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Crime Fiction Set in the Middle Ages: Historical Novel and Detective Story

Abstract: In the wake of Ellis Peters' first Brother Cadfael Chronicle, *A Morbid Taste for Bones* (1977), there has been a veritable boom in medieval mystery stories. Since all authors proclaim to write historical crime fiction, they combine the two genres of the historical novel and the detective story. In doing this, they create specific images of the Middle Ages. The notion of what is medieval and how the Middle Ages can be used as a site for crime fiction is the subject of the first part of this investigation. Parts two and three analyze the conventions adopted from the modern detective story, especially the Golden Age clue-puzzle story and the hard-boiled school, and their use in medieval mysteries.¹

I.

In the last decade and a half, the extensive section on mystery stories and crime fiction in British and American book stores has been complemented by a new type: the medieval mystery story.² The slogans on the covers of the paperback versions appeal to the prospective buyer: "In the tradition of Ellis Peters' Brother Cadfael novels, Sister Frevisse is sinfully good at discerning the mysteries of the soul [...] and solving the crimes of the human heart" (Margaret Frazer, *The Servant's Tale*, 1993); "In the tradition of Ellis Peters, 'A Plague on Both Your Houses' introduces the physician Matthew Bartholomew [...]" (Susanna Gregory, *A Plague on Both Your Houses*, 1996); "Definitely an Ellis Peters competition," *Evening Standard* (Peter Tremayne, *Absolution by Murder*, 1997); and "Ellis Peters has a cohort of pretenders snapping at her heels [...]" *Time Out* (Candace Robb, *The Cross Legged Knight*, 2002). Only P.C. Doherty stands on his own: "The maestro of medieval mystery," *Books Magazine* (Paul Doherty, *A Haunt of Murder*, 2003).³

¹ This paper has profited greatly from the advice and the suggestions offered by Sandy Camargo (University of Illinois), an expert on popular culture. My special thanks go to her, and also to the Scottsdale Public Library at the Scottsdale Civic Center, a treasure trove for those interested in medieval mysteries.

² Brief references to this new type of detective story have been included in recent histories of the genre, cf. Schmidt 1989, 327-32; Ousby 1997, 189-91; Knight 2004, 144-5; cf. also Rauter 1999, 35-44.

³ His outstanding position was recently recognized by Baumann 1998.

These sales pitches are obviously directed at those buyers who appreciate Ellis Peters' historical detective stories which are seen, by both publishers and readers, as the fountain head of this particular type of crime fiction. And indeed, the Brother Cadfael mysteries, first published in 1977, constitute the beginning of a sub-genre that has been very successful commercially. As Jacqueline K. Dohn Maas, writing in 1995, observes: "There have been twenty titles or 'Chronicles' featuring the shrewd Benedictine with over 10 million copies sold to date" (Dohn Maas 1995, 425). Kathryn Kennison quotes sales people as saying that mysteries set in medieval England generate the most interest and sell more than any other detective fiction (Kennison 1997, 177).

Ellis Peters' Brother Cadfael Chronicles, however, were no instant success. They did not make the *New York Times* best-seller list, as Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* did, which was published in 1980 in Italian and translated into English in 1983. The first Brother Cadfael novel had a modest run of 5,000 hardcover copies, largely for library sales. The Cadfael novels continued to be issued in hardback by Macmillan, but sales were modest and appreciation limited, which frustrated Peters' literary agent, Deborah Owen. Once Eco's book was published, however, sales picked up. The huge international success of *The Name of the Rose* was beneficial to the Cadfael series, as Deborah Owen realized (Lewis 1994, 84-5). Peters, though, appeared miffed when her books were described as being "in the tradition of *The Name of the Rose*" and she responded in an interview in *The Guardian*: "seven of my books had been published before Eco's first" (Lewis 1994, 85). Comparisons with Eco rankled her, as can be gathered from remarks made in an interview with *Clues* three years before her death in 1994.

This interview is interesting for a number of reasons helping us to differentiate her approach to fiction, history, and the Middle Ages from that of Eco. She dislikes *The Name of the Rose* because it is "very dark, and very hopeless [...]. It doesn't give much consolation to any reader" (Christian and Lindsay 1993, 15). She feels that, in contrast to Eco's novel, her books have a wide readership because they are hopeful. In her opinion, the goal of fiction is to inspire hope. In order to have a redeeming function, literature has to be up-lifting. She also addresses the issue of historical versus detective fiction. Asked by *Clues*, "Do you write them as historical novels with a detective element or detective novels with a historical element?" she responds, "I think probably it began as the second, and has now very much veered towards the first because I find myself more interested in the people than in the mystery" (*ibid.*, 26). People and history merge in Peters' mind. Since people in her novels are, however, fictional characters, they constitute Peters' own version of history. She does not look at history in terms of historical otherness or cultural alterity because "the whole series is trying to say that human nature and human people, human needs and motives and passions have not changed very much, and [is] trying to make the characters feel like the people next door" (*ibid.*, 3). History (without people), then, is strictly material history and furnishes the chronology of events that form the back-

