‘Idol of my heart’: a story of love and crime in 19th-century Italy

Mark Seymour

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‘I’d like to tell a story about a woman.

The thing is, I know next to nothing about her.’

Haruki Murakami, ‘The Stone Pillow’, 2020

I’ll admit it: I can be lumped in with those historians who love too much. Rigorous scholars may tut-tut even louder when they hear that one of the historic figures I love most is a woman about whom I possess only very few certain facts. In her late 30s, she lived in a small southern Italian town in the 1870s. She was the de-facto wife of a securely employed man whom she wished to leave for someone else. She could write (unusual for a woman in 1870s Italy), and she could afford the luxuries of paper, pen, ink, and postage. That is the sum total of the hard facts. I don’t even know her name. She signed the only documents known to have been penned by her with a mysterious code: ‘L. M.+’. By the traditional standards of the day, L. M.’s best years were behind her, and her domestic arrangements suggest she may have been a widow. She was the last person you’d expect to be sought by the law for cross-examination about her torrid love-life.

Strangely, given the minimal facts at my disposal, I know more than feels decent about L. M.’s amorous aspirations. It’s as if I had come across a forensic x-ray of her very heart: in the midst of a faint outline of a woman’s bones sits a fleshy organ throbbing with fantasies. The idol of L. M.’s heart was a circus showman named Pietro. You might titter now, but in provincial 1870s Italy, a famous circus acrobat was the ultimate matinée idol. From within the circus ring, Pietro noted L. M.’s rapt attention. Each time he galloped past her, he repaid her avid stare with the intensity of a lighthouse beam, the thudding hooves of his horse overlaying her heartbeat. Somehow, personal contact was made, and a marriage plan emerged.

Later, it became clear that Pietro’s beam had fallen upon many women. But L. M. fell for him harder and for longer than most, and she fully thought he was her destiny. After the circus went on its way, L. M. pursued Pietro, letter by florid letter. She baked him biscuits and sent costly gifts. Once, after a tirade about losing his wallet, Pietro asked her to send him a large sum of money. She sent him a token, reminding him rather primly that a ducat of rage wouldn’t pay a cent of debt. She instructed him to send his letters via various go-betweens so her role in the correspondence could never be traced. He did not like the fact that she only signed ‘L. M.+’ and begged for a true signature, saying it would make her feel closer to him. She refused, citing her delicate domestic arrangements: what if the man who provided the roof over her head found out? There would be hell to pay.

L. M. turned out to be very wise not to sign letters to her future husband. In October 1878, Pietro travelled from Calabria, in the deep south of Italy, to Rome, to carry out a violent mission. There, he murdered the husband of another female admirer, hoping to marry her. Arrested red-handed within minutes of the crime, police soon gathered from Pietro’s accomplice that the murder was motivated by marital calculations. Instructed by telegram from headquarters in Rome, police in distant Calabria searched Pietro’s abode and soon found his carefully preserved cache of L. M.’s letters, 37 in all. The men representing ‘the law’ immediately presumed that their author must have been the crime’s instigator.

A major search for L. M. was launched with all the zeal of a fledgling bureaucracy that was both eager to assert authority over its people, and keen to prove its efficacy. The murder prompted one of Italy’s first national media storms, and details such as the hunt for ‘L. M.+’ were reported by newspapers across the length and breadth of the nation. L. M. knew that the law’s net was closing around her. Even if she was the wrong woman, she was appalled by the prospect of her intimate desires being exposed in a public courtroom with the entire nation as an audience. Fortunately, the various ruses she had employed in her correspondence with Pietro proved sufficient to place L. M. beyond official grasp.

‘The law’ itself was something of a novelty in 1870s Italy. The nation’s unification in the early 1860s had swept away several old-regime principalities, replacing them with a unified liberal-constitutional state. One of the new state’s missions was to modernize the complex legal vestiges of the old regimes into a new, uniform system. Compared with the systems it replaced, the Italian legal regime was ‘open’. Public participation – particularly in criminal trials involving a jury – was an important element of the new state’s claim to legitimacy. Throughout Italy, local court houses began to offer a novel nexus between the state and the people. Courts of law were a particular novelty for the public in 1870s Rome, because the city had only been incorporated into the new nation in late 1870. And it was in Rome’s Court of Assizes that L. M.’s former fiancé, Pietro, was tried, in October 1879.

