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Lyrical Mysticism: The Writing and Reception of Catherine of Siena

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LYRICAL MYSTICISM:
THE WRITING AND RECEPTION OF CATHERINE OF SIENA

by

LISA TAGLIAFERRI

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Comparative Literature in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City

University of New York

2017

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2017

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in
Comparative Literature in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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ABSTRACT

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(<https://caterina.io>) affirms the 14th-century mystic Catherine of Siena as a writer through contextualizing her texts among the corpus of contemporary Italian literature, and studying her reception in the Renaissance period of Italy and England. Joining an increasing body of recent meaningful scholarship that has been making significant progress to recover many overlooked and peripheral female voices of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, this work serves to fully assert Catherine as a writer of work that is literarily significant and worthy of textual analysis alongside contemporary male Italian authors, many of whom also wrote on religious matters and spirituality. The current project firmly casts Catherine of Siena as a literary figure through utilizing a gender theory framework and exploring her body of work alongside contemporary poetry, through network analysis of her community-driven writing and spiritual activism, and via the reception of her texts in England.

Theoretically situating Catherine the mystic as a liminal figure, Chapter I argues that the space Catherine inhabits is queer in multiple ways: between male and female, virgin and sexual, human and godlike, earthly and divine. Chapter II investigates the

literary exchange that took place between poetic and mystical writing, concluding that the influence is not merely one-directional, but that the two genres serve to influence each other. Leveraging data visualization and network analysis, Chapter III discusses the textual state and history of Catherine's letters, investigating the contemporary literary network that Catherine formed around herself through the transmission of her writing. Chapter IV analyzes the metaphors and images of Catherine's letters, examining the pragmatic financial language she utilized in writing to secular and religious interlocutors, and the powerful corporeal language she used in letters written to fellow *mantellate*. Chapter V explores the history of the book in terms of the transposition and reception of Catherinian texts, especially the *Dialogo*, which was written in Italian for a lay audience, translated into Latin for a professional religious audience, then translated into English for a communal female religious audience. This dissertation views Catherine's authorship as that which is embedded within a community-based network and political and public life, presenting her as a truly singular instance of a 14th-century figure who was active in both deed and word, and whose literary voice resonated across European vernacular languages and through the medieval and early modern periods. This work firmly asserts Catherine of Siena, in her own right, as among the early innovators of the Italian literary tradition, providing opportunities for future humanistic inquiry into Catherine's texts.

Acknowledgements

One of the things I do, when I step up on a stage ... I bring everyone who has ever been kind to me with me — ... I say come with me, I'm going on the stage, come with me, I need you now ... so I don't ever feel I have no help. I've had rainbows in my clouds. —

Maya Angelou

Writing is a collaborative enterprise. This text could not be possible without the many people who have helped me along the way, and who I “bring” with me whenever I face an arduous task. I have been fortunate to have made lifelong friendships with professors from my undergraduate and master’s degrees — Jack Salzman, Clara Mucci, and Carrol Coates have guided me through my early academic years and continue to mentor me now. At the Graduate Center, Cathy Davidson has inspired me through her tireless work to drive equity in higher education, and encouraged me to include a digital component as part of the present dissertation. My committee members Monica Calabritto and Steven Kruger have offered me engaging conversations, sharp eyes, and gentle corrections. Most of all, my advisor Clare Carroll has been the best guide I could have asked for on this journey, giving me so much of her time, intellect, and care throughout this process.

Working alongside peers has been a great gift, and I would like to acknowledge the discussion, support, collaboration, and friendship I have shared with Yulia Greyman, Danica Savonick, Kalle Westerling, Javiela Evangelista, Becca Howard, and the Folger Library’s “Researching the Archive” 2015-2016 seminar cohort. The Futures Initiative and HASTAC have provided a second home for me in my last few years of graduate

school, and I would like to thank Katina Rogers, Lauren Melendez, and Kaysi Holman for being great colleagues who continue to do such important and meaningful work. Additionally, my students have in many ways taught me the most; I am so appreciative of the time I have spent in the classroom building knowledge together.

Finally, my family has provided me with such a strong foundation and so much unwavering support that I could not have done this without them. My siblings, Teresa and Anthony, have served as ad hoc editors and presentation audiences, and continue to amaze me as they grow. My grandmother, Marie, perpetually extends kindness, generosity, and tea. My parents, Maryann and George, have always believed in me even when I did not believe in myself, and I cannot thank them enough.

Dedication

For my mother and for Arno.

*Reconocí en la voz del Arno entonces
viejas palabras que buscaban mi boca,
como el que nunca conoció la miel
y halla que reconoce su delicia.*

— Pablo Neruda

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Digital Manifest

I. Website

<https://caterina.io>

- a. Data Visualizations
- b. Media

II. GitHub Repository

<https://github.com/ltagliaferri/dissertation/>

- a. Dissertation text
- b. Code
- c. Data
- d. Media

Note to Readers

This dissertation is comprised of the current text and digital components. The project website is available at <https://caterina.io>. It includes data visualizations done in the programming languages Python, R, and JavaScript D3.js. Additionally, a GitHub respository (<https://github.com/ltagliaferri/dissertation>) includes version-controlled drafts of the current text (along with feedback), the source code of the data visualizations and the website (HTML, CSS, JavaScript), raw data (JSON, stop lists, plain text files, topic modelling output, spreadsheets), and media (images, video, audio).

Introduction

Born in 1347 to a wool-dyer father, Caterina di Iacopo di Benincasa chose a religious life against her family's wishes, as they had wanted her to marry. At 6 years of age, she had her first mystical vision of Christ, at 7 she made a vow of perpetual virginity to God, and at 21, she married Christ in a vision. In the years leading to her mystical marriage, she diligently practiced asceticism, which Suzanne Noffke describes as "silent solitude" and "cozy isolationism" (65). In her youth and adolescence, Catherine was largely private, occupying a small room in her father's house, while practicing daily flagellations and extreme fasting. Because of the severity of her actions, and their effects on her health, her biographer Raymond of Capua tells his readers that her family required her to keep her door ajar (V, 52). As she had decided early in life to dedicate herself to God, Catherine had initially followed a traditional approach typical of hermitage and cloistering of oneself, a popular form of spirituality through the Middle Ages. Indeed, the 13th and 14th centuries found fertile ground for religious expression in the urban centers of Italy — especially in Siena — with male and particularly female recluses well supported by the city and visible to society. In the year of Catherine's birth, 80% of Siena's recluses were women (Thurber 47). By the second half of the 14th century, urban reclusion, which existed on the boundaries of cities and the boundaries of institutionalized religion, began to decline, while the third order "secular" vocations,¹ for those who wanted to be part of a religious community without greatly changing their current lives, were increasingly considered to be more appropriate channels for

¹ "First Order" refers to male religious (monks or friars), the "original" Christian spiritual community. The "Second Order" refers to contemplative nuns who wished to follow in the spirit of the First Order; these communities are cloistered, with nuns living apart from their biological families with other nuns. The "Third Order" or "Secular Order" encompasses both women and men who wished to live in the spirit of the religious community while not drastically changing their current state of life (popular among widows and celibates). The Carmelites, the Franciscans, and the Dominicans all have Third Order followers, and the majority of what we may colloquially refer to as Catholic "nuns" today are actually Third Order "sisters," as nuns would be in the Second Order.

female lay religious expression (Thurber 72). Although Catherine had at first seemed content in her reclusive life, she was eventually compelled by God to lead a public life.²

While Catherine certainly spent her early years as an ascetic, her transition to communal space seems to have been grounded in her experiences. In her youth, she was attracted to the travelling Dominican preachers (Order of Friars Preachers) who came through Siena, and — as Raymond explains — Catherine so esteemed these Dominican friars that she longed to enter their Order to help guide people in spiritual matters. However, Catherine realized that her status as a woman would prevent her from joining them, leading her to consider following Saint Euphrosyne’s model to pass herself as a man (III, 38). As Carolyn Muessig notes, Catherine would eventually prove to be an “itinerant peacemaker, papal representative of sorts, spiritual counselor, theologian, and tireless letter writer” (4). And Raymond himself writes that “her life was to follow lines far different from those of other women,” as God sent her to live among people, working for others in public places (XII, 116). However, it was through communities of civic-minded and spiritual women that Catherine learned and flourished, and throughout her life she served as a community-builder and advocate to both secular and religious, regardless of gender.

Catherine joined the *Mantellate*, a tertiary order of the Dominicans consisting of mostly widowed and married laywomen, when she was about 18 years old. The women at first did not want to accept her, as her status as a virgin was not typical of the order, but she was persistent and persuasive, as she would also prove to be in her subsequent political affairs. When Catherine first joined, she was still committed to prayer and solitude, but her work for the ill as a *mantellata* may have contributed in compelling her to leave her private space. The *mantellate*

² In a literal sense this is very much the case, as Catherine had a mystical vision of Christ beckoning her from outside the door of her room, which led her to pursue public service.

were dedicated to caring for the ill and doing good, and it was in hospitals that these groups of women gathered. Their center in Siena was the Spedale di Santa Maria della Scala, near the Duomo. As Jane Tylus notes, the hospital “represented an intermediary space between public and private ... for the layperson dedicated to acts of mercy” (68). Because of Siena’s location on the Via Francigena, the ancient pilgrimage route to Rome, the *mantellate* cared not only for their geographical neighbors but also for many visitors. Thus, Catherine’s position as a lay Dominican proved to be beneficial though her initial desire to be in the *mantellate* may have seemed contradictory. In this position, she had access to larger circles of people through her affiliation with the Dominicans and was able to engage with people of the world by living outside of a monastery, not unlike her Italian predecessor Francis of Assisi.

In 1374, Catherine first traveled to Florence, and she spent most of 1375 in Pisa, where she cultivated a greater public reputation. While she had started constructing herself as a public figure in Siena, she generated excitement during her extended stay in Pisa and established herself as a public preacher and miracle worker (Capecelatro 107, Tylus 134). It is from Pisa that Catherine begins to engage in intense and frequent letter-writing, often addressing her spiritual and blood *famiglia* in Siena. In 1376 she traveled to Avignon and is credited with the pope’s return to Rome in September of that year, proving herself as effectively engaged in church politics. Still, as a woman in the public sphere, she was accused of vainglory, which Raymond sought to defend her from throughout the last chapter of his *Legenda*. As one may expect, this is a gendered issue; as Raymond notes her critics claimed, ““She’s a woman. Why doesn’t she stay in her cell, if it’s God she wants to serve?”” (IV, 365). Raymond writes that both men and women are accusatory, but in the face of persecution she proved her sanctity through steadfastness, commitment to the public work of God, and through her desire for martyrdom.

Although he mentions Catherine's companions often and writes of Catherine's public outreach, Raymond in some ways works to assert her as a solitary holy figure, committed primarily to working miracles and practicing contemplation.

Raymond describes Catherine's writing as among "her extraordinary achievements [of] humility's proof and fruit," noting the "style, and more importantly ... usefulness" of her work that "moved people, provoked compunction, gave instruction" (Astell 41). However, he constructs these accomplishments not as the result of her natural abilities or education, but as due to the Holy Spirit working within her (Astell 42). When Raymond discusses the act of reading, he primarily speaks to the present reader engaged with his text. However, according to the anonymously authored *Miracoli di Caterina di Iacopo da Siena*, Catherine read aloud to her fellow *mantellate* at supper time, which Tylus notes "situates Catherine in a world of women who, far from spreading snide words about her imagined sanctity, are listening to her read" (127). Meanwhile, Raymond's own *Legenda major*, Caffarini's *Leggenda minore* and *Processo Castellano*, Stefano Maconi's and the Pope's letters — to name a few — are all indicative of Catherine's participation not just as a member of a female community but as an active interlocutor of the male religious community as well. Her letters on practical matters (to a prostitute, a Jewish moneylender), addressed to political leaders (the Queen of Naples, the Queen of Hungary, the King of France), and concerning the justice system (T273), reveal her participation in wider civic society. Therefore, Catherine of Siena is not only a mystic bound by her interiority and other-worldliness, but rather an active force in this world — her contemporary Italy — and a remarkable human who can operate outside and within societal constructs.

Catherine wrote a number of texts; the work that seemed to have been the most significant to her was what she referred to as her *Libro* — the *Dialogo della divina provvidenzia*.

This is a dialogue of 167 chapters between the soul who rises up and God, written a few years before her death during a period of about 13 months, between October 1377 and November 1378. The text generally concerns itself with the spiritual welfare of the reader and features significant thematic overlap with her letters. An important text within the context of publishing and readership, the *Dialogo* was first printed within the initial few years of the technology having been introduced within Italy, quickly following the printing of Bibles. The first printed edition was done in 1472 by Azzoguidi in Bologna, and it has been printed about 70 times since then; meaning there has been about one edition for every seven to eight years from its first printing through today (Cavallini xiii). Catherine's prayers make up another set of her texts that were primarily written down by disciples during her ecstatic visions, mostly recorded in Rome, from December 1378 to 1380. Prayer 6, however, is described by Caffarini as having been written in Catherine's own hand at Rocca di Tentennano in the Val d'Orcia.³ The collection of nearly 380 extant letters of Catherine's reveal how she was a living saint embedded in her community, who developed and fostered a strong network of literary exchange. Her 10-year prolific letter-writing career began in 1370, with letters addressed to men and women, with recipients located throughout Siena, Tuscany, the Italian peninsula, and into Europe.

Catherine as Writer

In his 1524 text *De institutione feminae christianae*, Juan Luis Vives explicates his curriculum for teaching the Christian girl — for his purposes, the future female elite of England. He mentions Catherine of Siena as among the virtuous exempla of Christian women in his chapter “On the Instruction of Young Girls.” As this work is dedicated to the English Queen

³ For a full discussion on this prayer, as well as the critical dissenters, see Noffke's edition and translation, *The Prayers of Catherine of Siena*, 2nd edition, 2001, pp. 50-55.

Catherine of Aragon (mother of Queen Mary I), it would certainly have been remiss of him not to include her namesakes, first Catherine of Alexandria, then “The learned virgin of the same name, Catherine of Siena, [who] left fitting monuments of her genius in which the purity of her saintly intellect is resplendent” (IV, 25). The English translator and editor of the modern edition, Charles Fantazzi, issues a footnote here — “Catherine Benincasa . . . was not a very learned woman, as Vives states. She dictated her writings in the beautiful Tuscan vernacular of Siena” (69). Though Vives may be cultivating the esteem of his patron here, what is interesting is that he is writing prior to Catherine of Siena’s designation as a Church Doctor — a title reserved for those who have contributed to theology or doctrine, and who are regarded as the great teachers of Catholic followers — and Fantazzi glosses the text with some “insight” about Catherine’s lack of learning *after* she had received this honor.

Though she lacked a strictly formal education — of the kind that Vives put forth in his instruction manual — Catherine did set out to be educated in general terms, and to learn to read in particular. A friend and fellow *mantellata*, Alessa de’ Saracini (a woman!) served as her teacher, and Catherine did successfully learn to read the Tuscan vernacular, as well as physically write it in at least an elementary manner (Noffke, *Vision Through A Distant Eye* 40). As a noblewoman, Alessa was educated at least in the Italian language, and Catherine was wise to enlist the help of a woman from the higher classes to learn to read. Though Catherine is painted as a literate woman to various degrees throughout her biographies and hagiographies, the agency afforded to her literacy differs. Raymond writes, “I must tell you, reader, that this holy virgin knew how to read without being taught by human beings,” and continues to explain that Catherine was unable to learn through the assistance of her friend, but instead learned through divine miraculous intervention (79). While miracles make for a compelling case in efforts toward

canonization, and divine teaching may be more appropriate for a holy woman during Catherine's lifetime to gain respect, it is unlikely that a person putting her mind toward learning to read would be unsuccessful with patient guidance. Catherine's learning from fellow women situates her inside of a community that is outside of traditional hierarchical modes of elite privilege, and instead contextualizes her as someone who both contributes to and benefits from this Sienese community.

Reading would serve Catherine throughout her life and spiritual devotion. As the text *Miracoli di Caterina di Iacopo da Siena* notes, she would read about the saints while at the table with her companions, as she would never eat a larger quantity than a nut ("ella legge delle cose de' Santi, perocché tutte le cose che ella si mette in bocca recando in uno non farebbono quantità quanto una noce" (Valli 9)). Throughout each of her days, she would also be sure to dedicate some time to reading (*ibid.*):

Tutto l'altro tempo del dì, poich' è levata la mensa, ispende o in amaestrare genti di seguire la via di Dio, o in contemplare, et di stare rapita come di sopra è detto, o in leggere libri santi; ma il più suo tempo è quello della contemplazione, se ella fosse lasciata, perocché è molto visitata per divozione di genti che la vogliono vedere per pigliare assempto et dottrina da lei.⁴

Throughout her day, she is in devotion herself, reading, in contemplation, in ecstasy, or with people who come to visit to learn from her —she is very much a part of a literate, teaching and learning community. Probably due to the construction of gender at the time, and following Raymond's lead, this anonymous writer tries to emphasize Catherine's commitment to

⁴ "At all other times of the day — from getting up to go to the dining hall — she spends either devoting herself to, or teaching people, to follow God's way; or in contemplation; and being in ecstasy as I said above; or reading holy books. But she spends the most time in contemplation if she is given leave to, because many people visit her out of devotion and want to see her to take example or teaching from her" (My translation).

contemplation. In this text, the many visiting people are almost described as a nuisance, but what is significant about their presence is that others *are seeking knowledge from her*, even if she is not considered learned in an exclusive elite sense of the word.

In addition to being a reader, Catherine seems to have been successful as an auditory learner, attending scholarly preaching and instructional sessions designed for the *mantellate*. For Catherine, writing and speech are never far apart, as both are methods to spread God's Word. She had a very retentive memory as evidenced by her summoning of many Biblical passages from the Latin Vulgate Bible in her writing. This sharp memory causes one of her recent biographers and translators, Suzanne Noffke, to question Catherine's command of Latin, which Raymond stated that she could read and pronounce (though not speak). It seems that Catherine occasionally misquoted scriptures through corruption of her auditory reception of the texts. Still, her intellectual pursuit of Latin reading is evidenced in a letter from Tommaso Caffarini, a follower and biographer, in which he writes, "Mi dimandasti se quello verso del salmo: *Domine non est exaltatum cor meum*, vuol dire *sicut adlattatus* senza el b, o *sicut ablattatus* col b"⁵ (*Leggenda minore* 1868 253, as quoted in Webb, "Catherine of Siena's Heart" 803). This indicates an attention to the Latin language as well as a processing of the meaning of Latin words.

