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Karen Sullivan, *Truth and the Heretic: Crises of Knowledge in Medieval French Literature*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005. xii + 281 pp. Notes, select bibliography, index. \$35.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-226-78169-0.

Review by John H. Arnold, Birkbeck College, University of London.

Karen Sullivan's previous book had a very tight analytical focus: the condemnation trial of Joan of Arc.^[1] That was an excellent study of an historical document as text (and I wish I had come across it prior to completing my own monographic work on inquisitorial records), demonstrating the combined strengths of a literary critic's close reading, the use of critical theory to open up a text, and the author's innate imagination and intelligence. In *Truth and the Heretic* Sullivan moves backwards in time, southwards geographically, and her focus dilates: we are in the world of twelfth-to-early-fourteenth-century Languedoc, and the heretics of the title are those dualists commonly known as Cathars (plus one chapter on Waldensians). The results are provocative, insightful, and if at points problematic, never less than intriguing.

The "Introduction" sets out the plan of the book, and asserts that, for the most part, Sullivan is interested not in the heretic of lived reality, but the heretic imagined by orthodox texts. And this character interests her because of the epistemological faultline it figures: "Unstable in his own meaning, the heretic made the meanings of the texts he read seem unstable" (p. 2). Whereas orthodoxy sought and agreed upon one meaning of a text (most importantly the Bible), the heretic found divergent readings, and hence sowed confusion. For "the medieval imagination" he hence symbolised "textual and even epistemological indeterminacy" (pp. 2-3). How that indeterminacy was treated depends, Sullivan suggests, on whether the text representing the heretic was "literary" or otherwise.

Chapter one takes us to the well-trodden uplands of Montailou, and reintroduces us to Béatrix de Planissoles, *châtelaine*, Cathar sympathiser, lover of two priests, and ultimate victim of the inquisitor and bishop Jacques Fournier. Through a close reading of Béatrix's deposition, and a couple more, Sullivan draws out issues of secrecy and indeterminacy. The secretive behaviour of the heretical preachers is seen as a kind of erotics of knowledge, enticing potential converts to them. Béatrix tells her last lover, the parish priest Bertomieu, many things about heresy; all are reported in a kind of distanced fashion, open to multiple interpretations. Bertomieu at one point suggests that she knows a lot more about heresy than she admits, and that he could have her arrested; and "she smiled" (p. 40). The ambiguity of this smile (and others like it) fascinates Sullivan, and she allows us to glimpse the image throughout the chapter—the half admission, the indeterminate acknowledgment, all so different in discursive terms from the binary epistemology and categorising tendencies of the inquisition that brings these vignettes to our sight.

Chapter two takes us back through earlier heresiologies, beginning with the more obvious patristic writings, into the narrative accounts from the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and then dealing particularly with Bernard of Clairvaux's relevant sermons on the *Song of Songs*, and Guillaume Pelhisson's chronicle. The secrecy associated with heresy is the recurrent theme, and the tendency of that very secrecy to become a marker, in orthodox eyes, for dissent. What cannot be clearly seen—the interior intentions and beliefs of those suspected of divergent faith—becomes in itself the very indication of those beliefs: "As it is impossible to prove that one does not have a secret to someone who believes that one does, it becomes impossible for the accused heretic to prove that he is not a heretic to

authorities who believe that he is legitimately charged" (p. 83).

Chapter three moves from ecclesiastical texts to the literary—to, one might say, the very foundations of European literari-ness, as a form of writing highly self-conscious of its exploration of the possibilities of language and meaning: troubadour poetry. It is this chapter that will, I suspect, prove the most controversial for other literary scholars. Sullivan's inspiration here lies with an old view on troubadour literature that sought to link it in various ways with Catharism: hints of viewpoints and ideas, but also (as she particularly explores here) in the hermeneutic attitudes particular to the "secretive" genre of *trobar clus*. Just as heresies were thought to reveal their inner meanings only to intimate initiates, so this playful and allusive style repelled immediate interpretation, and demanded the skills and intimacies of decoding. In the final section of the chapter, Sullivan goes beyond noting homologies, arguing for a closer connection between Catharism and the poetry of Peire Cardinal in particular.