ground to her stories. Medieval intellectual history is viewed with suspicion: "I'm no lover of St. Bernard [...]. I find St. Augustine in many ways regrettable" (*ibid.*, 23-4). Bernard was too ferocious, that is, so unlike the gentle, understanding and humane Brother Cadfael. St. Augustine, on the other hand, believed in election, that is, in the redemption of a few, whereas Peters/Cadfael is inclined to give everybody a second chance. Neither the church father nor the twelfth-century saint fits Peters' concept of enlightened theology exemplified by the situational ethicist Brother Cadfael. Why then has she chosen twelfth-century England as the setting for her novels? By her own admission, the twelfth and thirteenth centuries are her favorite age because "it was a very optimistic time" (*ibid.*, 4): A look at the entry of the Laud (Peterborough) Chronicle for 1137, featuring a vivid description of the evils in the reign of King Stephen, might have dampened her optimism. 1137 is the very year, though, in which the first Cadfael Chronicle, *A Morbid Taste For Bones*, is set!

As the interview with *Clues* illustrates, Ellis Peters conceives of herself primarily as a writer of historical novels with a detective element. Her study of monastic chronicles, saints' lives, *The Rule of St. Benedict*, *The Cartulary of Shrewsbury Abbey*, Dom David Knowles' *The Monastic Orders of England*, and of the *History of Shrewsbury* by Owen and Blakeway provided her both with plots for her novels and the knowledge of material culture that make her stories appear historically accurate. The novels are called *The Chronicles of Brother Cadfael*, suggesting historiography rather than fiction. The same convention is taken up by Susanna Gregory who entitles her series "The Matthew Bartholomew Chronicles," that is, she, too, emphasizes the historiographic dimension of her writings which is implied in the term chronicle. The other writers of medieval crime fiction either move the mystery aspect into focus or combine both the mystery and the Middle Ages.⁴

Interestingly, several of the authors are historians or have taken degrees in history: P.C. Doherty (alias Paul Harding), Michael Jecks, Susanna Gregory, and Peter Tremayne (Peter Berresford Ellis). With the exception of Ellis Peters (Edith Pargeter), who turned completely to the historical novel, none of them writes fiction set in contemporary times. They prefer to create a medieval ambience that serves as the background to their mystery stories. And being or professing to be historians, their concept of the historical novel is a fairly narrow one. They want to get the facts right, that is, the dates, the events, the names of the historical figures,

⁴ Candace Robb refers to her novels as "Owen Archer Mysteries," Peter Tremayne as "Sister Fidelma Mysteries," Paul Harding (P.C. Doherty) as "The Sorrowful Mysteries of Brother Athelstan," Margaret Frazer as "Dame Frevisse Medieval Mysteries," Paul Doherty as "Medieval Mysteries featuring Hugh Corbett," Edward Marston as "The Domesday Mysteries," and Michael Jecks as "Medieval West County Mysteries." There are further series set in medieval England that are not discussed in this paper because they do not offer any new insights into historical crime fiction: Bernhard Knight's "Crown John Mysteries," featuring Sir John de Wolfe, the county coroner of Devon, and Kate Sedley's "Roger the Chapman Medieval Mysteries" which follow the fate of the itinerant Roger on his travels through England during the Wars of the Roses.

and the material culture from weaponry to dress and from kitchen utensils to building materials. The novelists foreground their works' historical accuracy – for example, most of them include maps of buildings, towns, and land areas. Events of English and Irish history are incorporated such as battles, crusades, famines, epidemics, synods, and the Doomsday Book, as are some figures from national and, to a lesser extent, regional history (especially in the Owen Archer, the Brother Cadfael, the Hugh Corbett, the William Falconer, and the Matthew Bartholomew mysteries). The fictional characters move amongst the real historical figures, who establish their credibility. Thus, John Thoresby, the historical Archbishop of York, is the principal agent in the “Owen Archer Mysteries,” who employs his private eye on various delicate missions just as the historical Chancellor Robert Burnell employs the fictional character Hugh Corbett as an investigator when matters of state demand it, like the mysterious death of the Scottish King Alexander. It could be argued, of course, that this creation of credibility is mutual. Since a series character acquires a substantial reality of his own, the credibility of the authors' respective portraits of the historical figures is likewise enhanced by the portraits of their fictional protagonists. In either case the fictional element dominates the historical one because it is doubtful that the intended reader knows who the historical characters may have been in “real life.”

All authors possess a good or at least adequate knowledge of medieval law and the medieval legal system as well as of the regional differences in the law and its institutions. In Tremayne's “Sister Fidelma Mysteries” Irish and Saxon, in Marston's “Domesday Mysteries” Saxon, Danish, and Norman, and in Peters' “Brother Cadfael Chronicles” English and Welsh law is compared and contrasted. Moreover, all authors know medieval medicine: the human anatomy as it was known in the Middle Ages, the diseases (their symptoms and their cures), and the medicinal properties of plants as poisons and their antidotes. Morson's “William Falconer Mysteries,” moreover, demonstrate the author's knowledge of the major intellectual topics discussed in the universities in the late thirteenth century. They are the most academic of the novels, whereas this important aspect in a university mystery is sadly missing from Susanna Gregory's Cambridge novels, in which the intellectual life of the Middle Ages (with the exception of occasional allusions to the Nominalist/Realist-debate) plays hardly any role at all.