The founder of the Order of Friars Preachers, Dominic de Guzman (1170-1221), believed that preaching was best practiced out of a firm foundation in theology. As part of his commitment to learning, he sent his brothers to be educated in Christian doctrine throughout the universities of Europe, wishing for them to recruit others to also be educated. The famous erudite Dominican friar, Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), was an influential philosopher, theologian, and

⁵ "You asked me if that verse of the Psalms: *Domine non est exaltatum cor meum*, should be *sicut adlattatus* without the *b*, or *sicut ablattatus* with the *b*" (my translation).

jurist in the tradition of scholasticism during his lifetime, and is now honored as a Doctor of the Church, like Catherine. This tradition of learning and education within the Dominican Order manifested itself in Catherine, as she propagated this legacy within her own practice. Her predecessor Thomas Aquinas was also there when she was taught by God to write in her own hand in Letter T272:

Questa lettera, e un'altra ch'io vi mandai, ho scritte di mia mano in su l'isola della Rocca, con molti sospiri e abondanzia di lagrime; in tanto che l'occhio, vedendo, non vedeva; ma piena d'ammirazione ero di me medesima, e della bontà di Dio, considerando la sua misericordia verso le creature che hanno in loro ragione, e la sua Provvidenzia; la quale abondava verso di me, che per refrigerio, essendo privata della consolazione, la quale per mia ignoranzia io non cognobbi, m'aveva dato, e provveduto con darmi l'attitudine dello scrivere; acciocchè discendendo dall'altezza, avessi un poco con chi sfogare 'l cuore, perchè non scoppiasse. Non volendomi trarre ancora di questa tenebrosa vita; per ammirabile modo me la fermò nella mente mia, siccome fa il maestro al fanciullo, che gli dà lo esempio. Onde, subito che fuste partito da me col glorioso evangelista Joanni e Tommaso di Aquino, così dormendo cominciai ad imparare. Perdonatemi del troppo scrivere, perocchè le mani e la lingua s'accordano col cuore.⁶

⁶ “This letter and another I sent you I’ve written with my own hand on the Isola della Rocca, with so many sighs and tears that I couldn’t see even when I was seeing. But I was filled with wonder at myself and God’s goodness when I thought of his mercy toward [his human creatures and his overflowing providence towards] me. He provided for my refreshment by giving me the ability to write — a consolation I’ve never known because of my ignorance — so that when I come down from the heights I might have a little something to vent my heart, lest it burst. Because he didn’t want to take me yet from this dark life, he fixed it in my mind in a marvelous manner, the way a teacher does when he gives his pupil a model. Shortly after you left me, I began to learn in my sleep, with the glorious evangelist John and Thomas Aquinas. Forgive me for writing so much, but my hands and my tongue run along with my heart. (Trans. Noffke, Letter T272, vol. II, 505-6).

For Catherine, God is the ultimate master or teacher, but having both John the Evangelist, writer of a Gospel, and the learned Dominican Thomas Aquinas alongside her while learning the physical act of writing⁷ shows her claim of a rich pedigree. However, due to her status as a woman at the bottom of conventional hierarchies, she also insists that she is ignorant, straddling a fine line between education and the lack thereof. Though at the time, actually writing something down was largely considered a technical skill and scribes were often utilized to render thoughts on the page, Catherine sees her ability to write as a comfort and solace. When she is alone and without a scribe upon returning to the earthly realm from the height of divine mystical experience, through the act of writing, Catherine is able to pour out her heart onto the page rather than feel it burst.

The heart is an important locus for Catherine, a metaphor she uses frequently in her writing, considering it to be a masculine body part that is simultaneously a source of nourishment, while also using the symbol for its religious and Aristotelian implications.⁸ What is perhaps most fascinating about her descriptions of the heart is that she orients it accurately,⁹ which is information that she would not have been able to glean from contemporary public depictions, according to Heather Webb, who explains that only anatomical descriptions of the heart oriented the organ properly during Catherine's lifetime ("Catherine of Siena's Heart" 804). As Catherine explains "how the literal shape of the heart reflects the ideal shape of human affections, with the greater portion directed toward heaven," Webb argues that it becomes evident that Catherine utilized Dominican encyclopedic sources analyzed in Antonio Volpato's

⁷ See Noffke's note 51 on page 505 of Volume II of her translation of Catherine's letters for a discussion on the meaning of this passage. I agree with Noffke's belief that "there is sufficient anecdotal evidence in the sources to indicate that Catherine did at this time in some fashion (miraculous or otherwise) learn to write in at least an elementary sort of way" (506).

⁸ For analysis on Catherine's heart, see Heather Webb's article "Catherine of Siena's Heart" (2005); and her book *Medieval Heart* (2010), p. 58-61 and p. 135-139 in particular.

⁹ "Tu vedi bene che la lanterna è larga di sopra, e di sotto stretta; e così è fatto il cuore" / "You see, a lantern is broad on top and narrow at the bottom, and that is the way the heart is shaped" (T23, Trans. Noffke).

research¹⁰ that often contained depictions of physiology (“Catherine of Siena’s Heart” 805). Catherine is not the only mystic to have been intrigued by science, and biology in particular, as Hildegard of Bingen wrote on scientific and medicinal uses of natural objects in both *Physica* and *Causae et Curae*,¹¹ and Teresa of Ávila punctuates her *Libro de la vida* with symbols of water, soil, and nature to describe what María M. Carrión refers to as “sustainable devotion” (“Sustainable Devotion. Water, Soil, and Nature in Teresa de Jesús’s *Libro de la vida*”). While Catherine’s utilization of Dominican encyclopedic sources further confirms her own literacy, it also indicates a general interest in learning that is not limited to reading and writing. Her seeking out of knowledge about the natural world alongside theology points to a commitment to greater understanding and sharing of that knowledge through teaching. As she is able to learn in the traditional sense of listening, reading, and speaking with the educated *famiglia* that she cultivated around her, but also gleans a special knowledge through mystical experience, she seeks out public speaking and writing to help others gain from what she has learned and what she has taught (and likewise others seek her out).

Despite her efforts to learn across fields, gaining knowledge through the vernacular and writing using the vernacular was not considered to be true literacy in a Latinate world. Though Catherine was born half a century after Dante had written *De vulgari eloquentia*, little had changed regarding the status of the Italian and Latin languages, and what participating in those language communities meant. Latin — the language of upper-class men, intellectual humanists, and the church — presented a clear barrier that prevented common people and women in particular from accessing information. Though Catherine *was* interested in participating in the

¹⁰ Antonio Volpato, “Le conoscenze scientifiche di S. Caterina,” in *Con l’occhio e col lume*, pp. 191-202.

¹¹ Hildegard von Bingen, *Causae et Curae (Holistic Healing)*, trans. Manfred Pawlik and Patrick Madigan, ed. by Mary Palmquist and John Kulas (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, Inc., 1994); Hildegard von Bingen, *Physica*, trans. Priscilla Throop (Rochester, Vermont: Healing Arts Press, 1998).

same language as this separate and self-monitoring exclusive group (as is evident in her efforts to learn Latin), she consciously and emphatically would choose Sienese Italian as her language of writing and speech. As a religious figure doing good work in the world, offering comfort, advice, and care to the prisoners, penitent women, and ill of Siena, how could she choose to communicate in a language they would not be able to understand? Having learned to write through her own community, and being a publicly-engaged woman who addressed her fellow Sienese in speeches in the piazza or through dispatched letters, Catherine was working to include the poor, sick, uneducated and sinful, rather than exclude them. As both a learner and a teacher of God, tasked with delivering messages of the divine to others, the local language of her time was incredibly instrumental to gain followers and communicate. Indeed, her use of language is remarkably similar to Francis of Assisi's equity-driven approach to spirituality, as he wrote what are considered to be the first Italian language texts in the Umbrian dialect as a means to engage all those in his community who could not understand Latin. His prayer-song "Cantico delle creature" even invites the disenfranchised group of non-human animals to praise the divine, appreciating their dignity in being the creatures of God.¹² Catherine's use of language is consistent with her spirituality (as well as Christ's inclusive teachings), which is public, community-based, and poetic while also being meaningful and significant.

Where Catherine did exclude by language was in letters she wrote in her native Sienese to prominent foreign men and women who likely had little or no grasp of Italian. In response to this, Raymond notably would send an accompanying messenger to Pope Gregory XI in order to interpret, *viva voce*, Catherine's words into Latin, thus creating a performative and multivalent text (Tylus 161). Though this may be viewed as an intent to diminish Catherine's Italian,

¹² Today, Francis's eating habits would be considered raw-food vegan, though this was probably more of an expression of abstention and bodily denial than an interest in non-human animal welfare.

especially when considering that Raymond also quickly worked to have her *Libro* translated into Latin, this was actually an effective method for retaining Catherine's agency and community-focused ideals while also accommodating the Pope. As with all of her language-based choices, Catherine's use of the vernacular in her letters, especially those addressed to the Pope, serves not only a literary purpose, but also a political one: Catherine's activities were directed towards returning the papal seat from France to Italy (Tylus 162). Similarly, Raymond's work was invested in Catherine's canonization, and he was well aware that for a female mystic to access the church hierarchy in this way, she would have to be presented in the language of the elite rather than the language of the people. Translating texts into Latin also ensured the circulation of texts across linguistic boundaries, as they could subsequently be translated into local vernaculars (as with the translation of Catherine's *Libro* and Raymond's *Vita* into English, discussed below). Italian women religious, like Angela of Foligno and Elena da Udine, did not enjoy the same relatively quick canonization that Catherine did, as most of the texts surrounding their lives were in the vernacular. Angela of Foligno (d. 1309) was not canonized until 2013 by the current Pope Francis, and Elena da Udine (d. 1458), whose notarized vernacular life was written by Simone da Roma, was only beatified after the composition of Giacomo da Udine's interesting late 15th-century Latin text that focused on her ascent into heaven (*Vita Helenae utinensis*).¹³

Although today we may consider authorial dictation to be not quite the same skill as writing, it is worth noting that the great English poet John Milton was blind by the time he wrote *Paradise Lost* from 1658 to 1664 (with the second edition written in 1674), and "Contemporary accounts relate that Milton, whose eyes finally failed completely in 1651, would dictate to his daughter Deborah, his nephew, or a paid amanuensis every day" (Farmer 19). There are numerous paintings of Milton dictating to his daughters, including the 1826 painting by Eugène

¹³ For more on this text, see Alison Knowles Frazier's *Possible Lives*.

Delacroix, suggesting a romanticizing of the oral epic nature of the text, which calls to mind the great works of classical poets like Homer, but also shows an intimate community between writer and scribe. Also, these paintings do not seem to call into question the fact that the one who is manually writing is female, with authorship remaining firmly with the esteemed male poet Milton. However, this charming literary tableau is not afforded to Catherine. As a driving force of her monograph, *Reclaiming Catherine of Siena*, Jane Tylus problematizes Catherine as a “producer of words,” only trying to claim that she was “certainly a woman intrigued by the technology of writing and interested in exploiting it for a variety of spiritual reasons” (18). Tylus mentions Stephen Botterill as among the dissenters to considering Catherine as writer. It is worth quoting Botterill’s gloss in the *Cambridge History of Italian Literature* (considered to be a standard scholarly text) at length (125):

In all these writings Catherine handles the vernacular with subtlety and force, commanding a wide range of tonal registers and using her expressive medium with supple ease and pithy eloquence that make her letters, in particular, one of the monuments of epistolary tradition. But the idea of Catherine as “author” of her own texts bring with it several extra-literary problems that affect interpretation. Born and raised in working-class poverty, and subject, like nearly all women of her century, to virtually complete exclusion from the realm of education and literate culture, she learned to read and write only near the end of her life. Most if not all of her “writings” were thus orally dictated to (male) secretaries, foremost among them the famous friar Raimondo da Capua. It is by no means clear exactly what role these secretaries played in editing, revising or otherwise preparing Catherine’s dictated texts for circulation in manuscript; and any conception of Catherine as a woman

writer of the Trecento — a *rara avis* indeed — needs to be modified by attention to the individual and social realities that govern her work, and which include substantial involvement by men in the preservation of that work in written form.

There are quite a few assumptions made on Botterill's part here, which stem from a discourse that must modify the woman writing as a "woman writer" rather than a "writer." Although he will grant that Catherine effectively "handles" language (he does not state that it is her scribes doing this handling), he will not afford her authorship. The neologism "working-class" is anachronistic and unclear — her father was a wool-dyer, a skilled worker and likely providing more than poverty for his family as part of Italy's growing artisanal class. As is noted in her biographies, Catherine's family provided her with her own small room within the familial house in which to pray, a luxury not indicative of a poor father. Catherine, a mystic and future saint, chose the life of poverty for herself rather than marry. It is also assumed that education was limited to the realm of a formal education, and that a knowledge of reading and writing could not be attained outside of elite male institutional study. Even the fact that Catherine went to fellow women to attain literacy suggests that a grassroots-style education could be realized by women and the non-elite living in Siena during her time. Reserving the title of "teacher" or "master" for Christ alone, Catherine clearly was not participating in the same kind of educational system that Botterill describes (Noffke 58). The "literate culture" he refers to is likely the Latin literacy discussed above, a literacy that was exclusionary and inequitable. The note of "(male) secretaries" is also inaccurate, as Catherine employed secretaries from both sexes, as is evidenced in many letters that state which women are there with her.¹⁴ Though the men around her worked to promote Catherine's spirituality and sainthood, there is little to indicate that they

¹⁴ See also Tylus p. 83. Among her primary scribes were the Dominican sisters Alessa de' Saracini, Francesca Gori and Giovanna Pazza, and young laymen Neri di Landoccio, Stefano Maconi and Barduccio Canigiani.

would mishandle her texts — they are part of her *famiglia* and go to her for advice, why should the assumption be that they would change her words when they, part of Latinate culture, do not prevent her from writing in Italian?

Concluding that Catherine has little or no control of her dictated texts based on little evidence while assuming that men who used scribes had full control is a problematic stance. While we do not have writing extant in her own hand, we also do not have much of the writing in the hand of male writers from her period, either (including Dante and Francis of Assisi). Writing in a communal setting is exactly what we may expect from a figure so embedded in her city and culture, and though in some letters she notes when she writes in her own hand, writing as a solitary and scholarly pursuit alone does not truly capture the full range of the nature of writing. Collaborative writing, as with collaborative visual art, was among the expressions of writing and the arts through the Middle Ages and Renaissance (acknowledging collaborative writing is integral to our understanding of Shakespeare),¹⁵ and to afford some collaborative negotiation as part of Catherine's writing process is not to diminish her writing and authorship any more than male writers who are also likely not writing entirely alone and never sharing or receiving feedback on their work, which is also likely edited by others. If we are to contextualize Catherine, as Botterill suggests we do, it is to reveal her as a writer of her own time, part of a growing discourse of writing in the developing Italian language, and among the innovators of that language, employing unique and consistent metaphors and imagery while also persuasively enacting diplomacy — indicative of both her poetic prowess and rhetorical style.¹⁶ Writing has

¹⁵ See, for example: Egan's "Intention in the Editing of Shakespeare," the chapter "Shakespeare and Lord Strange's Men" in Manley and MacLean's *Lord Strange's Men and Their Plays*, Vickers's *Shakespeare, Co-Author: A Historical Study of Five Collaborative Plays*.

¹⁶ Brunetto Latini, Dante's famous damned teacher, argues that Cicero's teachings on speeches also apply to letters, suggesting to me that the oral production of writing is rhetorically sound. Latini's French *Tresor* reinforces his notion that speaking is equivalent to letters: "Or dit li mastres que la escience de retorique est en .ii. mainieres, une

always proven to be a site of collaboration and negotiation, and this persists to this day; if we are to problematize Catherine's authorship, we must also problematize authorship in general, which has a long theoretical history, but is outside of the scope of this present study. For this work, the stance that will be taken is the stance that is afforded to male writers.

The chapters that follow serve to assert Catherine of Siena's literary achievements as she worked to innovate the Italian language, interacted with her readership, and was successfully received in other vernacular languages. As a female-bodied mystic who had to carefully negotiate her public and increasingly political status in 14th-century Italy, Catherine used written language to describe her extraordinary relationship with God, discuss spirituality and provide guidance to others, and pragmatically traverse across class and gender lines. The current work utilizes a theoretical framework of gender and queer theory alongside comparative analysis and digital humanities techniques to approach the texts and translations of Catherine in a comprehensive manner that considers their historical context and sheds light on her innovation of, and influence on, medieval and early modern literature.

This work could not have been possible without recent scholarship by Jane Tylus and Suzanne Noffke in particular. *Reclaiming Catherine of Siena*, the monograph by Tylus, broadly situates Catherine of Siena in a literary discourse, following significant contributions from both historical and religious scholars. In her text, Tylus contends that Catherine is a literary woman, and without this previous work adding legitimacy to Catherine as a writer, the scope of this project would be quite different. Suzanne Noffke, F. Thomas Luongo, Karen Scott, and Heather Webb have each done important work on Catherine of Siena and her writing outside of the field

qui est en dissant de boche & une autre que l'en mande par letres; mais li enseignement sont comun, car il ne puet chaloir que l'en die ou en conte ou que l'en mande par letres..." (296). For a full discussion of the *Ars dictaminis* and Brunetto Latini, see Witt's *Brunetto Latini and the Italian Tradition of Ars Dictaminis*.

of literature. Noffke's English translation of the *Letters* is the only recent scholarly edition available at the time of writing, and I have followed her dating of the *Letters* based on her linguistic analysis research throughout the present work. Noffke's translation of Catherine's other texts also provide a significant critical contribution, and her monograph *Vision through a Distant Eye* provides analysis of Catherine's biography and spirituality in addition to her writing. Luongo, Scott, and Webb have worked with Catherine of Siena's texts within the field of History, writing several valuable pieces on the subject. Luongo in particular provides meaningful analysis of the letters in relation to Catherine's political and public involvement, while Scott discusses how Catherine and Raymond received the texts written by Catherine, and Webb writes on the imagery of the heart and of tears in Catherine's writing. There have additionally been two recent books of essays published on Catherine of Siena: *A Companion to Catherine of Siena* (2011), edited by Carolyn Muessig, George Ferzoco, and Beverly Kienzle; and *Catherine of Siena: The Creation of a Cult* (2013), edited by Jeffrey F. Hamburger and Gabriela Signori. These collections take interdisciplinary approaches to Catherine, contributing an important context that includes literary, art historical, historical and religious inquiry. Much of the Italian scholarly tradition to Catherine of Siena has been within the field of Religion, with Giuliana Cavallini's contributions being the most significant. Cavallini completed critical editions of Catherine's *Orazioni* and *Dialogo* in 1978 and 1995 respectively. Antonio Volpato has done an Italian edition of the letters, though this text is currently without critical notes.

The English tradition of Catherinian studies also benefits from the work of much exciting recent scholarship in the field. Jennifer N. Brown's recent essays, "From the Charterhouse to the Printing House: Catherine of Siena in Medieval England" (2013) and "The Many Misattributions of Catherine of Siena: Beyond *The Orchard* In England" (2015), along with her ongoing

research on the Harley 2409 manuscript, have provided greater context for Catherine's English reception and women's reading practices in late medieval England. A number of essay collections have also proven to be invaluable to my understanding of the English reception of continental texts and English devotional readership. The comparative collection *Prophets Abroad* (Rosalynn Voaden, ed.) is broad and religious in scope, and deals with the influence of continental religious on British religious. Denise L. Despres's essay in the volume "Ecstatic Reading and Missionary Mysticism: *The Orchard of Syon*," provides a departure point for discussing Catherine's English text as it was received in England. *Syon Abbey and its Books* (E. A. Jones and Alexandra Walsham, eds.) discusses the textual culture of Syon, and the essays by Virginia R. Bainbridge, Vincent Gillespie and C. Annette Grisé are particularly relevant as they address the time period in question for female readership. The series of papers from *The Medieval Mystical Tradition*, also edited by E. A. Jones, provides additional contributions on English mysticism, including another essay by C. Annette Grisé.

