

R. I. MOORE

**THE
WAR
ON
HERESY**

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P r o l o g u e

DEATH AND A MAIDEN

It is always disturbing when intelligent people seriously talk nonsense ... The hardest things to understand about much of the past are its errors and delusions.

J. M. Roberts

In the year 1163 some heretics of the sect of the Cathars came to Cologne from Flanders and stayed secretly in a barn near the city. But when they did not go to church on Sunday they were found out by their neighbours. They were brought before the church court and thoroughly examined about their sect. When they would not be corrected by sound arguments and stubbornly maintained their position, they were summarily expelled from the church and handed over to the lay court. On 5 August four men and a girl were taken outside the city and burned. The girl would have been saved by the sympathy of the people if she had been frightened by the fate of her companions and accepted better advice, but she tore herself from the grasp of those who were holding her, threw herself into the flames and was killed.¹

Dreadful though this story is, it does not quite fit the image of the medieval world as an 'age of faith', in which the burning of heretics provided regular entertainment for multitudes of the applauding pious.

The onlookers at Cologne were shocked because in 1163 this was by no means a commonplace event. No heretic had been executed in western Europe for almost 600 years after the end of the Roman empire until, in 1022, about sixteen people were burned alive at Orléans by order of King Robert II of France. In 1028 the nobles of Milan insisted over the protest of the archbishop on burning ‘many’ – but we have no idea how many – whose bodies ‘were reduced to wretched ashes’.² In the following 140 years heretics, real or alleged, were burned on five other occasions we know of, but the numbers involved were much smaller.

The burning at Cologne in 1163 was a turning point. From this time forward burnings became much more frequent. Because their victims were not only the preachers or leaders of alleged heretical sects but their ordinary followers, they sometimes involved much larger numbers of people. This was the war against heresy that did so much to fix the primitive, blood-stained image of medieval Europe and foreshadowed burnings in far larger numbers at the beginning of the modern epoch, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Along the way it restructured the relationship between church and people, reshaped the kingdom of France into the hexagon we know today and helped to mould Europe’s universities and its legal and governmental systems. Like other world-changing wars, it originated in profound long-term changes in social relations, the climate of ideas and the distribution of power as well as in ordinary, and extraordinary, human idealism, opportunism, vanity and greed.

The burning of 1163 was widely reported in the Rhineland region and beyond. The report of the *Chronica regia Coloniensis* quoted above illustrates a great deal about how both the perception of heresy and the treatment of those accused of it were changing in Europe in the middle of the twelfth century, as well as about the problems of recovering its history. To begin with, although this is the version of the story that historians almost always quote or have in mind when they tell it, it is not the earliest or most authoritative, for it was written some sixty years after the events it describes. The nearly contemporary *Annals of Aachen*, a short

distance to the west of Cologne, and the *Annals of Erfurt*, some way to the east, both compiled in the 1160s, say only that ‘Some heretics were burned at Cologne. A woman among them threw herself into the fire without being pushed.’ The identical wording of these two notices suggests that they reproduce a written report circulated immediately after the trial and burnings. Dietrich, a monk of the nearby abbey of Deutz who died in 1164, gives a fuller account:

On August 2, 1163, six men and two women were arrested in Cologne as Catafrigiens, or Cathars, with their leaders Arnold, Marsilius and Dietrich, who were condemned and excommunicated by the clergy and handed over to the judges and people of the city because they refused to accept the catholic faith and renounce their impious sect. When they were burned near the Jewish cemetery, on the hill called ‘Jew Hill’, they showed themselves so obstinate in their belief that, inspired by the devil, some of them threw themselves into the fire.³

Even among these three strictly contemporary sources there is an apparent discrepancy on the vital question (we might think) of the number of people – one woman or two? – who were burned. But it was through later versions that the episode came to be well known. They included not only the *Chronica regia Coloniensis* and other thirteenth-century chronicles but also a widely circulated collection of stories for the instruction and edification of Cistercian novices (the Cistercians being the order of monks most closely associated with the identification and pursuit of heresy), Caesarius of Heisterbach’s *Dialogue of Miracles*, composed like the *Chronica regia Coloniensis* in the early 1220s.

As might be expected, the story was polished in the retelling, the better to illustrate the lessons it was intended to teach. A lone girl makes a more pitiable figure than two women and by the 1220s would have reminded many listeners of another famous story, of another burning, in the late 1170s, which we owe to another Cistercian chronicler, Ralph of Coggeshall. It tells how Gervase of Tilbury, an English clerk in the service of the archbishop of Reims, was attracted by a young girl whom he saw working alone in a vineyard. When she declined his amorous advances, pleading that the loss of her virginity would bring her to

certain damnation, ‘Master Gervase realised at once that she belonged to the blasphemous sect of the *Publicani*, who were being searched out and destroyed all over France.’⁴ The girl was arrested and taken to the archbishop’s palace for questioning. It transpired that she had an instructress in the city, who, she was confident, would be able to answer the arguments that were being advanced against her beliefs. Found and brought before the court,

the woman was bombarded by the archbishop and his clerks with questions and citations of the holy scriptures to convince her of the greatness of her errors, but she perverted all the authorities which they brought forward with such subtle interpretations that it was obvious to everybody that the spirit of all error spoke through her mouth.

The two women, refusing to recant their errors, were condemned to the stake, but the elder escaped:

When the fire had been lit in the city, and they should have been dragged by the archbishop’s servants to the punishment that had been allotted to them, the wicked mistress of error called out, ‘Madmen! Unjust judges! Do you think that you can burn me on your fire? I neither respect your judgement nor fear the fire which you have prepared.’ So saying she took a ball of thread from her breast, and threw it through the great window, keeping one end of the thread in her hand, and calling loudly in everyone’s hearing, ‘Catch!’ At this she was raised from the ground in front of everyone, and flew through the window after the ball of thread. We believe that she was taken away by the same evil spirits who once lifted Simon Magus* into the air, and none of the onlookers could ever discover what became of the old witch, or whither she was taken.