Scrupulous observation in the depiction of medieval life and accuracy in the description of historical facts do not make these novels medieval, however. Facts may create a degree of verisimilitude but not historical authenticity; that is, we do not get an accurate image of the medieval world from reading the typical medieval mystery story.⁵ The Middle Ages in these novels serve mainly as a pretext for the mystery story.

⁵ Paul Doherty is aware of these limitations when he asserts: “I tend to regard historical fiction as speculative history. In other words, it allows you to experiment, to theorise as well as to create an imaginative environment for the theorising to take place” (Shankland 2004, n.p.).

Using David Cowart's typology of historical fiction, some of these novels are distant mirrors at best, that is, fictions where the present is projected into the past by the authors (Cowart 1989, 89). Thus, modern topics like ethnicity, multiculturalism, the Celtic fringe, and feminism are occasionally raised and treated in Tremayne's, Marston's, Doherty's, and Peters' novels. At worst they use the Middle Ages simply as a stage – as a colorful background – on or before which the detective story is enacted. As Werner Wunderlich has observed, the protagonists of this sort of fiction do not act in the service of history but in that of the mystery story, and the modern reader enjoys the alienation effect that is achieved when modern processes of detection are presented in the costume of a past age (Wunderlich 1996, 415). For the most part these novels are cloak-and-dagger novels, as Eco calls them, because unlike the historical novels that endeavor to provide a better understanding not only of a particular period but through it also of our present time as the product of remote historical events, these novels are intended to make us enjoy the fictional mystery plot taking place in a quasi-historical environment (Eco 1986, 68-9). This historical period can vary from ancient Egypt or classical Rome to the Tudor era or seventeenth-century New York or late eighteenth-century New England. P.C. Doherty, whose medieval "Hugh Corbett" and "Athelstan Mysteries" are considered in this paper, makes full use of this temporal variety: He enacts his clue-puzzle plots (sometimes with touches of the hard-boiled school) in various historical periods, a fact that illustrates the randomness of the historical background.

Although most of these writers are either historians or profess to write historical novels, no answer has so far been provided as to why their mystery stories should have a medieval setting. What makes the Middle Ages attractive to these writers and what image of the Middle Ages is projected by them? Moreover, having decided on the Middle Ages, what types of modern crime fiction and which plot structures were available to them for their medieval mysteries? Obviously, the police procedural with its forensic reports, record searching, criminal dossiers, fingerprints, science of ballistics etc. is an unlikely candidate because there was no police to speak of in medieval England and modern means of tracing down criminals were not available to medieval English sheriffs and bailiffs. Also, the conventions of hard-boiled detective fiction, featuring a sexually active private eye who lives by his private code of ethics, takes physical risks, and operates on the margins of society and the legal system cannot be fully transposed into a medieval setting because the margins of medieval society were inhabited by outlaws. Nevertheless, some authors of medieval mysteries draw on this tradition. That leaves a third type, the classical clue-puzzle story with its protagonist, the Great Detective, and his assistant. The virtual absence of a police force in medieval England and the temporal distance of the setting are factors in favor of this type because they eliminate the "police paradox": How can one create a situation in which the detective can be a hero without undermining the readers' belief in the effectiveness of their own legitimate police force? Since there is no police to speak of and the crime takes place in a distant past, this problem does not arise.

Thus, avoiding this paradox altogether may indeed be one reason why the Middle Ages are such an attractive setting for crime fiction.

Another reason for choosing the Middle Ages as a site for mystery stories is the genre's inherent need for oppositions. The Middle Ages are normally conceived of as a time of opposing forces, which also generate the conflicts in the mysteries. There is both a hierarchically structured society and outlawry on the margins, a sense of order and of lawlessness, a severe penal code and a profusion of capital crime. To be successful, the medieval detective has to know both sides. He has to maneuver between these antagonistic forces, a feat that requires knowledge, resourcefulness, and cunning.

What image of the Middle Ages is projected in these novels? As becomes readily apparent from the many divergent representations of the Middle Ages in contemporary media, the image of the Middle Ages is unfixed: It changes from age to age depending on a society's needs for values, reconstructions, and projections. In his essay "Dreaming of the Middle Ages" Umberto Eco has assembled a list of "Ten Little Middle Ages," which includes many contradictory notions of what the Middle Ages mean or have meant to us – this list could easily be extended. There are, for instance, the Middle Ages of the Gothic novel, in which Poe's detective stories are rooted. In Gothic fiction, place (Italy), religion (Roman Catholicism), ethnicity (Mediterranean Machiavellians), and form of government (Absolutism) combine to create a negative image designed to inspire horror and fear. In contrast to this negative view of time and place in the Gothic novels, the image of the Middle Ages in modern historical crime fiction is largely positive or at least neutral. We are not confronted with Middle Ages "swarming with Knights Templars, Rosicrucians, alchemists, Masonic initiates, neo-Kabbalists, drunk on reactionary poisons sipped from the Grail [...], mixing up [...] Conan the Barbarian, Avalon and the Kingdom of Prester John" (Eco 1986, 71). There is no prevalent concept of the Middle Ages as a primitive barbaric or Dark Age, although witchcraft, magic, and superstition are part of the medieval world presented in these novels. Only Doherty's Middle Ages bear some resemblance to this sensational view which dominates the fictional world of his *Knight's Tale*, *An Ancient Evil*, and his *Parson's Tale*, *Ghostly Murders*. A different sort of negative image is provided in Susanna Gregory's novels: the Middle Ages as a time of civil unrest, lawlessness, and crime (murder, hysteria, superstition are the catch phrases on the cover of the book). In an explanatory note attached to *A Bone of Contention*, Susanna Gregory appears to have singled out those aspects of Cambridge life (tensions between town and gown, fights between students from different countries, and the rise of superstition in the wake of the plague) which turn medieval life into a hotbed of criminal activities, causing murder and mayhem. Mass hysteria and rioting become characteristic aspects of her novels, that is, she reverts to the Gothic image of the Middle Ages (Gregory 1998, 499-500).⁶

