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L. J. Sackville. *Heresy and Heretics in the Thirteenth Century: The Textual Representations*. Rochester, N.Y. and Woodbridge Suffolk, York Medieval Press: 2011. xii + 224 pp. \$90.00/ £50.00 (hb). ISBN 978-1-903153-36-9.

Review by R. I. Moore, Newcastle University (retired).

For the past half century at least—some would say, for a good deal longer—the momentum of work on “popular” heresy and its repression in the thirteenth century has been powerfully in the direction of deconstruction. Even so great an historian as Henry Charles Lea (whose *History of the Inquisition in the Middle Ages* (1888), in many respects still the most complete account of the subject, continues to be reprinted) substantially accepted the thirteenth-century church’s own account of itself as confronted by an array of more or less organised and more or less radical sects, even amounting in the case of the “Cathars” to an alternative church inspired and shaped by a dualist theology and widely dispersed in Latin Christendom, though most deeply entrenched in southern France and northern Italy.

Not until the 1930s was it seriously argued—first by Herbert Grundmann, whose work was not widely known outside Germany until the 1960s—that the ideas and impulses (such as apostolic poverty and community, disgust of clerical ostentation and corruption) which animated many of the heretical movements outside the church in the High Middle Ages also inspired the most important movements for reform within it; and not until the 1950s that this was what lay behind what had hitherto been perceived as the presence of a missionary dualist church from the Balkans in the eleventh- and early twelfth-century west. Even then, the assertions of the (Catholic) sources about the beliefs and organisation of those alleged to be heretics, if no longer those about their conduct and motivation, continued to be accepted at face value.

Only since the 1990s (with a handful of distinguished forerunners) has the full force of modern critical approaches been systematically directed at the foundations of the old story, with devastating results.[1] In brief, there is now a formidable body of scholarship which holds that “Catharism,” both as a body of ideas and as an organised church, or even as a group of more or less loosely related sects, together with crucial elements of the documentation once thought to underpin it, was a collective construction of monks, masters and bureaucrats, politically, ecclesiastically and spiritually motivated, contrived from the resources of their own well-stocked imaginations with occasional external reinforcement from miscellaneous and independent manifestations of local anticlericalism or apostolic enthusiasm, and confirmed from the 1230s onwards by the ingenuity and assiduity of the Dominican inquisitors. The historiography of the Waldenses has followed—indeed, often pioneered—a similar and similarly controversial trajectory.

Medieval historians being no readier than other folks to surrender long-cherished ideas the commonest reaction to this development has been simply to ignore or, if pushed, stridently to denounce it. A more interesting, as well as a more sophisticated response, has been to suggest that since the received account cannot all be bathwater (though why not, to declare an interest, remains a mystery to this reviewer) we

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must work all the harder to locate the baby. As a student of Peter Biller, a (or the) leading proponent of that approach and a most learned scholar especially of the Waldenses, Dr. Sackville sets out “to look for not what the sources can say about heresy so much as what they can tell us about Catholic ideas of heresy that lie behind them: how and from what parts the picture of heresy is put together” (p. 9).

To this end she proposes to look not simply at anti-heretical literature—though that in practice supplies the greater part of her material—but “across the whole range of what was written [about heresy] through a comparison of different types of text.” Academic heresy is understandably and reasonably excluded and the remaining texts categorised as polemics, works of religious edification, canon law and inquisitorial. A chapter is devoted to each of these groups, and a fifth and concluding chapter “addresses the broader interpretative implications.” A brief appendix usefully notes that the *perfecti* who, as *parfaits* et cetera, abound in fictional and (allegedly) non-fictional accounts of the “Cathars” are almost entirely absent from the sources.

After a careful and thorough descriptive list of the texts in question, which will be particularly helpful to readers unfamiliar with the field, each of the first four chapters considers what the texts it addresses have to say about heresy and heretics, paying close attention to their arrangement and structure and to the relationships between them, and taking full account of incidental allusions and references, as well as to the topic directly addressed. The most general conclusion is that heretics and heresies are depicted in the ways that suit the purposes of their authors. Thus, for the Italian authors of the group of polemics of the 1230s and ‘40s considered in chapter one, the essence of heresy is intellectual error, a series of propositions to be rebutted. Particular errors attributed to heretics also provide material for the lists of authorities compiled to aid preachers considered in chapter two, but personal anecdotes and iniquities contribute to collections of exempla both for the edification of general audiences and the development of pastoral services, and for particular groups like the Cistercian novices for whose benefit Caesarius of Heisterbach tailored his well-known fables. A distinctive sub-set of the genre is found in the way in which accounts of the campaigns of its early leaders against heresy and the suffering even to martyrdom that it entailed was used to shape the identity and ethos of the Dominican order. In outlining the development of ecclesiastical legislation against heresy the third chapter shows how the heretic who to Gratian in the twelfth century was self-defined, having chosen error, and so in need of correction, was by Innocent III and his successors “defined by the judgement and sentence of the church... not (by) the false doctrine” (p. 111), and treated accordingly as an object of punishment. Similarly, in the inquisitors’ manuals described in chapter four, the beliefs of the heretics are taken for granted: the focus is on their behaviour, by which they can be classified as heretics or supporters of heresy of various degrees of culpability, and through which their presumed associates and organisational structures can be identified.

