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Leprosy and Social Exclusion in Italo Calvino’s *Il visconte dimezzato*
and Umberto Eco’s *Il nome della rosa*

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Leprosy and Social Exclusion in Italo Calvino’s *Il visconte dimezzato* 
and Umberto Eco's *Il nome della rosa*

by

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Abstract

Leprosy and Social Exclusion in Italo Calvino’s *Il visconte dimezzato* and Umberto Eco’s *Il nome della rosa*

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The leper is the ultimate symbol of the social outcast. Plagued by connotations of not just contagion but of sinfulness and moral depravity, lepers have long been stigmatized and excluded from society. The Hebrew Bible declared them to be unclean, and their influence was believed to be wholly corrupting, as if their physical deformities were an external sign of their defiled souls. In the Middle Ages, those diagnosed with leprosy were made to undergo a particularly severe ritual that closely resembled the office of the dead, making them effectively dead to the world. They were then isolated from the healthy population in leprosariums, and their movements and behaviors were strictly controlled. However, their exclusion can be seen as serving a larger purpose than just the protection of normal society from infection in that it can be used by those in power as a mechanism of social control. The imputation of danger to undesirable persons of a given community ensures that they will be duly feared and ostracized. It is within this context that Italo Calvino and Umberto Eco make use of the idea of the leper as a social outlier in their novels, *Il visconte dimezzato* and *Il nome della rosa*, as a way to critique certain processes of exclusion, namely the construction and stigmatization
of a social “other” as a means of maintaining social order. This report draws on the historical and literary treatments of the leper to discuss the ways in which Calvino and Eco successfully employ the image of the leper to represent the machinery of exclusion and to shed light on the continued marginalization of outcast groups down to the present day.
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The term “leper” carries with it a decidedly negative connotation, not just of illness but of one who is unwanted—an outcast, a social pariah. Dating back to the time of the Hebrew Bible, those afflicted with leprosy were shunned from their community: “And the leper in whom the plague is, his clothes shall be rent, and his head bare, and he shall put a covering on his upper lip, and shall cry, Unclean, unclean. All the days wherein the plague shall be in him he shall be defiled; he is unclean: he shall dwell alone; without the camp shall his habitation be.”¹ In the Hebrew Bible, it was a problem of uncleanness. Anything judged to be unclean or impure was necessarily kept out of contact with that which was holy and worthy of worshiping God.² That the leprosy of the Bible is very different from the leprosy of today, now known as Hansen’s disease, is of little importance. The stigma attached to the disease persisted into the Middle Ages—as did the desire to separate those afflicted from the rest of society—and is, to a lesser extent, still present today. Leprosariums sprang up all over medieval Europe with the aim of isolating and excluding the sick, and though such places no longer exist, the apparent need to exclude certain marginal groups from society, so-called social lepers, is as strong as ever.

Italo Calvino’s novel Il visconte dimezzato and Umberto Eco’s novel Il nome della rosa each touch on the subject of lepers, playing up their status as outsiders or marginal peoples. Published in 1952 and 1980 respectively, the novels are set in the Middle Ages/early modern period—the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries to be

¹ Leviticus 13:45-46
exact. The opening sentence of *Il visconte dimezzato*, “C’era una guerra contro i turchi,”\(^3\) situates the novel more ambiguously in time with the titular character, at the novel’s beginning, in Bohemia presumably to fight in the Turkish wars of the late seventeenth century.\(^4\) The setting of *Il nome della rosa*, on the other hand, is clear: “Quando all’epoca in cui si svolgono gli eventi descritti, siamo alla fine del novembre 1327.”\(^5\) Fittingly, lepers are not the central focus of either novel; instead, they stand as marginal characters. Through them, however, Calvino and Eco succeed in representing and critiquing this idea of social exclusion and the construction as well as stigmatization of a social “other” as a means to maintain order. In doing so, each author elucidates the persistence of specific methods of social control and the continued creation of modern-day social lepers, who are subject to exclusion based on such factors as race, gender, socioeconomic status, and disease. This report aims to examine the literary representations of lepers from a historical and sociological perspective, an understanding of which then allows for a closer look at them allegorically to determine their possible relationships to other marginalized groups of the present day.

A discussion of leprosy through history is necessary if we are to understand the way in which Calvino and Eco appropriate such images and conventions for their own purposes. Most often, premodern lepers were identified as having bodies covered with spots, or lesions, their faces overgrown with nodules, with stinking breath, and altered

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(hoarse) voices. In Biblical times and continuing into the Middle Ages, however, leprosy was something of an umbrella term under which a wide range of skin conditions were classified. The leprosy of the Bible was, in fact, more often vitiligo, psoriasis, or scabies, and even with advancements in medical knowledge, medieval physicians were, centuries later, still unable to distinguish leprosy from such conditions. As a result, diagnoses of leprosy could be quite arbitrary and were mostly based on the information contained in the Hebrew Bible.

