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"The Heresy of the Free Spirit" at 50

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- 1 A well-worn copy of Robert E. Lerner's *The Heresy of the Free Spirit in the Later Middle Ages* has held a central place on my bookshelf for more than half my life. Upon being accepted into the doctoral program at Northwestern University to study medieval history with Robert Lerner in 1996, I rushed to buy and read his best-known work, already a classic even then. I was twenty-six years old, *The Heresy of the Free Spirit*, published in 1972, was twenty-four<sup>1</sup>. My immediate impression was that the book's author possessed a rigorously logical mind, an encyclopedic knowledge of late medieval culture, a flair for incisive prose, and a virtuosic control of the manuscript evidence. More fundamentally, he seemed fearless as he demolished previous scholarly assumptions about the supposed existence of an amoral medieval sect believing itself freed from traditional morality. Robert Lerner's carefully constructed argument replaced this lurid image with a meticulous study of women and men searching for authentic contact with God; if these late medieval Christians often pushed the boundaries of orthodoxy, they hardly formed an underground sect of Bohemian nihilists. For a fledging doctoral student, Lerner's larger message was both exhilarating and intimidating: You need not assume that your scholarly predecessors have been right about everything; but if you plan to offer a radical re-interpretation of the sources, you had better be ready to advance a rock-solid reading of the manuscript evidence, capable of withstanding the closest scholarly scrutiny.
- 2 Twenty-seven years later, with the book and I both having passed the half-century mark (well into our later middle ages), it seems safe to say that *The Heresy of the Free Spirit* has stood up to such scrutiny remarkably well. It certainly remains the standard treatment of its subject. Indeed, in recent years it has become increasingly common to see Lerner's volume of 1972 cited as a turning point in the study of heresy, insofar as it built on insights from Herbert Grundmann to illuminate the way inquisitors and other

churchmen could create the illusion of organized sects by extracting similar sounding answers to standardized and widely distributed lists of questions<sup>2</sup>. In some cases Robert Lerner might be uneasy about the ends to which his methodology has been put (if there was no organized “heresy of the Free Spirit”, were there any Cathars or even Waldensians?)<sup>3</sup>, but important innovations will always inspire in ways well beyond their originators’ control. As Jessalynn Bird’s essay in this forum elegantly demonstrates, *The Heresy of the Free Spirit in the Later Middle Ages* has made its influence felt in many sub-fields of medieval religious history.

- 3 But Robert Lerner would be the first to insist that “standard treatment” is not the same as “last word”. Indeed, he once quite publicly corrected me on this point. In the fall of 2005, when I was a new assistant professor at the University of Vermont, I invited Robert to Burlington to give a public lecture and to meet with my advanced seminar on Marguerite Porete, her inquisitorial trial, and the *Mirror of Simple Souls*. The seminar had read parts of *The Heresy of the Free Spirit in the Later Middle Ages*, and I introduced Robert Lerner to seminar members as (if memory serves) “the author of the definitive book on the heresy of the Free Spirit”. He immediately corrected me: no book is ever definitive, he insisted, because the best books open up new avenues of research and inspire the progress that will, and should, eventually necessitate new interpretations.

### Presentation of the essays

- 4 The essays that follow Jessalynn Bird’s opening appreciation bear out Robert Lerner’s wise words. While each paying tribute to the paths pioneered by Lerner’s work a half century ago, Paweł Kras, Walter Simons, Delfi Nieto-Isabel, and Sylvain Piron and Justine Trombley move us farther along those paths and toward a fuller understanding of various aspects of the subject.
- 5 Paweł Kras recounts the pivotal role that *The Heresy of the Free Spirit in the Later Middle Ages* played in advancing research on the beguines from Świdnica known as the “Hooded Nuns” or “the Daughters of Odelindis”. Although the inquisitorial interrogation of these beguines in 1332 had been published in 1889, it was not until Lerner’s work in 1972 that the original manuscripts were closely re-examined and crucial progress made in understanding this evidence<sup>4</sup>. Thus when Kras and his co-author Tomasz Gałuszka launched a fresh examination of this important case study around 2014, they self-consciously picked up where Robert Lerner had left off forty-two years earlier, as Kras explains here in fascinating detail<sup>5</sup>. Their resulting research has given us not only a better understanding of a unique source for beguine life after the Clementine decrees of 1317, but a tantalizing glimpse of a previously overlooked network of sisters who perpetuated the name and ideals of a certain Odelindis, the founder of a community in Cologne<sup>6</sup>.
- 6 Walter Simons honors Robert Lerner’s spirit and *Spirit* by uncovering a revealing new aspect of the religious culture from which Free Spirit thought emerged. His meticulously documented four-part contribution (a *magnum opus* if ever there was one) demonstrates that a long-misunderstood strand of poor beguines and beghards emerged in the Low Countries and the Lower Rhineland in the late thirteenth century and the first half of the fourteenth. Labelled by contemporaries as *swesteren*, *lollards* or *willige arme*, it was these groups, Simons argues, that were first accused of spreading Free Spirit tenets. While their existence has been known to historians (Robert Lerner

among them), Simons pushes past previous interpretations by articulating the differences between traditional beguines and beghards on the one hand, and the movement of *swesteren* and lollards on the other. Simons's findings offer additional context for the "union" of the "Daughters of Odelindis" studied by Kras, and present an exciting new investigation into this wider movement, in order to "complete the work that Robert Lerner began".

