

## Book Reviews

Andrew Colin Gow, Robert B. Desjardins, and François V. Pageau (eds., trans.). *The Arras Witch Treatises*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016. 168 pp. ISBN: 978-0-271-07128-2. \$24.95.

This sourcebook edited by Andrew Colin Gow, Robert B. Desjardins and François V. Pageau presents annotated translations of two treatises connected to the trials against alleged witch sect members in Arras in northern France in 1460. The first of these treatises is *Recollectio casus, status et conditionis Valdensium ydolatrarum* (*A History of the Case, State, and Condition of the Waldensian Idolaters*). The authorship of this treatise remains uncertain, but the editors follow the widely accepted view that Jacques du Bois, then dean of the cathedral chapter in Arras and a man who played an influential role during the trials themselves, is probably the author of this text. The editors quote two of the most influential recent works about the Arras trials, and about the Sabbath imageries in the second half of the fifteenth century: Franck Mercier's *La Vauderie d'Arras* and Martine Ostorero's *Le diable au sabbat*.<sup>1</sup> Technically, they worked not with a manuscript of the treatise, but with the classic edition by German historian Joseph Hansen.<sup>2</sup> This means they could not include any notes concerning the original text and visual organization of the manuscript. However, Hansen's edition provided them with a solid basis for their translation of the content.

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<sup>1</sup> Franck Mercier, *La Vauderie d'Arras. Une chasse aux sorcières à l'Automne du Moyen Âge* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2006), 32; Martine Ostorero, *Le diable au sabbat: Littérature démonologique et sorcellerie (1440–1460)* (Florence: Sismel, 2011), 666.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Hansen, ed., *Quellen und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte des Hexenwahns und Hexenverfolgung im Mittelalter* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1963 [1901]), 149–83.

The second translated treatise is *Sermo contra sectam Valdensium* (*Sermon against the sect of the Waldensians*), which was written by the renowned theologian John Tinctor in 1460. It must be noted that the translators worked with an early French translation of the text known under the title *Imvectives contra la secte de vauderie*, which was compiled shortly after the Latin original, and which also appeared in a very early printed version, probably shortly after 1475. (81) The translators argue that this French version of Tinctor's treatise was more influential at the end of the fifteenth century than the Latin original, and note that they have therefore decided to follow this edition and only consult some passages of the Latin text. (81)

Both translations are supplemented with a brief introduction discussing the context of the Arras trials and the origin of the treatises, and include multiple relevant bibliographical footnotes. The Arras witch trials started in spring 1460, when four women and one man were accused of witchcraft and devil worship and subsequently convicted and burned at the stake. This incident triggered an anti-witchcraft riot in the city, which was interrupted after a few months by Duke Phillip of Burgundy, when some of the local noblemen happened to become targets of the accusations. The trials are an important part of the history of the late medieval European witch-hunt, both from a social perspective, as they took place in an influential Burgundian city, and as indicators of cultural imagination in the period. The trials combined imagery of heresy, devil worship, and harmful magic with demonological speculations about the physical abilities of evil spirits and their capability to affect human bodies. Both treatises represent this synthesis particularly well. Rather than revolutionary innovations in the imagination of late medieval witchcraft, the two treatises should be read as steps in the gradual genesis of both imagistic *and* intellectual speculation about the Witches' Sabbath. The content of the treatises belongs to the tradition of elaborate theological works on the devil and his worshippers, following in the vein of Johannes Nider's *Formicarius* (1430s) and preceding Heinrich Krämer and Jacob Sprenger's notorious *Malleus Maleficarum* from the 1480s.<sup>3</sup>

The *Recollectio*, probably written or strongly influenced by Dean Jacques du Bois, contains long thematic chapters dealing with the methods of investigation and interrogation of the suspects. The huge emphasis put on these topics shows just how closely this treatise was connected to the actual witch trials. The author claims to debunk the suspects' usual strategies of defense, most notably the argument that they were not themselves present at the fiendish congregations, but were impersonated by demons. (58–63) His harsh rhetoric is accompanied by quite detailed knowledge of classical works by church authorities like Thomas

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<sup>3</sup> The factuality of Sprenger's co-authorship is not universally accepted by scholars.