As the present text originated within the field of Comparative Literature, it is theoretically grounded in gender and queer theory, pivoting on works of the feminist canon ranging from Beauvoir and Irigaray to Donna Haraway and Sara Ahmed. There has been much innovative writing about mysticism from both a theoretical and literary perspective of late, including works by Amy M. Hollywood, Barbara Newman, and Anna J. Cruz, all of whose contributions have helped to situate the mystic as a complex and potentially literary figure. Alison Knowles Frazier's 2005 monograph *Possible Lives: Authors and Saints in Renaissance Italy* has also provided an important framework in considering the sanctification of Catherine based on her own texts, hagiographies on her life, and the historical context in which this writing was embedded. The digital humanities approach to this research has been influenced by many

interactions with practitioners that are not formally cited here, including Cathy N. Davidson, Patrik Svensson, Katina Rogers, Matthew K. Gold, and others. Formally, I have utilized Franco Moretti's *Distant Reading*, which considers looking at a textual corpus as a whole, and balancing that analysis with close humanistic reading, which I have set out to do here. Taking an interdisciplinary perspective, I have also considered statistical modeling from statisticians George E. P. Box and Norman R. Draper, and network analysis from a sociologist's perspective with Paul D. McLean's book on networking in Renaissance Florence.

In the present work, Chapter I, "The Figure of the Mystic" discusses the theoretical groundings that underpin the rest of this work. Situating the mystic as a liminal figure, I argue that the space they inhabit is queer in multiple ways: between male and female, virgin and sexual, human and godlike, earthly and divine. This chapter complicates the history of mystics (both male and female) as brides and soldiers of Christ at once, and notes the fluid gender history of the construction of Christ himself, who is considered to be a nourishing and maternal figure in many ways throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance periods. Existing in this separate and complicated space, mystical, saintly, religious, and sacred figures like Catherine are able to cross boundaries that others cannot, using their fluid and undefined nature to accomplish their purpose in this world and the next.

Chapter II, "*O amore ineffabile*': The Poetics of Mysticism," considers that the exchange that took place between poetic and mystical writing is not merely one-directional. Dante, Petrarch, and Italian poets of the Sicilian, Tuscan, and Dolce Stil Novo schools of poetry would allow erotic language to mingle with spiritual language, and this is likely due to the literary context offered to their work by mysticism. This chapter investigates the subjectivity of the lover as related to the beloved, how the beloved can influence the lover to virtue, and how the earthly

or divine court impacts the dynamics of two individuals. By analyzing literature both through a distant and computational manner, as well as through close reading, this chapter posits that both erotic love and spiritual love are ineffable and can intersect, and that both traditional love poets and mystical writers from the Beguines through Catherine (at least) are searching for ways to describe the indescribable through similar literary approaches.

Catherine's 386 letters are the subject of Chapter III, "The Corpus of Letters and Catherine's Network," which discusses their textual state and history, and the contemporary literary network she formed around herself through the transmission of her writing. This chapter considers Catherine's acts of collaboration and community-building as the means through which she was able to gain spiritual legitimization as well as political power despite her status as a woman and tertiary nun. As a mystical figure moving about in the world, Catherine's ability to create alliances and a strong network through her innovative use of the emerging vernacular language ensured that she would not be considered a heretic as many other public-facing women were during her lifetime. Additionally, the care that she put into developing strong relationships with religious and intellectual figures established her afterlife through the transmission of her texts over time and place. Leveraging data visualization and network analysis alongside historical and literary inquiry, this chapter constructs Catherine as an individual who is central within a network of many important figures of her time.

Following a distant reading of Catherine's letters, Chapter IV, "'*Ogni cosa passa*': How Catherine's Letters Negotiate This World and The Next", provides a granular approach to the letters, looking specifically at how Catherine modifies her message based on the individuals she is addressing. By looking specifically at her letters that utilize financial language and advice letters that are written to fellow *mantellate*, this chapter considers how Catherine's position as a

writer and mystic who is concerned with both life on earth and the afterlife in Paradise is able to negotiate that boundary when providing spiritual advice to others. Additionally, Catherine realizes that certain individuals can aid her broader spiritual missions, and in some cases will temper her guidance in order to have continued support from politically strong interlocutors. In particular, this chapter shows Catherine's pragmatism as she balances her dualistic approach to faith that is both grounded in the economic realities of 14th-century Siena and devoted to everlasting life.

Finally, the movement of Catherine's writing into England is treated in Chapter V, "The English Reception of Catherine of Siena's Texts and Spirituality." This chapter explores the transposition of the *Dialogo*, which was written in Italian for an Italian lay audience, translated into Latin for a professional religious audience, then translated into English for a female religious audience. Additionally, the chapter discusses other related books that were brought into the English context that were related to Catherine and engages with the readers' and book collector's networks that interacted with this literature. Particular attention is given to the readers at Syon Abbey, as this religious women's house was the originating site of the English translation of the *Dialogo* which became known as the *Orcherd of Syon*. Considering Catherine as a figure who can teach women and as a tempered model of continental devotion, this chapter looks at the translator's framing of the text, and finally compares Catherine's mystical writing with that of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe to contrast the approaches to spirituality found within England and Italy.

The intention of the current work is to firmly cast Catherine of Siena as a literary figure through utilizing a gender theory framework and exploring her corpus of writing alongside contemporary poetry, through network analysis, and via the reception of her texts in England.

Embedded within Catherine's authorship are multifaceted literary expressions that present a range of intentionality and demand to be received in different registers. Catherine wrote a variety of texts that had practical, social, political, spiritual and cultural functionalities, offering multivalent readings that situate her writing as that which is imbued with historical and religious interests. She wrote as a mystic and religious figure but also as a literary practitioner of the emerging Italian language, very aware of rhetoric and the art of persuasion. Catherine was a writer who was certainly cognizant of her audience, the afterlife of her writing, and how her texts would be received. She wrote lively and literary prose and prayers that used innovative language and unique imagery, and presented her texts within a context that was consistent with the literature surrounding the topos of love. Catherine's authorship, embedded within a community-based network and political and public life, presents a truly unique instance of a 14th-century woman who was active in both deed and word, whose literary voice resonated across European vernacular languages and through history.

Chapter I

The Figure of the Mystic

Catherine of Siena, as a writer and reader, student and teacher outside of traditional and established elite hierarchies, proves herself to be a liminal figure, pushing against conventional norms while also capable of moving through and working within prescribed systems. Her success as a writer, as a religious figure, and as a saint, depended very much on her ability to construct herself in ways that were within and without acceptable boundaries for a 14th-century Italian woman. In many ways, her robust efforts at community building served her well throughout her life and continued to serve her in the construction of her legacy. But another aspect of her life also clearly guided her spirituality as well as her approach to writing and even her community development: mysticism. Understanding Catherine as a mystic is crucial for contextualizing the reasons why she engaged in so much outreach, and how writing fit into her religiosity and social justice-driven approach to faith. This chapter is devoted to the figure of the mystic: how the mystic is theoretically cast as a transgressive figure at the borders of binaries but also outside of them. Thinking about Catherine in these terms will enable us to move forward with her writing from the theoretically grounded perspective that she is functioning at the margins of male and female, human and divine, sanctioned and unsanctioned.

A year before his death, Sigmund Freud writes a single sentence in an entry dated August 22, 1938: “Mysticism is the obscure self-perception of the realm outside the ego, of the id” (“Mystik de dunkle Selbstwahrnehmung des Reiches ausserhalb des Ichs, des Es”). Though Freud wrote on mysticism throughout his life, he did not view it as a means to religious redemption, but seemed to couple it more with psychoanalysis itself, as a way to know that which exists outside

of the ego, in direct contact with the id.¹⁷ In general, Freud sees mysticism as irrational and lacking an organizing language, while still probing an intellectual problem that cannot be grasped by the rational self. Though many theorists will agree with its irrationality and further identify the mystic as a pathological figure, others view mysticism to be a domain within which a specific language is explored and brought to light, beyond the boundaries of learned and self-conscious speech and writing. For feminist theorists, the language is largely charged with amorous expression due to mysticism being intrinsically joined with femininity and a state of loving and even eroticism.

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir characterizes the mystic as a lover desirous of Christ, associated with blood and self-annihilation, and ostensibly a woman. As part of Beauvoir's argument throughout the broader text, love is assigned to woman as her supreme vocation — that is, she is defined by the loving she does. When a woman loves a man, Beauvoir explains, she is seeking God in this man. Man is the representation of God (or the *logos*), and as Lacan further demonstrates, “The phallus is the signifier of signifiers, the privileged signifier of that mark in which the role of the logos is joined with the advent of desire” (*Écrits* 287). For man, reason and desire and the *logos* are conflated, but as woman is without the phallus, she is relegated to the lover, only capable of desiring the *logos*, typically in the form of a man. If, Beauvoir writes, human love is denied to her — whether due to her having been disappointed in love, or her having been too selective in choosing a lover — she may seek the *logos* in the person of God himself. Interestingly, by choosing to direct herself to God, the female mystic is superseding the intermediary force of the male human and is encountering the *logos* unimpeded, desiring this true signifier of signifiers rather than the corporeal representation of God found in

¹⁷ For a discussion, see Chapter 4 of Naomi R. Goldenberg's *Changing of the Gods: Feminism and the End of Traditional Religions*, 1979; and Chapter 1 of Jacques Derrida's *Le toucher*, Jean-Luc Nancy, 2000.

man. The female mystic using love (even desirous love) as a vehicle toward desiring and comprehending the *logos* is exactly in line with Christian theology, as Dante so aptly illustrates in erotic language throughout *Paradiso* by borrowing from the eroticism inherent in the biblical Song of Songs and hagiographies (e.g., St. Francis marrying Poverty).¹⁸ The blending of *caritas* and *eros* as a method for approaching the divine and thus the *logos* or God is a legitimate expression of faith that simultaneously disrupts psychoanalytic gendering of women through their channeling of desirous love to encounter the *logos* unmediated by masculine *accoutrements*.

Much of the tension surrounding the mystic in theoretical inquiry pivots around the perception of the mystic as an hysterical figure. Hélène Cixous views the mystic as being aligned with hysteria rather than religiosity — a non-mystical religious woman, for Cixous, is an obsessive-compulsive, whereas an hysterical woman is an artist and revolutionary. In my reading, and as Amy Hollywood notes in general terms, theorists typically denigrate the affective and expressive embodiments of mysticism, though the rare exceptions (Bataille, Beauvoir, Lacan, Irigaray) view these women less pathologically and instead as subversive figures who can effectively merge action and contemplation, emotion and reason, body and soul. Teresa of Avila and Angela of Foligno are discussed in particular throughout theoretical writing on mysticism, and Simone de Beauvoir specifically writes on Joan of Arc and Catherine of Siena as well.

On Catherine, Beauvoir in fact mentions her prior to discussing the mystic in particular, when she addresses the special status of queens and saints, who — she argues — were afforded more social support than other women and granted equality. Women she mentions in this regard include Clotilda, Radegonde, Blanche of Castile, Heloise, and Joan of Arc along with Catherine

¹⁸ On this topic, see scholarship by David Meconi (“Traveling without Moving: Love as Ecstatic Union in Plotinus, Augustine, and Dante”), Marguerite Chiarenza (“Dante’s Lady Poverty”),Carolynn Lund-Mead (“Dante and Androgyny”), J.A. Mazzeo (“Plato’s Eros and Dante’s Amore”).

(104). As an Italian woman, Catherine is mentioned again when Beauvoir discusses how women made gains during the Italian Renaissance; she argues that at the time individualism was available for everyone regardless of sex, and that women became powerful sovereigns, military leaders, artists, writers and musicians (105). When she writes on the mystic in chapter 24 (670-678), in which she mentions Catherine on several occasions, she discusses how the mystic tries to annihilate herself, while also being especially concerned with blood, setting up an interesting mystical obsession with corporeality that is both a denial and a preoccupation with bodily fluid. For mystics, “Ecstasy mimics corporeally that abolition of the ego”; that is, whereas other loving women may abolish only their psychological egos, mystics also annihilate their flesh (675).

In their being especially concerned with blood, Beauvoir claims mystics are indulging in “sado-masochistic fantasies,” and mentions that “St. Catherine of Siena refers to [Christ’s blood] in most of her letters” (676, 677). Of course, Catherine evokes the blood of Christ within the rhetorical structure of her letters. As a liminal figure between the Middle Ages and the early modern period, Catherine is very much engaging with a form of medieval devotion that is concerned with Christ’s blood, and referring to this as sadomasochistic is certainly an anachronistic reading. What is more unsubstantiated about Beauvoir’s analysis on the mystic is that she writes, “To be sure, there have also been men who burned with that flame, but they are rare and their fervor is of a highly refined intellectual cast, whereas the women who abandon themselves to the joys of the heavenly nuptials are legion, and their experience is of a peculiarly emotional nature” (670). I say this is unsubstantiated, because not only does it incorrectly estimate the number of male mystics (there are many more male mystics than female mystics),¹⁹ but also because it sets up a false dichotomy of mystical expression. What is not intellectual

¹⁹ Although this should be taken with a grain of salt, and should not be considered to be fully comprehensive, Wikipedia provides a list of Christian mystics here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Christian_mystics.

about Hildegard and Catherine? What is not emotional about Bernard of Clairvaux and Francis of Assisi?

Where Beauvoir's examination is rich and vital is when she discusses the relationship between action and contemplation, which is what gets at the heart of Catherine's mysticism. Beauvoir maintains that for some women, "Ecstasies, visions, talks with God — this inner experience is enough," but that "[o]thers feel impelled to transmit it to the world through acts" (677). She further explains that these are "women of action [. . .] who know very well what goals they have in mind and who lucidly devise means for attaining them: their visions simply provide objective images for their certitudes" (678). For Beauvoir, Teresa of Àvila is the preeminent embodiment of this mystical sensibility, but she includes Catherine of Siena and Joan of Arc among the women who use contemplation to fuel their action in the world. What is significant here is that there is a balance and an occupation of a liminal space between contemplation and action. Where many religious figures are revered for their meditative approach to spirituality, mystics are typically engaging with the wider world in some way, often by transmitting their knowledge through text.

As Beauvoir does dwell on Catherine of Siena in her text, it is worthwhile to quote her assessment of the mystic at length (*Le Deuxième Sexe* 104):

the story of St Catherine of Siena is significant; in the midst of a quite normal existence she created in Siena a great reputation by her active benevolence and by the visions that testified to her intense inner life; thus she acquired the authority necessary for success, which women usually lack. Appeal was made to her influence in exhorting those condemned to death, in bringing back wanderers, and in allaying quarrels between families and cities. She had the support of a society that recognized

itself in her, and thus it was that she could fulfill her mission of pacification, preaching from city to city submission to the Pope, keeping up extensive correspondence with bishops and rulers, and in the end being chosen by Florence as ambassadress to go to seek out the Pope in Avignon.²⁰

Catherine's "active charité" is juxtaposed with her "visions qui manifestent son intense vie intérieure," but rather than occupying two different aspects of Catherine's approach to life, they support and drive each other (*Le deuxième sexe* 169). As a person inciting works of charity and spiritual policy, Catherine was a vital element of her community, and she reflected back the community she was a part of and helped to maintain ("Elle est soutenue par la collectivité qui se reconnaît en elle" (*Le deuxième sexe* 169)). In Beauvoir's assessment of Catherine, the active life and the contemplative life are impossible to disentangle, and serve as the foundation of Catherine's mysticism.

Catherine's own texts adroitly blend the active with the contemplative, emphasizing her act of doing good works in the world as part of her spirituality. In a letter to the Dominican abbess and nuns of San Pietro in Monticelli a Lignaia in Florence, she writes (T79):

E non lassi la buona operazione con santi desiderii, nè per tentazione del dimonio, nè per fragilità della carne ... E non debbe lassare il servire al prossimo suo, nè di cercare la salute sua, per ingratitudine nè per ignoranzia, che non cognoscesse il servizio. Non debbe lassare; perocchè, se lassasse, parrebbe che cercasse d'essere

²⁰ "l'histoire de sainte Catherine de Sienne est significative; c'est au sein d'une existence tout à fait normale qu'elle se crée à Sienne une grande réputation par son active charité et par les visions qui manifestent son intense vie intérieure; elle acquiert ainsi cette autorité nécessaire au succès et qui manque généralement aux femmes; on fait appel à son influence pour exhorter les condamnés à mort, ramener les égarés, apaiser les querelles entre familles et cités. Elle est soutenue par la collectivité qui se reconnaît en elle, et c'est ainsi qu'elle peut remplir sa mission pacificatrice, prêchant de ville en ville la soumission au pape, entretenant de vastes correspondances avec évêques et souverains, et finalement choisie par Florence comme ambassadrice pour aller chercher le pape à Avignon" (*Le deuxième sexe* 169).

retribuito da loro, e non da Dio: la quale cosa non si debbe fare, ma prima eleggere la morte.²¹

For Catherine, doing good is intrinsically tied to holy desire, and nothing should prevent the servants of God from serving their neighbors, whether it is corporeal weakness or their neighbors' ingratitude. She emphasizes that their fellow earth-bound humans cannot offer them a reward, so they should not seek one from them but from God through eternal life. This letter, which Suzanne Noffke dates to October 1377, is contemporaneous with Catherine's writing of the *Dialogo*, and this sentiment of loving thy neighbor through service is reiterated in a statement of God's in *Dialogo 7*:

come io non voglia altro che amore, poiché l'uomo esercita l'amore del prossimo nell'amore di me. Quando ha adempiuto il precetto dell'amore del prossimo, egli ha osservato la legge, e coi legami di questa dilezione, potendo, farà utilità agli altri secondo il proprio stato.²²

Being useful to others is the proper state for followers of God, for when people love each other they are showing love for their creator, and upholding his law. This service or active charity is such a crucial component of Catherine's mysticism and general mode of living in the world, that she includes it in her advice letters directly to others as well as early on in her *Dialogo* which is intended for all to read and learn from.

As Catherine was working on this merging of the active life with the contemplative life in her own daily activities, there is a contemporaneous shift in Renaissance hagiography from an

²¹ "Let nothing keep her from doing good with holy desire — whether it be diabolical temptation or carnal weakness ... Nor should her neighbors' ingratitude or lack of recognition or appreciation keep her from serving them and seeking their salvation. If it did, it would seem that she was looking for some reward from them rather than from God, and she should prefer death to that!" (trans. Noffke)

²² "All want is love. In loving me you will realize love for your neighbors, and if you love your neighbors you have kept the Law. If you are bound by this love you will do everything you can to be of service wherever you are." (trans. Noffke)

other-worldly spirituality to a this-worldly spirituality. Alison Knowles Frazier discusses this movement in her work, *Possible Lives: Authors and Saints in Renaissance Italy*, which is focused on representations of men living the *vita activa* alongside reform of religious life that generally moved men outside of communal cloisters and into city centers. Figures like St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Ambrose, St. Potitus and St. Nicholas are profiled in particular, and the Latin humanist writers generally prefer the male subject to the female, with only about 5% of Dominican accounts and 25% of Franciscan accounts being about women (Frazier 35). The manifestation of this preference in hagiographies of Catherine's time reveals that this is an increasingly condoned *modus operandi* of religious expression, though the fact that it was almost entirely limited to male religious hagiographies shows that blending of action with contemplation was not typical or sanctioned for female religious figures like Catherine.