⁶ See also "Interview with Susanna Gregory" (2004): "I've been interested in the fourteenth century since I was a child. For me, it's an interesting combination of magical and sinister,

For the most part, however, the Middle Ages appear as a contemporary age in these novels, and the characters behave like reasonable modern men. In other words, the alterity of the Middle Ages is not an essential feature of this literature. Our sense of wonder, bewilderment, and awe is rarely appealed to. We do not read these novels (with the exception of Doherty's books) because of their strangeness or bizarreness as we might read science fiction.⁷ Since the solution of the crime depends on an act of ratiocination, the world in which the medieval detective moves is by and large a rational one. The reader has to be able to follow the deliberations of the investigator, a fact that demands careful plotting on the part of the author. Ian Morson, for example, meets this requirement by introducing a detective, the Regent Master at Oxford William Falconer, whose favorite philosopher is Aristotle. Thus, Aristotelian logic based on the process of deductive reasoning is Falconer's preferred method of solving crimes.

II.

Instead of reconstructing the Middle Ages as a distant, atavistic, and violent age, a view summed up in the famous remark of "I'm gonna git Medieval on your ass" in *Pulp Fiction* (Dinshaw 1999, 184),⁸ crime fiction presupposes laws, legal institutions, and law enforcement. Consequently, the Middle Ages, though different from our modern times, must conform to the modern reader's expectations in regard to the maintenance of the law. The crimes then are committed for the same motives as now: greed, passion, and the fear of discovery. Typical medieval crimes like heresy, sorcery or high and low treason play a relatively small role in these novels. Unlike in modern society, however, there is more individual and less organized crime (an exception being Doherty's *Satan in St. Mary's*, a story in which the populares, the followers of Simon de Montfort, and the coven under the leadership of the mysterious Hooded One try to assassinate Edward I). Gangs of brigands, outlawed under the Trailbaston Ordinance of 1305, which constituted a true threat to fourteenth- and fifteenth-century English society, receive only peripheral literary treatment – they appear in Michael Jecks' *The Last Templar*.

For the most part, an individual criminal and perhaps his helpers are confronted and exposed by one detective (Owen Archer, Dame Frevisse) or a team of detectives (Brother Cadfael and Hugh Beringar, the deputy sheriff of Shropshire; Sister Fidelma and Brother Eadulf; Simon Puttock, the bailiff of Lydford Castle, and Sir Baldwin Furnshill, Keeper of the King's Peace; Gervase Bret and Ralph Delchard; Brother Athelstan and Sir John Cranston, Coroner of London; Hugh Corbett and Ranulf; Matthew Bartholomew and Brother Michael, Proctor

with the Black Death looming through it, along with the Hundred Years War [...]. I think it's a century of contrasts and contradictions."

⁷ I realize the "we" refers most likely to the academic reader. Other readers may very well see these books as time-travel experiences.

⁸ See also Oexle 1992, 8-10: "'mittelalterlich' [...] als Diffamierungsbegriff" (9).

of Michaelhouse in Cambridge; and William Falconer and Peter Bullock, the town constable of Oxford). Some of these are institutionally legitimate detectives, others have more informal sources of authority, most notably friendships with someone who is a part of the legal system. Brother Cadfael, Dame Frevisse, Matthew Bartholomew, and William Falconer are amateur detectives. Owen Archer is a private eye in the employ of the Archbishop of York, and Hugh Corbett starts out as a chancery clerk in the service of the Chancellor of England under Edward I to become Sir Hugh Corbett, Keeper of the Secret Seal. Sister Fidelma is an official representative of the Irish courts, Simon Puttock is a bailiff, Gervase Brett and Ralph Delchard are members of a royal commission charged to redress grievances in connection with the Domesday Book, and Friar Athelstan serves as a clerk to Sir John Cranston, the Coroner of London.