In conclusion Sackville contends that the variety of uses that her writers made of the idea of heresy rules out “a reading that sees the heresy represented in the Catholic tradition as entirely and deliberately constructed...(because) the construction of heresy is determined more by the purpose of the text and the function it serves than by one over-arching agenda” (pp. 198-199). This may be true, but her work points towards something better than the demolition of a straw man. As far as I know no such reading has been proposed or is likely to be. The readings (plural, and various) to which Sackville seems to refer suggest rather that the accusation of heresy could serve many agendas and was frequently made to do so, and that Catholic observers had spiritual and intellectual reasons, as well as political and institutional ones, for over-interpreting the assertions and behaviour of their subjects to bring them into conformity with increasingly elaborate preconceived models.

That is not radically at odds with what Sackville has found in her texts. Certainly, her assumptions about the relationships between her constructions and reality are open to criticism. For instance, she naturally makes it plain that Caesarius of Heisterbach’s exempla were selected and shaped to suit his

didactic purposes, and concedes implicitly that some of them were not, in the mundane sense of the word, true—as, for example, that heretics were in the habit of convening nocturnal assemblies at which they engaged in vigorous and indiscriminate sexual activity, or that some of them had records (chirographs or charters) of their pact with the devil sewn under the skin of their armpits.

On the other hand, she supposes that the errors of the heretics whose burning at Cologne in 1163 Caesarius described sixty years later “may *in reality* (my emphasis) have been quite complex” (p. 57), implying that they were dualist “Cathars” as described by the extremely dubious Eckbert of Schönau, rather than stubborn adherents of the original vision of Norbert of Xanten, as suggested by Uwe Brunn in the formidable and fundamental re-examination of dissidence in the Rhineland which Sackville has shrugged aside in a footnote fifty pages earlier.[2] More broadly, frequent references to lively encounters and public debate between Catholics and “heretics,” especially in Italy, certainly suggest “a landscape populated by heretics” (p. 72), but they say nothing about the accuracy with which either side (to accept the Catholic polarisation) perceived or described the other.

And so on. The point is not how much of the traditional story of heresy Sackville accepts—it seems to be a good deal—but that whether or not she does so is irrelevant to, and distracting from, the genuinely important thing that she has to say, which is that the idea of heresy, precisely because it was a protean idea, malleable to many purposes, had an increasingly central and even necessary part to play in the thirteenth-century church, not only or perhaps even primarily as an instrument of discipline, but as a means of defining, elaborating, displaying and inculcating Catholic teaching and conduct. Sackville does not use the phrase “thinking with heretics,” or suggest that if heresy had not existed it would have had to be invented, but that is what many of her most acute and perceptive observations imply.

The political, institutional and social reasons why the thirteenth-century church—and not only the church, but secular authority and the social order to which both were committed—needed heresy and heretics are becoming better understood; to add intellectual necessity to the list would be a real advance. It would also open the door to a greater one. If such a need existed in the early thirteenth century it had arisen fairly recently. As many of Sackville’s comments remind us, especially in relation to canon law, there is little sign of it much before the end of the twelfth. Among the changes that would need to be explained, for example, would be papal endorsement of belief in the reality of night flights to secret meetings under diabolic presidency—beliefs which churchmen had long dismissed as culpable superstition. In short, though Sackville is understandably grateful, in another evasive footnote (p. 94) to “pass over” *Vox in Rama*, it is by no means clear that the logic of her conclusions permits her to do so. But it is not her fault that the conditions that now govern entry to academic life in the United Kingdom require a first book to be completed in a far shorter period than that in which the implications of a significant insight can be fully thought through.

## NOTES

[1] For this work in France see especially Monique Zerner (dir.), *Inventer l'hérésie? Discours polémiques et pouvoirs avant l'Inquisition* (Nice: Centre d'Etudes Médiévales, 1998) and Jean-Louis Biget, *Hérésie et inquisition dans le midi de la France* (Paris: Picard, 2007).

[2] Uwe Brunn, *Des contestataires aux “Cathares” Discours polémiques de réforme et propagande antihérétique dans les pays du Rhin et de la Meuse avant l'Inquisition* (Paris: Institut d'Études Augustiniennes, 2006).

R. I. Moore  
Newcastle University (retired)  
[rimoore3@gmail.com](mailto:rimoore3@gmail.com)

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