



**Anglophonia Caliban/Sigma**

French Journal of English Studies

29 | 2011

Échanges et transformations : le Moyen Âge, la Renaissance et leurs réécritures contemporaines

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### Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/acs/844>

DOI: 10.4000/caliban.844

ISSN: 2802-2777

### Publisher

Presses universitaires du Midi

### Printed version

Date of publication: September 1, 2011

Number of pages: 267-276

ISBN: 978-2-8107-0164-3

ISSN: 1278-3331

### Electronic reference

Catherine Lanone, "From St Winifred's Translation to Medieval Whodunnit: Ellis Peters and the *Cadfael Chronicles*", *Anglophonia Caliban/Sigma* [Online], 29 | 2011, Online since 15 May 2015, connection on 16 July 2024. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/acs/844> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/caliban.844>

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# From St Winifred's translation to medieval whodunnit: Ellis Peters and the *Cadfael Chronicles*

Catherine Lanone\*

## RÉSUMÉ

*Alors que le roman de détection historique tend aujourd'hui à multiplier les récits néo-victoriens, Ellis Peters choisit de recréer au contraire un Moyen Age à la fois distant et familier ; certes, la période est simplifiée pour plaire au public, et le récit reste dans la tradition d'Agatha Christie ; mais les Chroniques de Cadfael ont le mérite de ressusciter une période troublée, et de placer le crime sur fond de guerre civile. Le personnage du moine-détective offre une variation intéressante sur celui du détective retiré du monde, amplifiant la retraite en monastère, tout en ajoutant un passé tumultueux aux Croisades qui fait de Cadfael un homme qui connaît les méandres des désirs humains. Le détective se fait aussi jardinier, cultivant la sagesse et les plantes, guérisseur des corps et des âmes, autant d'éléments qui perpétuent une forme de tradition médiévale.*

**Keywords:** detective fiction, hybrid, Middle Age, recreation, medieval, Ellis Peters, *A Morbid Taste for Bones*, *Cadfael Chronicles*, *One Corpse Too Many*, *The Virgin in the Ice*, *Monk's Hood*, *The Heretic's Apprentice*.

Ellis Peters's *Cadfael Chronicles* tap into the exotic appeal of medievalism. The Warner Futura edition of the books uses Gothic characters on the cover, a gold band for the author's name, and an illuminated letter to open Cadfael's name, a simplified version of which opens each chapter; the Futura edition also opts for the spelling "mediaeval". Thus the reader may have the pleasure of holding a book which is somewhat reminiscent of a beautifully illuminated manuscript once copied by monks. From 1977 to 1994, Ellis Peters (whose real name was Edith Pargeter) chose to transpose detective fiction (a genre which was born in the nineteenth century with writers like Wilkie Collins and Conan Doyle), back in the Middle Ages. Though meant for entertainment, the playful transposition creates an interesting historical background, while reinventing the detective as healer and monk.

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### 1) The historical frame

Victorian medievalism recreated the Middle Ages as a legendary period of feats and courtly love. Tapestries, Pre-Raphaelite paintings, Romantic or Victorian poetry, all drew inspiration from Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, among other texts, to celebrate a pristine, vanished past of entwined motifs and garlands of great deeds and declarations of love. Ellis Peters's recreation is far less vivid, precisely because she wishes to depart from this somewhat glamorous realm of imaginary medievalism. She wishes to make her reader feel at home in the world of the 1130's or 40's. This is a world without technology, yet which is not so very distant from ours. Peters opts for the metonymic recreation of the texture of the times, barely describing clothes (the odd pin of a coat which may be used to pierce, for instance) or settings. It takes a number of books for the reader to become acquainted with the topography of Shrewsbury Abbey and its surroundings. Similarly, Ellis Peters spices her modern English with a few archaisms, unusual names like Radulfus or Elave, or odd words like "hospitaller" (HA 2), "infirmarer" (VITI 2), but her medieval world is meant to feel familiar. Time and distances are measured according to a different scale, but the reader must feel that the way of life is normal, not quaint or picturesque. Though the point is sometimes stretched (there are many more fifty-year-old or sixty-year-old characters in Peters's books than they would have been at the time), Peters's take on medievalism is refreshingly simple.