- 7 Delfi I. Nieto-Isabel builds on Robert Lerner's methodological advances by showing in new detail how inquisitors' choices necessarily placed accused heretics into discrete categories, determined in advance which kinds of dissident networks they could be linked to, and encouraged the imagined construction of "sects" where only loose intellectual links tied accused heretics to each other. Na Prous Boneta, the subject of Nieto-Isabel's study, was a *beguina* who claimed to be one with God, who dismissed the need for the sacraments, and who rejected the existing Church hierarchy; this description might seem to make her a perfect candidate for targeting as a "Free Spirit". Yet she was also a fervent adherent to the teachings of the "Spiritual" Franciscan Peter of John Olivi, typical of the radical southern "heresy of the burned beguins". Inquisition against her could proceed along only one of these lines. The choice had little to do with any abstract attempt to encapsulated her thought, but rather rested on an assessment of which real world networks framed her religious ideas. As Nieto-Isabel argues, inquisitions were well suited to breaking up tight networks of dissidents like the Olivian beguins. But looser intellectual frameworks, such as those that defined Free Spirits, challenged inquisitional mechanisms and forced inquisitors to impose the framework of a sect (even where no such social relations really existed) precisely so that it could then be dismantled.
- 8 Finally, Sylvain Piron and Justine Trombley offer a closing blockbuster by arguing that the hostile commentary on the *Mirror of Simple Souls* found in Padua, Biblioteca universitaria ms. 1647 preserves an expert's report to the Council of Vienne, and that this report led directly to the infamous decree *Ad nostrum* (crucial to the contexts studied here by Kras, Simons, and Nieto-Isabel)<sup>7</sup>. Scholars have long thought that the *Mirror*, directly or indirectly, must lie behind many of the articles in *Ad nostrum*. Piron and Trombley now suggest that this hostile assessment of the *Mirror* probably lies behind *all* the articles in the decree. The very first article of *Ad nostrum* turns on the notion of *impeccabilitas* (using the adjectival form *impeccabilis*). Piron and Trombley show, first, how this scholastic neologism combined several commonplaces of anti-heretical thought into a generic claim against abstract antinomianism by the early fourteenth century; and, second, how the rigorous refutation of the *Mirror* in ms. 1647 arrived at employing this term, in spite of the fact that it is never found in the Latin *Mirror*. That hostile assessment – that the *Mirror* sinned by claiming that simple souls enjoyed a state of *impeccabilitas* – then provided the basis for the first article of *Ad nostrum*, which in turn justified the following seven. Piron and Trombley thus offer a radically new perspective on the origins of *Ad nostrum*, famously named by Robert Lerner as the "birth certificate" of the heresy of the Free Spirit<sup>8</sup>.
- 9 The new research offered here by Kras, Simons, Nieto-Isabel, and Piron and Trombley underlines Bird's demonstration that, after a half century, *The Heresy of the Free Spirit in the Later Middle Ages* retains the power to inspire. Of course, even the most influential books eventually become historical artifacts. But I will risk a closing prophecy: In 2072 Robert E. Lerner's masterwork will retain sufficient regard to warrant a centennial

celebration. If I am proved correct, it will surely be due in no small part to the book's importance in blazing trails down which others might travel.

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## NOTES

1. Robert E. Lerner, *The Heresy of the Free Spirit in the Later Middle Ages*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1972. A reprint paperback edition, with corrections of typographical errors and errors of fact but retaining the original pagination, was published by the University of Notre Dame Press in 1991. This edition remains in print and was reissued by the same press as both a hard cover and an eBook in 2017.
2. In particular Grundmann's article "Ketzerverhöre des Spätmittelalters als quellenkritisches Problem", published in 1965 and now translated into English in *Herbert Grundmann (1902-1970): Essays on Heresy, Inquisition, and Literacy*, ed. Jennifer Kolpacoff Deane, trans. Steven Rowan, York Medieval Press, 2019, p. 126-179.
3. See Peter Biller, "Goodbye to Waldensianism?", *Past & Present*, 192, 2006, p. 3-33; Antonio Sennis, ed., *Cathars in Question*, York, 2016; *Le 'Catharisme' en questions*, ed. J.-L. Biget, S. Caucanas, M. Fournié, and D. Le Blévec Toulouse, Privat (Cahiers de Fanjeaux, 55), 2020.
4. Lerner, *Heresy of the Free Spirit*, p. 112-119.
5. The resulting study is *The Beguines of Medieval Świdnica: The Interrogation of the 'Daughters of Odelindis' in 1332*, trans. S. C. Rowell, York, 2023. See also Paweł Kras, "The Hunt for the Heresy of the Free Spirit: The 1332 Enquiry into the 'Cowled Nuns' of Świdnica", in *Inquisition and Knowledge 1200-1700*, ed. P. Biller and L. Sackville, York Medieval Press, 2022, p. 110-134.
6. In addition to the book by Gałuszka and Kras (which includes Letha Böhringer's essay "The Swesteren of Odelindis of Pyrzyce [Piritz] and Cologne and their European Context", p. 258-271), see L. Böhringer, "Die Schwestern und Töchter de Odelind von Pyritz: Ein überregionales Netzwerk von Beginen im Reich wird sichtbar", *Mitteilungen des Instituts für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung*, 131, 2023, p. 43-57; and Barbara Baumeister, "Schwestern der Udelhild. Eine geistliche Gemeinschaft in Augsburg mit europäischen Verbindungen", *Zeitschrift des historischen Vereins für Schwaben*, 115, 2023, p. 93-100.
7. For this manuscript see further J. L. Trombley, *A Diabolical Voice: Heresy and the Reception of the Latin Mirror of Simple Souls in Late Medieval Europe*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 2023, ch. 4.
8. Lerner, *Heresy of the Free Spirit*, p. 83.