THE INNER LIVES OF MEDIEVAL INQUISITORS
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F O R  D A N I E L  P I T T
At illi persecuntur et amant.

WALTER MAP
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In his black cloak and white tunic, the inquisitor would approach the town on his mule, surrounded by his armed retainers, assistants, and servant. After he had met with the local priest and other officials, he would proceed to the church, where the parishioners would have been asked to assemble. In a loud, clear voice, he would preach to the congregation about the Catholic faith and about the heretics in the region who were teaching doctrines contrary to it. So dangerous were these heretics, he warned, that the pope and the superior of his religious order had authorized him to take action against anyone who had been converted to their creed or merely implicated in their sect, whether by attending their sermons, receiving them into their houses, or sending them gifts. Those who remained obstinate in their heretical beliefs would end up damning themselves body and soul, he announced, but those who repented of their errors would find the Church to be merciful. Over the next few weeks, in a closed chamber, he would receive those who wished to come to him and confess their sins in matters of heresy, with the assurance that they would receive a light penance. As a sign of the sincerity of their contrition, these penitents would be expected to provide information about other people’s involvement in the heretical sect, so that they too could be brought back to the faith. Anyone who truly responded to the inquisitor’s sermon, it was assumed, would seek to extinguish heresy, not only in his or her own heart, but in the Church as a whole.

After the grace period had come to an end, the inquisitor would summon those people who had been accused by the penitents and who had not yet come before him of their own will. Meeting with the inquisitor in camera, with only the notary and the two official witnesses present, these persons would be interrogated about their involvement in the heretical sects. They would not be told the names of their accusers or the nature of the
accusations against them, and, as a result, they would be unable to confront these accusers or to challenge their testimony. Though, technically speaking, they were allowed to secure lawyers if they wished, these lawyers would be expected not to disrupt the proceedings by attempting to prove their clients’ innocence, but rather to support them by urging their clients to confess their guilt and to welcome their penance. If there was sufficient evidence to think the accused parties guilty, despite their protests to the contrary, they could be tortured. If they later claimed to have confessed only to end the pain, they could be tortured again to determine whether their confession or their retraction was true. Under such conditions, the vast majority of accused parties would eventually confess their guilt, profess their repentance, and accept their penances, which would be heavier than those given to the parishioners who had come forth voluntarily. Even as the inquisitor relied upon the secular power to apprehend, imprison, and torture uncooperative heretics, he remained an ecclesiastic, who welcomed any confession elicited during the trial as, at least purportedly, the product of a change of heart.

When the inquisitor had finished considering all of the individual cases, he would organize a “general sermon” (sermo generalis) or, as it would later come to be called, an “act of faith” (auto-da-fé). As he had done before, he would call the community together in a public place and deliver a sermon against heresy, now on a raised platform with the local ecclesiastical dignitaries and the repentant heretics gathered around him. He would read aloud these penitents’ confessions, would ask them to confirm their veracity, and would assign them penances, which would range from pilgrimages to nearby shrines, to the wearing of yellow crosses on their clothing, to imprisonment, perhaps even for life, on bread and water. At the end of this list, if necessary, he would announce the names of those who had refused to repudiate heresy, whether because they would not confess and abjure their errors or because, having already confessed and abjured them, they had relapsed and in doing so had proven themselves hardened in their heresy. As these impenitent heretics had abandoned the Church, he would declare, the Church was regretfully forced to abandon them in turn by releasing them to the secular arm. Because the Church does not kill or shed blood, the inquisitor would play no part in the next day’s proceedings, when the civil authorities passed their own judgment against the heretics and burned them alive before the crowd.

While it is possible to determine the outer actions of the inquisitor, as a historical subject in the world, as this sketch has done, it is not possible
to determine his inner thoughts and feelings in the same manner. We can know that the inquisitor traveled to a certain town on a certain date, that he tried people in this town for heresy, and that, as a result of his actions, some of these people were imprisoned or put to death, but we cannot know, let alone with any certainty, how he reflected upon what he was doing. Even if an inquisitor had left us an account, of his own hand, of what he thought and felt while functioning in this role, there was never any one, unified, self-identical experience that this account could purport to represent. The inquisitor may have perceived an accused heretic one way in the afternoon, when he was questioning him, another way that evening, when he was informing the bishop about his case, and still another way years later, when he was recalling his work as a judge to his confessor. From one hour to the next, from one trial to the next, from one stage of his career to the next, the inquisitor’s thoughts and feelings and, even more, his perception of those thoughts and feelings, may have changed; at any one moment, he may have undergone multiple and conflicting sensations. Even if there had been a single, fixed inner experience that the inquisitor could describe in some such account, there is no way that its veracity could be confirmed. If he reported that he felt joy at having condemned a heretic hardened in his sin or sorrow at having failed to persuade him to repent of his error, we cannot know if he was telling the truth. His outer activities were public events, observed by other parties and at least potentially recorded by them as well, but his inner thoughts and feelings were private occurrences, observed by himself alone and hence incapable of being seconded. Unless we resort to our own speculations, based upon possibly anachronistic assumptions about the human psyche, what we know about the inquisitor we know from texts, yet texts cannot give us positive, verifiable knowledge about what someone experienced inside himself.