Indeed, the medieval revulsion toward leprosy derives largely from its treatment in the Bible, Leviticus in particular. Lepers, as stated above, were deemed to be unclean, tainted, defiled; their condition was said to be “a mixture of dead and living in the flesh of a person,” and thus, they posed a danger to clean people, requiring their exclusion from the community. But it was not just a matter of the threat of infection. Though Leviticus itself makes no explicit condemnation of leprosy as morally corrupt, Christian writers saw in the Levitical rules a connection between leprosy, sin, and divine retribution: “Leprosy was the external revelation of the internal evil, an emblem of sin which branded the person defiled by sin outwardly on his skin.” The disease was often regarded as punishment for sin; Gregory of Tours, for instance, told a story

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7 Lewis, 596, and Brody, 41.
8 Lewis, 607. Lewis sees the idea that life and death could not be mixed represented in Leviticus 17:14 in which one finds the command “not to mix the blood (which is life) with the flesh which can be eaten.” It is, for him, an issue of preserving boundaries and setting apart that which is holy from that which is unclean (608).
9 Lewis, 598.
in which a man who stole from a church was castigated with leprosy. By the Middle Ages, such a connection had become tradition, resulting in a number of moral connotations surrounding the disease. Though associated with sins such as avarice, simony, and pride, leprosy was primarily regarded as a mark of lechery. Lepers were described as “burn[ing] with desire for sexual intercourse,” and the disease was widely regarded as a venereal disease, spread through “illicit sexual intercourse.” Unsurprisingly, it came to be associated with syphilis in the fifteenth century.

Accordingly, there existed strict rules of chastity for lepers. Due to their close ties with sin, lepers were viewed with both fear and sympathy: they were more often denounced as degenerates, yet some believed this disease was proof of God’s salvation and that lepers had been afforded the opportunity to complete their punishment here on Earth, rather than in the afterlife.

On account of its association with sin, leprosy was often treated allegorically in the literature of the time. Medieval writers understood the disease to be a punishment sent by God and therefore exploited it as “a symbol of moral guilt.” In Der Arme Heinrich, Hartmann von Aue writes of a seemingly perfect knight whom God punishes with leprosy for his worldly pride and vainglory. The legend of Constantine and Silvester features similar attributes: Constantine is likewise punished with leprosy for

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11 Brody, 52-56.
12 Ibid.
13 Allen, 35.
14 Brody, 148.
his worldliness and unholiness. In each story, the appearance of leprosy thus “chastises the estrangement from God.” But these two stories, and indeed many others of the time, represent the idea of the redeemed sinner. When each hero refuses to let innocent people die so that they may be cured (thereby submitting to the will of God), God lifts their punishment and heals them.

The sin of fraudulence, too, was identified with the disease, as it was commonly regarded as form of moral leprosy. Dante Alighieri, for instance, places falsifiers in the final pouch of the eighth circle of his Inferno where they suffer from diseased bodies: Dante the pilgrim happens upon two alchemists (later identified as Griffolino d’Arezzo and Capocchio), each “dal capo a piè di schianze macolati,” furiously scratching themselves without hope of relief. By locating the sin of fraud in a circle so close to the center of Hell, Dante implies that, like other lepers of medieval literature, the falsifiers are being punished for having moved away from God, only they have no recourse or hope for salvation as they are already eternally damned. More than that, Dante’s association of leprosy with falsification speaks to the idea of corruption. Just as alchemists possess the ability to change or corrupt the nature of metals, lepers—seen as inherently corrupt in both body and soul—are feared to possess the ability to corrupt others.

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16 Brody, 148-158.
17 Brody, 168.
18 Inf., 29.75
19 Brody, 168.
Thus, with the connotations of both moral and physical corruption and contagion attached to his disease, the leper stood outside the community as a terrifying threat. A person suspected of leprosy had to report to a council, made up of either priests, physicians, or other lepers, to conduct a physical examination. If leprosy was confirmed by this examination, the leper was to be removed from the remaining healthy population. Canon 23 of the Third Lateran Council decreed a number of rules of exclusion for those diagnosed with leprosy: they were not allowed to mix with, go to the same church as, or be buried with the rest of society. The isolation that took place was so severe that the ritual surrounding his removal from society greatly resembled the office of the dead, a sign that the leper was effectively dead to the world. Shrouded in black, the leper would kneel at the altar (or, in some places, would stand in an open grave) where he heard mass for the last time and was read a list of prohibitions. Sometimes, the priest would toss a handful of earth on the leper’s head. Then, the leper received the costume he must wear from that moment on to distinguish him from the healthy population; he was also provided with the precious few other items he was permitted to own—a cloak, gloves, a drinking cup, a purse, and some sort of bell or clapper with which to warn others of his presence.