The *Cadfael Chronicles* also depart from the tradition of medieval Gothic. Whereas for instance Eco's much more formidable *Name of the Rose* builds a more abstract, intellectual labyrinth, and taps into the lurid tradition of Gothic references to the Inquisition from *Melmoth* to the *Monk*, Ellis Peters's medieval England is essentially down to earth and strays from dark mazes. But though she shuns the obvious Gothic path, Peters chooses to create a world which is far from peaceful. Though Ellis Peters's novels descend from Agatha Christie rather than darker detection in the manner of P.D. James, for instance, her England is no green and pleasant land. Rather than human nature endlessly reproducing itself (in Christie's recipe for mystery, the rules applying in a village like Saint Mary Mead may be extended to the entire kingdom), Peters portrays an England on the verge of breakdown which opportunism threatens to blow to pieces.

Her abbey stands as a microcosm in a country torn by strife. The novels unfold during the crucial years of the Anarchy, as Cadfael begins his career both as monk and as detective during "the tide of civil war between King Stephen and the partisans of the Empress Maud" (*Monk's Hood* 7). Maud, or Matilda, only ruled for a few months in 1141, but the

struggle for the throne of England lasted for many a long year: " Cousins, most uncousinly, they tore each other and tore England between them" (*The Virgin in the Ice*, 4).

As Lindsay points out, Peters creates a historical threshold for each novel, so that the reader is taught to reflect on the unfolding saga of political strife, creating a loose structure of running instalments:

Most of the books begin with a recounting of the latest news of the civil war, with further bulletins as appropriate. King Stephen is captured, his brother Bishop Henry of Blois changes sides, the Empress Maud is invited into London, then expelled, because of her arrogant manners. Robert of Gloucester is captured, then exchanged for King Stephen. The Empress Maud is surrounded in Oxford Castle, but escapes in the snow [...] (Lindsay 280)

In the *Cadfael Chronicles*, England is locked in an absurd war where there is little to choose between either ruler. For Anthony Hopkins, "[this] continuing contrast between ideal social order and political chaos gives almost every novel a constant moral tension, and a wider social frame of reference than is usual in the mystery genre." (in Kaler 46)

The significant crimes which must be unravelled mean little compared to the general background of gratuitous violence. This is ironically enhanced in *One Corpse Too Many*, where Peters adds to historical fact—the ninety-four soldiers who were indeed hanged by King Stephen, after the siege of Shrewsbury—an extra corpse which triggers the murder mystery. The singular crimes Cadfael must solve are connected to the seismic political upheaval tearing the country apart. There is little loyalty as people change allegiance, seeking profit. Not only do sides and borders shift as the war goes on, but opportunists change sides, or "[flout] both contendants for the crown", "setting up on their own account" (*The Virgin in the Ice*, 3). Ambition feeds on trouble and disorder:

More than one lord in this troubled land had already changed his allegiance, more than one would do so in the future, some, perhaps, for the second or third time. (*The Virgin in the Ice*, 3)

Looting and stealing are never far away, as when a garrison of thieves spread terror between Shrewsbury and a gutted Worcester:

"In a land at war with itself", agreed Cadfael sombrely, "you may take it as certain that order breaks down, and savagery breaks out." (*The Virgin in the Ice*, 3)

We move back and forth as time is marked by a few constructive as well as destructive events, such as the translation of the relics of St Winifred from the shrine to the abbey, giving greater legitimacy and fame to Cadfael's

abbey. But the books mostly remain in the grip of the long war England is frozen into; the body of the nun Cadfael finds in a frozen pond in *The Virgin in the Ice* is both a consequence of civil war (she was trying to help fugitives when she was raped and killed) and a metaphor for a violated, soiled landscape and country (and perhaps the lapse of time, the "nineteen-year winter"). Against this background of strife, the detective is not given the means to restore order, as in Christie's novels, only to provide a modicum of solace by preventing the social structure from tearing itself further, mending mysteries as if repairing a texture which is threatening to rip itself to shreds. A great weaver of lives, Cadfael reinvents the contemplative detective as a monk, bent on healing what he may.