The girl, who had not yet achieved such madness in the sect, remained behind. No reason, no promise of wealth, could persuade her to give up her obstinacy, and she was burned. Many admired the way in which she let forth no sighs, no wailing, and bore the torment

*A magician encountered by the apostles, described in Acts 8: 9–24. The greatest heresy of this period, that of selling the gifts of the Holy Spirit, was named after him (see below, Chapter 5).

of the flames firmly and eagerly, like the martyrs of Christ who (for such a different reason!) were once slain by the pagans for the sake of the Christian religion.

It is easy to see how much more fancifully the story from Reims has been elaborated in successive tellings than the one from Cologne, but the message is the same. To the young monks and courtiers who made up the primary audience the steadfast and courageous young women represented mortal temptation as well as corrupted innocence. Their fates gave a dreadful warning of the seductive power of the heresies believed to be rampant at this time. The introduction at Reims of the older woman, who 'replied so easily, and had such a clear memory of the incidents and texts advanced against her, both from the Old and New Testaments, that she must have had great knowledge of the whole Bible, and had plenty of practice in this kind of debate', showed not only that the heretics were in the service of the devil but also that they were well organised, and capable of fighting the faith with its own weapons.

The miraculous escape brings out some of the dilemmas of interpretation that narrative sources always present. Both of these stories (as we shall see more fully in later chapters) originated in real events; Ralph of Coggeshall's is corroborated by the remark of the biblical commentator Peter the Chanter, about 1191, that laywomen in Flanders had been unjustly suspected and condemned as Cathars solely because they resisted clerical attempts on their chastity.⁵ Both stories were polished over much the same period of half a century or so, for much the same audience, to point the moral and fit the episodes into a changing picture of the world, and of the danger that heresy presented. But what is the relation between the old story and the new, between what really happened and what the sources tell us? It is easy to accept the burnings and dismiss the ball of thread, but is the reported presence among the heretics of an educated woman in a position of leadership a genuine reflection of the composition and appeal of some heretical sects at this time or simply a monastic nightmare, designed to show how heretics pervert the divine order in every possible way? Did the groups uncovered in Cologne and Reims belong to the same sect, sharing the same heretical beliefs, even though they are given different names by their respective chroniclers? If so, does

the greater degree of organisation portrayed at Reims suggest a historical development that took place within the sect between 1163 and 1180 or only the hindsight and commitment of authors writing after western Europe had been enthralled, and appalled, by a full-blown war against heresy – the Albigensian Crusade, proclaimed in 1208 by Pope Innocent III to root out heresy from the lands of the count of Toulouse – and the barrage of stories about heretics, true and false, that accompanied it?

The burning of six men and two women at Cologne may seem a rather small affair by comparison with that bloody and savage war of conquest, and with the manhunts, torture and burnings that marked the century from the establishment of the papal inquisition at Toulouse in 1233 through the persecution of sects, real and imaginary (among whom the ‘Cathars’* and Waldensians are only the most notorious), to the trial of the Templars in France (1307–14) and the hunting down of the Spiritual Franciscans in Italy (1317–27), which provided the setting for Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose*. The conflicts that gave rise to those horrors also established institutions and mentalities that pervaded the culture and shaped the growth of Europe, including both the tendency to recurrent and frequent persecution of more or less arbitrarily defined minorities and the development of defences against it. Denunciation, arbitrary arrest and imprisonment without charge, judicial torture and burning alive, became ordinary features of European life until the eighteenth century and beyond: a ‘witch’ was burned at Beaumont-en-Cambrésis, in northern France, in 1835.⁶ Those threatened included people accused or suspected not only of heresy but also of being Jews or Muslims, of being homosexual, of being lepers, of being witches and so on, and on. The stereotypes and ideologies that fuelled and rationalised these procedures were devised by intellectuals and public servants bent (often from the loftiest, most idealistic motives) on extending the power and

*The indiscriminate use of the term ‘Cathars’ (*Cathari*) by medieval writers, and even more by modern ones, is a problem addressed throughout this book. It is seldom clear in medieval sources that it refers to an identifiable set either of beliefs or of people (see further pp. 167–170, 332–6 below). I have placed it in quotation marks where it seems particularly necessary to emphasise this uncertainty.

effectiveness of governing institutions, secular and ecclesiastical, but they were quickly disseminated, to drive and justify persecution, violence and discrimination in many forms, and at all levels of society.

In 1163 these horrors lay in the future. Although the burning of heretics is now commonly thought of as an ordinary, even routine, expedient in medieval society, it did not become so until late in the twelfth century. The earliest cases, beginning at Orléans in 1022, do not reveal a settled method of dealing either with heresy accusations or with people found or alleged to be heretics. A burning at Bonn in 1143 was the first since the one at Milan in 1028 in which it is clear that what became the standard procedure was followed – that is, the heretics were condemned by a church court and then handed to the secular power for punishment. Before that, a hanging at Goslar in 1052, at the order of the German emperor, was the only other occasion on which we can be sure that heretics were put to death through a formal legal process. At Cambrai in 1077, Soissons in 1114, Liège in 1135 and/or 1145, and Cologne in 1147 contemporary sources assert with varying degrees of plausibility that alleged heretics were burned by ‘the people’ after being found guilty by ecclesiastical tribunals, but against the wishes of the clergy concerned. Two famous heretic preachers were killed without any formal procedure: in 1115, when Tanchelm of Antwerp was murdered by a priest; and in *c.* 1139, when Peter of Bruys was thrown by the citizens of St Gilles-du-Gard in Provence on to a bonfire of crosses that had been made by his own followers. Another, Eon (or Eudo) *de Stella*, died in prison after being found heretical but mad at the Council of Reims, presided over by Pope Eugenius III, in 1148, and an unknown number of his principal followers were burned.

In all of those cases the victims were leaders, accused of spreading heresy, not just of accepting or believing in it. Two years after the burning at Cologne, however, in the winter of 1165–6, Henry II of England had ‘rather more than thirty people, both men and women’, branded, stripped to the waist and flogged from the city of Oxford into the intolerable cold, forbidding his subjects to give them any help or succour. ‘Nobody showed the slightest mercy towards them,’ remarks the chronicler with satisfaction, ‘and they died in misery.’ Except for their leader, these were simple, uneducated people, ‘Germans by race and language’,

who had come to England allegedly to spread their faith – they were said to have converted one old woman, who disappeared as soon as they were arrested – but more probably as refugees.⁷ Compared with the 140 people burned at Minerve in 1210, the 60 at Verona in 1233, the 180 at Mont-Aimé in 1239 and the 200 at Montségur in 1244, this was a modest affair. Nevertheless, these wandering Germans should be remembered as the first victims of the mass repression of heresy in European history.