The constellation of two figures engaged in the criminal investigation and the solving of the mystery immediately strikes the reader of medieval detective stories. He is instantly reminded of the classical team Holmes and Watson, whose temporal predecessors and methodological successors William of Baskerville and Adso of Melk feature in Eco's *The Name of the Rose*. And indeed all the teams are more or less closely patterned on this classical pair. Sister Fidelma and Brother Eadulf, William Falconer and Peter Bullock, and Hugh Corbett and Ranulf resemble the original more closely than Brother Cadfael and Hugh Beringar, Simon Puttock and Sir Baldwin Furnshill, Gervase Brett and Ralph Delchard, Brother Athelstan and Sir John Cranston, or Matthew Bartholomew and Brother Michael. Social position and rank, however, account for some differences. Thus, Sister Fidelma, the sister of the king of Muman (Munster) and holder of the degree of *anruth*, outranks her Saxon companion Brother Eadulf. William Falconer, a master and university teacher, occupies a much more prestigious social position than Peter Bullock, the town constable, a rather lowly police officer in a medieval English community. And Sir Hugh Corbett, who occupies an eminent position in the royal household, is socially far superior to his assistant and companion, Ranulf-atte-Newgate – later on Principal Clerk in the Chancery of the Green Wax –, whom he saved from the gallows.

These social differences are reinforced by intellectual ones. Although Brother Eadulf is clever and observant – he is even called “an inveterate solver of puzzles” (Tremayne 1997, 83) –, he is cast in a supporting role. His job is to offer helpful suggestions and to provide Sister Fidelma with the material evidence from which she draws her conclusions. Similarly, Peter Bullock investigates the scene of the crime, interrogates potential witnesses, and assembles clues, which enable William Falconer to put the puzzle together. The cooperation between Hugh Corbett and Ranulf takes place on a considerably lower level. Ranulf does most of the footwork and is not involved in the crime solution process in the first novels.

The other pairs work largely as equals, a concept introduced to the medieval mystery by Ellis Peters, who attaches a professional police officer to the amateur sleuth. Brother Cadfael and Hugh Beringar are on equal footing. They become friends and even relatives, when Cadfael stands as godfather for Hugh's first

child. Peters' story plots demand such an arrangement because the monk Cadfael has no judicial authority. Being a monk, he is subject to ecclesiastical law and authority, whereas many of his cases fall within the provenance of the secular law. For the apprehension of the criminals, the sheriff's men are needed, whereas for the protection of the innocent Brother Cadfael's ingenuity is called for.

A similar relationship exists between Athelstan and John Cranston. The Dominican friar Athelstan, who as an act of penance has asked to be assigned as clerk to the Coroner Sir John Cranston, has no legal standing in London. He may be the exemplary shepherd of his little flock at St. Erkenwald, the lowliest church in Southwark, but John Cranston represents the legal authority. He is an officer of the law, not only empowered but also charged to investigate criminal cases involving uncertain deaths, suicides, and suspected murders. This unlikely pair represents two qualities equally necessary to the solution of crimes that partake of both the clue-puzzle and the hard-boiled school: on the one hand, logical inquiry, resourcefulness, and tenacity (Athelstan) and on the other, physical strength, courage, and bravado (Cranston). In the final analysis, though, Athelstan provides the solution.

Simon Puttock, the bailiff, and Sir Baldwin Furnshill, who at the end of *The Last Templar* is appointed Keeper of the King's Peace, are both law enforcement officers. Socially they are not equal – Simon Puttock being a commoner and Sir Baldwin a knight. In Jecks' egalitarian world, however, they become friends and relatives: Sir Baldwin stands as godfather for Simon's son. As detectives they are almost equal, with Sir Baldwin being more driven and inquisitive and Simon more doggedly pursuing his prey. Being an old, experienced crusader, Sir Baldwin is the better soldier, whereas calm, patient, and clever Simon is the better sleuth. Together they track down criminals in the wild and wide open West Country, which sometimes takes on features of the American frontier, when Puttock in pursuit of outlaws spends all day in the saddle leading a posse guided by a local scout (*The Last Templar*), or when the two antagonists in *A Moorland Hanging* fight pitched battles to preserve their local dominance like Burl Ives and Charles Bickford in *The Big Country*.

The final pair of detectives are the physician Matthew Bartholomew and the monk Brother Michael. Intellectually they are on even par. As a natural scientist, Matthew is a good observer but not always a good logician, even though he occasionally astonishes his co-sleuth Brother Michael with his brilliant analyses that lead to the discovery of unlikely killers. Still, he is innocent of the ways of the world, a trait offset by the worldly-wise Brother Michael, who is clever, practical-minded, and cunning. Together they are able to solve difficult cases in a clue-puzzle manner.

Owen Archer and Dame Frevisse are the only independent detectives. Originally, Owen Archer was modeled on P.D. James' Adam Dalgliesh. He expresses dissatisfaction with the authorities, but accepts their judgments (cf. Kingston Pierce 1998, n.p.). As the former captain of the archers of the Duke of Lancaster, he is a military man characterized by prudence, resourcefulness, and cunning.

The original conception of the character calls for an outsider – he is both a Welshman in York and unattached.⁹ Later, however, the love element prevails, and Archer marries Lucy Wilton, the widowed daughter of a local knight. By making Owen Archer a family man and involving him in domestic affairs, Robb deprives her detective of the aloofness characteristic of the outsider status.

Dame Frevisse, finally, is not only a female version of Brother Cadfael but also a medieval precursor of Miss Marple. She solves murder cases that take place in the immediate environment of the Benedictine Abbey of St. Frideswide just as Miss Marple solves the murder mysteries that occur in St. Mary Mead. Both are very restricted and circumscribed places in which respectable citizens belonging to the well-to-do classes commit crimes. The manner of Dame Frevisse's approach is close observation and deductive reasoning. Like Miss Marple, who often encounters difficulties with the dull and unimaginative members of the local police force, Dame Frevisse runs afoul of the foolish Coroner Master Montford until he is murdered in *The Clerk's Tale* and succeeded by his intelligent and cooperative son Christopher.