Chapter four looks in detail at the two famous narratives of Albigensian crusade: the chronicle written by the strongly pro-crusade Pierre des Vaux-de-Cernay, and the complex and dual-authored narrative poem *Canso de la Crozada*. The issue here is the intersection of heresy with class (or, more strictly, nobility). Both texts, with their differing viewpoints on the south, indicate a certain tension when nobility and heterodoxy combine, the expected deference and protected position of the social elite complicating the ascription of condemnation. But, as Sullivan demonstrates, for Pierre the issue of ecclesiastical obedience is paramount, ultimately trumping any other claims to authority and legitimacy. Guilhem de Tudela, the continuator of the *Canso*, has a more divided and complex viewpoint: happy to condemn for their support of heresy the southern French nobility en masse, he is disturbed by the spectacle of violence deployed against *particular* noble individuals such as Lady Guirauda de Lavaur, stoned to death by the crusaders.

Chapter five takes another literary text, the *Romance of Tristan*, and argues that, in the tale of Tristan and Iseut, the author Béroul was "responding to the epistemological challenges brought about by the pursuit of heretics during his day" (p. 157). The lovers' persecutors bear the same limited mindset as those prosecuting heretics, searching for external clues to hidden behaviour that can be collapsed, through a hard and somewhat crude epistemological action, into clear categories of transgression, which can then be condemned and punished. Sullivan refers explicitly back to her previous chapter, drawing parallels between the attitudes embodied by Pierre des Vaux-de-Cernay and others, and the clerical characters in Béroul's text—and more importantly sketching the collision between different discursive worlds, with tragic consequences for those on the weaker side: "If accused heretics and accused lovers cannot defend themselves effectively, it is because they attempt to do so in terms unrecognisable to the authorities who charge them" (p. 178).

With chapter six we are back to historical texts, this time focussed upon the Waldensians. The issue at stake is encapsulated in an early source, Walter Map's bitchy comments about the sect at the Third Lateran Council of 1179, deriding their attempts to act like the literati whilst seeking only their own personal glory. The Waldensians disturbed in a particular way, Sullivan argues, because of their very similarity to orthodox strands of behaviour and discourse—whilst also undertaking hidden activities and giving their apparent speech different meanings: "It is because the Waldensians appear to speak the same language when they do not, because they operate on two opposing levels, one open, the other hidden...that they resemble the moles, grubs and foxes to whom heretics are so often compared, which destroy without being noticed" (p. 214).

Chapter seven returns us to the literary, and the most famous fox of all, Renart. Duplicity is once again the theme, in Renart's romance, and in certain other fabliaux of the period. Sullivan indicates parallels again between the literary narrative and the heretical historical milieu—in this case, coming right up to the point of arguing for direct (perceived) connection as Renart is described as *herites*, which can be translated as "heretic" (though, as a footnote here admits, it may have a more general meaning of

scoundrel). Sullivan's argument, returning to a promise made in the introduction, is that literature, unlike historical or ecclesiastical texts, is able to hold the epistemological crises of heresy at a productive distance--is able, like the scientist who has not yet checked on Schrödinger's cat, to avoid collapsing the multiple potentials down into one dull and prosaic reality: "The conflict between the explicit and the implicit levels of these texts reflects, ultimately, the conflict between philosophy and literature, truth and fantasy, reason and appetite, moral judgment and visceral pleasure, and, by extension, orthodoxy and heresy" (p. 238). As the book's conclusion further elaborates, the ability to examine this conflict was chronologically limited to the period during which heretics were being pursued (p. 244).

It should be noted that, in the passage just quoted, the words "by extension" carry a considerable argumentative burden. Where dealing with connections between literary texts and heresy, Sullivan is also intermittently reliant upon the delicious indeterminacy set into play by the lawyer's term "insofar as": "Insofar as the comic authors [of fabliaux/Renart's tales] are responding to the characterization of the Waldensians in the air at this time" (p. 221), as she phrases it with rather wonderful additional vagueness. I have my doubts, in other words, about some of the connections made here between heresy and literature--partly also because the manner of connection claimed shifts at different moments in *Truth and the Heretic*, so that whilst certain areas suggest only homologies, and others focus on particular connecting tropes (execution by fire for Tristan and Iseut for example), certain parallels are either suspiciously loose (any sense of secretiveness at some points indicating heresy) or unnervingly direct (apparently entertaining suggestions that Tristan and Iseut's denial of free will connected to Catharism, p. 154 fn. 7) where things hover on the brink of going a bit Dan Brown.