In fact, many women in the medieval and early modern periods would have been entirely precluded from having a this-worldly active life whether religious or not. Aristotle develops the crucial distinctions between *zoe* and *bios*, *oikos* and *polis*, limiting women to the realms of *zoe* (the biological life outside of politics) and *oikos* (the home), whereas men inhabit the domains of *bios* (the qualified life, the life of society, and political life) and *polis* (the city). Though there are some women who were able to engage in their local public contexts — like Mary Magdalene, Joan of Arc (until she was captured by England), Eleanor of Aquitaine, Vittoria Colonna — the vast majority of historical women through the Renaissance were unable to participate in the political life of the city, including those who claimed to have a higher divine impetus for doing so. In *Women of the Renaissance*, Margaret King notes that between the years of 1300 and 1700 “witches” in Italy outnumbered religious women 100 to 1, revealing that women who attempted to be viewed as religious and spread the word about their sanctity were much more frequently

viewed to be demonic, an accusation that Catherine herself had even endured from some skeptics (described by Raymond as her “disparagers” (176-7)), though she is distinguished as a Church Doctor today (145).²³ Even earlier female mystics like Hildegard of Bingen (who did have the support of Bernard of Clairvaux) led remarkable lives pursuing multivalent approaches to knowledge production and creative works, yet were proscribed from a public life outside the cloister apart from their letter writing endeavors. Though letter writing could be interpreted to be a subversive form of political engagement, and would continue to be an important method of communication for later mystics and Catherine of Siena in particular, there is still a lack of public presence and public voice. Famously, a portion of Hildegard’s *Scivias* was read aloud by Pope Eugenius III to assembled clergy, revealing how even a medieval woman’s writing could participate in public performance, though the female voice of the writer is left unheard (Logan 175). Catherine stepping outside of a designated role as female religious puts her in a vacillating space, not just’s between contemplative life and active life, but also between male and female expression.

Like Beauvoir’s description of the woman intellectual, the mystic or even religious woman is othered twice: first she is an outsider contained within *zoe*, secondly she is an outsider for being something that is “sacred.” In Roman law, the *homo sacer* is one who cannot be sacrificed yet can be killed without the killer being condemned for homicide — those that are sacred belonging to the class of those who exist outside of society (Agamben 47). Priests, hermits, the sacrificial and the gods all exist outside of *bios*, outside of society and in a state of exclusion. Yet, all except God(s) are in some ways included in the form of exclusion — what Agamben describes as “the ambiguity of the sacred” — these sacred men are in some ways

²³ Catherine is not formally tried for witchcraft, but friends, family, and her first confessor believed that her refusal to eat may have been the work of a demon. For more on this, see Rudolph Bell’s chapter, “I, Catherine,” in his monograph *Holy Anorexia*, 1985.

within and some ways without (50). Ambiguity consistently lies within the construction of the sacred, with overlapping between the holy and the unclean, for instance, which is an even more historically difficult line for women to negotiate. This is because the *femina sacra*, doubly without political life, is rendered twice removed. The “witches” killed throughout history for being part of this *femina sacra* classification suffered due to their twice-othered status, yet without any ramifications for those who killed them — in most cases the state. A sacred woman existed completely outside the world of man, just like God,²⁴ and was therefore closer to the word of God, viewed more often as a conduit for God’s word in their mystical writing, than as a mediatrix channeling the *logos*.

As men were typically able to express their religious authority through learning, citation, rhetoric, and public engagement, they were not limited to the “prophetic, visionary, or mystical claims [that] were the primary modes of religious authorization available to women” (Hollywood, “Gender, Agency” 514). On the figure of the male mystic, Lacan writes, “There are men who are just as good as women. It does happen. Despite, I won’t say their phallus, despite what encumbers them on that score, they get the idea, they sense there must be a *jouissance* which goes beyond. That is what we call a mystic” (“God and the *Jouissance*” 147 / S XX p. 76). Here, Lacan ties mysticism to bodily experience that is a painful pleasure (for him, beyond the phallus), an eroticism that could be said to be described frequently in mystical writing. Though corporeality and perceived sexual difference are subjects touched upon by mystics, along with images of sensually felt divine love, there is also at play a complication of gender throughout many mystical and religious texts that suggests that there is an aspect of mysticism that goes beyond not just *jouissance* but also beyond a dichotomous gender binary. As Anne J. Cruz

²⁴ As McGinn notes, “God lies beyond all distinctions of gender and the ordinary realms of consciousness” (*Flowering of Mysticism* 169).

writes, “female mystics verbalize a uniquely Christocentric position that both transgresses and transcends gender order,” and I would add this to mystics in general, that male mystics participate in *jouissance* but are equally inhabiting a complicated space that is both pushing at the boundaries and beyond the construction of gender (134).

Running parallel yet divergent to the other creation stories of Genesis,²⁵ the book of the generations of Adam, Genesis 5, reads, “In the day that God created man, in the likeness of God made he him; male and female created he them, and blessed them, and called their name Adam, in the day when they were created” (1-2). That is, from the beginning, male and female are part of Adam, and are also, presumably, part of God, as Adam is created in God’s image. This rings remarkably similar to Aristophanes’s creation tale of the three sexes as described in Plato’s *Symposium*, except that in Genesis 5 there is only one sex comprised of both male and female identity (189e-194e). Perhaps, like the four-legged androgyne of Aristophanes, the female part of Adam was excised to form Eve, and we have since inherited a double-sexed notion of gender which was largely enforced in the Middle Ages and early modern period. Yet, from these early religious texts, there is enough scope for two genders to exist in one body, suggesting a complication of gender from the very creation stories that propagate the Judeo-Christian tradition. Raymond reports that, when Catherine spoke to God about her misgivings of being female,²⁶ God replied (90):

²⁵ This is divergent from Genesis 2.21-22, where Eve is constructed from the rib of Adam. Genesis 1.27 is closer to Genesis 5.1-2, though I contend that Genesis 5 is clearer in its meaning that both Adam and Eve are understood to be in God’s image, whereas in Genesis 1 and 2 it could be argued that Adam is created in God’s image while Eve may not be.

²⁶ “But I beg you, O Lord — if it is not too presumptuous of me — how can I, wretched and frail as I am, be of use to souls? My sex, as you know, is against it in many ways, both because it is not highly considered by men, and also because it is not good, for decency’s sake, for a woman to mix with men” (90).

Am not I He who created the human race, and divided it into male and female? I spread abroad the grace of my spirit where I will. In my eyes there is neither male nor female, rich nor poor, but all are equal, for I can do all things with equal ease.

Raymond's description of God's words is consistent with Genesis 5 as well as Galatians 3:28.²⁷ Even if God divided humanity across male and female gendered lines, he indicates that he does not see them as separate or unequal beings, nor does he judge humans based on their economic status.

From a linguistic perspective, the situation of the soul is decidedly feminine as the Latin word "anima" is a feminine word. Thus, mystical writers like Jerome, Gregory of Nyssa, Thomas Aquinas (in *Summa theologica* as well as *De anima*), and Bernard of Clairvaux view the soul as intrinsically feminine. For those writing in the vernacular, Meister Eckhart uses the German feminine noun "Seele," and Catherine of Siena and Teresa of Avila will adopt the feminine "a/ánima" in their native Italian and Spanish, respectively. Though linguistic gender may not seem particularly remarkable, it is worth noting that male religious writers and mystics sometimes speak of the self in feminine terms, perhaps informed by the gendered language in addition to the hierarchical position of the worshipper who approaches the divine (Harmless 49, 85). Iacopone da Todi situates the reader in the role of the *donna* to the lord God, regardless of whether the readers of his Italian *laude* were male or female. In *Laude* 91 he writes "tu sè donna & signore"²⁸ as he discusses the union between God and Christian that causes multivalent subjectivity (the soul is both possessed and possessing, is both drinking and is drunk), and his language is infused with erotic and marital imagery. Bernard of Clairvaux speaks of himself and his fellow monks as feminine throughout his writing. His *Sermons on the Song of Songs* speak to

²⁷ "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (New International Version).

²⁸ "You are lady and lord" (trans. mine).

the malleability of the reader's gender, as the presumably male reader must place himself in the position of the presumably feminine bride — allegorically the Church — to the presumably masculine bridegroom of Christ.²⁹ In this text, he describes being kissed on the mouth by Christ, and remarks on his female corporeality including breasts that swell with milk (2.2, 9.2, 9.7).³⁰

Famously, Bernard is also tied to breast milk due to his mystical vision known as *Lactatio Bernardi* in which the Virgin Mary intervenes on his behalf, perhaps to cure an eye infection, by either shooting her milk into his eyes, or dripping it into his mouth. In his chapter on “Bernard and Mary’s Milk,” Brian Patrick McGuire details a number of stories and visual art treatments that center around Bernard or another unnamed monk from Clairvaux, and James France notes that Bernard was not the only non-Christ figure suckling Mary’s milk as this became a “widespread theme in collections of Marian miracle stories” (McGuire 189-225, France 329). Interestingly, the monk is not only cured or aided, but also learns to be a great preacher through the milk,³¹ and in one 13th-century source the holy fluid allowed the monk to obtain a “knowledge of letters.”³² Here, the Virgin is regarded as a divine figure, not a mediatrix who intervenes on the male worshipper’s behalf to attain grace from the masculine divinity of the Father or the Son, and is able also to foster traditionally male knowledge of preaching and letters in the monk she blesses with her breast milk. This is certainly in line with the Cult of the Virgin popular through the Middle Ages and still arguably pursued in present-day Catholic

²⁹ For a discussion of the history of “queering” the Song of Solomon, see Moore, Stephen D. “The Song of Songs in the History of Sexuality.” *Church History*, Vol. 69, No. 2 (Jun., 2000), pp. 328-349. For a discussion on the masculine nature of the bride, see Krahmer, Shawn M. “The Virile Bride of Bernard of Clairvaux.” *Church History*, Vol. 69, No. 2 (Jun., 2000), pp. 304-327.

³⁰ Ambrose similarly conflates the Bride with the image of the preacher, and refers to her/his breasts; see *Expos. Ps. 118* 6.18 (ed. Petschenig, p. 117.16-25). Additionally, Ambrose applies the imagery of the Song of Songs to specific individuals and events, including Emperor Valentinian II’s ascent into heaven (*The Foundations of Mysticism* 212).

³¹ As McGuire notes this is in part owed to linguistic similarities: “the happy coincidence of the latin terms LAUDANS ET LACTANS” (200).

³² “Qui cum maxima devocione ad eam accessit et per illum sanctissimum liquorem, quem suxit, tantam adeptus est **scienciam litterarum**, ut apud Romam acciperet cardinalem dignitate” (Hilka 164, emphasis mine).

tradition (especially in Latin America and the Philippines) which allowed for the persistent worship of the pre-Christian Earth Mother.³³ What is significant is that the Virgin, despite her status as mother and thus embodied as female, still cultivates divine agency, which typically belongs within a masculine domain. The Virgin, having become pregnant and birthing a child miraculously, as well as being the only human after Christ's death to have not suffered a bodily death,³⁴ reveals how the feminine can fit into the conception of the divine without becoming masculinized in some way. In her essay "Stabat Mater," Julia Kristeva asks, "If it is not possible to say of a *woman* that she *is*..., would it perhaps be different concerning the *mother*, since that is the only function of the 'other sex' to which we can definitely attribute existence?" (161). If not knowing man sexually, as Eve did, somehow precludes her from some construct of the feminine, then the expression of motherhood with its pregnancy and bodily nourishment of the infant must call her back into that domain.

That domain of motherhood, however, is not reserved for women. Christ is frequently a nurturer, who literally provides sustenance to his followers through his body and blood via transubstantiation during every Catholic mass. If one were to argue that corporeality and nourishing were exclusive to a feminine expression of spirituality, in Christ exists the clear exception. Caroline Walker Bynum discusses the parallelism between the Virgin's breast and Christ's wound, compellingly arguing that the art historical record that positions Christ's wound

³³ For a discussion on the Virgin of Guadalupe in present-day Catholicism, see Valentina Napolitano's *Migrant Hearts and the Atlantic Return: Transnationalism and the Roman Catholic Church*. For a feminist analysis on the trajectory of paganism to Judeo-Christian religions, see Adriana Cavarero's *Nonostante Platone*.

³⁴ Mary's assumption into Heaven is not strictly a Biblical text, but the Catholic Church interprets chapter 12 of the Book of Revelation in reference to it and as written into doctrine by Pope Pius XII in 1950 (*Munificentissimus Deus*). Apocryphal accounts regarding Mary's assumption have circulated since at least the 4th century. In the Old Testament, two men are ambiguously described as being taken away by God rather than dying in a bodily way: Enoch (Genesis 5:24) and Elijah (2 Kings 2:11).

close to the breast is purposeful and telling.³⁵ Like Mary, too, and noted by Augustine, he is positioned as “Mediator of God and humanity, the man Jesus Christ,” existing simultaneously in the earthly and spiritual realms (1 Tim 2:5).³⁶ As the virgin son of God and the virgin Mary — a woman — Christ is without a flesh and blood direct male ancestor, rendering him a gender outsider.³⁷

We must keep in mind that historically, blood has at times been gendered, as James White notes, “In medieval medical theory, blood was understood as the precursor to all other bodily fluids, including sperm and breast milk” (167). Thus, when Catherine equates the fragrance of her blood to that of Niccolò di Toldi,³⁸ she is suggesting that her blood is masculine rather than feminine. And for Christ, the opposite may well be true, as his human bloodlines are feminine, and as his blood is used in the production of a nourishing liquid. Catherine also constructs a “female Christ,” as F. Thomas Luongo has argued with regard to the language of Letter T273 that seems to reverse the traditional understanding of the Song of Songs, with Christ as the “sweet bride” who receives the masculine bridegroom soul in penetrative language (“Catherine of Siena: Rewriting the Female Holy Authority” 95-97).³⁹ Christ is in many ways tied to nourishing and motherhood, and though he can be complicated as a feminine figure, he is still often cast as masculine and thus decidedly outside of the traditional realm inhabited by female. Roland Barthes suggests a new conception of the maternal: “Perhaps one should end up with this: ... no longer automatically confusing mother and woman. In which case, the androgyne

³⁵ See *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages and Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007.

³⁶ Translation from *The Foundations of Western Mysticism* by Bernard McGinn, p. 248.

³⁷ Jesus’s virginity is implicitly referred to in Hebrews 4:15.

³⁸ “Io allora sentiva uno giubilo e un odore del sangue suo; e non era senza l’odore del mio.” / “I sensed an intense joy, a fragrance of his blood — and it wasn’t separate from the fragrance of my own.”

³⁹ “e così voi versate l’acqua del santo desiderio sopra il capo de’ fratelli vostri, che sono membri nostri, ligati nel corpo della dolce Sposa.” / “I mean, with a boundless desire pour the water over the heads of your brothers and sisters who are our members bound together in the body of the sweet [B]ride.”

would be any subject within whom there is something maternal” (194). It is therefore necessary to claim the maternal as outside of woman, and fitting with a shifting, inconstant or outlying gender identification.

In Kristeva’s essay on the Virgin, she evokes not only milk but also tears as a non-verbal semiotics (“Stabat Mater” 174). While the milk is the symbol of nourishment, the mother’s tears are an expression of a sorrowful humanity; as a mother one is the symbol of life who also functions as the veil of inevitable death. However, again, it is not only women and mothers who cry — Abraham weeps out of mourning for Sarah in Genesis 23:2, David weeps occasionally in the Books of Samuel, Christ weeps in John 11:35 and Hebrews 5:7, Peter weeps bitterly after denying Christ in Matthew 26:75, Gregory the Great introduced the phrase “lacrymarum gratia” in his 6th-century *Dialogues*, sorrowful tears and the tears of his mother are a recurring motif in Augustine’s *Confessions* that factor into his conversion, tears were an important aspect of medieval monastic life for men,⁴⁰ and hagiographical records of Francis of Assisi note that his copious tears contributed to his eventually becoming blind. Arguably, each of these cases of tears expresses sorrowful humanity, and is also a spiritual utterance that is not constrained by corporeal states of sex, sexuality, or gender. The tears of men may not cause one to question their masculinity, but they do complicate the gendering of these emotional performances as ipso facto feminine. Kristeva’s nonvocal semiotics of the mother can be extended to be part of a mystical semiotics that exists outside of speech and written word (as in Francis’s case), but should not be limited in its conscription to the domain of womanhood, as mothering and its expressions are not bound to a singular gender.

⁴⁰ For a discussion on this, as well as some analysis on the gendering of tears, see Brian Patrick McGuire’s “Monks and Tears: A Twelfth-Century Change” in *The Difficult Saint: Bernard of Clairvaux and his Tradition*, 1991.

The figure of the virgin, who is determinedly outside of sexuality, and typically does not participate in the expression of motherhood as in Kristeva's discussion of Mary, is even less easily gendered. For many, the virgin is in a privileged gender space, especially when the virgin is a woman. For many thinkers, the female virgin is so esteemed that she is rendered man. The Church Father, Jerome wrote, "as long as a woman is for birth and children, she is as different from man as body is from soul. But when she wishes to serve Christ more than the world, then she will cease to be a woman and will be called man" (Bullough 227). Jerome utilizes the theological dichotomy of body and soul to compare the state of woman and man, aligning women with a corporeal material state and men with a transcendent divine-reaching state. However, women who choose not to engage with what many of the pre-modern period would believe to be their biological destiny can transcend their flesh-oriented state, and rather than produce more of humanity, can approach God.

However, some Christian thinkers situate virginity as outside of a binary construction of gender. In an illustrated account of her mystical visions from the 12th century, the *Scivias*, Hildegard puts forth that married sexual life can be a fine choice for a Christian when done with care, but the corporeal state of virginity would always be preferable. Throughout her writing, she conflates "virginitas" with "viriditas" (greenness) and "virilitas" (virility) — for Hildegard and her contemporaries, words were valid signifiers for that which they signified. Thus, the virgin is a green and ripening fruit that pulls its power from the sun, rendering greenness to be a vital force that can be easily reconciled with the notion of virility. With these similarities in mind, both male and female "green" virgins prove to be not only virile, but the most virile of humans as virginity has more viridity (thus virility) integral to it than any other state of being. Indeed, in her *Symphonia* no. 19, Hildegard refers to the female-bodied Virgin Mary as "viridissima virga,"

a phrase that encompasses several distinct meanings. Literally, the phrase translates to “greenest branch,” while also connoting “greenest rod,” which can refer to the male sexual organ. Because the word “virga” is so close to the word “virgo,” the literal word for “virgin” is also conflated with the “branch” or “rod” meaning. The ambiguity places the idea of the virgin in an undefined and multimodal space that inhabits the tension of virile sexuality and lack thereof. The male-bodied virginal Saint Rupert of Bingen is described as “dulcis viriditas pomis”⁴¹ (no. 49, 4a), a “vas nobile / quod non est pollutum,”⁴² and a “sarcina sine medulla”⁴³ (no. 49, 4b). Rupert is a green fruit, and a container that is both unsoiled and light in terms of weight, suggesting a lack of sexuality in both figurative and physical terms. Though Maud Burnett McInerney argues that Hildegard represents Rupert through a “feminization of his body,” it seems to me that Hildegard is actually working to position the virgin within a separate class in and of itself (149). That is, the greenness that Hildegard describes is not in some way aligned with femininity, or even masculinity despite its connection to virility, but exists as an especially virile condition that is amplified for having been taken out of a sexual economy and gender binary.