As he was escorted away, the leper’s will took effect, his property passed to his heirs, and the leper’s spouse was legally widowed. Leprosariums (also called lazars houses) and asylums, located outside of cities and towns, provided a place for the leper

20 Brody, 61.
22 Brody, 66-67, and Allen, 36-37.
to retreat, but life there was particularly cruel. The rules of such places, which expressed a moral judgment on those who lived there, often resulted in “the mortification of the spirit and the mortification of the flesh.”\textsuperscript{23} Furthermore, the severe restrictions on lepers often left them with begging as their only option for survival.\textsuperscript{24} Secular law treated lepers in an equally harsh manner, conferring on them subhuman status.\textsuperscript{25}

However, the process of exclusion serves a purpose beyond eliminating potential sources of physical or moral contagion. It also enables a certain element of a given community (generally the one in power) to impose a social order or hierarchy. In her essay “Witchcraft and Leprosy: Two Strategies of Exclusion,” Mary Douglas examines the way in which diagnoses of illness are employed as techniques of social control.\textsuperscript{26} Perpetuating the idea of insidious harm (the danger from a carrier of infection is not visible and can be deceptive) and imputing filth to victims ensures that they will not only be rejected without question, but that they will be actively feared and ostracized by the remaining community. Douglas suggests that such strategies were, and continue to be, used to “informally entrench the hierarchy of social categories and warn well-placed persons against indiscriminate social intercourse.”\textsuperscript{27} She goes on to argue that before the twelfth century, charges of leprosy were used against unpopular

\textsuperscript{23} Brody, 78-79. The rules included restrictions on where lepers could go, what they could wear, who they could marry, what they could do for entertainment, and imposed harsh punishments for minor offenses.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{25} Allen, 37.
\textsuperscript{27} Douglas, 726.
office holders by discontented subordinates in an effort to restore the proper functioning of small, local hierarchies, which were threatened by the monetization of the barter economy due to the Crusades and the emergence of new social classes. Over the next fifty years, Douglas maintains, the influx of new wealth combined with a centralization of secular powers created masses of poor—at this time, the charges of leprosy overwhelmingly shifted from the wealthy to the hordes of vagabonds and beggars. These disentitled “lepers” were said to be highly infectious and exceedingly lecherous, eager to spread their condition by forcing sexual intercourse with the healthy. Consequently, they were segregated from society for the public good and divested of their rights as citizens. The stigmatization and exclusion of the lepers was thus a method to suppress social disorder and control the new class of disadvantaged, landless persons.28

Douglas’s theory of the social exclusion of the lepers meshes nicely with the work of Michel Foucault. In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault also discusses briefly the exclusion of lepers from society in the Middle Ages.29 He begins by writing of the lazar houses that populated medieval Europe, which were later abandoned as the incidence of leprosy declined, and of the tradition of segregating lepers from society. Though the leprosariums eventually disappeared, Foucault insists that the formulas of exclusion applied to lepers were repeated later on against “poor vagabonds, criminals, and ‘deranged minds.’”30 The new excluded groups found themselves confined for many of

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28 Douglas, 731-734.
30 Foucault, 5.
the same reasons Douglas asserts the lepers were banished: new responses to poverty and to the economic problems of unemployment and idleness, among others.\textsuperscript{31} Whereas medieval lepers and other social undesirables were expelled from society, the poor and unemployed in the seventeenth century were confined and forced to work. The houses of confinement served two purposes, depending on the economic climate; in times of prosperity, they were sources of cheap manpower, while in times of crisis, they reabsorbed the idle and provided social protection against revolutions.\textsuperscript{32} In either case, exclusion-confinement ensured there would be no disruption to the social order.

Italo Calvino’s novel \textit{Il visconte dimezzato} exposes this idea of exclusion as social control. On the surface, it appears to be nothing more than a fantastic, grotesque tale: The basic story involves a young man named Medardo of Terralba, who somewhat naively goes to war against the Turks and is split in two halves by a cannonball. Yet, each side is able to live on autonomously. One half seems to be completely bad and returns to terrorize his village, while the other half, the good side, eventually comes back as well to vex the people in a wholly different way, this time with extreme moral righteousness. After a duel in which both are injured, the local doctor stitches the two halves back together, again creating a whole man. Beyond the fable-like narrative, however, one finds “a critical examination of conventional morality and the disintegration of modern society”\textsuperscript{33} that encourages a consideration of the social construct of the outcast (leper).

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{31} Foucault, 42.
\item \textsuperscript{32} Foucault, 44-47.
\item \textsuperscript{33} Bloom, 35.
\end{itemize}
Kerstin Pilz argues that Calvino infused each novel of his *I nostri antenati* trilogy with “powerful images of alienation as schism, split, and loss of unity.” The central figure of *Il visconte dimezzato*, the split-in-two Medardo, exemplifies this idea, and it is equally apparent in other characters as well: the narrator, for example, “suffers the alienation brought on by youth and by lack of position in the society,” and Dr. Trelawny has been cut off from his own society after being stranded in Terralba when his ship wrecked. But this theme of alienation and division “is not limited to the individual, but is also inherently present in society.” The lepers of Pratofungo, a leper colony nearby Terralba, are equally important in expressing it. Medardo and the lepers are tied together in their bodily mutilation—for instance, Medardo possesses a “mezzo naso” while a leper is “senza naso” and Medardo is alienated from his other half just as the lepers are alienated from society.