III.

It is certainly no coincidence that the medieval mysteries in the Ellis Peters tradition harken back to the conventions established in Golden Age detective fiction. Peters herself had used the clue-puzzle story because of all types available it was the easiest to transpose to a medieval setting. The clue-puzzle image appears literally ("He had an interesting puzzle to solve," Robb 1994, 30) or metaphorically: "I am like the painter of that mosaic, the small pieces are falling into place [...]" (Doherty 1988, 150) or "Another truth was in place. The tapestry virtually complete" (Morson 1994, 174). These novels not only include the development of the plot consisting of crime, analysis, and discovery, interrupted by the many red herrings that lead the detective on a wild goose chase, but there are also certain presuppositions that govern both Golden Age mysteries and medieval crime fiction.

Firstly, we deal with a closed society that hides some dark aspects under its respectable facade. This may be the well-ordered genteel society of St. Mary Mead that is shocked into the realization of hidden corruption among its good citizens or the quirky Oxbridge society of dons and students who engage in elaborate murder games. Medieval society also is a closed society that is not only divided into a secular and an ecclesiastical branch, but also carefully structured by rank. Transgressions of the worldly authorities against the clergy or the clergy against the worldly authorities upset this social equilibrium as does warfare between the classes and rivalry within the classes themselves.

⁹ Cf. Robb 1994, 317: "I made Owen an outsider because the best detectives have been people outside the immediate society, never quite a part of the community, and because his past experiences and connections would make him more flexible."

Within this closed society, locked rooms or places with limited access became favored sites of crime: country homes, hospitals, ships, trains, airplanes, etc. Medieval England offers similar places. Aside from the ubiquitous monasteries and the Oxbridge colleges, there are manor houses, churches, castles, prisons, and walled gardens. Many are conventional sites and have a long history in clue-puzzle fiction.

This isolation of the setting also isolates the crime. Because crime always happens somewhere else, far away from the reader – a physical distance enhanced by a temporal one in the medieval detective stories – the readers do not feel threatened as they might if the crime were to take place in a contemporary setting. They can view the puzzle from a detached position, and respond to it intellectually rather than emotionally.

Secondly, the confined setting bars outsiders from entering, which means that once the crime is committed, the suspects will be relatives or close associates of the dead person. This restriction also serves to reduce the possible suspects to a reasonable number. Since the seemingly glittering facade of established society is tainted, however, almost all of them will have something to hide that will turn such bystanders into suspects. Historical crime fiction set in medieval England works according to the same principle. Here, too, family members, friends, and associates are suspects, as are the known enemies of the victim. In a feudal society this is a substantial group due to feuds, rivalries, and property disputes. Suspected servants, however, who are socially far less dangerous than powerful criminal lords or felonious members of the wealthy merchant class, will soon be exonerated in observance of Van Dine's Rule 11: "A servant must not be chosen by the author as the culprit" (Van Dine 1946, 191).

Thirdly, the detective in Golden Age clue-puzzle fiction enjoys a large degree of independence. Whatever he or she is, a highly intelligent, energetic, and somewhat elitist and eccentric superman like Sherlock Holmes, an armchair detective like the quaint spinster Miss Marple or the fastidious Hercule Poirot, a professorial thinking machine like S.F.X. Van Dusen, or an inconspicuous, seemingly clumsy and absent-minded clergyman like Father Brown, he or she relies primarily on his or her powers of observation and deduction to put the puzzle together and solve the case.

In a medieval society, however, there are no outsiders akin to those in Golden Age detective fiction. There may be armchair detectives like Dame Frevisse, inspired yet worldly-wise men-of-God like Brother Cadfael or intellectuals like William Falconer, but none of them occupies the assured independent position of their modern counterparts. Although all of them are outsiders of sorts – Dame Frevisse because of her tenuous position in St. Frideswide, Brother Cadfael because of his Welsh nationality, his long and motley secular career, and his office as a herbalist, and William Falconer because of his interest in the natural sciences and Aristotelian philosophy – they are also a part of an association: the convent, the monastery, and the college. And as members of these respective groups, they are subject to rules and regulations which make their job as detectives difficult. Dame

Frevisse and Brother Cadfael cannot leave whenever they feel like it; they have to attend mass and observe the monastic hours (although Brother Cadfael is given an occasional dispensation). Falconer, too, is subject to the time schedule of his college, which puts some limitations on his movements. Moreover, they are accountable to their superiors, who either favor or disapprove of their activities. Especially Dame Frevisse receives little or no official support. In short, the medieval detectives are more restricted in their movements and their investigating activities than their modern counterparts. Still, they solve the cases.