In most respects the Italian state was no more welcoming of female participation than its predecessors. One notable exception was the court of law: trials offered the female public a unique opportunity to engage with the official processes of the new state. Women did not qualify as jury members, but as part of the audience, they could watch, they could gasp, they could exclaim, and they could answer journalists’ questions outside the court. As elsewhere, well-to-do Italian women with time on their hands became habitual attenders of criminal trials. If the storyline behind the crime involved passion, court officials quickly learned to make special preparations for high levels of public interest.

When Pietro the handsome horseman was brought to trial, accompanied by his female riding companion and the wife of the murder victim – both charged as accessories – the public, and particularly women, were seized with a feverish desire to hear the stories behind the murder as they unfolded in the courtroom. The trial, which lasted four weeks, took on its own carnivalesque quality, and journalists outdid themselves to note the particularly high level of women attending. They eagerly broadcast stories about the details of each day’s proceedings to a nation thirsty for every detail. A regular feature of their articles was a daily assessment of the crowd’s mood and level of attention. Both varied according to the point in the storyline to be covered on a particular day, but interest was always very high, and women always made up a large proportion of the audience.

The preponderance of women attracted much negative commentary from influential men. Some claimed to want to protect them from the salacious stories that emerged during the trial. The Vatican’s newspaper dismissed the entire affair as a disgusting and depraved cavalcade that epitomised all that was wrong with liberal government. During the trial, Italy’s most famous living poet, Giosuè Carducci, published a poem on the front page of Rome’s prominent cultural weekly, castigating women’s interest in the trial as prurient. He likened them to so many Mary Magdalens, and accused them of being the bloodthirsty descendants of ancient Rome’s immoral matrons, cheering in the arena. None of this commentary did anything to reduce the interest of modern Rome’s matrons in the trial – on the contrary.

By the time the case came before the court, L. M.’s affair with Pietro was but a sideshow, since it turned out that it was unrelated to the murder. Nevertheless, the prosecution publicly probed the relationship as a strategy to discredit Pietro in the jury’s eyes. The public listened in wonderment as Pietro naïvely explained that entertaining women like L. M. had become part of his professional stock in trade, a way to boost his circus income. The bottom of L. M.’s world fell out as she read in the newspapers that she was merely one of many women who had been profitably duped by the idol of her heart. Her fear of being arrested and questioned had been enormous. The relief that her safeguards had preserved her from becoming Exhibit A in the dock was something of a consolation. But it was a great disappointment to the worldly Roman women who ardently wished to hear stories about Pietro from a horse’s mouth.

The women in court had no formal voice, but an unofficial language of oohs, aahs, sighs, and even applause – all meticulously recorded by the court’s stenographers – meant that at least some of their collective views on elements of the storyline were noted for those reading the newspapers – and for posterity. To the consternation of some men, the women tended to expressed sympathy for Pietro’s female admirers, including the one who had colluded in the murder of her husband. This unfortunate had been made impotent by a battle wound that had also made him a war hero. He was no hero to his wife alas, and in the interests of guaranteeing her sexual satisfaction, she had betrayed him and colluded in his assassination. To some men she had betrayed both her husband and the nation in one act. Many of the women among the public could see that she had found herself between a rock and a hard place, and they oohed their sympathy for her dilemma unreservedly.

Prior to the advent of the courtroom as a venue for public storytelling, educated and well-to-do women might have encountered themes related to those on trial in a serialised novel, at the opera, or in art and myth. Others might have explored them in gossip, whispered when they were out of earshot of men and children. By contrast, public trials embedded such stories in the machinations of an official, modern world. They allowed genies out of bottles, showing that fact could be stranger than fiction, especially in matters of the human heart.

L. M.’s heart had its day in the limelight, but after that, she was never seen again at the circus, and faded gratefully into obscurity. Her idol, Pietro, went to prison for life; his accomplice lover suffered the same fate, even though there was much doubt about her precise role in instigating the murder. Pietro’s acrobatic partner was found innocent and released. She launched a new solo career across the river from the court house, at Rome’s great Politeama circus, the day after the trial concluded.

Sources

This story is based on research for my recent book, *Emotional Arenas: Life, Love, and Death in 1870s Italy* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

The main primary sources were Italian and foreign newspapers, and the official murder investigation files held in Rome’s judicial archives.

For the sake of storytelling rather than history writing, I have taken some small liberties in terms of reporting L. M.’s personal feelings, but almost all other elements in the story are supported by documentary evidence.