Calvino clearly draws upon the historical treatment of leprosy in his description of the people of Pratofungo. Each one wears a yellow or mauve-colored robe as costume, and Galateo, the only one allowed to come down into the village, carries a horn with him to warn people of his presence (like the medieval bell or clapper). Following the medieval tradition associating lepers with lust, Calvino writes that, prior to becoming a leper colony, the village of Pratofungo had been “un covo di prostitute

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37 Calvino, 12 and 54. The attention Calvino gives to the nose is significant in that a commonly held belief about leprosy was that the “bridge of the nose changes color and rots.” Irwin W. Sherman, *The Power of Plagues* (Washington, D.C.: ASM, 2006), 304.
dove convenivano marinai d’ogni razza e d’ogni religione,” noting that the women there still keep up their licentious ways.38 Indeed when our narrator visits, the women are all half naked, and an orgy breaks out. It would seem, then, that life in Pratofungo is carefree and happy, “una perpetua baldoria,”39 filled with music, drunkenness, and idleness, such that the lepers forget and/or are not bothered by their exclusion. Yet, Calvino undermines this image at various points in the narrative. Galateo must suffer the indignity of children throwing live lizards on his head, and after the revelry ceases due to il Buono’s visits, the women spend their nights weeping.

Also noteworthy is the degree of fear inspired by the lepers: it is particularly apparent at the beginning of Chapter VII. As the narrator wanders in an idyllic and aromatic garden with “cespugli di menta piperita e siepi di rosmarino,”40 he is suddenly surrounded by lepers as they rise from their hiding places in the bushes. He tries to escape, but everywhere he turns, he is met by a leper, until he is ultimately swept along toward Pratofungo “come un animale catturato.”41 The tone of this episode is decidedly threatening, especially for the young narrator. His attempts at finding his usual protector, Sebastiana, are met with the lepers’ scornful laughter “con quella loro aria saputa e maligna,”42 such that he is greatly relieved to see her appear in the crowd. But even that happiness is short-lived. He quickly becomes “disperato perché [lo]
aveva preso per mano e attaccato certamente la lebbra.”

The tension and horror of this episode illustrates the extent to which these outcasts have been stigmatized.

The exclusion of the lepers in *Il visconte dimezzato* is total. Calvino emphasizes the way in which a newly sick person must walk the road to Pratofungo, never to see their family or friends again. When Sebastiana makes the long trip, veiled in black as was customary, the entire village is deserted, for “nessuno deve rimanere nelle strade quando passa il lebroso.” And until the narrator ventures to Pratofungo to find the nurse, no healthy person had ever set foot inside the village. Unlike some of the other images of alienation in the novel—Medardo, for example—the lepers cannot be reunited with that from which they are separated, that is society. Whereas after the final duel, Medardo’s two halves are rejoined, the lepers continue to stand on the outside.

What then do the lepers represent within the larger context of the story? Calvino himself says that the lepers signify the hedonistic qualities of man: “I lebbrosi sono venuti a rappresentare per me l’edonismo, l’irresponsibilità, la felice decadenza, il nesso estetismo-malattia, in un certo modo il decadentismo artistico e letterario contemporaneo ma anche di sempre (l’Arcadia).” Eugenio Bolongaro similarly posits that the “community of lepers, whose death masks are effete aestheticism and

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43 Ibid.
44 Calvino, 29.
unrestrained sexuality, provide[] a thinly veiled allegory for the excessive expenditure typical of doomed and sterile elites.”47 But the presence of the lepers, I think, warrants a look in another direction as well. To begin with, Medardo’s treatment of Sebastiana plays out in a strikingly similar manner to the techniques of social control that Douglas and Foucault describe. Medardo, as a viscount, ranks highest in Terralban society, and his aristocratic status brings to mind “the older social pattern of feudal lord and dependants.”48 Sebastiana is the only person in the novel who stands up to Medardo and condemns his actions, thus making her into something of a threat to his authority. When the fire he sets does not kill her, though her skin becomes “screziata e stravolta”49 from her burns, Medardo uses the diagnosis of leprosy to get rid of her. The overwhelming fear of such a diagnosis guarantees that no one will defend her. She is banished to the leper colony without so much as a visit from the doctor, and the threat she poses is removed. In Pratofungo, she is powerless. Thus, the lepers of Il visconte dimezzato can be interpreted as an example of the way in which the social hierarchy is preserved through the construction and stigmatization of an “other.” Furthermore, implicit in the description of the lepers of Pratofungo is a condemnation of their behavior, particularly their lasciviousness, drunkenness, and idleness (the hedonism that Calvino mentioned). Such a condemnation ascribes to Foucault’s idea of

