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## Review Essay: Theresa Coletti, *Naming the Rose: Eco, Medieval Signs, and Modern Theory*

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## BOOK REVIEWS

There is much about the medieval forest that is intriguing and in need of further study. It is thus a pity that with *Trees and Man* Roland Bechmann tried to do so much and, in fact, accomplished so little.

Kelly DeVries

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Theresa Coletti, *Naming the Rose: Eco, Medieval Signs, and Modern Theory*, Cornell University Press, 1988, xi, 212 pp., index, \$30.00.

Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* is a novel of great complexity that admirably fits a definition of the genre as "a machine for generating interpretations" that Eco himself proposes in his Postscript. Of the many exegeses Eco's work has elicited, none is richer or more illuminating than Theresa Coletti's *Naming the Rose*. With her critical assessment of Eco's novel, she has produced an informative and stimulating book that guides its readers to an awareness and a better grasp of Eco's reflections on a panoply of cultural, linguistic, and theoretical issues, an impressive achievement considering the intricacies of the topics involved and the interdisciplinary proportions of Eco's work. She demonstrates, with particular acumen, Eco's ability to formulate carefully thought-out statements about language and hermeneutics against a concrete setting of medieval social, religious, and intellectual life. Declaring her discussion eclectic, she covers a vast array of intellectual endeavors, appealing to history, semiotics, biblical exegesis, medieval studies, literary theory, etc. In broader terms, she describes her book as a gesture toward the furthering of the dialogue between students of the medieval past and of modern theory. Emphasizing that Eco does not simply use medieval history as a setting—as an object of representation destined solely to enhance the historical novel aspect of the work—she draws attention to the fact that medieval history provides Eco with an opportunity to reflect on meaning as the product of culture and on a wide variety of social, linguistic, religious, and philosophical concerns.

Central to Coletti's discussion of the medieval component in Eco's book is her analysis of the role played by the Franciscan order in changing the religious configuration of Europe. Poverty, as preached by the Franciscans, evolves into a social problem constituting a challenge to the dominant Benedictine power base. The poor become marginal, excluded from the social order; they became outsiders produced by processes of cultural exclusion, hence the felicitous definition of culture as a system of exclusions legislated from above. These developments are posed in terms of an opposition between Benedictine monasticism and

Franciscan scholasticism. Monastic study advocates the repeated reading of Scripture, while scholasticism engages in the pursuit of new knowledge with its attendant risk. There are other oppositions in this medieval power play, between spiritual and carnal love, between sinner and saint, between serious and comic. Poverty, knowledge, love, and laughter are thus seen as having potential to challenge established power. This view ties in with semiotics, with the problem of distinguishing between similar phenomena with different names and different phenomena with similar names. The larger issue in Eco's work is the cultural production of meaning.

It is impossible, within the limited scope of a brief review, to bring out the topical diversity of Coletti's book. What precedes will have to suffice as a sampling. The book contains a useful topical index, but no bibliography. An annotated bibliography would have been a welcome addition, and it could easily have been assembled from the material available in the copious notes that accompany the text.

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Francis X. Newman, ed., *Social Unrest in the Late Middle Ages: Papers of the Fifteenth Annual Conference of the Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies*, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, vol. 9, 1986, 148 pp., ill., \$16.00.

This little volume consists of five essays: "Social Change Versus Revolution: New Interpretations of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381" by J. A. Raftis; "Peasant Resistance to Royal and Seigneurial Impositions" by Barbara A. Hanawalt; "Chaucer and the Economic and Social Consequences of the Plague" by D. W. Robertson, Jr.; "'He hath a thousand slayn this pestilience': Iconography of the Plague in the Late Middle Ages" by John B. Friedman; and "Social Conscience and the Poets" by Russell A. Peck.

These papers focus exclusively on England and are primarily concerned with two events, the 1381 peasant revolt and the 1348 Black Death. The title of the book thus promises more breadth than the book provides.

The first two essays on the peasants are excellent and pack a lot of information into a few pages. Of course, this is only what one would expect of such pioneers in this field as Raftis and Hanawalt. Both scholars offer a sweeping view of changing economic, social, and political conditions in English villages, although Hanawalt, as usual, also manages to fit in many specific details of peasant life.