The figures of the mystic as well as the saint, whether virgin or not, are also in many ways beyond gender, just as they remain as individuals outside of the political life of society. Employing shifting subjectivity throughout her text *Das fliessende Licht*, the beguine mystic Mechthild of Magdeburg has the allegorical Lady Knowledge instruct the soul: “You are a virile man in battle, a well-dressed virgin in the palace before your Lord, and a joyous bride in your bed with God” (II.19).⁴⁴ That is, the figure of the mystic is man, virgin, and bride all at once —

⁴¹ “the fruit’s sweet greenness” (NB: “pomis” could be genitive case of “apple” or “fruit”) (Translation mine)

⁴² “noble vessel / that is not violated” (Translation mine)

⁴³ “package without anything inside” (Translation mine)

⁴⁴ “Du bist drivaltig an dir, du maht wol gottes bilde sin: Du bist ein menlich man an dinem strite, du bist ein wolgerzieret juncfrowe in dem palast vor dinem herren, du bist ein lustlichú brut in dinem minnebette gottes!” *Das fliessende Licht* II.19.

alternately courageous and pugnacious, courtly, ecstatic. With all of the recasting of gender in Song of Songs by religious thinkers, it is interesting to consider that in the *Legenda aurea*, Jacobus de Voragine describes Saint Sebastian as the saddle in between Christ-the-horseman and Church-the-horse. Though Sebastian has recently become an iconic saint for the LGBTQ community due to frequent homoerotic paintings of his martyrdom throughout art history,⁴⁵ Voragine was likely not consciously depicting Sebastian as inhabiting a third gender between the presumably masculine Christ and presumably feminine Church, though the imagery is decidedly sexual. Not only does Voragine evoke the Song of Songs,⁴⁶ but horseback riding as well, which was typically understood to be a metaphor for sexual relations throughout the medieval period.⁴⁷ In occupying the space between the masculine and the feminine, as the saddle between horse and rider, Sebastian can skillfully negotiate both spaces, or else be entirely outside either. Famously penetrated by all those arrows as one of his trials of martyrdom, Sebastian can occupy the positionality of the sexual female, while simultaneously holding military rank, which was traditionally reserved for the masculine domain. Though not described as a mystic, throughout his saintly life, Sebastian exemplifies the complicated gendering of the religious figure, which is even more problematized when the religious figure is also engaging with mysticism.

Mystics in particular reject many of the traditional and typically masculine forms of Christian worship: the desert fathers and mothers rejected all societal and gendered context by

⁴⁵ See, for example, Charles Darwent's "Arrows of desire: How did St Sebastian become an enduring, homo-erotic icon?" in the *Independent*. <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/features/arrows-of-desire-how-did-st-sebastian-become-an-enduring-homo-erotic-icon-779388.html>

⁴⁶ Within the tradition of Christian allegory, with many commentaries written in the Middle Ages, the female protagonist of the Song of Songs is identified both as the Church (the collective people of God) and as the individual soul of the Christian who approaches Christ (constructed as the male bridegroom). For a full analysis of this tradition as well as how it differs from Jewish tradition, see Stephen D. Moore's chapter on "The Song of Songs in the History of Sexuality" in his monograph *God's Beauty Parlor and Other Queer Spaces in and Around the Bible*, 2001.

⁴⁷ As in Chaucer's *Reeve's Tale* and *Nun's Priest's Tale*. For a discussion of this trope in art history, see Malcolm Jones's "Sex and Sexuality in Late Medieval and Early Modern Art," p. 187-304 in Erlach 1994.

separating themselves from civilization, cloistered and anchorite mystics separated themselves from society at large and the gender binary more specifically, and itinerant mystics like Catherine chose to live unconventional lives that were unattached to norms imposed by gender roles. As Bonaventure writes, the Franciscans prayed not on ecclesiastical books and did not chant the canonical hours, but prayed humbly to the Cross of Christ and on other religious objects, suggesting that they were not interested in praying in a learned and erudite manner (which would have been limited to male Christians at the time) (IV, 3). Further, Bonaventure explains how the Franciscans believed that to achieve grace, one should renounce the wisdom of the world as well as his knowledge of letters, and thus dispossessed of such inheritance to go naked to the Lord (VII, 2). This teaching, which is certainly in keeping with Francis's own biographical experience of renouncing his earthly possessions and father's profession by rendering himself naked in a piazza of Assisi,⁴⁸ rings true for all mystics — without the accoutrements of clothing and societal performance, these figures are without gender, class or societal status, and are instead like the *homo sacer*.

Many mystics — more than denying themselves clothes, educational capital, belongings, and manneristic performance — tried to deny themselves of their body as well. Though Caroline Walker Bynum and Rudolph M. Bell discuss the many holy women who denied themselves food,⁴⁹ and the fasting Catherine would also limit her sleep to half an hour out of every period of two days, bodily denial was not limited to feminine spiritual practices. Hair shirts and flagellation were typical expressions of corporeal mortification and suffering across gender, whether to prevent sexual urges or in an attempt to no longer feel the body at all. In addition to sleeping on hard surfaces and a diet devoid of meat and cooked vegetables, in one hagiographic

⁴⁸ Angela of Foligno also famously removes her clothes in church.

⁴⁹ *Holy Feast, Holy Fast and Holy Anorexia*.

episode, Francis flees to the cold snow outside to dispel his desires. Writing on Spanish mystics including Juan de los Ángeles and John of the Cross, Maureen Flynn explains how negating the temporally-bound body proved to be a means to fully incorporate the soul more purely with God, allowing the individual's core of the immortal soul to rid itself of sensory and mental faculties to transcend ("The Spiritual Uses of Pain in Spanish Mysticism" 267). This is to say, that even if we do not follow Judith Butler's view that sex is just as much of a construction as gender is, these practices show that not only are mystics divorcing themselves from gender but they are trying to remove themselves from corporeality: going naked to the Lord means ridding oneself not just of clothes but of the body as well. Mystics are working to exist on the Earth just as they eventually will in Paradise, as genderless, sexless, body-less immortal creatures of God.

Although religious and holy figures engage with many of the same negotiations of sex, gender, and social status that mystics do, the mystics are in a special situation due to their direct access to God. As Helen Rolfson writes (128):

The mystic speaks of God as of the partner in dialogue. What is said about one is reflected mirror-wise in the other... The prayers of Catherine of Siena beautifully demonstrate this reciprocity... As William of St. Thierry puts it: "True friendship either finds or creates equals." No friendship is based on inequality. The mystic is very aware that that offer of divine friendship has been extended to one who is anything but God's equal.

Though mystics do not perceive themselves to be the equal to God, they see themselves to be a partner and a friend, which is a condition that approaches God unlike any other state of being. The unique relationship between mystic and God is often viewed as one in which the mystic serves as a conduit for God's word, but, as Rolfson suggests, it proves to be more of a working

and reciprocal partnership. And indeed, as Barbara Newman explains, often the mystic forgets the difference between the creature and the Creator, and “behaves as an equal” (144). Within this practice, the mystic’s conversations with God and the resulting writing that documents these dialogues act as another space in which the mystic serves to mediate. The mystic channels God’s direct teaching, filters it through her experience and knowledge, and then releases it as a means to teach and nurture others. The language, as we will explore, is bound by earthly literary conventions and reveals the agency that the mystic has in her relationship to God’s word.

More than a partnership, of course, is the union with God that all religious followers experience to some degree, but which mystics more palpably participate in, through mystical marriages and spiritual transpositions. Catherine of Siena marries Christ, exchanges her corporeal heart with his, wears his foreskin for a ring (as do all other Christians),⁵⁰ relates how her name is interchanged with Christ’s by Niccolò di Toldi,⁵¹ and carries out God’s work in public spaces throughout her life. She is not alone, as Catherine of Alexandria, Teresa of Ávila, Rose of Lima, Francisco de Hoyos y Sena, and many others also experienced a mystical wedding, and still more wrote prayers and sermons on marriage with Christ.⁵² Similarly, others take the place of Christ in certain instances: the martyrs suffer and sacrifice themselves as Christ did; Bernard of Clairvaux drinks Mary’s milk in the place of the infant Jesus; Margaret and other saints literally and allegorically beat the devil as God does in the Bible. Origen *adimantios* writes on the role of the soul as a mother to Jesus: “And every soul, virgin and uncorrupted, which conceives by the Holy Spirit, so as to give birth to the Will of the Father, is the Mother of Jesus,”

⁵⁰ Letter T221: “Ben vedi tu che tu sei sposa, e che egli t’ha sposata, e te e ogni creatura; e non con anello d’argento, ma con anello della carne sua. Vedi quello dolce Parvolo, che in otto dì nella circoncisione, quando è circonciso, si leva tanta carne, quanta è una estremità d’anello.”

⁵¹ Letter T273.

⁵² Mystics who wrote on marriage between the soul and Christ include Bonaventure, David of Augsburg, Gilbert of Hoyland, John of Fécamp, Richard of St. Victor, William of St. Thierry (see McGinn’s four volumes on *Mysticism* for more).

thus emphasizing the constantly in-flux relationships between Mary and Christ, the soul and Mary, and the soul and Christ (Comm. on Mt. frg. 281 [GCS Origen 12.1:126.10-15]).⁵³ In commenting particularly on a pure soul, which is virginal and uncorrupted, Origen is limiting his pool of Christian followers dramatically, and speaks to the complicated role of the Virgin Mary, and the concept of the virgin as a figure that is on the peripheries of gender and in conflict with itself in many ways — at once a virgin and a mother. Moreover, Teresa of Ávila notes in her writing that she lived only through God being within her;⁵⁴ the missionary mystical writer Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza appropriates Christ’s voice, and Angela de Foligno identified with Christ throughout her writing (Cruz 133-136). In many ways the mystic is not only married with God, but combined with him, and more often with the Son of God specifically, exchanging body parts, voices, and positions with him.

The union with God, whether it is perceived as the result of a mystical marriage or not, leads to another positionality that is difficult to locate. Iacopone da Todi writes of the union with God as a loss of self, tempering it paradoxically with some semblance of maintained subjectivity on the part of the soul who is both conquering and conquered (*Laude* 91, 154-8):

como cera desfacto a gran foco mostrata,
 En tanto sì reluce ad quello lume tracto,
 tutto perde suo acto, voluntate è passata.
 La forma che gli è data, tanto sì l’à absorto,
 che vive stando morto, è vincto e è victore.⁵⁵

⁵³ Translation from *The Foundations of Mysticism* by Bernard McGinn, p. 125.

⁵⁴ “Sólo Vos en mí vivid” (Teresa of Ávila 379).

⁵⁵ “And as wax melts from the heat of fire, / So the soul drawn to that light is resplendent, / Feels self melt away, / Its will and actions no longer its own. / So clear is the imprint of God / That the soul, conquered, is conqueror; / Annihilated, it lives in triumph” (trans. Serge and Elizabeth Hughes)

Evoking imagery of Song of Songs 8:6,⁵⁶ through discussing wax, fire, and the imprint of God, Iacopone speaks of the soul melting away and being annihilated to the point of losing its will. However, through this process, the soul is absorbed by God to be paradoxically both the conquered and the conqueror. Hadewijch uses similar contradictory language of the union between the mortal soul and the divine in a letter (*Letter IX*):⁵⁷

From the depths of his wisdom, he shall teach you what he is and with what wonderful sweetness the one lover lives in the other and so permeates the other that they do not know themselves from each other. But they possess each other in mutual delight, mouth in mouth, heart in heart, body in body, soul in soul, while a single divine nature flows through them both and they both become one through each other, yet remaining always themselves.

In this description, there is a knowledge that is cultivated through the union — not a knowledge of letters (though one may gain that from Mary’s breast milk), but a certain sweet and spiritual wisdom. Hadewijch blends imagery from the Song of Songs with more equitable ideas about marriage than what may have been available at the time of her writing: two lovers who are one yet maintain their own identity. Quoting William of St. Thierry, Bernard McGinn writes, “The mystical life consists of an ongoing oscillation between [...] two stages — ‘the man of God ought to be always either rational in seeking or spiritual in loving’” (*The Growth of Mysticism* 235). The “man” of God is always finding himself in a fluctuating position, shifting between not just two stages of rationality (an earthly state) and spirituality, but constantly negotiating among many different registers that are coded as human, divine and other. Like the recluses of Siena in

⁵⁶ “Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm; for love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave. It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame” (New International Version).

⁵⁷ Translation from *Visions and Longings: Medieval Women Mystics* by Monica Furlong, p. 109.

the 13th and 14th centuries, the mystic is on the peripheries of the city, at its edges like the *homo sacer*.

Catherine, straddling many boundaries, manifests her identity in multifold ways. As a virile woman, she describes herself, the Pope, and her companions as knights on the battlefield fighting for the Church, with Christ leading the way. This militaristic imagery is employed in both her *Dialogo* (chapter 77) and in several of her letters, including T128 addressed to Gabriele di Davino Piccolomini, a married Sienese noble, in late 1377:

In questo modo noi, che siamo posti nel campo a combattere contro li nostri nemici, cioè contra il mondo, la carne e 'l dimonio, senza l'arme non potremmo combattere, nè ricevere li colpi che non ci offendessero. Che arme dunque è quella che ci conviene avere? Di coltello. Convienti anco avere la corazza della vera carità, la quale ripara e' colpi...⁵⁸

Catherine, as a knight among many others, casts herself in a way that is not unlike the figure of Joan of Arc, a Christian soldier who is fighting with a double-edged knife that serves to uphold charity and work against human frailty in the face of temptation. Raymond, too, acknowledges Catherine's self-positioning as a woman who is virile and armed. When describing her mystical marriage to Christ, he writes that God says, "Age igitur filia viriliter amodo absque cunctatione quacumque illa, que ordinante mea providentia tuas deducuntur ad manus, quia fortitudine fidei iam armata cunctos tibi adversantes feliciter superabis" (I.12.4).⁵⁹ Catherine will act in a virile manner without hesitation because she is armed with the strength of her faith and will overcome

⁵⁸ "In this manner we are positioned in the field of combat against our enemies; that is, against the world, the flesh and the demon. Without weapons, we cannot fight and we would not be able to receive blows. What weapon is that which is advisable to have? The knife. It is advisable also to have the armor of true charity..." (trans. mine)

⁵⁹ "From this time forward, daughter, act firmly and decisively in everything that in my Providence I shall ask you to do. Armed as you are with the strength of faith, you will overcome all your enemies and be happy" (Trans. Lamb). Note that in the Latin "viriliter," as in "a virile manner," is used rather than "firmly."

her adversaries. Again, she is cast as a knight going out to battle and not a cloistered woman, even when describing her mystical marriage which one may expect to be in a more heteronormative register.

On expressions of monasticism in Europe, Theodora A. Jankowski writes that there are two primary traditions for religious expression, that of the *miles* or soldier who battled Satan on Christ's behalf, and that of the *sponsa* or bride of Christ, unified with him through love (62). What, she argues, is significant is that these two possibilities are "interchangeable in terms of gender. A male virgin could be considered a *sponsa*; a female virgin could be considered a *miles* ... genderless images of the soldier and bride of Christ allowed [female monastics] to act in the same way as male monastics" (62-63). Existing in a way that can conflate traditions allows religious figures, both male and female, to occupy spaces that were reserved for what society considered the opposite sex. In her book *Tendencies*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes (8),

That's one of the things that "queer" can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically.

Queerness allows for greater possibilities, enabling individuals to fill in gaps, create opportunities for lapses, and exist in multiple fluctuating places within a spectrum of gender or sexuality. Catherine, and many other mystics, took advantage of the conflation of "dissonances and resonances" within their respective communities. Because the idea of the *sponsa* and the *miles* resonated so successfully as symbols for monastic life, both male and female religious were able to occupy those spaces, despite the dissonances between genders in a binary society.

Jankowski's project is around the notion of queer virginity, and is a good place to consider the recasting of mystics as they often exist as virgins in their natural lives (6-7):

I have chosen to use the term "queer" to define or categorize the position of the adult virgin primarily because of the inclusivity of the term ... focus[sing] on the way in which the notion of "queer" or "queerness" allows a space for examining issues of sexuality that are not restricted to the binary axis of homo- versus heterosexuality.

Since virgins are outside of what is a binary sexual landscape, they are queer. From Jankowski's work, I would like to expand this definition. Including celibates is an obvious move, but I contend that queerness can exist outside of a definition of sexuality, and carry over to expressions of gender and expressions of otherness in more general terms. Heather Webb writes on the masculinity of the heart in medieval literature, discussing how writers like Catherine and Dante can allow for masculinity across variously sexed bodies (138-9):

For Catherine, as for Dante, the gendered notion of vital heat and its association with the capacity for outward propulsions does not enforce a limiting binary. This idea of gender relies on gradation or continuum, allowing for a significant amount of play in the temperatures and extrusive or projective power associated with the sexes. The concept of the heat of the heart allowed these writers to reevaluate the key characteristic of masculinity as a quality that was derived from virtue, from the reception of divine gifts within the body, and from the desire to pull something forth in response to that gift — to give back.

In styling masculinity as an aspect from virtue, Catherine can occupy the space of masculinity, claiming it as a quality that she possesses. She is both soldier and bride of Christ, existing across a spectrum of identity.

In her article “Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology,” Sara Ahmed defines the act of queering as such (565):

To make things queer is certainly to disturb the order of things. The effects of such disturbance are uneven, given that the world is already organized around certain forms of living — certain times, spaces, and directions. It is important to make the oblique angles of queer do this work, even if it risks placing different kinds of queer effects alongside each other.

Queering disturbs the order of things. Catherine, as someone marked as woman, inhabiting various edges of society — located in spaces that are not typically authorized for someone of her sex, class, education level — disturbs the order of things. She acts as a soldier, as a bride, has a masculine heart beating in her chest, claims a grassroots education, achieves literacy, writes to people in positions of power, preaches in piazzas, empowers the disenfranchised in her city. Claiming power through an intimate relationship with the divine, and existing in a space between this world and the next, she is disturbing established hierarchies, using her own self-knowledge, mystically-obtained knowledge, and community-based knowledge to become, in time, a sanctioned teacher of the Church. And Catherine is not alone in this impulse — many mystics throughout history, as described above, work to disturb the order of things.