47 Eugenio Bolongaro, Italo Calvino and the Compass of Literature (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 67.
48 Hume, 96.
49 Calvino, 33.
the “ethical power of segregation,” namely that it is permissible to eject those who are socially useless (idle).\(^{50}\)

The appearance of lepers in Eco’s *Il nome della rosa* is, in contrast to *Il visconte dimezzato*, much more subtle, but also more explicit in terms of expressing exclusion. There are no overt instances of leprosy in the novel; instead, Eco mentions lepers in a metaphorical sense that ties them to heretics, another group of outsiders. The idea of marginality as related to social order pervades his novel, and the lepers are central to the illustration of this relationship. *Il nome della rosa* is, among other things, a novel about order and the process of ordering.\(^{51}\) The organization of the novel itself, which mimics the highly structured nature of a Benedictine monk’s daily life, and the Abbey’s library, with its complex system of ordering books, are just two examples of this. Derek Duncan cites a passage of Eco’s that, he argues, works as a metaphor for “an imperfect and complicated social order that strives in vain to achieve a clear sense of differentiation between a pure center (the Abbey) and an impure margin or exterior.”\(^{52}\)

As Adso and William of Baskerville explore the Abbey, Adso looks over a parapet and sees a pile of straw mixed with waste and other decaying matter, which was “tutto il rifluire di materie morte che l’abbazia espellava dal proprio corpo, per mantenersi limpida e pura nel suo rapporto con la sommità del monte e col cielo.”\(^{53}\) In this, Duncan

\(^{50}\) Foucault, 54. The lepers, in this way, are different than another excluded group in the novel, the Huguenots, who are known for their extreme work ethic. I would argue that the difference comes from the fact that the Huguenots choose to keep to themselves, whereas the lepers are banished from a society to which they once belonged.

\(^{51}\) Derek Duncan, “Margins and Minorities: Contemporary Concerns?” in *At the Margins: Minority Groups in Premodern Italy*, ed. Stephen J. Milner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 23.

\(^{52}\) Duncan, 22.

\(^{53}\) Eco, 93.
reads a suggestion of the way in which “otherness” is regarded, namely that it is perceived as waste, should be found on the outside, and evokes a feeling of disgust.⁵⁴

But Eco uses a metaphor of his own to describe this concept, both to the readers and to Adso. In his attempts to explain to his apprentice the problem of difference (between different heretical groups and between heresy and orthodoxy) and the reason why the simple attach themselves to heretical leaders, William of Baskerville likens heresy to leprosy and invokes the image of groups of lepers in the countryside, stating that “essi sono per il popolo cristiano gli altri, quelli che stanno ai margini del gregge.”⁵⁵ As the ultimate outcasts, the lepers are the “segno dell’esclusione in generale,” for God has ordained that they be understood as a representation of the “esclusi, poveri, semplici, diseredati, sradicati dalle campagne, umiliati nelle città.”⁵⁶

Though there are no true lepers in the novel, Eco includes an individual that possesses many of the characteristics associated with them. Salvatore, a disfigured monk, seems to be the epitome of the excluded individual. His time with the heresiarch Fra Dolcino leads to his denunciation as a heretic, and as he reveals to Adso, he knows a great deal about witchcraft (which, as pointed out by Mary Douglas in her article “Witchcraft and Leprosy: Two Strategies of Exclusion,” has long been associated with leprosy). Prior to taking up with the marginal groups, Salvatore roamed the countryside alone, as a beggar and pilferer. His account of his vagabond life prompts Adso to imagine him in the company of bands of, among other things, lepers. Further,

⁵⁴ Duncan, 22.
⁵⁵ Eco, 204.
⁵⁶ Eco, 204-5.
his physical description in many ways likens him to a leper. He even suffers from a skin condition, and the depiction of his face gives the impression of some sort of deformation as well:

La testa rasata, ma non per penitenza, bensì per l’azione remota di qualche viscido eczema . . . Il naso non poteva dirsi tale se non perché un osso si dipartiva dalla metà degli occhi, ma come si staccava dal volto subito ne rientrava, trasformandosi in null’altro che due oscure caverne, narici amplissime e folte di peli. La bocca, unita alle narici da una cicatrice, era ampia e sgraziata, più estesa a destra che a sinistra, e tra il labbro superiore, inesistente, e l’inferiore, prominente e carnoso, emergevano con ritmo irregolare denti neri e aguzzi come quelli di un cane.57

He is also described as extremely lustful, a trait often associated with lepers. And indeed Monte Rebello, where Salvatore spent time with the heretics under Fra Dolcino, shares with Calvino’s Pratofungo the reputation for licentious behavior. He is excluded, moreover, by his peregrine language, “la lingua della confusione primeva,”58 as is a local village girl accused of witchcraft, who “era come muta”59 because she knows only her vulgar, peasant tongue. Salvatore, as the embodiment of the leper that William details to Adso, must necessarily be rejected, and by the novel’s end, he is.

