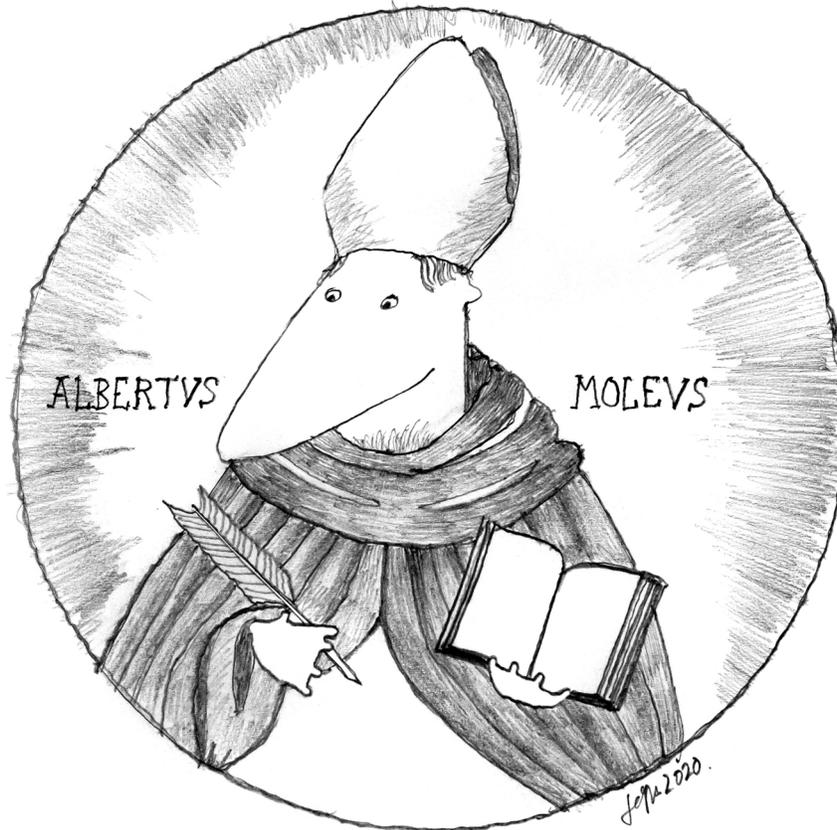


STICKY WICKET

Corona XXIV – poison

Mole

Original artwork by Pete Jeffs - www.peterjeffsart.com

Good morning! If, indeed, it is morning where you are. For me? It's Sunday morning, and I'm doing what I do every Sunday morning. I get up, get out of bed, run a comb across my head (okay, I don't do that, since there isn't enough to comb, but I'm channeling 'A Day in the Life,' I guess). I do brush my teeth (and floss, dental hygiene is important), and I get the newspaper. Okay, I do this every day, but on Sundays it's a really big paper, and I settle down with it a bit longer than on other days. But a part of my ritual, every day, is that after I pick up the paper from my driveway and dump it out of its plastic bag, I wash my hands carefully before touching anything else. I've spoken with the woman who delivers it, and she wears gloves as she bags them, but still – I treat it like poison. I treat everything I get from the outside world like poison now. If I've touched it, I wash my hands. It's automatic. Because, indeed, anything out there could be poison: the awful virus that, against the conventional wisdom, does not make you stronger if it doesn't kill you; it could well make us weaker, potentially crippling our lungs, hearts, and brains. And this virus, like other coronaviruses, does not impart long-lasting immunity, so there is no 'plus' to infection, really. Poison.

Which, as usual, puts me in mind of something completely unrelated: poison and noblewomen of 17th century France. The

Affair of the Poisons towards the end of the 1660s and into the 1670s was a series of mysterious deaths in the French nobility, apparently orchestrated by women who were driven to murderously address the unbridled power and recklessness of the men who controlled their lives. Louis XIV, concerned that this widespread use of poisons could reach him and his family, appointed a special tribunal in 1679, the *Chambre Ardente*, who arrested 194 individuals and sentenced 36 to death. Even before the tribunal (and three years before the 'official' start of the Affair of the Poisons), one case that rocked the royal court was that of the *Marquise de Brinvilliers*, who ultimately admitted, under torture (she later recanted), that she had poisoned her father and two brothers to prevent the family fortune from going exclusively to the male heirs. As a woman, she was forced to defend herself alone, without legal counsel (just saying). While she apparently used a variety of toxins, including one extracted from the skins of toads, her poison of choice was arsenic.