The mystic is a borderless figure, gendered queer and an amalgamation between nature and divine, fluctuating between a this-worldly direction and an other-worldly focus. Like the Latin American figure of Santa Muerte, a skeleton saint who travels beyond borders with migrants who carry her and is considered to be at once folkloristic as well as holy, the mystics operate within a similar space: by being sacred they are othered. Nomadic, whether by being an earthly itinerant preacher or a divinely transcendent anchorite, the mystic passes through borders

freely yet is bound by them, and persists as a figure of tension that holds “incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true,” paradoxically shifting between rational language and erotically charged spiritual language, the sense of being nothing and everything at once in union with, yet separate from God (Haraway 161).

In her “Manifesto,” Donna Haraway discusses the nature of writing, communication, and gender (176):

Writing is pre-eminently the technology of cyborgs... Cyborg politics is the struggle for language and the struggle against perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly, the central dogma of phallogocentrism... These are the couplings which make Man and Woman so problematic, subverting the structure of desire, the force imagined to generate language and gender, and so subverting the structure and modes of reproduction of ‘Western’ identity.

Though writing much later than many of the mystics discussed in this chapter, Haraway contends that writing is still the primary technology of cyborgs, subversion, and struggling against status quo and dogma. When desire is subverted and restructured, language and gender can be as well. The mystic that operates on a separate plane, desiring nothing of this world, and engaging both spiritually and erotically with the other world, as well as conflating, erasing, and otherwise bending subjectivities with the divine, proves to be in a critical position that undermines traditional power hierarchies. Even Catherine’s use of the literary vernacular speaks to this crucial aspect of her mysticism and identity, as she uses writing to struggle against structures of literacy and to speak of the ineffable in language that cannot quite contain divinity (see below). Rather than fixed in sex and identity, Haraway writes, “Cyborgs might consider more seriously the partial, fluid, sometimes aspect of sex and sexual embodiment,” and, moreover, the queer

cybernetic mystic might consider the partial, fluid, and sometimes-state of mortality and immortality, human and non-human (as they approach divinity), within and without (180). A paradoxical figure, the mystic, like the texts that they leave behind, operates within the periphery: between and among, folklore and canon, erudite and wise yet uneducated and sensing.

Returning to Freud's claim that "Mysticism is the obscure self-perception of the realm outside the ego, of the id," and considering that the id also dominates psychological development prior to the phallic stage of sexual awareness and gender expression, it is possible to see how mystics are working outside of a sexual economy, outside of gender, and outside of typically human forms of consciousness. In her lyrical text, *Teresa, My Love*, on the mystic Teresa of Ávila, Kristeva evocatively captures the situation of the mystic (26):

Hail Teresa, borderless woman, ... made word, made flesh, who unravels inside and outside herself, ... too much body yet disembodied, beyond matter, ... throbbing for the Beloved ever-present and yet never there, ... His in her, hers in Him, ... La Madre being the most virile of monks, most canny of the herders of souls, a veritable twin of Christ, she is He, He is she, the Truth is me, or Him in the deepest part of me, me Teresa...

Both experiencing excessive flesh and disembodiment, the mystic and Christ join together, becoming a being outside of humanity, society, and economics. In her *Dialogo*, Catherine writes of Christ as a bridge, a means for Christians to avoid the tempestuous sea of this life and cross over into the next in union with God (21-22):

Perciò Io, volendo rimediare a tanti vostri mali, vi ho dato il ponte, che è mio Figlio, affinché, passando il fiume, non annegaste. Il fiume è il mare tempestoso di questa vita tenebrosa. ... tu veda la sua grandezza, che si estende dal cielo alla terra: rimira,

cioè, come la terra della vostra umanità sia unita in Cristo colla grandezza della Divinità. Per questo ti dico che esso va dal cielo alla terra, appunto a causa di quella unione, che io ho fatta nell'Uomo-Dio.⁶⁰

Though Christ is a special case in that he is literally half-human and half-divine, the mystic, in her union with him, occupies a similar space. A bridge that spans over this world and ushers others into Paradise, the mystic joins the earth with the divine. The mystic is a conflation of so many seemingly contradictory yet in flux states of being. Despite these multivalent experiential states, there is an interest in self-construction among mystics that is beyond the constraints of society in general, and instead approaches a transcendent state of being that is yet still operating within temporal language and space. In this way, the mystic is within and without, straddling the border between the active and contemplative, the masculine and feminine, the earthly and the divine — and serving as a bridge that complicates these boundaries and fuses them together.

⁶⁰ “So I[, wanting to remedy so many evils,] gave you a bridge, my Son, so that you could cross over the river, the stormy sea of this darksome life, without being drowned .. Look! It stretches from heaven to earth, joining the earth of your humanity with the greatness of the Godhead. This is what I mean when I say it stretches from heaven to earth — through my union with humanity” (Trans. Noffke)

Chapter II

“O amore ineffabile”: The Poetics of Mysticism



Fig. 1. Word Cloud Visualizations, Catherine's *Dialogo* on left, Dante's *Paradiso* on right. Sinclair, Stéfán, Geoffrey Rockwell and the Voyant Tools Team. 2012. Voyant Tools (web application).

The famed love poets Dante and Petrarch are among the most successful 14th-century Italian writers from the perspective of their continued legacy. Their work established the canon of Italian literature, while having also been among the first ventures and earliest innovations of vernacular writing. Though also writing as one of the founders of the Italian literary tradition, Catherine is more often relegated to religious or political rather than literary status (as discussed above). However, she uses language, themes and constructions markedly similar to those of Petrarch and Dante. The primary vernacular texts of each author — Dante's *Commedia*, Petrarch's *Rime sparse*, and Catherine's *Dialogo* — while participating in different communities, appealing to different audiences, and serving various and diverse purposes, also show overlaps of diction, topic, and word frequency. This suggests that the work being done by each of these authors is operating within a particular context, and that there is a certain amount of exchange

between these different forms and styles of writing (i.e. mystical and lyrical writing), which is not merely one-directional.

Franco Moretti, in theorizing world literature and arguing against canon-based close reading, makes a case for “distant reading”: “where distance ... *is a condition of knowledge*: it allows you to focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes — or genres and systems” (49). If we are to recover missing voices from the canon, who have been overlooked due to their marginalized status (be that due to gender, race, religion, economic status, etc.), it becomes imperative to employ new methods of entering into analytical and theoretical discourse. Utilizing a quantitative approach enabled through digital humanities statistical computation can allow readers to look at Catherine’s texts in light of her fellow Italian vernacular innovators that *are* within the literary canon.

When applying a digital humanities computational-driven methodology to explore texts, especially those written prior to moveable type that exist in various iterations across manuscript editions, one must bear in mind statistician George E. P. Box’s and Norman R. Draper’s warning: “Essentially, all models are wrong, but some are useful” (424). Applying modes of reading texts — in the humanities writ large or statistical models via digital humanities techniques — is subject to careful analysis, and each method is merely another way of “getting at” a text, not a definitive answer. This is why Moretti’s proposal for “distant reading” can prove useful, as using machines to read texts can provide a wider perspective serving as a counter-balance to close reading. My inquiry into Catherine’s writing brings together computer-based textual analysis and traditional humanistic examination to arrive at a more robust account of her writing and its context. My digital humanities approach uses both statistical word counts and

topic models based on a machine learning algorithm trained on a corpus of available 14th-century Italian texts, all of which are visualized so as to be readily accessible.

It is worth noting that the *Dialogo* represents the largest corpus by far with 143,906 words, with the *Commedia* and the *Rime sparse* containing 101,602 and 57,154 words respectively. Among these three texts, there are 21,549 unique words out of 302,662 words total, that is 7% of the words are unique. The 7% figure shows the vocabulary density of all of these texts, which refers to the measurement of vocabulary usage in comparison to the length of the text, computed by dividing the total words of a text by the total unique words. Of these three corpora, the text with the most vocabulary density is the *Commedia*, with the *Dialogo* being the least dense. Dante and Petrarch are much more likely to use variations on the same word in order to fit rhyme schemes and syllabic constraints, and it is up to the analyzer to choose whether or not to render “amore” and “amor” as the same word. In most cases, I chose to have words count differently unless I specify otherwise. These variations of the same word, however, are likely a major computational component of the vocabulary density of their texts. Certain words trend throughout the three texts, with notable peaks in frequency occurring across the corpora: “vero” (peak at the end), “anime” (peak at the end), “cielo” (peak in the middle), “eterna” (peak at the end), “misericordia” (peak at the end). The three texts analyzed together reveal a frequent use of commonly used words throughout them, including “amore,” “lume,” “desiderio,” “dolce,” “occhio/occhi.” When considering Catherine’s *Dialogo* alone, along with the words above, “anima” and “virtù” are more frequent. The *Rime sparse* favors words like “bel,” “ben,” “cor” (not combined with “cuore”), “donna,” “morte” and “sol.” The *Commedia* utilizes words like “ben,” “disse,” “fuor” and “terra” more frequently. As Dante’s *Paradiso* engages with other-worldly concerns in ways similar to mystical writing, I performed a separate analysis on this

canticle (here I changed all instances of “amore” to “amor”), and when compared with the *Dialogo*, we can see that many words are frequently used across both texts, with “amor”/”amore” and “lume” among the most frequently used words, and other words and categories of words related to Christ, the mind and consciousness, corporeality and nature, and eyesight all being shared across the two texts.

To further see the categories of words and themes that these texts are dealing with, topic modeling analysis was performed across all of the texts mentioned above as well as Catherine’s collection of letters. I used stop word lists of very common words like “un” and “il” so that these would not be counted in the final analysis and throw off the results of meaningful words. For word frequency analysis, the stop word lists included personal pronouns, but I reinstated them for topic modeling as they would no longer overwhelm the sample sizes. Topic modeling is a computational method used to detect the close proximity of words that renders frequent clusters of words called topics, and the full topic modeling analysis of these texts is in the Appendix. Between the *Paradiso* and the *Dialogo* in particular, the topic with the most weight shares similar words (in bold), with “amore,” “bene,” “grazia,” “lume,” “dio” and the personal pronouns “mio” / “loro” making up its strongest topic:

Paradiso:

mia mio amor occhi **ben** lui **dio** luce **lume** ciel vidi mente **lor** sol donna beatrice
veder lei **grazia** natura

Dialogo:

loro amore anima virtú veritá **lume mio** corpo pena **bene** sangue **grazia**
desiderio decto figliuolo affecto morte sancta **dio miei**

We see that both texts are concerned with love, light, the personal self, goodness, God, and grace. There are some differences between the two sets — “luce,” though similar to “lume” does not occur in the *Dialogo* topic model, and though “lume” is also concerned with vision, Dante employs “veder,” “vidi,” “occhi” where Catherine does not. There is an interest in the body with Catherine, though not the eyes in particular — preferring the words “corpo,” “sangue” and related words like “pena,” “affecto,” “morte.” Instead of seeing, Catherine is more concerned with speech (“decto”). The word “dio” that both Dante and Catherine use, is joined by “figliuolo” in Catherine’s topic model. Additionally, Dante is concerned with the physical space of Paradise, using the words for sky and sun near each other, and he is also concerned with nature and the figure of the woman and Beatrice in particular. Catherine’s proximate words instead show a dualism between the body on one side and the soul on the other; she speaks of desire and virtue and truth while Dante evokes the mind with “mente.” This data suggests that the traditions related to lyrical poetry⁶¹ and mystical writing may well inform each other, and that Catherine’s writing, far from being unlearned, is actively engaging with the larger linguistic world of her time.

Like mystics who have proven to be master practitioners of shifting subjectivities, the writers of courtly love poetry also negotiate their relative subjectivity and objectivity in relation to their lover. Using amorous and erotic language to do so, they simultaneously contemplate virtue and the loss of self, just as mystic writers do. Though theorists like Beauvoir have argued that mystics, inherently feminine, have been informed by their experience of love and love

⁶¹ The *Commedia* is an epic poem, but Dante’s writing stems from lyric poetry and courtly love poetry of the Italian schools, and his epic work is very much grounded in these traditions. I’ll be using “lyric poetry” as a shorthand for that tradition while discussing works related to the overarching tradition.

poetry because they have not been able to function within another domain, here I would like to suggest that there is an exchange — not a one-directional influence — between mystic writing and love poetry. Love poetry generally borrows language from religious writing (the loved lady as the Sun, for example), but is typically thought to eroticize the religious language; and some have argued that the Song of Songs is the solitary gateway for religious and erotic language to mingle together. But mystical writing, while also informed by the Song of Songs, has had a long-standing tradition originating in ancient times (as with the Biblical texts) of erotically-charged language used as a means to access knowledge in general and sacred knowledge in particular. The tradition of love poetry that comes out of courtly love, and of which I will consider Catherine’s fellow Italian vernacular writers, similarly uses erotic language as an avenue to knowledge of love, knowledge of metaphysics (as with Guido Cavalcanti), and knowledge of God.

In the chapter “Vernacular Voices of the *Donna*: Pisa” in *Reclaiming Catherine of Siena*, Jane Tylus writes of the significance of the Italian preference for the courtly word *donna* rather than the more biological *femmina* for “woman,” which persists to this day. This linguistic inclination is likely influenced by Dante’s prose discussion preceding “Donne ch’avete intelletto d’amore” in the *Vita Nuova* XIX.⁶² More than biological, the Italian word *femmina* reveals a somewhat negative connotation, as the 1612 edition of the *Vocabolario della Crusca* defines the word as “Quell’ animale così ragionevole, come bruto, che concorre col maschio, come recipiente, sesso. *L. foeminas.*”⁶³ Castiglione, in his 1528 work *Il libro del Cortegiano*, uses the word “femine” as a corollary to “maschi,” when discussing childbirth and biology, but employs

⁶² “...pensai che parlare di lei non si convenia che io facesse, se io non parlasse a donne in seconda persona, e non ad ogni donna, ma solamente a coloro che sono gentili e che non sono pure femmine” (Dante, *Vita Nuova* XIX).

⁶³ *Vocabolario della Accademia della Crusca*, 2011. <http://vocabolario.sns.it/html/index.html>

the word “*donna*” much more when discussing the court lady in Book III. Catherine herself makes the distinction between the two words: *femmina* as weak, *donna* as cultivating strength and will. *Donna*, derived from the Latin word *domina*, is the feminine noun counterpart to *Dominus*, a word for God. In literal terms, *dominus* is lord and *donna* is lady, with all the undertones of King Arthur’s court. As Tylus argues, the word *lady* is not typically employed more than *woman* in other languages, for example, the French preferring *femme* over *dame*. Though it is interesting that this distinction has been so compelling and influential to the Italian language over time, the use of *donna* in courtly love poetry reveals the play with subjectivity inherent in these texts. By instilling so much force in the word used for the beloved, granting her a domain and a queendom regardless of her social status — even perhaps suggestive of a feminine god — the masculine lover-speaker mitigates his own power in linguistic terms, often of course significant to the meaning of the poetry.

In terms of feminist analysis, there is a lot to unpack from troubadour poetry and the subsequent courtly love poetry that developed in the Italian language first in the court of Frederick II (the Sicilian School), then through to the Tuscan School and Dante’s own cohort of the *dolce stil novo*. Though it can be argued that the elevated position of the female beloved in relation to the male pursuer can be seen as progressive, even patronizing, it is also possible to read the texts not as a binary representation of a masculine knight-errant pursuing an inaccessible feminine lover, but as a negotiation of several power hierarchies in an amorous relationship. For each poet, these dynamics play out differently, and in poetry cycles much can be shifted. While Beatrice is known to be the virtuous and lofty unattainable woman in Dante’s love poetry, Dante also presents a very different woman and very different speaker-lover in his *Rime petrose* cycle, “*La crudele*.” Here the stone woman may be the more powerful one in the relationship, as Dante

also does depict Beatrice, but the Donna Pietra is not virtuous and seems to be the aggressor who overtakes the fleeing speaker-lover. In the last of the four poems, “Così nel mio parlar voglio esser aspro,” rape imagery and the notion of eros as revenge intersect with the imagery of the liturgical hours (66-73):

S'io avessi le belle trecce prese,
che fatte son per me scudiscio e ferza,
pigliandole anzi terza,
con essere passerei vespero e squille:
e non sarei pietoso né cortese,
anzi farei com'orso quando scerza;
e se Amor me ne sferza,
io mi vendicherei di più di mille.⁶⁴

The imagery of the bear is from an old proverb: if you don't want to get bitten, don't play with a bear. Here the speaker-lover wishes to enact a violent sexual fantasy on the *donna*. The church bells show the passage of night, but they also lend a sacred sense to the representation, especially considering that Dante brings imagery from this poem into *Paradiso* XXVI (discussed below).

The conflation of erotic and spiritual imagery that we see in Dante's poem above has existed intrinsically within mystical writing from its origins, and there are many surprising overlaps between mystical and courtly writing. Barbara Newman describes 13th-century Beguine writing as “*la mystique courtoise*,” arguing that writers such as Hadewijch, Mechthild, and Marguerite Porete experiment with polyvalent subjectivity, sometimes as the beloved bride of Christ the bridegroom and sometimes as the knight-errant longing for his/her faraway beloved.

⁶⁴ “Oh, if I could but seize those lovely tresses which have become both whip and lash for me, / from very early matins / I'd make them ringing bells unto the night: / and I would not be pitying or kind, / but like a playful bear with her I'd play; / and, since Love whips me still, / I would avenge myself a thousandfold” (trans. Tusiani, p. 99).

Hadewijch, for example, twins “I” and “she” in her lyric poetry, “indistinguishable from the troubadour’s,” and even pretends to abandon love and spurn her beloved, which “only initiates will recognize ... as God” (148). Beguine mysticism adopted both the monastic allegorical tradition surrounding the Song of Songs and a courtly love tradition: “In combination, the two discourses may reinforce each other or they may work at cross-purposes, almost incidentally conferring dual gender on both the lover and the divine Beloved” (138). In Italy, too, there is a tradition of mystic writing that predates Catherine especially in Franciscan circles, with Iacopone da Todi (c. 1230-1306) being a particular exemplar whose words found resonances in wider literature. It is not just the mystics who are combining the two threads of Song of Songs subjectivity-shifting monasticism and courtly love, for how else can Dante bring erotic and spiritual language together into his courtly love poetry, but also ultimately into *Paradiso*?

Even in the writing of the poet considered the most secular of the *dolce stil novo* group, Guido Cavalcanti, *donna* (again, related to *dominus*) is employed throughout his poetry (the famous “Donna me prega” is considered here in particular), displacing power from the masculine speaker to the feminine beloved. Unlike the beloved of some of his contemporary poets, Cavalcanti’s beloved is not depicted as cruel, stingy with her love, nor is she in any way punished for her power over him; instead he is a willing servant to her and happy to suffer for his love. This resembles the mystic’s relation to God, as the mystic is always full of love and ready to serve her lord. As Dana Stewart explains, for Cavalcanti the *donna* is equipped with the Platonic model of active eyes, while the speaker has the Aristotelian model of passive eyes (49). The words for eyes (*occhi*) and other vision-based words including light (*lume*) are used throughout love poetry and mystical writing; Cavalcanti, who writes in a very philosophical manner, uses these terms as they relate to the science of optics, as he was aware of it in his time.