Fourthly, the detective in Golden Age fiction is a puzzle solver, that is, he relies on observation, interrogation, and logical deduction. He is usually not guided by sudden intuitions. As Julian Symons observes: "The assumption of the classical detective story was that human affairs are ruled by reason" (Symons 1992, 138). And, if this is so, then the methods and the motives of the criminal can be detected by reason alone. As Poirot's lengthy disquisitions (running up to twenty pages) at the end of Agatha Christie's novels illustrate, the human mind is capable of fitting every piece of evidence into the puzzle, which itself is the ultimate tribute to human ingenuity. There is only one path that leads to the final conclusion. The progress to this goal, though, can be documented on several occasions. Agatha Christie normally provides short lists, whereas Michael Innes in *Death at the President's Lodging* (1936) supplies the reader with elaborate tables which summarize the findings up to a certain point. Ellery Queen, in many of his novels of the 1930s and 1940s, issues "A Challenge to the Reader," in which he states that the reader is now in possession of all the facts he needs to solve the case, and this 'Challenge' signals the reader's opportunity to reason it out before the author tells all when the story resumes. The reader is asked to play along with the detective, that is, to compete with him or her in the race to solve the crime. In this way he can (or is led to believe he can) participate in the process of crime solution.

Memoranda, itemized lists, and reports, in which the evidence is assembled and questions are formulated, are also part of the procedures used by Doherty's/Harding's detectives, Corbett and Athelstan, who are particularly interested in the "Cui bono?"-aspect (Doherty 1988, 16), a question also asked by Gervase Bret, the civil lawyer, in *The Ravens of Blackwater* (Marston 1994, 193). This is a typical lawyer's question which enables the author to list all possible suspects and to analyze their motives and means. It conforms to medieval scholastic analysis, which is particularly fond of breaking down subjects into a series of *questiones*. In this academic world, logic rules supreme, and thus, it is only fitting that logical inquiry is championed by those who have received university training. Thus, Hugh Corbett, the chancery clerk, states with conviction: "If a problem exists then a logical solution must also exist. It is only a matter of time before you find it" (Doherty 1988, 83). And Falconer, the Oxford Master, swears by Aristotelian logic to help him solve a case: "I am simply applying Aristotle's deductive logic to the situation. This requires the establishment of general truths not open to reasonable doubt. Then, when you put them together, they often

imply a further truth not previously seen, which can then be demonstrated" (Morson 1995, 51). The clergymen among the detectives, however, do not solely rely on their rational faculties. Brother Cadfael's method of investigation is guided by observation, rational argument, luck, and intuition. As the Germersheim Group observes, there is nothing specifically medieval about this mixture (The Germersheim Group 1997, 46). The same holds true for the combination of factors proposed by Athelstan: "[...] logic and a little evidence, some speculation, and perhaps some help from Mistress Fortune. In the end we will grasp the truth" (Harding 1991, 193).

Fifthly and lastly, Golden Age detective fiction guarantees a reassuring return to a well-ordered and closed society. Once the criminals are discovered and punished (an action outside the domain of detective fiction) life will go on unchanged. The discovery of the criminal(s) is an act of purgation, which enables the community to continue its life undisturbed in the future. Since crime in Golden Age detective fiction à la Agatha Christie is a product of moral depravity rather than of psychological aberration or adverse social conditions, the uncovering of the criminal and his subsequent elimination from society holds out hope for a return to peace and social harmony. The prospect of a healing reunion brings about a positive, albeit conservative ending.

The concept of an ordered and closed universe fits the Middle Ages well. Order returns to what is depicted as an homogenous society. Once the culprits are discovered and brought to justice (an aspect more often stressed in historical crime fiction than in modern detective stories), social order is reasserted. Unlike truly medieval crime stories, however, these historical fictions mostly lack the perception of crime as a violation not only of human but also of divine order. Whereas we are told by the narrator of Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale* that "Modre is so wlatsum and abhomynable / To God, that is so just and resonable, / That he ne wol suffre it heled be, / Though it abyde a yeer, or two, or thre," these sentiments occupy a subordinate position or play no role at all in modern historical fiction (*The Riverside Chaucer* 1987, 256, ll. 3053-7). It is the detective – rarely helped by divine inspiration like Brother Cadfael –, not God who reveals the criminal. And the detective is by far more efficient than God, if the assessment of the real life situation in medieval England by John Bellamy, an expert on medieval English criminal history, is correct: "Everywhere there is a host of violent crimes, but appearances in court by the suspected malfactors are sadly few. Convictions are even fewer" (Bellamy 1973, 3). The reestablishment of social harmony, then, through the offices of the detective is also the goal of detective fiction set in the Middle Ages and represents just as much of a utopian solution to a social problem as it does in the Golden Age.

Aside from similarities in structure and general presuppositions governing both Golden Age and historical crime fiction, there are a number of frequently-employed devices such as odd murder weapons, like a rosary used to strangle the young Welshman John Gryffin in his cell in *Falconer's Judgement* (Morson 1995, 194), and strange or ingenious methods of killing a victim, like burning him alive

in *The Last Templar* (Jecks 1995, 160) or biting him to death in *The Wolves of Savernake* (Marston 1993, 3-4). The authors are also fond of riddles (Marston 1994, 204), cryptic prophecies (Doherty 1988, 101), strange scripts like the Ogham alphabet (Tremayne 2000, 162), enigmatic messages (Harding 1992, 75),¹⁰ and secret codes (Doherty 2004, 207 and 276), which serve to introduce an element of suspense or to confuse the issues. These devices are both red herrings and valuable clues. Last but not least, some authors resort to the spectacular conclusions that Agatha Christie used for her Poirot mysteries. Both Paul Harding/P.C. Doherty (*Brother Athelstan Mysteries*) and Peter Tremayne (*Sister Fidelma Mysteries*) end their stories with a grand finale, that is, the reader is treated to a magnificent demonstration of logical reasoning. After all suspects are assembled, the solution is logically explained: those who are not guilty are cleared and the real criminal is revealed.