Though it is impossible to gain access to the inner life of the inquisitor as a historical subject in the world, it is possible, I would like to propose here, to gain access to his inner life as a literary subject in medieval texts. In his outer life, the inquisitor acted, and texts then represented, more or less accurately, what he did. When he arrested, interrogated, and sentenced an accused heretic, he performed deeds outside himself, which the final records of his investigations then aimed to portray. In his inner life, however, the inquisitor thought or felt, but whatever he was thinking or feeling was always already mediated by texts, that is, by discourses which were helping him to make sense of what he was already undergoing. When he arrested, interrogated, or sentenced an accused heretic, he experienced sensations
which the texts he had encountered made recognizable and articulable. The literary inquisitor, inside the text, can never be assumed to be identical to the historical inquisitor, outside the text, but he provides us with as close a view as we can get of that inquisitor and, arguably, a closer view of him than that we could get if, by some miracle, we were able to meet him or even to be him. The discourses which would have been fleeting and inchoate in the mind of the inquisitor become stable and solid when they are written down. That which would have been diffuse becomes concentrated. Because it is only in the text that the inquisitor’s thoughts and feelings achieve their fullest definition, it is only in the text that his inner experience is fully realized. In contrast to his outer life, the inner life of the inquisitor cannot be known as an objective fact, because it never was an objective fact, even to the inquisitor himself, but it can be known as a subjective fiction, because it is through such fictions that the inquisitor and his contemporaries made sense of his life.

If one considers the inner life of the inquisitor as he and his contemporaries depict it in their writings, one sees that it could take two forms. On the one hand, the inquisitor in these texts could imagine the accused heretic as someone whose identity is necessarily vague, indefinite, and subject to change. That man, seemingly so resolute in his heretical faith, may one day return to the Church. That woman, so long linked with the heretical sect, may go unnamed in the Book of Life, but this is a Book to which we have no access. While the inquisitor can ponder the witnesses’ testimony and the accused heretics’ own confessions, he remains uncertain about who these accused heretics are and, even more, about who they might one day become. On the other hand, the inquisitor in these texts could imagine the accused heretic as someone whose identity is singular, definite, and fixed. That man proclaiming the truthfulness of his heterodox creed is a damned soul, destined for hell. That woman, having once professed repentance of her errors, has exposed the falsity of this repentance through her relapse. From what these accused heretics’ neighbors have testified about them and from what they have confessed about themselves, the inquisitor feels confident of his ability to determine whether they are innocent or guilty of heresy and, if guilty, whether they are capable of redemption or hardened in error. Whether the inquisitor in these texts understands the accused heretics’ identity as defined by becoming or by being may not affect what he ultimately does, but, as we shall see, it does affect how long he waits before doing it, and the length of this wait is what makes all the difference.


**CHARITY AND ZEAL**

If there is one pattern in medieval accounts of the inquisitor by himself or by his peers, it is that he pursues heretics out of love, though he may understand that love as charity or as zeal. In the Gospel of Matthew, as all Catholic clerics of this time knew well, Jesus Christ declares that the first and most important commandment is “Love the Lord your God with your whole heart, and with your whole soul, and with your whole mind” and that the second commandment is “Love your neighbor as yourself.” It is because they love God, such clerics thought, that they need to defend his teachings, as articulated in Scripture and as explained by Church tradition, and it is because they love their neighbor, they also thought, that they need to confront the heretic who is attacking those teachings. On one level, as we shall see, the inquisitor of these texts perceives the neighbor God wants us to love as the heretic himself. He is familiar with the Book of Ezekiel, where God declares, “I desire not the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live.” As he understands it, the Church must seek not to kill the heretic but rather to persuade him to reject his errors and return to the fold in order that he may be saved. On another level, however, as we shall also see, the inquisitor of these texts perceives the neighbor God wants us to love as what he sometimes called “the common people” (vulgus), that is, the passive, silent third party the heretic threatens to lead with him into damnation. Worrying that the Church might destroy someone who could have been converted and saved, he also worries that, by failing to destroy the heretic, the Church might enable him to ensnare others in his heresy. If clerics are to love their neighbor, as Christ bids them to do, the inquisitor in these works is sure, they must show charity toward the heretic, whom they strive to convert, but they must also show zeal on behalf of the common people, whom they strive to protect against the heretic’s own efforts at conversion. While medieval texts about inquisitors may not have set charity and zeal into opposition as sharply as we will be doing here, they recognized them as two distinct forms of love, one of which may often look like hate.