## 2) The detective as healer

Cadfael is a pleasant mediator and composite character; he was once a man of the world, who fought in the East and whose soul and temper have been moulded by his experience in the Crusades. As such, he is a monk who is allowed to have known women, and may even be given the chance of meeting his own son unawares, in *The Virgin in the Ice*. He is thus both a warrior and a man of wisdom, a quiet elder defined by his garden. Cadfael is a healer, whose magic herbs bring mental and physical solace. His garden is a microcosm within the small world of the abbey, a place of profusion and peace. As opposed to civil war, the garden gives us a glimpse of the Middle Ages as *hortus conclusus*, not a benighted time of dark ignorance but of subtle knowledge and infinite wisdom:

And in his own small kingdom the crop had been rich and varied, the eaves of his workshop in the garden were hung everywhere with linen bags of dried herbs, his jars of wine set in plump, complacent rows, the shelves were thronging with bottles and pots of specifics for all the ills of winter [...] *Monk's Hood*, 7

The ordered rows and plump jars confirm the impression of a sanctuary within the sanctuary, a more secular circle of healing enshrined in the abbey. The garden is associated with a sense of periodic regeneration: its soil is cyclically nourished by the floods of the river Severn. For Anthony Hopkins, this attention paid to seasons (as Cadfael lists the herbs of his gardens or notices rain or heat, harvests and snow), gives the novels their particular flavour, so very rural as opposed to the part played by cities, especially London, in detective fiction, especially the Sherlock Holmes tradition.

Interestingly enough, Cadfael's healing recipes mingle his up-to-date knowledge of the science of his time, his Welsh inheritance and what he learnt from the woman he loved in the East, who kept a stall in a market

and was well-versed in herbs and potions. He nurses plants but has also brought back his opium poppy from the Holy Land. Thus Cadfael is a monk who blends East and West, religion and magic, prayers and oriental know how. No wonder that he should be renowned as a herbalist and physician, with his incremental, experimental knowledge, learned "by trial and study":

[...] he was left with just one novice to help him brew his draughts, and roll his pills, and stir his rubbing oils, and pound his poultices, to medicine not only the brothers, but many who came for help in their troubles, from the town and the Foregate, sometimes even from the scattered villages beyond. (*Monk's Hood*, 18-19)

Cadfael's medicine is potent and inventive, as when he recalls to life and mental health the freezing, distraught monk in *The Virgin in the Ice* by calling for warm stones to be wrapped in flannel and placed close to him, before he begins to nurse him. Margaret Baker has sought to trace Cadfael's medicines and the influence of classical texts by Dioscorides or Apuleius Barbarus, but she points out that Peters does not discuss the herbs in "their standard medieval format" or according to the theory of the four humors (Baker 123), perhaps not to bore the reader. Using nettles, comfrey, cleavers, Cadfael prepares potions, balms and salves, though his remedy may sometimes be used against his will as poison rather than *pharmakon*, as in *Monk's Hood*. His function as healer gives him a chance to leave the abbey as he is called forth to nurse men who are often, as Malory's knights endlessly were in the *The Morte d'Arthur*, "sore wounded". For Baker, Cadfael is allowed to become a detective precisely because he is given a degree of freedom, just as his garden hut allows him to hide fugitives or converse with men or women secretly. But he reads minds and souls as much as men's wounded bodies, and his function is as symbolic as it is convenient for the plot. *The Heretic's Apprentice* begins with Cadfael cutting dead roses in the abbot's garden, a sign of the passing of time, of potential harmony and regeneration.