The systematic, violent and large-scale repression brought to western Europe by the war on heresy of which these events in the 1160s were the opening shots had no earlier parallel. There was indeed nothing new, or even specifically Christian, about the idea that religious dissent should not be tolerated. In ancient China, as in ancient Rome, it was held to be the emperor's duty to uphold the proper observance of religious rites and respect for the gods. During the bitter struggles between warring Christian sects from which the catholic church emerged victorious in the fourth and fifth centuries AD punishments such as the destruction of places of worship, fines and confiscation of property and the deprivation of the legal right to testify or to dispose of property by will were occasionally imposed on heretics, notably the Donatists of North Africa and the Manichees, as they were on Jews and others. In his definitive codification of Roman law (AD 529) the Emperor Justinian I equated heresy with treason, a principle that was revived by Pope Innocent III in 1199.

Many died in the often long and savage conflicts that revolved around these disputes, but the exaction of capital punishment seems to have been relatively rare; indeed, at least up to the reign of Diocletian (284–305), Christians bent on martyrdom were sometimes frustrated by the reluctance of magistrates to accommodate them. Similarly, although the eastern (Byzantine) part of the Roman empire, which survived until 1453, always demanded strict religious orthodoxy of its subjects and religious dispute was commonplace, intense and often central to both political and social conflict, the persecution of heresy was intermittent throughout its history, and the execution of heretics rare. The very different relationship between religious and political structures and

authority in the Islamic world makes direct comparison less straightforward, but again it may be said that though the right, and indeed duty, to persecute heretics was generally maintained and acknowledged, it was seldom widely or systematically exercised for sustained periods.

The key questions to be discussed in this book, then, are why the persecution of people described by some of their contemporaries as heretics became widespread and frequent in western Europe after the middle of the twelfth century, and why from that time it was conducted against a much greater variety of people and on a much larger scale than ever before. That is to ask why 'heresy' appeared to become more threatening, or at least more evident, and what danger it presented, or appeared to present, to twelfth- and thirteenth-century Europeans. Even if religious dissent was becoming more widely supported or theologically more radical just then, it would still be necessary to account for the suddenness, scale and savagery of the response. And hence to ask what part was played in persecution by the clergy, by secular rulers and authorities, by the population at large? How much reliance can we place on accounts of 'heretics' and their doings produced almost exclusively by their enemies, and how can we hope to understand these events on the basis of such accounts? Was the confrontation between 'heretics' and their persecutors purely a clash between religious fundamentalists, fanatics or idealists (depending on your point of view), or did it in some way arise from or embody broader political, social or cultural issues?

The problem posed by the victims is still more difficult. The strenuous efforts both at Cologne and at Reims to persuade the condemned women to abandon their beliefs were no mere formalities. Heresy was defined by Robert Grosseteste in the thirteenth century as 'an opinion chosen by human perception, contrary to holy scripture, publicly avowed and obstinately defended'. It was in stubbornly refusing to abjure such beliefs, even after their error had been repeatedly and exhaustively demonstrated, and every incentive to repentance and reconciliation with the church offered, that the essence of heresy lay. It was the bounden duty of every cleric who confronted alleged or suspected heretics to do everything he possibly could to persuade them to recant and save their souls. With some notorious exceptions, that duty was taken seriously. The burning represented a failure, not a triumph, for those who authorised

it. It follows that on most occasions the victims, like the women at Cologne and Reims, chose their fate knowingly and deliberately. That is one reason why they made so profound and disturbing an impact on the onlookers. Few things could be more unnerving than the spectacle of young, gifted, attractive people insisting on, even glorying in, a terrible death for an utterly incomprehensible cause, 'like the martyrs of Christ who (for such a different reason!) were once slain by the pagans for the sake of the Christian religion'. In the course of this book it will be necessary to clear away a luxuriant overgrowth of falsehood and legend that has gathered around these heretics – especially, but not only, the so-called 'Cathars' – during the thousand years since the burning at Orléans. To deny the myths is not to deny the victims themselves, or their dreadful fate. On the contrary, the only reparation that we can now offer to their memory is to try to reach a better understanding of what it was they died for.

THE AVENGING FLAMES

Clovis, who believed in the Trinity, crushed the heretics with divine help and enlarged his dominion to include all Gaul; but Alaric, who refused to accept the Trinity, was therefore deprived of his kingship, his subjects and the life hereafter.

Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, III

On 28 December (Holy Innocents' Day) 1022, by order of the French king Robert II, often called 'the Pious', a number of prominent clerics and others, of both sexes, were burned at Orléans. 'Thirteen of them were in the end delivered over to the fire,' says Ralph the Bald,

but when the flames began to burn them savagely they cried out as loudly as they could from the middle of the fire that they had been terribly deceived by the trickery of the devil, that the views they had recently held of God and Lord of All were bad, and that as punishment for their blasphemy against Him they would endure much torment in this world and more in that to come. Many of those standing near by heard this, and moved by pity and humanity, approached, seeking to pluck them from the furnace even when half roasted. But they could do nothing, for the avenging flames consumed them, and reduced them straight away to dust.¹

These were the first people to be put to death as heretics since the end of the western Roman empire six hundred years ago. They could hardly have been more different from the modest young women who would later choose the stake at Cologne and Reims or the illiterate and destitute migrants driven into the Oxfordshire countryside in the winter of 1165. Their leaders were canons of Orléans cathedral, and therefore – although we know nothing about the particular connections or previous careers of these individuals – men of the highest standing and influence. Cathedral clergy were normally drawn from the leading families of the region, though canonries could also be used to recruit and support men whose particular talents and abilities might be of use to the ruler – who, for example, needed someone to write his letters – or the bishop. The leaders among those convicted in 1022 were royal favourites; one of them had been the queen's confessor. Their trial and condemnation, rumours of which reverberated through northern France for at least two generations afterwards, averted a scandal capable of threatening the monarchy itself.