Between the early eleventh century and the mid-twelfth century, when heretics were seen as resurfacing in Western Europe for the first time since Late Antiquity, the Church, in general, emphasized charity toward heretics. The bishops, who were at this time charged with preserving the spiritual well-being of their flocks, were unsure of their ability to identify heretics and as a result would hesitate to take action against them. They would initiate proceedings only after they had heard that certain individuals
were teaching doctrines contrary to the faith. Summoning these individuals to ecclesiastical councils, they would question them and have them questioned by their colleagues. As bishops passively waited for cases of heresy to be initiated by witnesses’ accusations, they passively waited for them to be resolved by God’s deliberation. If they had reason to doubt the veracity of the accused parties’ responses to their questions, they would oblige them to submit to “the judgment of God” (\textit{iudicium dei}), whether by swearing their innocence over relics in a trial by oath or by withstanding the test of fire or water in a trial by ordeal. Even after they had identified heretics through these procedures, bishops were still unsure of their ability to identify heretics hardened in their heresy and as a result hesitated to release them to the secular arm. They did not arrest the renegade monk Henry of Lausanne until 1134, almost twenty years after he had begun spreading his errors throughout the Midi; even then, they continued to seek his redemption rather than his punishment and merely sent him back to a monastery—from which he soon escaped to renew his heretical mission. In those rare instances when heretics were executed during these years, it was more often than not at the instigation of the secular rather than the ecclesiastical powers. In 1022, for example, King Robert II the Pious of France had a band of so-called “Manichaeans” burned outside Orléans, and, in the 1160s, King Henry II of England had a group of “Publicans” branded, stripped, flogged, and cast out in the countryside outside Oxford, to perish in the winter weather. Mobs suspicious of what they regarded as “clerical leniency” occasionally seized accused heretics from episcopal prisons and killed them before the bishops could conclude their proceedings. It may have been that, at a time when the Church perceived heretics as taking the form of eccentric individuals, like Leutard, Tanchelm, or Eudo of Brittany, or of small, isolated sects, like the “Manichaeans” of Orléans or Aquitaine, it felt less threatened than it would later and as a result less anxious to pursue harsh methods. Focusing not so much upon the common people as upon the heretics themselves, the bishops resisted treating these heretics as definitively and unredeemably guilty.

Between the mid-twelfth and the mid-fourteenth centuries, however, the Church turned from emphasizing charity toward heretics to emphasizing zeal on behalf of the common people. In his 1184 decretal \textit{Ad abolendam}, Pope Lucius III required bishops, not to wait for accusations against particular heretics, but to visit every parish in their diocese alleged to be infected with heresy at least once a year, to summon three or more honorable citizens of this parish to identify suspected heretics in their midst, and to compel these suspected heretics to clear themselves of these charges by
trials by oath or ordeal.\(^8\) Having obliged the bishops to become more active in initiating cases against heretics, the Church soon obliged them to become more active in investigating these cases as well. At the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, it took advantage of the resurgence of Roman law and began to reject trials by oath or ordeal in favor of trials by “inquest” (\textit{inquisitio}).\(^9\) Instead of expecting God to reveal the truth about the accused party’s faith through a miracle, ecclesiastical judges now took it upon themselves to discover this truth through their own reason, by examining witnesses and by interrogating accused parties. A trial “by inquest” (\textit{per inquisitionem}) was a trial initiated, not by the accusation of a private individual, representing his or her interests, but by the informed decision of a public magistrate, and it was one resolved, not through God’s intercession, but through that magistrate’s own investigation. A trial “by inquest of heretical depravity” (\textit{per inquisitionem hereticae pravitatis}) was such a proceeding applied to matters of the faith. It was not until the 1230s, however, when Pope Gregory IX shifted the primary responsibility for such trials from the bishops to specially appointed “inquisitors” (\textit{inquisitores}), most often from the newly founded Dominican\(^{10}\) and, to a lesser extent, Franciscan orders, that the potential of these procedures was fully realized. Over time, these inquisitors were allowed certain judicial liberties,\(^{11}\) including the rights to withhold the names of accusers and the nature of their accusations, in order to prevent their informants from suffering retribution for their testimony;\(^{12}\) to proceed “simply and plainly, without the uproar and figures of speech of lawyers,” in order to prevent the courtroom from becoming a scene of judicial theatrics;\(^{13}\) and to resort to torture, if there was compelling but not yet conclusive evidence of guilt.\(^{14}\) In addition to enabling its own ecclesiastical judges to function more actively and freely, the Church persuaded secular rulers to reinforce the power of their spiritual weapons with the power of their temporal sword. It may have been that, at a time when the Church saw heretics as taking the form of large, international movements like those of the Cathars (or Albigensians), the Waldensians, and the various heterodox offshoots of the Franciscans, it felt more threatened than it had felt earlier and as a result more eager to undertake severe measures. Focusing not so much upon the heretics as upon the common people, the inquisitors determined, not to await, passively and patiently, the conversion of individual souls, but to pursue, actively and impatiently, the protection of the social group.

Wazo, the bishop of Liège in the mid-eleventh century,\(^{15}\) exemplifies the charitable approach toward heretics, whom he regards as uncertain and unstable in their heretical identity and hence as capable of redemption.