Aquinas, as well as competence in scholastic ways of argumentation. The legacy of the older heresiology is present in the passage where the author considers different opinions of the diabolical Waldensians about hell, paradise and eternal life. (51) This part is very reminiscent of passages about the Cathars or the Waldensians in the inquisition manuals of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries,<sup>4</sup> such as Bernard Gui's *Practica inquisitionis hereticae pravitatis*,<sup>5</sup> and can serve as an illustration of how the public imagination of the Witches' Sabbath contained concepts of both harmful magic and heresy. John Tinctor's treatise contains a systematic prologue explaining the fall of Satan and his angels and the original sin of man. (83–90) As a prominent theologian with a broad spectrum of interests, Tinctor deals extensively not only with the demons' engagement in the physical world, but also with topics like the coming of the Antichrist, (105–10) or the methods of discerning wonders performed by good and evil spirits. (144–49)

The translators of the Arras treatises faced several difficulties related to the terminological and conceptual instability of categories like “witchcraft” and “heresy” in the late Middle Ages. Most importantly, a problem has emerged regarding the label “Waldensians” and its relations to medieval concepts of witchcraft. Members of the allegedly devil-worshipping sect are called Waldensians (*Valdenses, secta Valdensium*) in both treatises. This term originates in high medieval heresiology and originally labeled followers of an anti-clerical ascetic movement, which appeared in late-twelfth-century France and soon became a target of persecution. Accusations against these Waldensians of luxury, promiscuity, and even devil worship became a *topos* already during the fourteenth century, with the meaning of the term itself gradually getting darker in this period. During the fifteenth century, however, the meanings of the terms Waldensians and Waldensianism started to shift more significantly. These words began to label alleged (probably purely fictional) sects of devil worshippers, accused of dealing with harmful magic and sometimes of being provided with strange skills by the devil, like the ability to fly in order to join diabolical gatherings.

The translators of the Arras treatises decided to translate the term *Valdenses* alternately as heretics and witches. This translation strategy provides a reader not-so-familiar with the late medieval heresiology a basic understanding of what this label generally meant in the treatises, but does result in the loss of some semantic nuances. Perhaps the most evident example of these terminological

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<sup>4</sup> See Lucy J. Sackville, *Heresy and Heretics in the Thirteenth Century: The Textual Representations* (York: York Medieval Press, 2011), 135–53.

<sup>5</sup> See Celestin Douais, ed., *Bernardi Guidonis Practica inquisitionis hereticae pravitatis* (Paris: Alphonse Picard, 1886).

issues appears on pages 26–27, where the author of the *Recollectio* explains that the contemporary devil worshipping Waldensians are not the same sects as “the Waldensians, or the poor of Lyon,” who were active “some 270 years ago.” By referring to the original Waldensians as Waldensians and the fifteenth century “Waldensians” as witches, the fact that the author notifies the reader about the difference between the ancient and contemporary sect, but at the same time calls both sects Waldensians, is lost from the translation.<sup>6</sup> It is a pity because this passage in the original shows very well how heresiological knowledge crumbled during the late middle ages, with terms changing or losing their meaning, and how public imagination about witchcraft was influenced by these unstable assumptions.

Another problematic decision is the translation, in some cases, of the words *Ydolatria* and *Ydolatrae* as “heresy” and “heretics” respectively, most obviously in the translation of the title of *Recollectio*. (19–20 and further) The medieval concept of idolatry generated a complex discourse and was closely connected to many other terms, such as infidelity and superstition. Connections between idolatry and heresy existed, but were by no means clear and straightforward. Perhaps the most immediate encounter of the concepts of idolatry and heresy occurred during the trial against the Templar order (1307–1312), when the Templars were accused of worshipping an idol, sometimes called Baphomet.<sup>7</sup> Other connections between the concept of heresy (especially its darker associations with devil worship) and idolatry are known from the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries,<sup>8</sup> but simple substitution of the terms does not seem justified in this context.

These strategies of translation were probably employed to make the text intelligible to a reader with little or no background knowledge about medieval history, but they also somewhat reduce the value of the translation for historians. Despite these few issues, the sourcebook presents a valuable contribution to the study of witchcraft and devil worship in the late medieval imagination. It is intelligible to lay readers, while scholars may find it useful as a brief overview of the Arras affair, with multiple references to more detailed studies on the topic.

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<sup>6</sup> Compare Hansen, *Quellen und Untersuchungen*, 152–53.

<sup>7</sup> See the classic work by Malcolm Barber, *The Trial of the Templars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978). For sources, see above all Jules Michelet, ed., *Procès des templiers I–II* (Paris: Imprimerie royale, 1841).

<sup>8</sup> See Bernd–Ulrich Hergemöller, ed., *Krötenkuss und Schwarzer Kater: Ketzerei, Götzendienst und Unzucht in der inquisitorischen Phantasie des 13. Jahrhunderts* (Warendorf: Fahlbusch Verlag, 1996).