

THE NAME OF THE ROSE

As William of Baskerville explained to his Watson, Adso:

"For in every crime committed to possess an object, the nature of the object should give us an idea, however faint, of the nature of the assassin. (p. 285)" You don't have to be Sherlock Holmes to realize that there was "something afoot" at that monastery in 1327. It cost the lives of Adelmo, Venantius, Berengar, Severinus, Malachi, and Abo.

What was going on? What was everyone so upset about? Why were these monks murdered? In any murder or murder mystery, you need to get to the key that unlocks the mystery: motive.

I might be helpful with getting to the motive in *The Name of the Rose*.

Because I once lived a monastic life, as a member of the Franciscan Order, I have loved this book since its publication in the US back in the 80's.

And I used it as a resource in my undergraduate Honors Thesis in history, which was about how people in the middle ages understood their world. How they thought that everything around them resembled the perfection of heaven, and how physical things were actually signs that pointed upward. This was particularly the case in the subject of the thesis: ALCHEMY. So, I'll tap into all that experience for the discussion today.

This will help us explore how people who lived in 1327 understood their world, and what they valued so much they were willing to commit murder for it. So, we must ask ourselves William's question: "When we consider a book, we musn't ask ourselves what it says, but what it means.... p. 316).

What does *The Name of the Rose* mean? This will make for an interesting discussion today. And to open the discussion up I'll start with 4 main points:

1. The political situation in 1327: the Pope vs. the Emperor
2. The Franciscan Order and why poverty was regarded as heretical.

3. Without modern science, how did people in the Middle Ages understand their world? Signs and resemblances....

4. AUTHORITY--which gets us to THE MOTIVE.

This sounds like a lot, but luckily I can use Umberto Eco quotes for each of the 4 points.

1. THE POLITICAL SITUATION

William and Adso arrived at the monastery on a politically high-stakes mission. Europe, and the Church, were being torn apart by the struggle between the Spiritual vs. the Temporal, that is between the Pope and the Emperor. The Franciscans had the insight that there was actually NO DIFFERENCE between the two--this made the Franciscans DANGEROUS.

BOTH the Pope and the Emperor were fighting for worldly power and wealth. The pope, in Avignon, opposed the Franciscans, who were temporarily backed by the emperor.

2. THE FRANCISCAN ORDER, POVERTY AND HERESY

The Franciscans, and the numerous offshoots of the Franciscan Order like the Dolcinians and the Fraticelli, were dangerous to those in power in Avignon. In the novel "...rebellion against power takes the form of a call to poverty, (p. 127)" a central belief of St. Francis of Assisi.

Salvatore, and millions of other well-intentioned people, found the wealth of the Church scandalous and repulsive. One of them, Michael of Cesena, who felt called to poverty and advocated it at the Chapter of Perugia is summoned to Avignon by Pope John XXII. Eco makes us feel a sense of foreboding for him--is he to become burnt flesh? Like the simple but sincere Salvatore?

Reforming corrupt institutions sounds like a good idea to most people. In Medieval Europe, poverty seemed like a handy antidote to the poison of wealth in the Church. Eco writes that it is hard to "understand why the men of the church and of the secular arm were so violent against people who wanted to live in poverty.... p. 237)"

But I have a hunch that those in power do not like to be reminded about what they have betrayed. And the wealthy and powerful always want more wealth and power--never less wealth and power. And back then they could send annoying people to the stake and justify it by calling their victims heretics.

3. SIGNS AND RESEMBLANCES

The Medieval world knew a lot of science and chemistry. They just didn't know they knew it. But there was a lot of sophisticated chemistry going on in areas like metallurgy, dyes, perfumery and that glorious achievement of the art of the Middle ages: stained glass.

But medieval man interpreted these manifestations of the physical world as signs that pointed to resemblances to their spiritual counterparts. Since gold did not rust--was incorruptible, it was seen as resembling the perfection of Christ.

Today we study things for what they are in order to understand them. In William and Adso's time things were studied for what they resembled.

There is quite a difference in the way modern man and medieval man understood things. Today we understand television. However, if William and Adso were to watch television they might understand it in terms of a Visitation--like Gabriel at the Annunciation.

They believed that God covered the earth with resemblances to its perfect heavenly model--like the tympanum over door of the abbey, so marvelously covered with carvings that Adso spends several pages describing it.

The outward, physical manifestations of resemblance, signs, also covered the earth. William tells Adso, "I have never doubted the truth of signs...they are the only things man has with which to orient himself in the world. p. 492"

This harmonious system of resemblance, signs and authority was at the disposal of those who undertook the pilgrimage to salvation. Medieval man felt well-equipped for the journey.

4. AUTHORITY

William asks Adso who

"...decides what is the level of interpretation and what is the proper context? You know, my boy...it is authority, the most reliable commentator of all and the most invested with prestige, and therefore sanctity. Otherwise how to interpret the multiple signs that the world sets before our sinner's eyes, how to avoid misunderstandings into which the Devil lures us?" p. 448

The medieval concept of authority is shocking to the modern mind. As shocking as television would have been to William and Adso.

Authority derived its prestige due to its proximity to Christ. Therefore, scripture, the gospels, and ancient philosophers like those of ancient Greece and Rome were authoritative. The further we receded away from Christ in time the more imperfect we become. There was a belief in "mundus senescit. p. 36" --the world grows old.

Authority was perfect, and preserving it was the main task of scholars. Jorge explains:

"Preservation, I say, and not search....There is no progress, no revolution of ages, in the history of knowledge, but at most a continuous and sublime recapitulation. p. 399"

So Jorge takes a very dim view of one book in the library. Aristotle's *Second Book of Poetics*. Just as earlier in the story there was a discussion as to whether or not Christ actually owned anything, later in the story there is discussion about whether or not Christ laughed.

The church sent uncountable thousands to the stake over the issue of poverty. Jorge was so threatened by laughter it became his motive for murder and suicide.

Why?

He argues back at William:

"The spirit is serene only when it contemplates ...and truth and good are not to be laughed at...Laughter foments doubt...When you are in doubt, you must turn to an authority, to the words of a father ...then all reason for doubt ceases....With his laughter the fool says in his heart "Deus non est. p. 132" There is no God.

So destroying the *Second Book of Poetics*, and everyone who touched it or knew of it became Jorge's way of protecting everything he believed in. That was his motive.

Medieval man was VERY different from modern man.

I doubt if anyone recently has murdered someone else for reading Aristotle.