The earliest surviving report of the affair at Orléans is in a letter evidently written soon after the trial by John, a monk of the Catalan monastery of Ripoll, to Oliba, its abbot. Oliba had sent John to the great monastery of Fleury (St Benoît-sur-Loire), near Orléans, to secure for Ripoll a fragment of the relics of St Benedict, for which Fleury was famous. 'If you have heard a rumour of heresy in the city of Orléans', John wrote,

it is quite true. King Robert has had about fourteen of the most reputable clerks and noble laymen of the city burned alive. These people, odious to God and hateful on earth and in heaven, absolutely denied the grace of holy baptism, and the consecration of the body and blood of the Lord. They would also deny forgiveness to those who had committed mortal sins. Moreover, they rejected the bonds of marriage. They abstained from foods that the Lord has created, meat and animal fats, as impure. Enquire carefully in your abbey and in your diocese [Oliba was also bishop of Vich] in case there are some who under the cover of false religion have secretly fallen into these errors – may it never happen!²

John was well placed to confirm the rumour and to describe the heresy, for his host was the king's half-brother Abbot Goslin of Fleury, also archbishop of Bourges, who had been present at the trial. John's summary of the heretics' beliefs accords well with the account of the trial that another monk, André of Fleury, provides in his biography of Goslin. This was not written until after Goslin's death twenty years later, but André had probably attended the trial himself, as one of the senior monks from Fleury he mentions who had accompanied Goslin. He describes the heretics as 'certain clerks, raised from childhood in holy religion and educated as deeply in sacred as in profane letters ... Some were priests, some deacons, some sub-deacons. The chief among them were Stephen and Lisois.'³ Like John, André reports that the heretics denied the efficacy of baptism, the sanctity of marriage and the possibility of redemption from mortal sins, and adds that they did not believe in the church as an institution or the rank of bishops or their capacity to ordain priests. More shockingly still, 'They boasted that their own mothers resembled in every respect the Mother of God, who was like no other woman and has had no successor.' On the other hand, André does not mention the denial of the eucharist or the abstention from meat and animal fats, on which John had commented.

As John anticipated, the burnings at Orléans created a considerable sensation, and they appear, as he recommended to Oliba, to have been followed by something of a witch-hunt. Before turning to the more lurid descriptions of the affair that circulated in its aftermath, we should pause to consider what we are told by these two, the closest to the event and to the main actors. Both were struck first by the denial of baptism, to which André attributed a wider significance than John had noted:

they pretended to believe in the Three-in-One, and that the Son of God had become flesh; but it was a lie, for they denied that the baptised could receive the Holy Spirit in baptism, or in any other way secure redemption after committing a mortal sin.

Here is a cast of mind that would become the hallmark of the inquisitor at work. In André's view the accused had made statements about their beliefs that were logically incompatible: they could not both believe in the Holy Trinity and the incarnation of Christ, as they claimed, and disbelieve in the sacrament of baptism and the forgiveness of sins. André, in other words, chose to prefer his own understanding of what the statements of the clerks implied to what they had actually said. Whether he was logically, or theologically, correct is, of course, irrelevant to the historical question of whether the accused were deliberately lying, as André supposed, for even highly educated people may be capable of believing at once several things logically inconsistent with each other. As it happens, André, as Archbishop Goslin's biographer, had an interest in maintaining that Stephen and Lisois had lied about their beliefs all along: it excused the king's patronage and exonerated Goslin himself from any suspicion of complicity in the heresy to which, as we shall see, he may have been exposed.

Real or apparent, the contradiction does point to the source of Stephen's and Lisois's beliefs. During the century and a half before their time a way of thinking had become fashionable (though not predominant) in Francia which explains what they said, or what André thought they said. This was neoplatonism, whose influence on some of the most popular works from antiquity such as the *Confessions* of Augustine and Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, had been reinforced by the work of the most learned scholar of the ninth century, John Scotus Eriugena. His translation (from Greek into Latin) of the works of an unidentified but probably fifth-century writer now known as the pseudo-Dionysus, and his commentaries on them, circulated widely in tenth- and early eleventh-century monasteries and schools.⁴

There were dangers inherent in this way of thought. Combining the teachings of the church with the methods and conclusions of Classical Greek philosophy had always been a source of inspiration, but also of difficulty, for Christians. Plato's insistence, especially as expounded by Plotinus of Alexandria (AD 205–270) and his followers, on the unity of creation, on the flowing of all things from the Word (*Logos*), in which they began, on the permanence and purity of idea and spirit as opposed to the transience and corruptibility of material things, had great religious

potential. Plotinus's vision of the soul striving to free itself from the prison of the flesh to reunite with the divine essence from which it had been parted offered a powerful appeal to Christian mystics, and to those who sought the religious life. But these ideas also presented serious obstacles to some of the fundamentals of catholic teaching – most obviously that God was Three as well as One, had assumed human flesh through the virgin birth, had lived on earth and been crucified as a man with a human body. So neoplatonism, in many manifestations and formulations, has been a recurrent influence in Christian history, especially at times of religious revival and renewal. But it has also been a fertile source both of heresy and of accusations of heresy, because even when those inspired by it have succeeded in resolving the difficulties to which it gives rise in stating Christian doctrine, the resulting complexities have often left them highly vulnerable to misunderstanding or misrepresentation.

Whether Stephen and Lisois had indeed strayed into heresy or were misunderstood or misrepresented there is now no means of knowing. Either way, the very brief and, of course, hostile summaries given by John and André show quite clearly that we are in the presence of neoplatonist language, and therefore in one way or another of neoplatonist belief. Thus, neoplatonists might deny that the Holy Spirit was contained in the water of baptism, or conveyed by the hands of the priest in blessing, or of the bishop in ordination, without (in their own view) necessarily denying the sacraments themselves – especially at a time when the nature and indeed the number of the sacraments was still by no means clearly defined. Others might easily fail to grasp the distinction, with or without malice. The difficulty is evident in André's tortuous explanation that Stephen and Lisois did not believe in the church because 'that which is contained cannot be defined by the container'. The meaning seems to be that the power and workings of the Holy Spirit could not be restricted by the confines of a human institution, or perhaps within the material fabric of a church building. Neoplatonist distrust of matter, and so of the flesh, certainly encouraged abstinence both from sex and from meat, and therefore tended to the disparagement of marriage, though not necessarily to denial of its validity. On the other hand, the heretics' assertion that Mary was no different from their own mothers might as easily reflect an affirmation of Christ's humanity as a denial of it.