Although the closed world of the medieval monastery, castle or small town is more conducive to the clue-puzzle mystery, some writers, notably Paul Harding (P.C. Doherty) and Susanna Gregory, have also drawn on the hard-boiled school. Susanna Gregory's first two *Matthew Bartholomew Chronicles* are sprawling tales of intrigue and murder with many elements borrowed from Gothic fiction (secret trap doors and passage ways, vindictive abbesses, the return of an avenger in the guise of a Scottish friar, and strange poisons). The ever mounting death toll would do credit to a Mickey Spillane novel. Considering that a university mystery story provides limited physical space (the geography of the town and the layout of the college building are restricted), the number of casualties, not just from the plague, is staggering, especially if one adds those to the score that were already killed the year before. *A Summer of Discontent* even includes a list of the murdered men in case the reader has lost track! (Gregory 2002, 510-1) The two detectives, Matthew Bartholomew and his friend and companion Brother Michael, are not only confronted by ruthless killers but are also targeted by them and often make narrow escapes. Like their modern colleagues in the big cities on the American West Coast, they face widespread corruption which touches all walks of Cambridge life: the town, the colleges, and the church, a corruption that seems to be endemic, because for every solved crime there will be another. Once the criminal has been identified and purged, we do not return to Edenic monastic tranquility as in the "*Brother Cadfael Chronicles*" or the "*Sister Frevisse Medieval Mysteries*;" rather, the social tensions persevere and engender new conflicts and crimes.

The hard-boiled private eye with his individual code of ethics who operates outside the law enforcement agencies does not really fit into a medieval community because the hierarchical system of medieval society did not tolerate outsiders. The social marginality of the hard-boiled detective and his active sexuality seem inappropriate in a medieval setting. For this reason, there are no Continental Ops, Sam Spades, and Philip Marlowes on the move through a medieval town.

¹⁰ The seedcake sent to the victim as a warning is clearly modelled on Arthur Conan Doyle's story "The Five Orange Pips," where orange pips are sent by the Ku Klux Klan.

On the other hand, some of the characteristics – honor, incorruptibility, rude wit, disgust for sham, and a contempt for pettiness – imputed by Raymond Chandler to the modern detective can also be found in medieval sleuths, even though they are part of the system like the Coroner Sir John Cranston in Paul Harding's (P.C. Doherty's) *Brother Athelstan Mysteries* (cf. Chandler 1995, 992). Also, Doherty's description of late fourteenth-century London is reminiscent of Personville (Poisonville) in Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest* or of other seedy metropolises featured in the writings of the hard-boiled school. We are treated to a cesspool of filth, depravity, and crime. The graphic description of the London prisons, places of execution, stews, thief dens, dirt-covered alleys, and stinking shambles is disgusting. Scenes of cruelty and debauchery abound; they are rarely alleviated by human kindness. Doherty's London is bawdy, raucous, and bizarre. Crime has infiltrated and touched every fabric of society.

Hard-boiled novelists allow their stories to unfold by violent twists and turns. Their heroes embark on journeys through the city as Athelstan and Cranston traverse London. Both the modern and the medieval sleuths demonstrate their ability to survive and to cleanse (at least fictionally) corrupt, crime-ridden America and London, even though this purgation will only be temporary due to the ubiquity of crime. In this respect, the Coroner Sir John Cranston bears some resemblance to Chandler's Marlowe, who originally was to be named Malory because Chandler thought of detection as some form of knight errantry (cf. Ousby 1997, 112).

The English medieval mystery has managed to assimilate many features characteristic of the clue-puzzle and some of the hard-boiled story. As a literary form, the medieval mystery is extremely flexible due to its ability to accommodate a vast spectrum of crimes and detectives. The monk is no longer in charge of the investigation, but his former monopoly is now shared by civil servants, officers of the law, college masters, private detectives, and even women, the latter, though, mostly cast into the role of a Miss Marple rather than that of an aggressive professional like V.I. Warshawski – Sister Fidelma is the noteworthy exception. Although some of these novels provide us with insights into the material culture of medieval England, the new hybrid (a combination of historical and detective novel) draws its strength from the mystery plot. Still, both as crime fiction and historical novels, these works are remarkably conservative. Whereas for Eco the detective story is just one part of a complex intertextual process that extends from the establishment of a labyrinthian setting to changing narrative perspectives and the incorporation of large chunks of historical material into the matrix of the detective story, these authors tell straightforward tales. They do not participate in the post-modern approach to historical fiction that has become characteristic of English literature since the end of the sixties, where the narrative treatment of historical subjects is not only carried out in an experimental manner but also contains metafictional elements and reflections on history and historiography (cf. Nünning 1995, 2). The best of these mysteries present stimulating puzzles, but they do not encourage the reader to assess or reflect on the Middle Ages.

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