In discussing Cavalcanti within the theoretical cinematic model of the male gaze, Stewart writes, “The poet-lover exerts no controlling gaze over her [his beloved],” revealing his relative subordination to the beloved (54). Intellectually, as will be discussed below, Cavalcanti is unable to grasp the image of his beloved, which further demonstrates his lack of power in relation to the woman who exists in an ineffable state.

In both mystical and courtly love writing, shifting subjectivities are constantly in flux, as they are in Catherine’s writing. While Beguine mystics may often operate within a traditional role reversal with Christ as love object, Dante and other Italian poets depict throughout their texts a negotiation between the one who is the beloved and the lover. Catherine transposes relations so that she instead is the one that God is after, as can be seen in the *Dialogo* as well as her *Orazioni*:

o pazzo d’amore! Hai tu bisogno della tua creatura? Sì, a quanto mi pare; perché tu tieni dei modi, come se tu non potessi vivere senza di lei, sabbene tu sia vita, da cui ogni cosa ha vita, e senza di te nessuna cosa vive. Perché dunque sei così impazzito? Perché tu t’innamorasti della tua fattura, ti compiacesti e dilettesti in te medesimo di lei, e, come inebriato della sua salute, la vai cercando, mentre ella ti fugge? Ella si allontana, e tu ti appressi a lei; non potevi venire più vicino, che vestendoti della sua umanità. (*Dialogo* 153)⁶⁵

⁶⁵ “oh mad lover! And you have need of your creature? It seems so to me, for you act as if you could not live without her, in spite of the fact that you are Life itself, and everything has life from you and nothing can have life without you. Why then are you so mad? Because you have fallen in love with what you have made! You are pleased and delighted over her within yourself, as if you were drunk [with desire] for her salvation. She runs away from you and you go looking for her. She strays and you draw closer to her. You clothed yourself in our humanity, and nearer than that you could not have come” (trans. Noffke).

O amore ineffabile, benché nella tua luce tu vedessi tutte le iniquità che la tua creatura doveva commettere contro la tua infinita bontà, tu hai come fatto finta di non vedere, e hai fermato lo sguardo sulla bellezza della tua creatura, della quale tu, come pazzo ed ebbro d'amore, ti sei innamorato, e per amore l'hai tratta da te dandole l'essere a tua immagine e somiglianza. Tu, verità eterna, hai dichiarato a me la tua verità, cioè che è stato l'amore a costringerti a crearla; benché tu vedessi che ti doveva offendere, la tua carità non ha voluto che tu fermassi l'occhio in questo vedere, ma al contrario hai distolto i tuoi occhi da questa offesa che doveva avvenire e li hai fermati sulla bellezza della creatura. Se tu avessi fermato lo sguardo in quell'offesa, avresti dimenticato l'amore che avevi per creare l'uomo. E non ti fu nascosto questo, ma ti sei fermato all'amore, perché tu non sei altro che fuoco d'amore, pazzo della tua creatura. (*Orazione 4*)⁶⁶

Catherine depicts God as a sort of Pygmalion figure in love with his creation — not only in love, but madly and drunkenly and crazily in love⁶⁷ with her (Catherine uses *creatura*, a feminine noun, but she also refers to his creation as *uomo*). She talks about love as ineffable, a metaphor for self knowledge, and also of his beloved straying from the pursuing love, an allegory of the sinning human escaping God. She discusses God becoming man in Christ, and how that resolves

⁶⁶ “Oh unutterable love, even though you saw all the evils that all your creatures would commit against your infinite goodness, you acted as if you did not see and set your eye only on the beauty of your creature, with whom you had fallen in love like one drunk and crazy with love. And in love you drew us out of yourself, giving us being in your own image and likeness. You, eternal Truth, have told me the truth: that love compelled you to create us. Even though you saw that we would offend you, your charity would not let you set your eyes on that sight. No, you took your eyes off the sin that was to be and fixed your gaze only on your creature’s beauty. For if you had concentrated on the sin, you would have forgotten the love you had for creating humankind. Not that the sin was hid from you, but you concentrated on the love because you are nothing but a fire of love, crazy over what you have made” (trans. Noffke as Prayer 13, 18 February 1379).

⁶⁷ This mystical expression of the experience of love is long-resonating, as being drunk and crazy in love are still very much a part of western culture’s love rhetoric, as exemplified in Beyoncé’s “Crazy in Love” (2003) and “Drunk in Love” (2013). Consider also how erotic and spiritual imagery play out in other pop songs, such as Madonna’s “Like a Prayer” (1989).

some of the lovers' tension, though man will always be expected to sin. The prayer in particular speaks to God's not giving up on his creation—the errant knight who continuously pursues his beloved.

Love poetry is often thought of as an exchange between two individuals, or even just the solitary writing of one party to another disinterested one (as the act of writing itself is often conflated with working alone). However courtly love poetry is inherently part of a larger community: the court. As Newman explains, the amorous couple is never truly alone and is always enveloped by friends, foes, or jealous members of the court. She writes (142),

A fulfilled relationship could overcome the solipsism of immature lovers and blossom into what Chrétien de Troyes called the Joy of the Court. In his *Erec et Énide*, high festival is held when mature lovers also achieve the integration of private desire with social responsibility.

That is, there is an assimilation of the private to the public within courtly love, which is also a topos for the mystic. Newman demonstrates this negotiation in her discussion of the Beguine mystic in particular. The mystic is surrounded by spiritual friends and is often in the position of sharing her bridegroom of Christ with them. In states of ecstasy, the mystic is often with others, dictating her experience to scribes, thus making a very private and erotic affair an aspect of the wider spiritual community of which she is part. While some cloistered or otherwise reclusive mystics, like Hildegard, are members of a much smaller community (though certainly still a community nonetheless), mystics like Catherine who are engaged with society invariably have social responsibility as a larger aspect of their mysticism and love with Christ. Therefore, in a figure like Catherine, the topos of community within courtly love is particularly strong, and she

must not consider just herself and her lover alone but all the societal implications as an aspect of her mystical experiences and writing.

A typical component of courtly love is the giving of gifts and their joyful reception by the lady. Though generally the gifts that Christ and God bestow upon the mystics are the virtues (charity, chastity), or tribulations such as poverty and illness,⁶⁸ Catherine (and a few other women who experienced mystical marriages with Christ) states that she, like all Christians, receives a foreskin ring from Christ.⁶⁹ She considers this to be more precious than a jewel, but the gift exchange is in keeping with courtly love motifs and plotlines. Further, the exchange of hearts between lovers is the utmost expression of passion in courtly love poetry. Dante mentions that the allegorical figure of Love holds his heart within his hands in the first poem of *La vita nuova* in Chapter III (9-11):

Allegro mi sembrava Amor tenendo
meo core in mano, e ne le braccia avea
madonna involta in un drappo dormendo.⁷⁰

More cruelly, Boccaccio's Tancredi serves the heart of Ghismonda's lover in a golden chalice for her to eat in the first story of the fourth day of the *Decameron*. In non-mystical literature, the exchange and displacement of the heart is usually expressed in metaphorical terms (at least when all parties are alive), with one of the two individuals expressing to the other that they have full control over the other's heart; in mysticism this exchange of hearts can be quite literal.

According to Raymond, Catherine herself exchanged hearts with Christ, with her heart beating

⁶⁸ Here Newman cites the *Règle des Fins Amans*: "The *fin amant* is exhorted to think of her lover often, to seek out his favorite haunts, and to receive the jewels he sends her gladly, although these consist of 'poverty, diseases, maladies, and tribulations'" (141).

⁶⁹ T221.

⁷⁰ "Joyfully Amor seemed to me to hold / my heart in his hand, and held in his arms / my lady wrapped in a cloth sleeping" (Trans. A. S. Kline)

inside his body and Christ's heart contained within her body for three days. Heather Webb notes that this exchange is not depicted within Catherine's own writing,⁷¹ but another example of literal heart exchange is also present in the mystic writing of Lutgardis in the early 13th century. Though the motif of jewel exchange may occupy a literal space in courtly love poetry but a figurative position in mystic writing, the aspect of community is in many ways heightened within mystical writing and the exchange of hearts rendered in very literal terms.

Another aspect of courtly love is the unattainable beloved, generally the unattainable lady. For troubadours, and in courtly cycles like that of Lancelot and Guinevere, the unattainable beloved is typically a woman socially elevated above the pursuing lover-errant, or, worse yet, a married woman (often the queen). This could generally be couched in language that was not offensive to the nobleman married to the woman, and often invoked the exemplary virtue of the lady, who was generally perceived to be noble not only in class but also in honor. As courtly love poetry removed itself from the court (as in the Tuscan School and the subsequent *dolce stil novo*), the topos of the beloved queen began to be effaced from the literature, but the sense of the lady's praiseworthiness was not diminished. The 13th-century poet, Guido Guinizzelli, exemplifies the virtuous nature of the beloved in his lyric poem, "Io voglio del ver la mia donna laudare," in which the speaker explains that all whom the lady greets lose their pride ("ch'abassa orgoglio a cui dona salute" (10)), and that no one can have bad thoughts when they behold her. The speaker, for his part, grows to be more virtuous, as well (12-14):

e no·lle pò apressare om che sia vile;
ancor ve dirò c'ha maggior vertute:

⁷¹ See "Catherine of Siena's Heart," pp. 815-816.

null' om pò mal pensar fin che la vede.⁷²

Similarly, in his *canzone* “Donne ch’avete intelletto d’amore,” in chapter XIX of the *Vita nova*, Dante writes of a woman who kills any man who is with sin, while any man who can withstand looking at her has sin erased from him by God (32-42):

che quando va per via,
gitta nei cor villani Amore un gelo,
per che onne lor pensiero agghiaccia e pere;
e qual soffrisse di starla a vedere
diverria nobil cosa, o si morria.
E quando trova alcun che degno sia
di veder lei, quei prova sua vertute,
ché li avvien, ciò che li dona, in salute,
e sì l’umilia, ch’ogni offesa oblia.
Ancor l’ha Dio per maggior grazia dato
che non pò mal finir chi l’ha parlato.⁷³

These two women are acting as servants of God, eradicating sin in their wake, or else further elevating those who are able to look at them. Additionally, the sonnet “Tanto gentile e tanto onesta pare” from chapter XXVI of *Vita nova*, Dante remarks on how the lady is dressed in humility (“benignamente d’umilità vestuta” (6)), and how she seems to have been sent to Earth

⁷² I paraphrase: Vile people cannot behold her / I become more virtuous [because of her] / No man can have bad thoughts as long as he sees her.

⁷³ “since when she goes by / Love strikes a chill in evil hearts, / so that all their thoughts freeze and perish: / and any man who suffers to stay and see her / becomes a noble soul, or else he dies. / And when she finds any who might be worthy / to look at her, he proves her virtue, / which comes to him, given, in greeting / and if he is humble, erases all offense. / Still greater grace God has granted her / since he cannot end badly who speaks with her” (trans. A. S. Kline).

from Heaven: “e par che sia una cosa venuta / da cielo in terra a miracol mostrare” (7-8).⁷⁴ This construction — someone to love sent from Paradise to perform miracles within human society — is markedly similar to another who is beloved: Christ.

Thus, more than an Earthly queen, the true ultimate expression of the inaccessible beloved is one who is in Heaven, and both Dante and Petrarch eventually employed this solution in their post-mortem figures of Beatrice and Laura respectively. While both ladies are considered to be within the kingdom of Paradise, and therefore within the general milieu of the court, for Dante in particular the figure of Beatrice, so virtuous and beatific, can be mapped onto the beloved of the mystic: Christ. First appearing within the *Commedia* in Canto XXX of the earthly canticle of *Purgatorio*, Beatrice would go on literally and figuratively to bring Dante up and into Paradise. The unattainable beloved is not only a woman of a higher class, but of nobler virtue, and the good lady serves to elevate her lover to a higher plane. Christ, too, works this way for believers on earth, and the mystics address this aspect of Christ. In a Letter to Queen Elizabeth of Hungary, Catherine writes (T145):

Quale cuore si potrebbe tenere che non scoppiasse d’amore a ragguardare questo dolce e saporoso frutto, cioè il dolce e buono Gesù? il quale Dio Padre ha dato per sposo alla santa Chiesa. Dobbiamo dunque correre come innamorati, ed essere amatori della Chiesa santa per lo amore di Cristo crocifisso.⁷⁵

Upon seeing the bridegroom Christ, any Christian should be compelled to action, running to the Church, overwhelmed with goodness. As a not fully attainable (until death) beloved who also compels his lover to make himself or herself more virtuous, Christ is the ultimate object of

⁷⁴ “and truly seems a thing come from the sky / to show on earth what miracles can be” (trans. Tusiani).

⁷⁵ “What heart could keep from bursting with love at the sight of this sweet savory fruit, our good and gentle Jesus, whom God the Father has given to holy Church as her Spouse? We ought then to run like people in love; as faithful Christians we ought to be lovers of this holy Churc [through the love of Christ crucified]” (trans. Noffke).

courtly love devotion, a tradition that goes back to French poet Chrétien de Troyes and the holy grail as introduced in his unfinished 12th-century romance *Perceval, le Conte du Graal*.

Guido Cavalcanti, whose work is among the least spiritually-inclined of the *dolce stil novo* poets, also notes how the virtue of his lady elevates the speaker-lover; she is like a divine goddess in his lyric poem of praise “Chi è questa che vèn, ch’ogn’om la mira” (9-14):

Non si poria contar la sua piagenza,
ch’a le’ s’inchin’ ogni gentil vertute,
e la beltate per sua dea la mostra.
Non fu sì alta già la mente nostra
e non si pose in noi tanta salute,
che propriamente n’aviam canoscenza.⁷⁶

For Cavalcanti, intellectual nobility may be higher than an orientation to the divine, but the same premise stands, as the beloved’s graciousness elevates the lover. Here Cavalcanti brings to bear another element that intersects with virtue: the ineffability that comes when the lover attempts to understand the lady’s goodness. The speaker cannot even fully describe her beauty (how pleasing she is), and when he tries to fathom her he explains that he is incapable of doing so within his own limitations. This inability to comprehend is echoed in the longer poem “Donna me prega,” which also considers the optics as discussed above. On this, Stewart writes, “when he does speak of his perceptual appropriation of her, he emphasizes that his mind cannot fully grasp her image,” which suggests that it is not just the virtues of the lady that are ineffable, but her entire

⁷⁶ “For her sweetness there is no description, / Every gentle virtue bows towards her, / And Beauty makes her its [goddess]. / Our minds can never soar so high, / Nor have we grace enough inside, / For us to ever know her perfectly” (trans. A.S. Kline).

being and all that she represents (53). The inability lies not just in understanding the beloved, but in not understanding love and the virtues of love as an abstract concept.

This language is also consistent with religious language about God and self-knowledge, and Dante's words as he progresses through Paradise, which begins in Canto I ("Nel ciel che più de la sua luce prende / fu' io, e vidi cose che ridire / né sa né può chi di là sù discende"⁷⁷ (4-6)) and culminates in Canto XXXIII: "per tal modo / che ciò ch'i' dico è un semplice lume,"⁷⁸ "credo ch'i' vidi,"⁷⁹ "Omai sarà più corta mia favella, / pur a quel ch'io ricordo, che d'un fante / che bagni ancor la lingua a la mammella"⁸⁰ (89-90, 92, 106-108). Dante, as he travels through Heaven, believes that he forgets, can only speak of what he saw in rudimentary language, can only attest to what he believes he saw, and ultimately sees how incapable he is at describing what he has seen. Similarly, in the first lines of *Laude* 91, Iacopone da Todi discusses love that is outside of language, and goodness that cannot be thought of, alongside light that is beyond measure: "Sopr'onne lingua amore, bontà senza figura, / lume fuor de misura, resplende nel mio core"⁸¹ (1-2). Iacopone describes how love of God is not possible to quantify through calculations, language, or figures. Divine love, for poets and mystics alike, is outside of the capacity of human expression. As in *Orazione* 4 above, Catherine describes love as "ineffabile," and God and Love can be considered to be one and the same. Throughout her *Dialogo*, she uses variants of the word "ineffabile" 30 times over its 167 chapters, pairing it with variants of

⁷⁷ "I was within the heaven that receives / more of His light; and I saw things that he / who from that height descends, forgets or can / not speak ..." (trans. Mandelbaum, I.4-7).

⁷⁸ "in such a way that what / I tell is only rudimentary" (trans. Mandelbaum, XXXIII.89-90).

⁷⁹ "I believe that I saw" (my translation).

⁸⁰ "What little I recall is to be told, / from this point on, in words more weak than those / of whose infant tongue still bathes at the breast" (trans. Mandelbaum, XXXIII.106-108).

⁸¹ "Love beyond all telling, / Goodness beyond imagining, / Light of infinite intensity / Glows in my heart" (trans. Serge and Elizabeth Hughes).

“amore” or “amare” 80% of the time (in 24 instances). In chapter 96, Catherine writes of the limitation of speech in describing union with God:

Qual lingua potrebbe narrare l'eccellenza di questo ultimo stato unitivo, e i frutti diversi e svariati che in esso si ricevono, essendo riempite le tre potenza dell'anima? ... E così via discorrendo, tutti ve l'hanno manifestata, chi per un modo e chi per un altro. Ma non potresti mai narrare l'intrinseco sentimento, l'ineffabile dolcezza e l'unione perfetta con me, con la tua lingua che è cosa finita.⁸²

Catherine evokes the finiteness of the tongue's capabilities at odds with the infinite quality of love and the divine. While she explains that doctors of the Church have revealed the glorious light through the Holy Scripture, this writing is also limited because love cannot be described until one experiences it. Although both Dante and Catherine suggest that the experience of divine love is not outside of human capacity, putting this experience into words seems beyond what the human is capable of. This translates to the mystic or other religious figure unable to understand fully the mechanisms of God's love. The mystic is a participant in this infinite love, but not the originator of it, and she cannot render that aspect of love to others in human language. Despite being unable to produce divine love, the mystic remains a devoted servant to her lover just the same, steadfast and firm in her love.

The love that the mystic experiences and participates in is an overwhelming love; it overtakes the lover. Iacopone describes how self-annihilation and love are the only methods available to humans in order to contemplate God (*Laude* 91, 231-234):

Mai trasformazione perfecta non può fare

⁸² “What tongue could describe the marvel of this final unitive stage and the many different fruits the soul receives when its powers are so filled? ... And so the light runs on, all of you showing forth, now one way, now another. But the inmost feeling, the ineffable sweetness and perfect union — you cannot describe it with your tongue, which is a finite thing!” (trans. Noffke).

né senza te regnare amor, quanto sia forte.

