Unknown Artist, Capital, 1100-1200
Guarded Knowledge in the Medieval Era

“A monk should surely love his books with humility, wishing their good and not the glory of his own curiosity; but what the temptation of adultery is for laymen and the yearning for riches is for secular ecclesiastics, the seduction of knowledge is for monks.” (Eco 183).

Books have the remarkable ability to transcend the lives of their authors. Books pass on knowledge over time, from generation to generation. In Umberto Eco’s novel, The Name of the Rose, we encounter the delicate relationship between the monks and their expansive library. Indeed, this dynamic of the infinite knowledge of books and the limited understanding of individuals is also present in the 12th century Spanish capital sculpted by an unknown artist that is housed in the Snite Museum of Art. These two works illustrate for us the important subtleties that characterize the concept of guarded knowledge in medieval society. Namely, these works force us to consider the responsibilities we have to preserve this knowledge for future generations and the tendencies we have to control the knowledge of others by restricting access to books.

The capital depicts an angelic figure with broad, arching wings that wrap around the sides. The man in the middle is bent at the knees and hunched over. His face is long and wizened. His expression is stern, yet it evokes a feeling of exhaustion. And in his hands, grasped firmly and held close to his side, is a book. It is easy to imagine that this angel has gone to great lengths to recover this book. The book is without doubt extremely important to him; it is quite literally near and dear to his heart. Certainly, this book can be considered a symbol for medieval knowledge and our responsibility to guard it.
But what does it really mean to guard knowledge? The artist places this symbolic book locked in the arms of its guardian angel—nothing could come between the angel and the book. And in doing this, the artist limits the viewer’s access to this book. For example, the artist chose not to display an open text, in the hands of an angel with extended arms, reaching out to share with all. Likewise, the abbot of the monastery in *The Name of the Rose* chose to restrict access to the library rather than to open its doors to all who wish to explore it. What do these actions tell us about the medieval concept of knowledge? It seems there are only two likely explanations for these decisions. The first is that in order to guard knowledge, it is our responsibility to do everything we can to preserve and protect books for future generations. And the second is that guarding knowledge sometimes requires us to control the knowledge of others by limiting the availability of books.

This first interpretation, guarding knowledge as a preservation of truth for the future, entails that books must be protected. In this view, the angel holds the book so close that nothing could harm it. This heavenly guardian prevents any evil or danger from interrupting the imparting of knowledge that comes only through books. Similarly, the abbot’s decision to close off the library to the monks becomes a righteous policy that saves the knowledge that the library contains for those to come: “There, I said to myself, are the reasons for the silence and darkness that surround the library: it is the preserve of learning but can maintain this learning unsullied only if it prevents its reaching anyone at all, even the monks themselves. Learning is not like a coin, which remains whole even through the most infamous transactions; it is, rather, like a very handsome dress, which is
worn out through use and ostentation. Is not a book like that, in fact?” (Eco 185). But this is not a complete interpretation of the medieval concept of guarded knowledge.

On the other hand, guarded knowledge is about control. Whether it is the angel who keeps the book to himself only, or the abbot who locks up the library to keep the monks out, this guarding of knowledge is a way to control the knowledge of others. Sometimes, this type of control can be good, like when a parent prevents a child from reading certain books designed for adults. Surely, no child should be exposed to the gratuitous sex and violence that marks certain pieces of literature. But it is far too easy for this type of controlling knowledge to escape its reasonable bounds. It is far too possible for the angel, or the abbot, or any controller of knowledge to rule over others by restricting access for their own sake. This type of controlling is an attempt to rewrite history and cover up the past by presenting only the knowledge that is in accordance with authority, disregarding the rest.

But Eco asserts quite clearly that a library is “a receptacle of powers not to be ruled by a human mind,” (Eco 286). Furthermore, he argues that a library is a “a treasure of secrets emanated by many minds, surviving the death of those who had produced them or been their conveyors.” (Eco 286). This suggests that the medieval understanding of guarded knowledge is not so clear one way or the other.

Ultimately, the angel’s clinging to the book and the monastery’s policy of limiting access to the library can be interpreted in divergent ways. It all rests upon the intentions of the artist and the abbot. But the picture we gather from trying to decipher all the clues they have left is murky at best. Indeed, both the artwork and the literature of the Medieval Era delicately toe the line between protecting knowledge and controlling it. We are
simply left to wonder where their true intentions lie. The only way to know for sure is to see inside, to explore the library, to open the book.