The confluence of leprosy and heresy in the character of Salvatore is centrally important in Eco’s critique of social control: just like lepers, heretics are a socially constructed marginal group made up of people who represent a possible threat to authority. In revisiting William’s leper metaphor, we see that the thrust of his argument to Adso is that impoverished people on the fringe, those who feel outcast

57 Eco, 53-4. (italics mine) Note in particular the way in which Eco describes Salvatore’s nose, which bears a striking resemblance to Calvino’s emphasis on the nose (as discussed in note 37.)
58 Ibid.
59 Eco, 334.
from society like lepers, are eager to join groups that promise punishment for those who exclude them. The people in power, cognizant of this fact, brand these elements as heretics, ascribing to them a moral and social danger. William therefore concludes that “ogni battaglia contro l’eresia vuole solamente questo: che il lebbroso rimanga tale.”

Eco appears to be dramatizing here the same arguments of Douglas and Foucault, that charges of leprosy and heresy are jointly used as techniques of social control to preserve the hierarchy of power. The identification of heresy and leprosy is nothing new. Heresy has long been connected to leprosy through the idea of infection—that “heresy was to the soul what leprosy was to the body.” Bernardo Gui, an inquisitor, even refers to the heretics as “la pecora infetta” that must be separated from the flock. Many twelfth-century writers and theologians believe that heresy spreads, as did leprosy, through “the poisoned breath of its carrier, which infested the air and was enabled to attack the vitals of those who breathed it.” The analogy between the two diseases means that their carriers are often represented as possessing similar characteristics: “the leper’s tattered and filthy clothing, staring eyes and hoarse voice are also part of the standard depiction of . . . the wandering heretic,” and the lecherousness and sexual libertinism of the leper are likewise imputed to the heretic.

However, conceiving of Eco’s depiction of heresy in Foucauldian terms, it

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60 Eco, 206.
62 Eco, 392.
64 Moore, Persecuting Society, 63-64.
would seem the goal of the accusation of heresy has little to do with theology (and a concern for a person’s salvation) and much more to do with the outlawing of opposition. As Duncan asserts, the alleged heresy of various characters in the novel is almost exclusively a reaction to their social condition. The stigmatization of these heretics, achieved by convincing the bulk of society that acceptance of such people is a threat to their salvation, enables the powerful to suppress any potential threats to their dominance with the near full complicity of the so-called normal population.

In a discussion of social control in the context of *Il nome della rosa*, it would be remiss not to more closely examine the institution of authority that drives the events of the novel, namely the medieval Inquisition. As Theresa Coletti notes, Eco’s novel “demonstrates how subaltern medieval voices of poverty and heresy are suppressed by forces of inquisitorial prosecution.” Not only does the Inquisition provide the backdrop for the story, but we are also able to witness the manifestation of the inquisitorial techniques of social control primarily through the trial and torture (or the threat of torture) endured by Remigio and Salvatore as well as in the sentencing of the village girl to burn at the stake for witchcraft.

The rapid spread of heretical movements throughout the Christian population

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65 Duncan, 28.
66 It is a bit misleading to talk of one Medieval Inquisition; rather, there were a number of inquisitors, commissioned by the pope, who oversaw the examination of heresy in various provinces of Europe. “There was no central department to direct and co-ordinate this work, and individual inquisitors had no institutional connection with their colleagues in other provinces, though they all exercised identical powers which were defined in canon law.” Bernard Hamilton, The Medieval Inquisition (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1981), 9. I follow Hamilton’s example of using the term “Inquisition” for the sake of simplicity.
in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries was viewed with fear by the papacy. Groups such as the Cathars and Waldensians took root throughout Europe, particularly in France and northern Italy, and they not only challenged the supremacy of Catholic doctrine but advocated for reform of the Church. Organized and influential, these groups were seen as even more dangerous than earlier heretical sects, which were generally tied to one charismatic leader (and which collapsed when said leader died or was subdued), prompting Pope Lucius III to issue the papal bull *Ab abolendum* in 1184. This bull was essentially the beginning of the Inquisition—though it tasked bishops, not inquisitors, with the job of prosecuting accused heretics in their dioceses—and tellingly, included “defiance of authority” as a significant part of the crime of heresy.68 Over the next few decades, succeeding popes (Innocent III in particular) built up and codified anti-heretical legislation through decretals as well as the Fourth Lateran Council, while also pressuring lay rulers to enact similar codes in secular law. However, the bishops were neither well trained nor motivated enough to do an effective job of eradicating heresy. Thus, under Pope Gregory IX and the Council of Toulouse in 1229, the first papal Inquisition was founded in which special, professional inquisitors, usually Dominican or Franciscan friars, were charged with actively hunting out heresy. Around this time, it can be said that the Church’s strategy evolved from one of persuasion to one of coercion.69