The discovery of arsenic is credited to the polymath (and saint) *Albertus Magnus* who, in 1250, extracted the element from arsenic trioxide by heating it with soap. Neal Stephenson, in his book 'The Confusion', suggests that French noblewomen in the 17th century obtained arsenic from commercial soaps to do their poisonings, and

used it to contaminate their husbands' underwear (and as a precaution, all great houses made their own soap, nevertheless continuing the poisoning practice when they felt it necessary). While I really like the book (and recommend it if you have a lot of time on your hands), the evidence suggests that the Marquise de Brinvilliers obtained *her* arsenic from her lover, Gaudin de Sainte-Croix (who was a pretty despicable character and quite possibly the real villain), who had learned to refine it from an Italian poisoner, Exili, with whom he had briefly shared a jail cell. If there were ever a sequel to 'The Princess Bride' (and I hope there never is to this perfect film), there should be an Exili in it.

The Marquise was described as 'a woman of much attraction. Her skin was extraordinarily white.' I mention that to highlight that this feature (white skin), as well as frailty and fainting, was considered so desirable among certain cultures that by the 19th century and into Victorian times, arsenic was in high demand as a cosmetic tool in Europe and the U.S.; women literally poisoned *themselves* to meet the demands of fashion. It was available in clothing, soaps (perhaps this is where Neal Stephenson got the idea), and even arsenic 'wafers' to be ingested.

Of course, now if we know that we have contacted arsenic, the recommended recourse is to remove it with the liberal use of soap and water. And this is why, when I get the paper each morning, I do just that: wash my hands. No, I don't think that there is arsenic on the bags my paper comes in, but there could be poison, nevertheless. And *this* poison, unlike arsenic, does not require extraction, and happily (for the virus, unhappily for us) spreads readily from person to person through surfaces and the air. Yeh, I wash my hands. Today I thought of Exili, the Marquise, and the *Chambre Ardente* as I did. Which is probably why I brought it up.

Some weeks ago, New Zealand, which had achieved virus-free status (All Black war dance!), reported a small outbreak of the virus. This was traced to a shipment of frozen meat that had arrived from Melbourne, where the Terrible Pandemic still surged. Of course, they controlled it. But see? Poison. Now, my friend and colleague, Professor Quokka, just told us during our weekly virtual CoVOID meeting that in his country (down-undah) they remain in Stage 4 lockdown as there were a reported *five* new cases in his entire country/continent. Five. I suspect that there were five cases last week on the street where I live, and our restaurants are open. (There were significantly more than five cases this week in Washington, D.C., apparently as a result of a mask-averse ceremony held earlier at the White House Rose Garden.) Quokka's country is going for a 'zero virus island.' Yesterday, I spoke with an Irish colleague, who told me that they, too, have a similar 'zero virus island' campaign (although they have a way to go, but *sláinte* anyway).

We now know that not only adults but also children, of all ages, can spread this poison to others, regardless of whether they display any symptoms. In my country, many of our schools are being held in person, and it is almost certain that this will accelerate the spread. Almost certainly, it already is.

I haven't gone to a restaurant, bar, movie, or concert since this all began. If I go out to the store (I do not make my own soap), I wear my mask and socially distance. A few days ago, finally, I went to the dentist, and it felt utterly strange to be maskless in public (okay, it was time, and as safe as possible, but still). You might do otherwise; you might be doing all these things, deciding to 'chance it.' Me, I still know that there is poison. Where I am, it isn't going away anytime soon. Probably that's true where you are too. We *cannot* let down our guard.

Just, please, be careful out there.