The story of what had happened at Orléans spread rapidly and was embroidered in the process. That is quite evident in the accounts of two more monks whose writings provide our most extensive, and most controversial, information about early eleventh-century heresy accusations, Adémar of Chabannes, of the abbey of St Cybard at Angoulême, and Ralph the Bald (Glaber), of St Germanus, Auxerre. Adémar, writing about 1025, gives a brief account of the trial and executions at Orléans, giving the number burned as ten, and saying that their leader was Lisois, 'a man whom the king had once loved for his apparent holiness'. He adds that

a canon of Orléans, a cantor named Theodatus, had died in this heresy, according to trustworthy witnesses, three years before, though he had seemed to be correct in religion. After this was proved his body was taken from the cemetery by order of Bishop Odalric, and thrown into waste ground.⁵

This is a more explicit indication than we had from either John of Ripoll or André of Fleury that there were tensions behind the burnings that went back some way beyond the exposure of Stephen and Lisois. Theodatus has been plausibly identified as a former master of the cathedral school at Orléans whose neoplatonist interpretations of the doctrines of the Trinity, baptism and the eucharist had been attacked some years earlier by Bishop Fulbert of Chartres, the teacher of Bishop Odalric. Odalric's disputed claim to the bishopric was one of the political conflicts behind the trial of 1022, about which André of Fleury remained discreetly silent.

Adémar has nothing to say about what Stephen and Lisois taught or believed. He explains instead that

they had been led astray by a peasant who claimed that he could give them great strength and who carried about with him dust from dead children which quickly made anyone who came into contact with it into a Manichee. They worshipped the devil who appeared to them on

one occasion in the guise of an Ethiopian and on another as an angel of light, and brought down money for them every day. In obedience to him they secretly rejected Christ, and in private committed sins and crimes which it would be sinful even to mention, while in public they pretended to be true Christians.

Here Adémar betrays his own agenda. Historically, ‘Manichees’ were the followers of Mani (d. AD 231), a prophet and visionary whose faith had flourished mightily in the Roman and Persian empires 600 years or so before Adémar’s time and been fiercely persecuted. Among their followers had been at one time Augustine of Hippo (354–430), subsequently perhaps the most famous (after St Paul) of all converts to Christianity. Augustine was the most influential, in the Latin tradition, of the fathers of the church whose writings laid down the authoritative account of Christian doctrine and practice upon which medieval – and indeed modern – catholicism would be founded. His vivid descriptions of the Manichees, of their belief in two gods – one good, who presided over the realm of the spirit, and one evil, who ruled the material universe – and of their refusal to perpetuate the domain of the latter by eating meat or procreating, made this the most feared of all ancient heresies. Adémar of Chabannes was convinced that it had reappeared in his own lifetime, and that it was being spread among ‘the people’ – that is, the poor and the unfree – by ‘emissaries of Antichrist’. Whether his fears were justified is a question for a later chapter, but the peasant preacher with his magic dust is as manifestly fictitious as he is an improbable prophet of the sophisticated neoplatonism of the canons of Orléans, about which Adémar says nothing. The magic dust itself, and the dead children from whom it was made, are also revivals from the ancient past, echoing stories directed by Roman pagans against the early Christians, and later by Christians against their own heretics.⁶

Ralph the Bald also attributed the appearance of the heresy to contamination from the lower reaches of society, this time ‘a woman from Italy’, who converted ‘not just the uneducated and peasants but even many who passed amongst the most learned of the clergy’. His account of the content of the heresy is somewhat confused: he likens it to the Epicureans – not Christian heretics at all, but a school of ancient philosophy

– ‘in that they did not believe that carnality was a sin meriting avenging punishment’. Nevertheless, he took it seriously enough to devote several pages to his own rebuttal of it, and in doing so reflects, though apparently without understanding, the neoplatonist influence that lay behind it. Ralph’s description of the circumstances in which the heresy had spread and been discovered, and of the people involved, however, adds significantly to what we learned from John and André. He identifies as its leaders Lisois, whom we have already met, ‘the [royal] favourite among the clerks in the cathedral’, and Heribert, master of the school at another church in the city, St Pierre-le-Puellier. Enthusiastic to spread their teaching to other cities, they made contact with a priest in Rouen, who reported the approach to Duke Richard of Normandy. Richard in turn informed King Robert, who summoned a meeting at Orléans of ‘many bishops and abbots and some religious laymen’ to look into it.

When inquiry was made among the clergy of the city to see what each felt and believed about the truths which the catholic faith by apostolic precept unchangingly observes and preaches, Lisois and Heribert did not deny their divergent beliefs but revealed all that they had previously kept hidden. Then many others professed themselves adherents of this sect, and declared that nothing could ever separate them from their fellows.

Refusing to retract, ‘on the king’s orders and with the consent of the whole people’ thirteen of them were consigned to the flames.

Ralph the Bald was a highly inventive writer with an agenda of his own. But he was also very well informed, and had a wide circle of acquaintance in the high political and clerical circles in which the burning at Orléans and its aftermath reverberated. In some of its essentials he supports, or is corroborated by, the fullest but most questionable surviving account, that of yet another monk, Paul, of the abbey of St Père at Chartres. Paul’s story is a sort of extended footnote to a compilation of documents that he put together to replace the abbey’s records, destroyed in a fire

in 1078.⁷ It is best known for its more elaborate version of the prurient rumours that Adémar of Chabannes had circulated half a century earlier:

They met on certain nights in the house which I have mentioned, each holding a light in his hand, and called a roll of the names of demons, like a litany, until suddenly they saw the devil appear among them in the guise of some wild beast. Then, as soon as they saw that sight, the lights were put out and each of them grabbed whatever woman came to hand, and seized her to be put to ill use. Without regard to sin, whether it were a mother, or a sister, or a nun, they regarded that intercourse as a holy and religious work. On the eighth day they lit a great fire among them, and the child who was born of this foul union was put to the test of the flames after the manner of the ancient pagans, and burned. The ashes were collected and kept with as much reverence as the Christian religion accords to the body of Christ, to be given as a last sacrament to the sick when they are about to depart this life. There was such power of diabolic evil in this ash that anyone who had succumbed to the heresy and tasted only a small quantity of it was afterwards scarcely ever able to direct his mind away from heresy and back to the truth.