Confessed heretics faced punishments that were strikingly similar to the penalties applied to those diagnosed with leprosy. Just as lepers were given special

garb to distinguish them from the healthy population, heretics were commonly forced to wear large yellow crosses on their clothing. Such a punishment, though not involving any physical hardship, could be a heavy burden to bear because it reinforced their status as outsiders. Many of the people subject to such a punishment “complained that they found difficulty in obtaining work, that their neighbors ostracized them, and that their children’s marriage prospects were diminished, because people were afraid of associating with those whom the Inquisition had defamed as former heretics.”  

In fact, some professions were closed altogether to persons even suspected of heretical beliefs. Additionally, heretics were subject to the loss of their property, just as lepers were. Banishment and imprisonment were common punishments for more serious offenders, which contributed to the exclusion of heretics from society. The most severe form of exclusion, reserved for the unrepentant or relapsed heretics, was relaxation to the secular arm, which, in effect, meant death at the stake—Eco leads the reader to believe this will be Remigio’s fate after he is taken to Avignon for a formal trial.

The reason for such harsh exclusion boils down to the apparent denial of the Church’s, and specifically the Pope’s, authority in religious doctrine and the threat that this alleged denial poses to social order, especially for a medieval Christian society that was largely shaped around the Catholic Church. Eco clearly demonstrates this danger by making the debate on poverty such a central element of his story, going so far as to include real historical figures (the well-known inquisitor Bernardo Gui, Michele da

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70 Hamilton, 52.
71 Peters, 51.
72 Hamilton, 52-57.
Cesena, and Ubertino da Casale) as characters in his fictional work. As Eco has Adso explain in the prologue, the controversy surrounding Apostolic poverty was not just an ecclesiastical issue, but a political one as well. Put simply, the Fraticelli emphasized “come verità di fede la povertà di Cristo, che se aveva posseduto qualcosa coi suoi apostoli l’aveva avuto solo come usus facti.”73 Implicit in this belief is a condemnation of the wealth of the Church. Further, many of the Fraticelli refused obedience to their superiors, and the faction quickly became enemies of the Pope, with some aligning themselves with the Empire instead. Pope John XXII saw in their proclamations “un principio che avrebbe messo a repentaglio le stesse pretese che egli, come capo della chiesa, aveva, di contestare all’impero il diritto di eleggere vescovi, accampando di converso per il sacro soglio quello di investire l’imperatore,” and for this, in 1323, he declared them to be heretics in the decretal Cum inter nonnullos.74 They were seen as “la mala pianta . . . che minavano alle basi l’autorità della chiesa,”75 those who also “mettono a repentaglio l’ordine stesso del mondo civile, anche l’ordine dell’impero.”76

The Inquisition’s duty, then, was to stamp out dissent and maintain social order, ostensibly to protect the normal population from chaos and to ensure their salvation against a growing heretical threat. In his book The Formation of a Persecuting Society, however, R.I. Moore argues that the danger from heresy (as well as leprosy) was no more pronounced than it was before the eleventh century, but that changes in society in the Middle Ages prompted those in power to adopt a newfound strategy of

73 Eco, 21.
74 Eco, 21.
75 Eco, 60.
76 Eco, 155.
persecution as a form of social control. The advent of the Inquisition is, in his mind, a sign of a wider trend in medieval society wherein "deliberate and socially sanctioned violence began to be directed, through established governmental, judicial and social institutions, against a group of people defined by general characteristics such as race, religion or way of life; and . . . membership of such groups in itself became to be regarded as justifying these attacks." Moore, like Douglas, contends that the widening gulf between rich and poor—a result of, among other things, the foundation of a seigneurial economy, the increasing use of money instead of bartering, and the attempt by various institutions, the Church included, to centralize and expand their power—hastened the development such a system. The ruling elites consolidated their power by inventing an external threat, and thus, the poor and powerless members of society became the victims of a process of social reclassification. Categories of outcasts were created (including lepers and heretics), and a myth constructed around that category, which could easily be recognized as "a source of social contamination, and whose members could be excluded from Christian society" as its enemies. Fittingly, the events at the abbey cause Adso to draw the conclusion that "spesso sono gli inquisitori a creare gli eretici." Eco further touches on this idea in his novel, when he emphasizes the association of the simple with heretical movements, and to be sure, the only characters to be swept up in the Inquisition (Remigio, Salvatore, and the peasant girl) are decidedly members of the powerless class. Not only are they stigmatized for their...
social position through charges of heresy and witchcraft, but Remigio becomes the scapegoat for the murders, the major cause of chaos and disorder at the abbey. In this way, the Inquisition, as the embodiment of authority in the novel, seeks to restore social order and impose its power through the exclusion of the heretic-outcast figures, the most notable of which is Salvatore with his leprotic characteristics. Moreover, the social lepers continue to be marginalized even after it is revealed they are in no way responsible for the upheaval at the abbey. Eco’s critique of the social ordering process becomes even more evident with the destruction of the library, which “itself is only man’s attempt to impose order on the greater rhizome of knowledge” found in its books. With the library fire, “all sense of order is lost,” making the attempt to maintain order through the exclusion of the lepers ultimately seem futile and unnecessary.