### **3) The Benedictine order**

Choosing a monk as a protagonist raises obvious questions; on the one hand, Ellis Peters simply pushes one step further a characteristic of many a great detective. Colin Dexter's broody Inspector Morse, with his disenchanting view of mankind, deep love of crosswords and classical music, and fondness for alcohol, is a solitary soul, just like, in a way, Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes with his opium, violin, and genius, despite Dr Watson. Such detectives are lay brothers dedicated to the fellowship of fighting crime. On the other hand, a monk's viewpoint may

seem limited, and necessarily involves a religious stance. Ellis Peters bypasses limitations by allowing her Cadfael a past which allows him to still be, in his inner self, a man of the world as much as a man of God. As we have seen, his position as healer also enables him to venture outside the monastery more than his brothers. The passing of time is measured by religious ritual, gatherings and common prayers, especially Vespers which Cadfael rarely misses; often he reluctantly interrupts his search or leaves a patient's bedside to respectfully abide by his vows and attend Vespers. Ellis Peters carves a few figures which stand out in the community: the good abbot Radulfus, the clumsy novices, the devious Jerome and the cold Prior Robert, blinded by ambition and lacking generosity, always attempting to thwart Cadfael and coming close to becoming the villains of the monastery, although they stay clear of crime. As the foils of Cadfael's generosity, they may recall medieval morality plays, a connection which Ellis Peters was actually seeking:

I have one sacred rule about the thriller. It is, it ought to be, it must be, a morality. If it strays from the side of the angels, provokes total despair, willfully destroys—without pressing need in the plot—the innocent and the good, takes pleasure in evil, that is unforgivable sin. (Ellis Peters, in Lindsay 286)

Though murderers are sometimes unredeemable villains, like the greedy outlaws of *The Virgin in the Ice*, Ellis Peters' murderers simply are, more often than not, fallen angels, erring men who find little solace in their own crimes, like the good uncle corrupted by the unexpected treasure in the box in *The Heretic's Apprentice*.

Thus the thriller becomes a way of probing into good and evil, and sometimes of dramatizing, albeit to a limited extent, religious debate. The sequence of novels opens with the quest for relics to justify the existence of Cadfael's monastery, drawing attention to the rather unlawful trade of bones and make-believe tales in the Middle Ages. Ellis Peters fleshes out the story of St Winifred, Abbess of Gwytherin, whose relics were indeed translated in 1136 to a shrine in the magnificent Abbey of Shrewsbury. Prior Robert of Shrewsbury wrote her *Life* two years later. Peters adds an audacious twist to the tale, as she muses upon the bare bones of the story. For his first apparition in the opening novel of the series, *A Morbid Taste for Bones*, Cadfael is created as a transgressive character who abides by the spirit, rather than the letter, of his vows; he goes through a complex process of deception, when he finds out that a monk of his own party has murdered the villager who opposed the transfer of the relics; when the fanatical monk is accidentally killed, a tongue-in-cheek Cadfael positions the missing monk's robe before the altar, pretending he has been taken by

God, ascending miraculously as befits a saint—whereas, unbeknownst to the other monks, he has actually hidden the missing body in the casket designed for St Winifred's relics. The bones of St Winifred will remain in Wales, as the villagers wanted, while the casket containing the sinner's bones is duly taken back to Shewsbury. However, Cadfael's "St Winifred" also performs small miracles on her arrival, as when rain stops and the sun shines on the procession. Pilgrims may rightfully attend the shrine, and Cadfael often prays to the saint, reverting to his native tongue, Welsh, when he does not remain silent, expecting her to read his mind; standing before her altar, he always feels the gift of "quietude and certainty" (*The Heretic's Apprentice*, 142). The replacement bones, purified by the transfer, seem to answer equally well, and become a true substitute for St Winifred. The instinctive connection with a saint he imagines as a girl, rather than as "the stately prioress of her second life" (*The Heretic's Apprentice*, 142), emblemizes Cadfael's straightforward, instinctive rather than intellectual faith. The episode also gives a measure of Ellis Peters's historical recreation and poetic licence.

Though usually mostly overshadowed by the suspense of murder investigation, religious debate sometimes plays an important part, as in *The Heretic's Apprentice*, where a young man returning from the Crusades is challenged and accused of heresy. The books are pervaded with a nostalgic vision of pre-Reformation England, and the writings of Saint Augustine are at stake in *The Heretic's Apprentice*. The debate foreshadows the stern belief in predestination, but Peters sides with Cadfael and Elave, who fail to see how the doctrine of free choice may tally with predestination, preferring to seek grace in men's actions and achievements. The long discussions about the value of baptism tie in with literary tradition, recalling for instance Tess's attempt to baptize her illegitimate baby herself in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. Elave refuses to believe that all babies are sinners who need to be purified by baptism, and that man is inherently evil, redefining baptism as the Church's way of welcoming the baby into its bosom, and helping him or her to preserve innocence as much as possible. The threat of heresy spreading through Europe is evoked, though Cadfael's world is a far cry from Eco's dark Inquisition.