Paul's account of how the heresy came to be discovered and unveiled is almost equally melodramatic. It begins with Heribert, a clerk in the household of Harfast, brother-in-law of Duke Richard of Normandy, who went to Orléans (which at this time 'shone more brightly than other cities with the light of wisdom and the torch of holiness') to study, met Stephen and Lisois, and was converted to their heresy. When he got home, he announced the good news to Harfast, who, horrified, went straight to the duke, asking him to warn King Robert and offer to help root out the heresy. The king responded by ordering Harfast himself to Orléans. On the way he stopped at Chartres to consult Bishop Fulbert, the most celebrated teacher of the day. Fulbert was away, but Harfast was briefed instead by Everard, a senior canon of the cathedral, who 'advised him to seek the help of the Almighty every morning, to go to church, devote himself to prayer and fortify himself with the holy communion of the body and blood of Christ'. 'Thus protected by the sign of the

cross,' Everard continued, 'he should proceed to listen to the wickedness of the heretics, contradicting nothing that he should hear them say, and pretending that he wished to become their disciple, while he quietly stored everything away in his heart.'

While Harfast won the confidence of the heretics in this way, preparations were made for the dénouement. King Robert, Queen Constance and a number of bishops came to Orléans, and when Harfast gave the word, 'the whole wicked gang' – Harfast among them – 'was arrested by royal officials at the house where they met, and brought before the king and queen and an assembly of clerks and bishops at the church of Ste Croix'. Harfast now identified himself and described the teachings that he had heard from Stephen and Lisois, who 'had prepared for themselves a dwelling with the devil in hell, and replied that he had remembered accurately, and they did hold and believe those things'. Then

from the first until the ninth hour of that day everyone put forward various arguments to make them renounce their errors, and they resisted with the obstinacy of iron. Then they were all commanded to put on the holy vestments of their order, and immediately stripped of them again with full ceremony by the bishops. At the King's command, Queen Constance stood before the doors of the church, to prevent the common people from killing them inside the church, and they were expelled from the bosom of the church. As they were being driven out, the Queen struck out the eye of Stephen, who had once been her confessor, with the staff which she carried in her hand. They were taken outside the walls of the city, a large fire was lit in a certain cottage, and they were all burned, with the evil dust of which I have spoken above, except for one clerk and a nun, who had repented by the will of God.

Paul told his tale more than a half a century after the event. Some of it is impossible and much of it improbable. On the other hand, its hero, Harfast, had retired to St Père as a monk, probably in 1026, when he gave land to the abbey. Everard, whom Harfast had consulted on his way to Orléans, also became a monk at St Père. Both were probably long dead when Paul did his work – Harfast was grown up by 990, when he witnessed a charter of Duke Richard I of Normandy, and

Everard was already a senior canon of Chartres in 1022 – but we may accept that their recollection of the events of 1022 was preserved, if also elaborated, in the monastery. Its importance is that the story it gives us, like Ralph the Bald's, is not that of the French royal court, as seen from Fleury by John of Ripoll and André. The most obvious difference is that Paul's version, like Ralph's, involves a much wider cast of characters than André's, suggesting that the initiative in uncovering the heresy (if that is what it was) came not from King Robert II or from within his court but from the circle of Duke Richard of Normandy, with the assistance of senior clergy of Chartres, the chief city of Count Odo of Blois. This contrast is sharpened by the silence of King Robert's official biographer, Helgaud – yet another monk of Fleury – who makes no mention of the trial of 1022. Helgaud, writing immediately after Robert's death in 1031, was anxious to present him as a God-fearing and actively Christian king: for example, he describes Robert as curing sufferers from scrofula, thus inaugurating the tradition of touching for 'the King's evil', which lasted in France and later in England until the eighteenth century. That image would certainly have been enhanced if Robert could have been credibly represented as energetically rooting out heresy.



We should not argue from silence, but neither should we ignore the questions that silence can prompt. The essential clue to explaining the silences of the writers with close links to the royal court is the behaviour of Queen Constance. Stephen had been her confessor, Paul of St Père says, and she struck out his eye with her staff as he was driven from the church at the end of the trial. Constance was King Robert's third wife, the daughter of Count William of Arles and, more importantly, a first cousin of Count Fulk Nerra ('the Black') of Anjou. Robert had married her in 1006, after repudiating his second wife, Bertha, widow of Count Odo of Blois. That is to say, he had married the cousin of one of his greatest enemies after discarding the mother of the other, Odo II of Blois. These three great lords – Robert, Fulk and Odo – were the main protagonists in a contest for power in the vast and wealthy region between the Loire and the Meuse that had been gathering since the

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middle of the ninth century and which would not be settled until the great victory of King Philip II of France (Philip Augustus) at Bouvines in 1214. The prestige of the monarchy had been greatly reduced when the last king descended in the male line from Charlemagne* died in 987.

* Charles, king of the Franks 768–814, crowned Holy Roman Emperor in 800 and widely regarded, for the territorial extent of his empire and the durability of the institutions and culture associated with it, as the ‘founder of Europe’.

The election as his successor of Robert's father, Hugh Capet, turned out to have inaugurated a dynasty that lasted until 1789, but at the time it was a sign less of strength than of weakness, or at least of the extent to which he seemed unlikely to threaten his neighbours. Among those neighbours the closest, strongest and therefore most dangerous were the counts of Blois and Anjou, both energetically extending their lordships, and in Robert's reign fiercely pitted against each other for domination of the Touraine. This, like Odo's annexation of the county of Champagne in 1019, was a major threat to the Capetian interest. To the north the counts of Rouen, descendants of Viking pirates soon to style themselves dukes of Normandy (as they are called here), were consolidating their command over an unruly territory and establishing their claim to an acknowledged position among the great princes of the realm.