This does not mean, however, that I'd reject Sullivan's suggestions out of hand. The tendency to completely reject associations between Catharism and troubadours has perhaps reached the outward swing of the pendulum, and whilst I don't think we want to return to the romanticism of Denis de Rougement or others, some consideration of Sullivan's central idea--that the social fact of heresy set in motion the apprehension of certain epistemological themes, to which contemporary literature might then respond--is clearly welcome. As an historian, I of course want, in lumpen fashion, more evidence linking circles of literary production with the kinds of ecclesiastical discussions that note epistemological crisis. Would something more clearly aimed at a "popular" audience, such as Jacques de Vitry's sermons against heresy, support or complicate the argument? I suspect the latter, because when orthodox authority came to communicate public policy on heresy, it tended to do so in rather more firm and uncomplicated terms than some of the texts discussed here.

Again, as grumpy historian, there are areas of context whose absence one notes. A richer understanding of the relevant law, and the sociopolitical contexts within which that law was applied, would benefit the text (and again possibly complicate the arguments). The unwillingness of Philip Augustus and others to jump to the pope's bidding in waging war against Raimon V of Toulouse was based on more than class solidarity; as Sullivan herself here notes, Philip says he has been advised by "learned and eminent men that you cannot legally [seize Raimon's lands] until he is condemned for heresy" (p. 116), which is at heart a *legal* point, and one with some merit. The implications of obeying the papacy in the absence of legal condemnation do not simply concern class solidarity: they also have a massive impact on the political principles governing relations between ecclesiastical and secular power. Similarly, in noting that Pierre de Vaux-Cernay's sense that heresy was essentially about obedience rather than doctrine, a close reading of twelfth- and early-thirteenth-century canon law would demonstrate to what extent this was a view shared by popes and canon lawyers (p. 132). What's important here is that this view depended upon a wider theological and epistemological point, one drawn from considerable orthodox argument and debate in the area: that it was recognised to be innately difficult, nay impossible, to tell what someone really, truly thought and believed, and hence, as one kind of legal and epistemological response, "you shall know them by their fruits" (Matt 7:16).

Incorporating some element of these areas would not, I think, destroy Sullivan's basic argument or

direction of enquiry. But it would lend it further nuance, something which, at certain points, the book more egregiously lacks. Whilst the sense of the heretics and authors here is elegantly, insightfully, and sympathetically drawn, the depiction of the forces of orthodoxy and authority slides at certain points toward nineteenth-century Protestant caricature: “Despite the pyres these clerics may well have beheld during the Albigensian crusade, would they agree with Bérout (and Scripture) that “God...does not want a sinner to die?” (p. 185). I’m quite certain that such clerics *would* have thus agreed; indeed, this concern in fact drove much of inquisitorial technique. Understanding the thinking of why such men believed that, ultimately, some unrepentant sinners nonetheless *had* to die is as important a task for the historian as understanding the views of their victims—not because one seeks to excuse or forgive the inquisitor, but because one needs to understand him and his discursive context. The sense in which inquisition was a complex and relatively self-aware response to the epistemological crisis (a crisis that various inquisition texts explicitly discuss) is not really apparent in this book. In a parallel fashion, a certain flirtation with the idea that the church might be expected to condemn courtly love, to see it as in some sense “heretical” (pp. 151-54), is simply silly—and again a rather impoverished idea of how the orthodox as well as the heretical universe operated. A reductive reading of Bakhtin hovers here, romanticizing and homogenizing both “folk” and “official” cultures.

These are flaws, more, I fear, than mere quibbles. But they do not negate the other merits and insights of the book, which are many. Her readings of all texts examined here are never less than thought-provoking and stimulating, and her central theme of literary responses to epistemological crisis—one which, in fact, I think could be extended well beyond the particular case of heresy in southern France—continues to fascinate, and provides an important nexus at which various medieval cultural currents intersect.

NOTES

[1] Karen Sullivan, *The Interrogation of Joan of Arc*, Medieval Cultures 20 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

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See also Karen Sullivan’s response to this review.

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