CHAPTER 7

The Signs of Heresy: How to Tell a Plant from Its Fruit

After having placed Church doctors on guard against the deceptions of false prophets, the commentary turns to the external signs by which it is possible to recognize enemies of the faith and to identify their perverse nature, despite every effort on their behalf to dissimulate it. The text examined (Matt. 7.16–20) is based on the metaphor of trees and their fruit, and it establishes, in the generative relationship between the two, the possibility of identifying the nature of the former by the latter.

If the preceding passage highlighted the malice of ravenous wolves and the peril constituted by their hiding behind a meek and innocent appearance, subsequent developments of the Sermon on the Mount present a constructive solution by opening the possibility of overcoming the discrepancy between what the false prophets seem to be and what they truly are. At the heart of this identification is the ability to recognize them by their fruits (“By their fruits you shall know them,” Matt. 7.16) and it is around this fundamental theme that treatises 99 and 100 of the Postilla super Matheum are constructed.1

Having already clarified in depth the correspondence between false prophets and heretics, the author must now explain to which of their fruits the text refers. From the opening of treatise 99, Fournier identifies them in words and actions (hereticalia dicta vel facta), both of which constitute tangible manifestations of the intrinsic nature of heretics and therefore an essential means of identifying them. After having placed the accent on the ways in which false prophets threaten the faith of good Christians, the cardinal concentrates rather on their actions as a starting point for working backwards towards the heart of their heresy. This undertaking, which was entrusted to the doctors of the Church, is anything but linear and direct. As Fournier amply demonstrates, heretics in fact seek to dissimulate their nature, thus rendering it tricky to identify plants from their fruits.

1 Troyes, Mediathèque du Grand-Troyes (olim Bibliothèque municipale) 549, iv, treatises 99 and 100, fols. 374va–318ra (hereafter: Troyes 549).
The actions of heretics therefore represent the first essential observatory in which the magistri might identify external signs of heresy. Fournier immediately delineates, in philosophical terms, the relationship that connects actions to the inward nature of the subject who accomplishes them. It is only in proceeding from action (operatio), Fournier explains, that one can retrace the latent form (forma) of something, since action follows form. From this it follows that the doctors of the Church, appropriately prepared, will be able to identify—from an indefinite panorama of words and actions—those with the greatest probability of indicating heresy. Which sayings or facts assume the value of a sign? How is one to distinguish the signs of sincere devotion from those of dissimulated infidelity?

Entirely analogous questions were also addressed in texts of a different nature, such as manuals for inquisitors. Noting the fact that heretics summoned before the judge resorted to multiple techniques of dissimulation aimed at concealing their guilt, these texts—which juxtaposed specific methods of interrogation and information on the rituals, behaviours and beliefs of various heretical groups—furnished inquisitors with a fund of knowledge deemed necessary to lay bare the truth. According to such manuals, even minor details can become important clues, if not manifest signs, of heretical belonging. The case of Bernard Gui is telling in this respect. In his Practica inquisitionis he points to specific external signs, such as manner of speaking, by which one might identify heretics despite their dissimulation.

If the starting point of the Postilla is analogous to that of the inquisitor’s manual, the difference in textual genre and in addressees gives rise to a very different deliberation in the commentary. Unlike inquisitorial manuals,

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2 On the matter of how to penetrate the intimate religious feeling of an individual through external signs, see the discussion by Peter Biller, “ ‘Deep is the Heart of Man and Inscrutable’: Signs of Heresy in Medieval Languedoc,” in Text and Controversy from Wyclif to Bale: Essays in Honour of Anne Hudson, (ed.) Helen Barr and Ann M. Hutchison (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), 267–80.

3 “Unaqueque enim forma que in re latet non cognoscitur nisi ex operacione et ideo operacio ipsa est manifestacio forme,” Troyes 549, iv, fol. 273vb.

4 For example, the Dominican inquisitor lists in detail the “artifices and deceptions” to which the Waldensians resorted during the interrogation. In his opinion, the very act of resorting to such techniques of dissimulation should be considered an “evident sign of heresy;” see Bernard Gui, Manuel de l’Inquisiteur, (ed. and trans.) Guillaume Mollat (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1926), i: 64–76, esp. 72. Elsewhere Bernard explains that the Beguins can be identified by external evidence (such as their particular mode of speaking), and as a consequence, he concentrates on those “signis quibus exterius aliqualiter distinguishunt,” ibid., i: 116–8.