For king and counts alike this meant securing the allegiance or alliance of as many as possible of the lords of those territories, who were in turn engaged at their own levels in the same struggle for control over lands and revenues. In the shifting patterns of alliance and counter-alliance which they struck in the unending pursuit of tactical advantage the exchange of sisters and daughters in marriage was a crucial stratagem, while the establishment of the lasting dynasties to which they all aspired required the fathering of sons by acknowledged, legitimate wives. The two necessities did not always sit easily together. Robert had repudiated Bertha some time between 1001 and 1006 and replaced her with Constance. We do not know whether this was because Bertha bore him no children or through hostility to her son Odo of Blois, but after Constance had promptly produced the two sons he urgently needed he repudiated her in turn, tried to get the pope to order him to take Bertha back and then changed his mind yet again, in favour of Constance. In the continuing struggle for ascendancy at court between the interests represented by the two women that these vacillations reflected (irrespective of Robert's personal feelings, whatever they may have been), the accusation of heresy against Stephen and Lisois was a manoeuvre by the supporters of the Blois faction, still hoping for the restoration of Bertha, against those of Constance and her Angevin connections.

It was a move very dangerous to the king. He was able to counter it only by dissociating himself from his former favourites at a hastily

summoned trial. As Paul of St Père described it, ‘The king and Queen Constance had come to Orléans, as Harfast had asked, with a number of bishops, and at his suggestion the whole wicked gang was arrested by royal officials at the house where they met, and brought before the king and queen and an assembly of clerks and bishops at the church of Ste Croix.’ This was more like a kangaroo court than the formal assembly of leading men of the realm which would ordinarily come together to consider its affairs at one of the three great feasts of the year, or be summoned in an emergency. Nor was it a properly constituted council or synod of the church: the only senior clerics on record as present were Archbishop Léger of Sens, Abbot Goslin of Fleury, Bishop Franco of Paris, Bishop Odalric of Orléans and Bishop Guarin of Beauvais. Léger was a long-standing supporter of the king and, as such, regularly criticised by Fulbert of Chartres for his role in ecclesiastical appointments; Goslin was the king’s half-brother, whose promotion to the archbishopric of Bourges had been strenuously resisted by Fulbert and the Blois faction; Franco was the king’s chancellor; Odalric was a nephew of Odo of Blois whose long and bitter struggle for the bishopric of Orléans against King Robert’s candidate, Thierry, seems to have been brought to a successful conclusion by this affair; Guarin was a friend of Fulbert of Chartres and another supporter of the Blois interest.

Léger might have been expected to preside in what was, after all, his own archiepiscopal province, but it was Guarin of Beauvais who conducted the interrogation, at whose conclusion Constance felt obliged to disown her confessor in so brutal and dramatic a fashion. In a final humiliation for the royal party Goslin himself, at the end of the proceedings, publicly recited a confession of faith. Whether it was required or volunteered, the implication can only be that he, and his office, had been directly threatened by association with the condemned heretics. The aftermath of the trial also included, by order of Odalric, the disinterment of Theodatus, the canon who had died some three years earlier and was now said to have been one of the heretics – and, no doubt, a supporter of Thierry for the bishopric. Several other churchmen felt it necessary to dissociate themselves in one way or another from the heretics and the ideas that had been associated with them.

In 1022 the allegation of heresy among the canons of Orléans was not in itself sufficiently remarkable or shocking to account for the violence of the outcome. Although the threat of heresy was extremely dangerous in principle, it did not in practice inspire widespread or urgent anxiety. Accusations were not uncommon, and not usually particularly serious. They were part of the currency of debate, and especially of disputes over property and office such as those in the diocese of Orléans which lay behind the trial in 1022. They generally went no further. The label was used and intended for rhetorical effect, neither alleging nor implying specific errors of doctrine. Abbo of Fleury (Goslin's predecessor as abbot) often likened his opponents (including the bishop of Orléans) to ancient heretics, especially when he was accusing them of usurping revenues which he thought rightfully belonged to his church. Fulbert of Chartres called a layman, Count Raginard of Sens, a heretic for the same reason. Sometimes it was used simply as a term of general abuse, as when (in the 1040s) Archbishop Adalbert of Hamburg-Bremen became unpopular for despoiling his diocese to fund his political ambitions and 'everyone hissed him and his followers as though they were heretics'.

The repercussions of the Orléans affair are attributable to the high social standing of the accused, the roots of the accusation in the royal court and the prominence of the king himself in the proceedings. The combination is typical of another kind of accusation, less common than of heresy but in practice much more serious – that of sorcery. In 1028, for example, Count William of Angoulême died after a lingering and mysterious wasting illness. Before he died, his eldest son, Alduin, accused a woman of having caused the illness by witchcraft and had her tortured to extract a confession. She resisted, but three of her friends, tortured in their turn, did not. Acting on the information thus secured, Alduin's men dug up from various places of concealment figures of the count that the women confessed to having buried. Count William from his sickbed ordered the women pardoned, but Alduin, engaged in a bitter succession dispute with his younger brother, had them burned as soon as his father was dead. Alduin succeeded his father, but his sons did not succeed him. A fine modern analysis confirms the obvious suspicion that

the witchcraft (which later rumours attributed to Alduin's wife) was fabricated to cover up Alduin's own part in his father's death.⁸ Such episodes cropped up intermittently throughout the middle ages, especially when ambitious newcomers sought to discredit and displace courtiers of traditional status and influence, or the old hands to disparage the upstarts. In 834, for example, Lothar, rebellious son of the emperor Louis the Pious, had Gerberga, sister of Count Bernard of Septimania, tortured and thrown into the River Saône in a barrel, to be drowned as a witch. It was a time, like the aftermath of the Capetian succession in 987, when factional rivalry was particularly intense and political legitimacy vulnerable to challenge.

The resemblance of the Orléans affair to a sorcery trial is one more confirmation that the tensions and motives that lay behind it were essentially political. But there was a crucial difference. To accuse a ruler's servants or intimates of sorcery did not implicate the ruler himself. On the contrary, by suggesting that he had been deceived or himself attacked by the sorcerer's magic, it cast him as an innocent victim, allowing him to accept without losing face what was in fact a political reverse. This was the function of the sorcery-like elements, the secrecy and the orgies, with which Paul of St Père, so long after the event, embellished his account of the activities of Stephen and Lisois.

