returned late – at about one hour after midnight – from the countryside, he was tired and it was urged that dinner was served quickly; nothing else was remarked in the Lady than an extraordinary and rather heavy dullness. Afterwards, when she had retired in her apartments she waived the usual nightly guard by a lady servant, because she didn't want to bother the daughter of her lady's maid with this, who that day had gone out to the countryside. When the young woman insisted that she wanted to assist her, she answered that the company of her Crucifix sufficed her. When the young woman had helped her Mistress into bed, she closed the doors

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of the room. The Countess stayed alone from the fifth hour of the night; because she had spent two, three hours on talking about domestic affairs and had shown her devotion in many usual prayers.

The morning of the 15th the above mentioned young woman, who had helped her Lady go to bed the previous night, saw that it had been already 11 o'clock, and that her Mistress, against her usage, had not waken up yet. She opened the door of the apartment, which could be easily opened from the outside by the latch of the door. When she was in the dark room – the windows were closed – she loudly called her Mistress several times, but when she didn't get an answer and wondered whether her Mistress had been surprised by some accident, she opened the windows quickly and then

witnessed a deplorable spectacle: she saw on the floor the remains of the dead body of her Mistress. So she started to scream fearfully, making all the people in the house rush in. They found on four palmwidths distance from the bed a pile of ashes and two intact legs, in stockings that reached from the foot until the knee joint. Between the legs they saw the head of the Signora, of which the whole braincase was incinerated and also half the skull towards the shoulder and all of the chin. Only the face without the just mentioned chin remained.

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Moreover they saw with teary eyes and greatly terrified three fingers of a hand that weren't completely burnt but just turned brown and black. These were lying in the above mentioned amount of ash. For the rest the servants of the family did not discover any other body part, because the bones, the intestines and the muscles had become such very small ash particles that when one took them in the hand and squeezed them a little – in contrast with any other kind of ashes – they fell lightly through the fingers and left a greasy and smelly moist imprint on the hand.

Confused and appalled the servants discovered also a soot like substance, which covered the whole room, and an oil lamp that stood on the ash covered floor, extinguished, but without oil. They saw on a table two chandeliers standing straight, with the wicks still perfectly intact. The tallow of the candles had molten and was evaporated and both the stems and the feet of the chandeliers had become somewhat moistened by the tallow. The bed was found undamaged, with the upper blankets and sheets intact and turned back only on one side, exactly in the manner that is usual when somebody gets into or out of bed. They saw nothing else on the bed, except moist and ashlike soot. That soot

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covered also the other furniture; it had also soiled and gone into the linen, which was stored in a chest of drawers. The soot was also on the walls and in all chests and closets and on the furniture of the adjoining kitchen. In a large closet one saw an amount of blackened bread, mixed with said soot. When this was given to the dogs, they refused it. Upstairs in the attic room above the room of the deceased, it was seen that from the window sill a greasy and nauseous yellowish fluid was dripping. And in all these rooms they smelt a stench of an undetermined kind, and everywhere said soot was flying.

What is notable, is that the floor of the room in which the dire event took place had become so dirty by this viscous moist substance that it couldn't be scrubbed away. This substance stuck to it, in such a way the floor still remains moist and greasy and the stench spread more and more in the other rooms.

The horror and exceptionality of the case has provided ample material for speculative people to make a thorough study of the probable cause. It appeared to those concerned that one could hardly claim that only the oil lamp could have caught fire and – more remarkably – incinerate a body.

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From experience one knows that the body of a guilty person condemned to burning at the stake, needs a quantity of wood to incinerate. Normally the bodies of such people used to be covered with a shirt that is smeared with tar or another inflammable substance. Moreover, experts say that one needs 48 hours of a strong fire to incinerate a body, the bones and the other body parts, depending on their solidity and resistance, whereas the burning and incineration in our case happened in five hours.

Also, the brightest minds cannot be convinced that this deplorable event can be ascribed to a supernatural or diabolical cause, because Mylady was exceptionally pious during her life. She showed that every time again when she partook of the Holiest Sacraments [e.g. Communion and

Confession] and in her generosity, her alms, and the continual exercise of her devotions. More in particular she showed her piety in her Testament which she had drawn up several years before. Both her Sons inherited equally and she had stipulated that her Daughters and relatives should be rewarded in another way. She had also amply provided for the peace of her soul [e.g. by having masses said for her]. All these things make one think of other, more natural causes and not of higher and miraculous causes.

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The most probable cause that one can think of is lightning as a cause of death. Indeed, according to the common opinion lightning consists of minuscule emanations from the earth containing sulphur and saltpeter, and this fits into the natural order of things. This could have caught fire in the air, or entered through the cracks in the shutters of the windows of the deceased. As proof of this, reasoning by way of consequences, the fire, the blackening, the incineration, and the all covering soot seem to be clear signs of lightning. Also the ashlike discoloring of the linen and all other matters that were in the said room. Because lightning consists of said constituents these parts could settle in great amount on these objects, keeping their ashen color, so this color appeared on every piece of linen and furniture. That is the reason the dogs didn't want to eat from the offered food, because with their keen noses they noticed the smell of sulfur. Also there is the light weight of the ashes into which the body was decomposed, to prove that it probably was the lightning. Indeed, it is typical for this kind of fire that, wherever it occurs, it destroys all objects and takes them away.