If Moore’s argument that the use of persecution and exclusion as a tactic of social control began in the Middle Ages is correct, such practices certainly do not seem to have abated over the years. The strategies of exclusion apparent in both Calvino’s and Eco’s works become even more significant in that it is possible to draw from them connections to modern society. In both *Il visconte dimezzato* and *Il nome della rosa*, the leper figure can serve as an analogy for present-day manifestations of the outcast/excluded group, especially in that each text is intimately tied to the present. *Il nome della rosa*, for example, stands as a work that is “very knowing about its status as

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81 Ibid.
a bridge between the present and a distant, obscure past.”82 And in the preface to his I nostri antenati trilogy, Calvino writes that his original intention for this story was purely for entertainment, but that he was incapable of evading the turbulent times in which he was living. Thus, Il visconte dimezzato, too, is a novel that “centres on contemporary issues.”83

One interpretation of the lepers in Calvino’s work sees them as symbolizing a modern form of alienation: the hedonism and decadence (as Calvino has suggested) brought on by the consumerism of the postwar economic boom. The Huguenots, in contrast, symbolize a dangerous religious and moral fanaticism.84 But the severity of their exclusion from society requires further examination of the lepers’ significance, particularly because postwar Italy (and Europe as a whole) had very recently experienced a similar process of exclusion by way of the anti-Semitic laws passed by the Fascists and Nazis. Historically, lepers and Jews have been connected for centuries. Christian rulers feared the Jews and did not want them to live amongst the Christian population. Like lepers, Jews were seen as “bearing something like an infectious disease,” making them dangerous to society,85 and thus they were often excluded or confined in ghettos.

The Italian Anti-Jewish Racial Laws of 1938-1943 mirror the laws against lepers stemming from the Third Lateran Council. Their aim was “to eliminate all Jews,

82 Duncan, 23.
83 Pilz, 8.
84 Ibid.
whether Italian or foreign, from Italian soil and from Italian society.” In 1938, foreign Jews were ordered to leave the country, and when the war began, those remaining were to be interned and then eventually expelled. The Fascist regime revoked the citizenship of any Jew naturalized after 1918 and issued a number of prohibitions, which included banning Jews from schools, cultural and sports associations, the entertainment industry, as well as public, and to a certain extent private, employment. Therefore, in a story dealing with the aftermath of World War II, it seems fitting to draw this connection between two outcast groups, both defined as “others.”

However, the lepers of 1327, I would argue, are tied less to a specific group than to marginal groups in general. Calvino’s lepers, too, can be seen as representative of any number of excluded peoples in modern society. The idea of social leprosy is still relevant today. In fact, actual lepers were discriminated against in the United States until surprisingly recently—the last leprosarium was not closed until 1997. But lepers of other sorts, whether political, racial, cultural, or social, still face troubling forms of discrimination and exclusion to varying degrees. In the United States, for instance, reservations for American Indians are vaguely reminiscent of leper colonies. The poor, the unemployed, the elderly, and homosexuals can all fall under the category of social lepers. In the news today, one often hears debates on closing our borders to keep out people who are deemed “undesirable” or are seen as socially parasitic, and a

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87 Sherman, 308.
short time ago, France also made headlines for the decision to expel the Roma. In terms of disease, HIV and AIDS patients have “like lepers . . . been stigmatized and excluded from society.” And, also like leprosy, connotations of sin and immorality have been attached to the disease, so that sufferers are often seen as sexually promiscuous and morally impure. For example, various members of the religious and political right, including Jerry Falwell and Pat Buchanan, in the late 1980s “rose to the task of reading God’s message in the new disease and denouncing the homosexuals they believed had inflicted it on an overly tolerant nation.” In other words, the AIDS epidemic was seen by some as punishment for the sexual deviance of homosexuals.

That the lepers in Calvino’s and Eco’s novels can be seen as representative of the way in which society excludes certain elements is perhaps not in itself groundbreaking, but the commentary each provides on the workings of power/hierarchies and the process of ordering in a community is worthy of consideration. These authors’ literary representations of medieval leprosy from a modern perspective thus shed light on the strictures that our society imposes on marginal groups in an attempt to enforce normative behavior and preserve the status quo.

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88 Allen, 121.
89 Allen, 123.
Bibliography