To save King Robert's face had been no part of the original plot. The whole history of the Frankish monarchy since the baptism of its founder, Clovis, 500 years before this time, had been interwoven with its claim to protect the faith against its enemies, and specifically against heresy. The greatest of those monarchs, Charlemagne, whose successor Robert II precariously claimed to be, had renewed the Christian empire when Pope Hadrian I crowned him in St Peter's on Christmas Day 800. Since heresy, by definition, was openly propagated, to accuse royal favourites of heresy was indirectly to accuse the king himself of spectacular weakness or incompetence at best, and at worst of the basest perfidy in the most fundamental responsibility of his office, and in a role on which his legitimacy depended. In 1022 the monarchy was highly vulnerable to attacks both on its legitimacy and on its competence. The weakness of his own situation and the ambition of his neighbours made Robert's court a snakepit of overt and covert contention between the

representatives of competing interests, in which only the ruthless abandonment of their accused favourites allowed the royal couple to survive, if not unscathed, at least without formal censure or open reverse.

For the next hundred years and more accusations of heresy played a prominent part in the political rivalries of northern France.⁹ None of those we know of ended in flames, as they had at Orléans, but we should not underestimate how easily they might have done so. This was the age of the 'wandering scholars', when activity in the schools and the exchange of masters and students between them were increasing rapidly. Disagreements among the masters were continued in rivalries between their pupils, conspicuously including those of Gerbert of Aurillac and Fulbert of Chartres. And behind the masters, usually well concealed from modern eyes, stood the political patrons for whom they acted, or were treated, in some degree as representatives and surrogates. The most celebrated case in the eleventh century was that of Berengar of Tours, who was repeatedly accused of denying that the bread and wine of the eucharist 'really' became the body and blood of Christ. A formidable debater, Berengar was condemned by a series of councils over three decades, the last at the Lateran in Rome in 1079, presided over by Pope Gregory VII himself. Berengar, a pupil of Fulbert of Chartres and apparently a hereditary canon of Tours, enjoyed the patronage of the counts of Anjou, whose court he joined around 1040 after establishing his reputation as a teacher. His principal critics at every stage were associates or subjects of Duke William of Normandy. It was William who convened the first of the series of councils to attack Berengar's teachings during that decade, at Brionne in 1050. Berengar's final, ablest and most relentless opponent was Lanfranc of Bec, William's closest ecclesiastical adviser and eventually archbishop of Canterbury.

Peter Abelard's debating skills were even more celebrated and feared than Berengar's, his enemies even more numerous and influential. His fortunes throughout his career were intimately connected with those of the shadowy but formidable figure of Stephen de Garlande, archdeacon of Paris and Chancellor of King Louis VI of France. The first of

Abelard's several famous confrontations with other masters took place a little before 1100, while he was still a student. It was with William of Champeaux, a bitter enemy of Garlande and thenceforth of Abelard, and later a friend and counsellor of Bernard of Clairvaux, the most famous preacher and miracle worker of the day. It may even be that Abelard had been brought to Paris from the Loire valley in order to confront and humiliate William. At any rate, for the rest of his life Abelard rode high when Garlande prospered. In the early 1120s, when Garlande lost royal favour, Abelard was driven into exile in Champagne and then in Brittany; he came back to Paris when Garlande returned to power in 1132. Abelard's fame now waxed greater than ever, until the final eclipse of Garlande after the death of Louis VI in 1137 opened the way for his enemies to prepare his nemesis at Bernard's hands, at the Council of Sens in 1141.

In Abelard's case, as in Berengar's, it is impossible to weigh precisely the significance of the political connections and rivalries of his patrons in the total context of his life and career – but insignificant they were not. One thing demonstrated by both is that right up to the middle of the twelfth century the accusation of heresy retained the public force and political menace that had been unleashed at Orléans in 1022. In the long contest for supremacy between the kings of France, the counts of Anjou and of Blois-Champagne and the dukes of Normandy, a successful accusation of heresy against a well-known supporter or protégé would be a serious reverse – as indeed it remained, though in greatly changed circumstances, thereafter. Heresy was a public matter. It touched the powerful and their relations with one another, whether they were clerics or laymen, with an intimacy that they could not ignore. When all authority was precarious, nobody who claimed it could allow the legitimacy of his claim to be impugned or be seen to have faltered in discharging its obligations.

This was made abundantly clear by the dénouement of the Orléans trial. 'At the king's command Queen Constance stood before the doors of the church, to prevent the common people from killing them inside the church, and they were expelled from the bosom of the church', says Paul of St Père. By this account 'the common people' had no part in the accusation, the trial or the sentence but nevertheless contributed to the

drama of the occasion, adding to the pressures under which the leading actors performed. ‘As they were being driven out,’ Paul continues, ‘the queen struck out the eye of Stephen, who had once been her confessor, with the staff which she carried in her hand.’ A similar effect is suggested by Abelard’s account of how before his first trial for heresy, at Soissons in 1121,

my two rivals spread such evil rumours about me amongst the clerks and people that I and the few pupils who had accompanied me narrowly escaped being stoned by the people on the first day we arrived, for having preached and written (so they had been told) that there were three Gods.¹⁰

A few years earlier another famous heretic of whose actual teaching almost nothing is known, Roscelin of Compiègne, complained to Bishop Ivo of Chartres that, while visiting that city, he had been set upon by ‘certain violent people’ by whom, after being robbed and stripped, he was stoned. Far from sympathising, Ivo – who, as bishop, was responsible for law and order in the city – said it served him right for repeating heretical opinions that he had renounced at an earlier council at Soissons, in 1092. Roscelin fled to England, and at Canterbury again recanted his heresies – but only, according to Archbishop Anselm, because he was afraid, once more, of being killed by ‘the people’.¹¹ It is not clear in any of these cases who ‘the people’ were, or what was their role and the role of their religious beliefs in public affairs, including the business of heresy. The establishing of answers to those questions during the next two centuries is an important part of our story.