Published in 1990, *The Heretic's Apprentice* heralds the end of the chronicles with its metatextual *mise en abyme*. The murderer turns animal skins into the purest vellum, and the mystery revolves around books. Elave has brought the young Fortunata the dowry bequeathed by her uncle, a brave Crusader. The treasure lies in an intricate box of rare wood adorned with carved ivory. The box contains silver coins, but hints of gold powder convince Cadfael that the coins have been substituted for a far greater



treasure, a book. The murderer dies trying to retrieve the treasure, which turns out to be a "most precious and marvellous thing" (241), a wondrous book which was made for the wedding of an Emperor's son with a Byzanthian princess by an Irish monk, thus connecting East and West. Gold and purple contrast with the snowy vellum. The sinuous and delicate shapes create a maze of motifs: "Everything rippled and twined, and was elegantly elongated" (240). The illuminated manuscript is exquisite, and the images are described at length, entwining vegetation with birds and animals:

[...] the numerals and initials flowered in exquisite colours, laced and bordered with all manner of meadow flowers, climbing roses, little herbers no bigger than a thumbnail [...] Tiny, perfect women sat reading on turfed seats under bowers of eglantine. Golden fountains played into ivory basins, minute ships ventured oceans the size of a tear. (240)

The book is a microcosm capturing the essence of medieval art, but also of the medieval world. Illuminated letters become an iconotext, a tapestry of flowers and herbs, with stereotyped women by fountains embodying beauty, while the miniature ships and oceans point to the great age of discoveries which is about to come into being, the age of trade preceding the age of colonialism.

A former wedding present, the book is duly returned to Fortunata, the English girl who gives it to a bishop for his library, in exchange for Elave, the young man she has fallen in love with. The book is preserved, a shrine of beauty emblemizing the refined culture of a period which was long written off as the dark ages. And at the very end; the book comes to life, in the very landscape peacefully unfolding beneath Cadfael's eyes: it is framed, not by the wooden box, but by the "hedge of box" (244) which is being clipped. As Cadfael and his friend Hugh, the sheriff, the man of God and the man of law, sit in the garden, the *hortus conclusus* magically recalls the wondrous miniatures:

The colour of the roses in the distant beds became the colours of Diamaird's rippling borders, and the white butterfly on the dim blue flower of flennel was changed into a little ship on an ocean no bigger than a pearl. (244)

The rose and the butterfly, traditional icons of vanity, become the emblems of Epicurian wisdom, and the tiny garden reflects both the Illuminated book and the world at large. The *mise en abyme* also connects the book we are reading with the tradition of Illuminated Manuscripts, with humble humour.

"What are we to make of these books? What is the validity of a medieval detective, especially when it is one who wears a habit who

develops the habit of detection?" (Lindsay 276). Lindsay's question may be rephrased as follows: what are we to make of this version of medievalism, which seeks to give access to history simply to entertain, rather than truly teach? The colours of Peters's books, unlike those of the wondrous manuscript, may not burn into the heart, as Cadfael has it, but they may well arouse interest as they strip the Middle Ages of the excess of romance bestowed upon them by the Victorian era. Without reading too much into fiction meant for consumption, the composite character of Cadfael is worthy of attention. The TV series and the choice of Derek Jacobi as interpreter have contributed to turn him into a household figure. The opening credits are superimposed upon carved wooden figures tinged with a slightly lurid light, a kind of wheel of fortune suggested by the camera's slow circular motion, before switching to Derek Jacobi's face. All in all, a fitting image, perhaps, for a tribute to Jean-Paul Débax, a scholar steeped in true medieval knowledge, full of wisdom, political integrity, but also gifted with a definite sense of humour...

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