Echoes of Eco

JANE JAKEMAN

Rita Monaldi and Francesco Soldi

IMPRIMATUR
Translated by Peter Burnett
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Imprimatur opens with a locked-room mystery. We are in Rome in 1683, in a rather louche hostelry, the Donzello all'Orso, with a cast of suspicious guests and dodgy servitors. They include an enigmatic French abbot, an Italian physician, an English aristocrat, a Neapolitan poet, a Venetian glass-maker and a damsel of dubious virtue. When one of the guests dies suddenly, plague is suspected. The doors and windows are sealed and the residents placed in quarantine, but it soon transpires that the cause of death might have been poison and other mysterious events rapidly follow.

Among those who are incarcerated until they should prove free of contagion is our narrator, a wide-eyed dwarf apprentice, fortunately taking notes for posterity. The abbot leads him on a perilous investigation, down a hidden tunnel and through the sewers and catacombs of Rome, braving the scrofulous *corpisantari* who comb tombs and ossuaries for scraps of skin and bones to sell as relics.

Through the far-flung connections of the various guests, the novel opens out from the narrow setting of the hostelry into something much wider, a tale of dazzling complexity involving fiendish plotting in the courts of Europe. The Turks are at the gates of Vienna and Europe is in a state of crisis as Pope Innocent XI tries to gather Christendom together to oppose the marauding armies of Mehmed IV. But the treacherous Louis XIV seeks to twist the situation to his own advantage. The Queen, who is aggrieved by her husband's philandering, opposes him with her own network of spies and couriers, and the reverberations extend to the Protestant states of Holland and Britain.

Into this mixture are thrown the theories of the scholar Athanasius Kircher, occultist, Egyptologist, astronomer, collector of secret lore. Kircher was one of the first in Europe to take a rational attitude to disease, and claimed to have detected "animulculae" in the blood of plague victims through the use of the microscope. He was probably the last great syncretist, treating all knowledge as interconnected, and this book echoes his syncretism in its assembly of much obscure knowledge, including musicology, ciphers and alchemy. Layers of dynastic intrigues, medical arcana, musicology and occultism accumulate around the central puzzle.

Imprimatur, which was first published in Italy in 2002, has been compared to *The Name of the Rose*, but Rita Monaldi and Francesco Soldi are less interested in narrative structure and crime-solving, and they do not go in for the sort of parallel philosophical considerations that accompany Umberto Eco's monkish investigations. Their long rambling excursions into historical byways are extremely enjoyable, however, as is the novel's vivid language. The English version by Peter Burnett is a splendid feat of translation, including a tour de force of inventive foul-mouthed abuse.

As for the historical content, there is an immense amount about European politics, but the authors' investigations do not seem to have extended to examination of the Ottoman records, though Kara Mustafa's diary of the siege has been translated into German (by Richard Kreutel, 1976). The primarily Catholic viewpoints of the characters reflect the view of the Battle of Vienna as the ultimate triumph of Christianity over Islam, though it was also a defeat for Protestant Europe and for the generally tolerant attitude of the Ottoman Empire. The Janissaries are seen as fiendish baby-kebabbers, a view which undoubtedly reflects current European attitudes. But as a panoramic view of seventeenth-century Western politics, with lengthy digressions into a variety of secret lore, *Imprimatur* starts well and gets better.

Sealed in discomfort

MARTIN SCHIFINO

Céline Curiol

comedy. To wait is to postpone action, and postponement can easily slide into metaphysical disquiet. If the character starts by waiting for Mr Right to make up his mind, she ends

she tells him that she is a prostitute. When he rings her to ask for her services (intending to call her bluff), she follows through. Why? Why not. If all this seems too much like a depiction of boredom, it is anything but

had been thrown down on the shingle . . . . A terrible, fascinating sight. Blood was trickling from its gills; now and then its body would wriggle. She'd crouched down and with her finger had given the animal a timid caress.

This recalls *Nausea* and Antoine Roquentin's intimation of existence while standing in front of a dark tree; but it is subtler and, because less grandiose, more