Ad sua possessione non può virtù menare,

né mente contemplare, se de te non ha sorte.⁸³

More than being unable to speak, the self must be negated in order to approach the divine, and in turn the self must be filled with love. Throughout Iacopone's work is a discussion of union in such a way that "Fuoco né ferro non li può partire,"⁸⁴ revealing how the self is truly merged with God (*Laude* 90, 43). In a letter to the Dominican Bartolomeo Dominici, Catherine suggests that this love, where the self is completely eradicated, is the ultimate expression of love:

con desiderio di vedervi tanto annegato e affocato in Cristo Gesù, che al tutto vi perdiate voi medesimo. Ma questo non veggo che potiate avere se l'occhio dell'intelletto del vero desiderio non si leva sopra di voi a ragguardare l'occhio ineffabile della divina carità col quale Dio ragguardò (e ragguarda) la sua creatura, prima che ci creasse.⁸⁵

The negation of self, enflamed in this love, can only be achieved when the intellectual eye rises to look into the ineffable eye of divine charity. Again, we see the trope of the unexplainable, with the eye of divine charity that cannot be described. This all-encompassing love is similarly a common trope in courtly love poetry, as exemplified in 13th-century poet Guido delle Colonne's lyric "Amor, che lungiamente m'ai menato," as he discusses being ridden by love against his will, citing Virgil's "Amor che vince tutto" (24) among his arguments. Like Catherine's

⁸³ "Without you, self-annihilation, / There can be no perfect union, / Nor can love, no matter how strong, reign. / Man without your help / Cannot possess or contemplate God" (trans. Serge and Elizabeth Hughes).

⁸⁴ "Neither iron nor fire can pry us apart" (trans. Serge and Elizabeth Hughes).

⁸⁵ Letter T204.

"I long to see you engulfed and set on fire in Christ Jesus that you will be completely lost to yourself. But I don't see how you can unless your mind's eye rises above yourself in true desire to gaze into the eye of the divine charity with which God looked on his creatures before he created us." (trans. Noffke).

depiction of the “pazzo d’amore” and feelings of drunkenness and madness while experiencing love, Guido also speaks to this loss of rational self (53-55):

Amor fa disviare li più sagi,
e chi più ama e pena à in sè misura;
più folle è quello che più si ‘nnamura.⁸⁶

The idea of measure in courtly poetry expresses the Aristotelian idea of the mean, and how one should conduct oneself with constancy. However, as Guido writes in this poem, love unravels these systems to render the wise incapable of competing with the force of love. For Guido, this may be considered contrary to human order, but as Catherine continues in her letter, this is how one must approach God, who is also a mad lover, “La quale poiché ragguardò in sé medesimo, innamorossene smisuratamente; tanto che per amore ci creò, volendo che noi godessimo e partecipassimo quello bene che aveva in sé medesimo” (T204).⁸⁷ In courtly love this reciprocity between equal lovers is often not exemplified in this way for it operates outside the hierarchies of the human court, but as love poetry is blended with spirituality by Dante, he navigates “l’amor che move il sole e l’altre stelle” (XXXIII, 142-145).⁸⁸

In fact, Dante incorporates some of the work of his mystical predecessors directly into the *Paradiso*, notably in Canto XXXIII, where he borrows language from Iacopone da Todi. This use of mystical writing in the canticle of heaven may be unsurprising, but it indicates how highly Dante esteemed the writing of his religious counterparts. As Mario Aversano writes (7),

Ma ci è parso utile evidenziare dappincipio anche le avvisaglie ... e mostrare la loro
consonanza con il solo poeta-teologo che si incontra alle spalle di Dante: Iacopone da

⁸⁶ “For Love can make the wisest turn astray; / Love, at its most, of measure still has least; / He is the maddest man who loves the best” (trans. Rossetti).

⁸⁷ “For he looked on us within himself and fell so boundlessly in love with us that for love he created us to share and enjoy the good he possessed in himself” (trans. Noffke).

⁸⁸ “the love that moves the sun and the other stars” (translation mine).

Todi. La sua opera, come poi la *Commedia*, si sostanzia degli articoli del codice sacro più importante del Medioevo: quello intitolato alla Conversione.⁸⁹

Aversano's monograph, *Dante, Iacopone da Todi e il canto XXXIII del Paradiso* shows the resonances of Iacopone's writing in Dante's *Paradiso*, revealing that Dante's literary approach to spirituality is not entirely unique but built upon the writing of others, and Iacopone's in particular. In *Laude* 59, Iacopone writes on nature, the will, and moving from earth to heaven (22-25):

Luna, sole, cielo & stelle fra miei tesor non son covelle,
de sopra cielo sì ston quille che tengon la mia melodìa.
Poi che Dio ha l mio velle, possessor d'onnecovelle,
le mie ale hon tante penne de terra en cielo non m'è via.⁹⁰

Comparing the lines with XXXIII, 138-145, it is possible to see similarities in the rhymes and general sense of the meaning:

l'imago al cerchio e come vi s'indova;
ma non eran da ciò le proprie penne:
se non che la mia mente fu percossa
da un fulgor in che sua voglia venne.
A l'alta fantasia qui mancò possa;
ma già volgeva il mio disio e 'l velle
sì come rota ch'igualmente è mossa,

⁸⁹ "But it seemed useful to highlight also the first signs ... and show their consonance with the only poet-theologian who meets at the shoulders of Dante: Iacopone da Todi. His work, then as the *Comedy*, takes the form of the articles of the most important sacred code of the Middle Ages: the one entitled as the Conversion" (translation mine).

⁹⁰ "Moon and sun, sky and stars, are but minor treasures: / The treasures that make me burst into song / Lie beyond the sky that you can see. / Since my will is centered in God, who possesses all, / I wind with ease from earth to heaven" (trans. Serge and Elizabeth Hughes).

l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle.⁹¹

The important resonances here are the rhyming words: “stelle,” “velle,” “penne,” “venne.” These words and their sounds are too similar to be coincidental, and moreover there is the parallel meaning that deals with the will and being overcome by the divine. What Dante does that may subvert Iacopone's meaning somewhat is that he sees God in nature, as it is God's love that moves the sun and the other stars, but for Iacopone the moon, sun, sky, and stars are only small treasures compared to divinity. Iacopone does not grant the same thread from God to the earth that Dante does, though his work provides a vocabulary for Dante to build upon in his own spiritually-minded poetry.

Working throughout the *Commedia*, Dante also blends his own previous works into his more religiously-minded epic. Many have argued that these examples are palinodes employed to distance his current work from earlier writing that was not as spiritually informed as his opus would prove to be. An example of this is in Canto V of *Inferno*, where Francesca and Paolo are damned for their amorous love that arose from reading about courtly love. Sara Sturm-Maddox also discusses the connection between the *Rime petrose* and *Purgatorio*, particularly with the figure of the Medusa, and how Dante must rid himself of this former life in order to pass into the Earthly Paradise.⁹² However, Dante does not purge himself of courtly or erotic language altogether, and even uses the imagery of love's teeth biting him in both his *Rime petrose* and in Canto XXVI of *Paradiso*:

Io mio penser di fuor sì che si scopra,
ch'io non fo de la morte, che ogni sense

⁹¹ “suited the circle and found place in it / and my own wings were far too weak for that. / But then my mind was struck by light that flashed / and, with this light, received what it had asked. / Here force failed my high fantasy; but my / desire and will were moved already-like / a wheel revolving uniformly-by / the Love that moves the sun and the other stars” (trans. Mandelbaum).

⁹² See “The *Rime Petrose* and the Purgatorial Palinode,” 1987.

co li denti d'Amor già mi manduca⁹³

Ma dì ancor se tu senti altre corde

tirarti verso lui, sì che tu suone

con quanti denti questio amor ti morde⁹⁴

Although this is not a direct citation, the image of love's teeth biting him cannot be a coincidence, and the repetition of sense and thought in the surrounding context deepens that connection. Dante, then, does not see courtly and erotic love as outside of a divine context and, given that Dante is approved by the blessed in this Canto, he must not believe that there is an incongruity between amorous love and love for God. This incomplete departure suggests a rhetoric of courtly love consistent and compatible with a mystical discourse. Catherine herself employs the imagery of teeth of desire in Letter T118 to Caterina dello Spedaluccio and Giovanna di Capo in 1377: "E non vogliate sempre stare al latte: chè ci conviene disporre i denti del desiderio ad ammorsare il pane duro e muffato, se bisognasse."⁹⁵ Though this imagery is more about desire to love God despite being faced with obstacles, the common metaphor shows how teeth can be a pliable image concerned with desiring God.

Arguing in her essay, "The Sexual Body in Dante's Celestial Paradise," that Dante co-opts courtly and erotic language throughout *Paradiso*, F. Regina Psaki emphasizes that in Paradise the soul is not actually without body, as after the Last Judgement souls will be joined with their bodies once again. Instead, she views erotic, embodied love as a site of redemption.

⁹³ "Così nel mio parlar voglio esser aspro," lines 30-32.

"...all my thinking / may so shine through as to be seen outside — / more than I tremble at this death, now biting / all of my senses with the teeth of Love" (29-32) (trans. Tusiani).

⁹⁴ *Paradiso XXVI* 49-51. "But tell me, too, if you feel other cords / draw you toward Him, so that you voice aloud / all of the teeth by which this love grips you" (trans. Mandelbaum).

⁹⁵ "Don't be satisfied to keep living on milk forever; we have to get the teeth of our desire ready to chew on bread that is hard and moldy, if necessary" (trans. Noffke).

Noting the innovative language of Dante, including neologism, she writes, “The colonization of the language of courtship, caress, intercourse, and orgasm as components of divine bliss would have struck a contemporary reader not because it was unprecedented, but precisely because it is not deployed in familiar fashion as simply a figure for the love which joins risen mankind and God” (57). Though it is clear that Dante’s ingenious and masterful use of language is ripe with poetic force and meaning, I would like to suggest that his words that relate to corporeal and erotic romance, intercourse and orgasm were already a part of mystical writing, not just in the writing of the Beguine mystics, but also in Italy (the Franciscans Iacopone da Todi, Clare of Assisi, and Angela of Foligno predate the writing of the *Commedia*), and that they would persist after his writing. We cannot be sure that Dante was reading mystical writing, but it is unlikely that his contemporary reader would be as struck by the conflation of eroticism and redemption as a reader of the 21st century may well be, for spirituality for us seems loosened from the passionate love so embedded in late medieval writing. The language of the mystic would have been circulating in the broader Italian culture and the very erotic nature of texts that treat the divine, such as Dante’s courtly love epic, would likely be in dialogue with these texts.



Fig. 2. Word Cloud of Petrarch's *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*



Fig. 3. Word Cloud of Catherine's *Letters*

Petrarch, the other towering poet of the Italian 14th century, works in a more introspective manner than many of the poets who precede him. In describing Dante's approach to poetry, Giuseppe Mazzotta argues that Dante is on a quest for "visionary poetry that would bind together various strands of experience against the partitions and fragmentations engendered by

critical, analytical thinking,” whereas Petrarch views poetry “as the act by which fame is acquired and death is conquered” (12). Indeed, Petrarch’s conception of poetry can be perceived as a departure from the spiritually-minded work of his predecessor Dante, but ultimately they are both working with the idea of everlasting life. Petrarch, like his contemporary Catherine, travelled throughout Italy and to Provence, an itinerant poet. He wrote the poetry of his *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*⁹⁶ over 40 years and continued to reorder the work, dealing more with fragments than the unified vision that Dante followed from his *Vita nova* through the *Commedia*. Though this poetry collection, famed for inspiring centuries of secular love poetry throughout Europe, may not popularly be read as a religious text, his 366 poems follow the 365 days of the liturgical calendar (with an introduction); he famously met Laura on Good Friday, and the last *canzone* is dedicated to the Virgin.

In considering the two word clouds above, there is significant overlap between Petrarch’s poetry collection and Catherine’s corpus of letters — also a fragmentary piece of writing that was done over many years, though not quite with the same editorial hand that Petrarch employed. Petrarch, unlike Dante, is defined by torment, and the words with negative connotations are more pronounced in Petrarch’s word cloud. The words that map over each other between Catherine and Petrarch include “dolce,” “amore,” “fuoco / foco,” and “lume” directly. The word “anima” is common to both, but much more frequently used in Catherine’s work, and “morte” is common to both but more used in Petrarch’s poems. Both are concerned with speech and words — Catherine uses “dico” frequently whereas Petrarch uses “parole.” They are both interested in desire and want, with Petrarch making use of the word “desio” often and Catherine using “vuole.” In terms of words of a more negative register, in addition to “morte,” Catherine

⁹⁶ “Fragments of common things” or “Fragments composed in vernacular,” now often referred to as the “Rime sparse” or “Il canzoniere.”

uses words like “pena” and words concerned with the crucifixion (“crocifisso,” “sangue”), and Petrarch opts for “dolor” with more despondent words like “ombra,” “lagrime,” “grave.” A departure between the two is Petrarch’s use of natural words like “verde,” “ciel(o),” “terra,” “natura,” and words that are concerned with seeing like “vista,” “veder,” and “occhi,” which are also common to Dante. A suffering lover like his courtly predecessors, Petrarch bears a cross for Laura, which leads to suffering that peaks at *Sonnetto* 365 where the speaker laments having loved a mortal creature over God, and the “tu” that had been reserved for Laura now addresses God in a melancholic love of last resort: “Tu che vedi i miei mali indegni et empì, / Re del cielo invisibile immortale” (5-6)⁹⁷. The last *canzone*, which has the semblance of redemption is not an entirely earned resolution, but still speaks to the movement from the beloved to the divine. Though the speaker is turned into himself and is unable to find an ultimate solution against the schism within himself, he still projects onto the beloved as a means to approach the divine, consistent with Catherine’s own language of “self-knowledge.”

The turn from Laura to the Virgin at the end of Petrarch’s *Rime sparse* works in the direction of transforming the work into a chain of love that operates between God and humankind. The Virgin is now the object of his love as she stands in as a figure marked by an intimate love relationship with God. The poem becomes a prayer, rife with ritualized and formulaic language that also recalls Dante’s own prayer to the Virgin in *Paradiso* XXXIII.⁹⁸ Speaking of Petrarch’s fascination with monastic spirituality, Mazzotta writes, “It can be said that Petrarch broadens the vast fields of theological reflection at the very moment when he confronts the figments of his vision and the demons of his own self. This is Petrarch’s radical project” (166). That is, Petrarch’s religious writing like *De otio religioso* do not do the same

⁹⁷ “You who see my shameful and impious sins, / King of Heaven, invisible, immortal” (trans. A. S. Klein).

⁹⁸ As in “Vergine Madre, figlia del tuo figlio” (XXXIII, 1).

work that the *Rime sparse* do truly to expand religious experience in a way that does not relegate it to confined spaces. This mediation between the divine and the secular is evident in Petrarch's poetic understanding of the Virgin, borrowed from Dante's *Paradiso* XXXIII (27-29)⁹⁹:

Vergine pura, d'ogni parte intera,
del tuo parto gentil figliuola et madre,
ch'allumi questa vita, et l'altra adorni¹⁰⁰

The Virgin as mediatrix, who illuminates this life, and adorns the other, working between the poet and the divine, and as a paradoxical woman who is both daughter and mother of her offspring (and later "madre, figliuola et sposa" (47)), serves as a figure who complicates the many fragments of Petrarch's work and vision.

As exemplified in the figure of the Virgin, one of the more striking aspects of Petrarch's poetry is his use of paradox and oxymoron, which is frequently employed in mystical writing. Catherine and other mystics like Iacopone use oxymoron in many instances to begin to describe their respective relations to God, or that which is ineffable. In her first *Orazione*, she sets up a series of binaries, showing how low a creature she is compared to her creator:

Tu, deità, somma sapiencia, io ignorante e misera creatura, e tu somma ed eterna
bontà; io morte e tu se' vita, io tenebre e tu luce, io stoltizia e tu sapiencia, tu infinito
e io finita, io inferma e tu medico, io fragile peccatrice che non t'amai mai; tu
bellezza purissima e io sozzissima creatura.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ "Vergine Madre, figlia del tuo figlio" (*Par.* XXXIII, 1).

¹⁰⁰ "Virgin, pure, perfect in every way, / daughter and mother to your noble Son, / you who illuminate this life, adorn the other" (trans. A.S. Kline).

¹⁰¹ "I am a foolish and wretched creature / while you are supreme eternal goodness. / I am death / and you are life. / I am darkness / and you are light. / I am ignorance / and you are wisdom. / You are infinite / and I am finite. / I am sick / and you are the doctor. / I am a weak sinner who have never loved you. / You are purest beauty / and I am the filthiest of creatures" (trans. Noffke).

The creature represents wretchedness, folly, death, darkness, ignorance and finiteness, while the creator represents all the opposite virtues. The opposing words occurring in close succession create a dizzying effect, and ultimately do not prove to be contradictory as the creature is made of the creator, so the divine (and conceivably the human) can occupy this paradoxical position. Similarly, Petrarch uses oxymoron and paradox throughout his *Rime sparse*, notably in his Sonnet 134 that treats death and life, hate and love, imprisonment and freedom: “Pace non trovo, et non ò da far guerra; / e temo, et spero; et ardo, et son un ghiaccio” (1-2).¹⁰² The speaker-lover is unable to find peace despite being done with war, and fears and hopes and burns and freezes. Like Catherine, Petrarch juxtaposes contradicting words against each other, to describe his current, love-struck dizzying state. Catherine takes love and hatred in turn as well, as she depicts the soul, which must feed on other souls (that is, winning them to salvation) in her *Dialogo*: “Dico che ella mangia, prendendo in cibo le anime sulla mensa della santissima croce... Dico che lo schiaccia coi denti, altrimenti non lo potrebbe inghiottire; lo schiaccia con l’odio e con l’amore” (161).¹⁰³ Invoking oxymoronic language to describe a paradoxical situation (a soul eating other souls in order to save them) is poetically fitting and makes it possible for Catherine to render this difficult experience in language. For many 14th-century writers, both earthly and divine love exist as experiences outside of the full range of human language, and they rely on literary devices like paradox to attempt to convey these personal events to others.

The mingling of erotic and spiritual love within the context of literature is something that was likely enabled through the context of mystical writing that preceded the writing of lyrics and epics. As both types of love are ultimately ineffable, both poets and mystics attempt to approach their beloveds and their own subjectivity as the lover through similar literary devices ranging

¹⁰² “I find no peace, and all my war is done / I fear and hope, I burn and freeze like ice” (trans. Wyatt).

¹⁰³ “She eats the food of souls for my honor at the table of the most holy cross ... And she chews it (for otherwise she could not digest it) with hatred and love” (trans. Noffke).

from allegory and metaphor to oxymoron and paradox. In considering texts from both a distant perspective through computational analysis and through a close reading with historical context, innovative approaches developed by both mystics and poets working in emerging vernacular languages are brought to light as they each grapple with describing the indescribable in order to reach others through their words.

Chapter III

Catherine's Letter Writing and Her Italian Network

Considering the collaborative nature of writing, I will begin to unpack the significance of the social network that Catherine cultivated around herself, which in turn fostered her writing and readership, and drove her reception and legacy after her death. This chapter will consider the connections that Catherine made in her lifetime that are illuminated historically through her letter production, setting up the chapter that follows which will analyze the strategic and rhetorical nature of her letters. Catherine's letters are persuasive, evocative, and lyrical, and serve as a material extension of her spirituality and political engagement, as well as markers of the many friendships she formed and nurtured throughout her life.

Collected along with her *Dialogo* after her death, only eight of the original transcriptions actually sent to their addressees survive (Noffke, "The Writings of Catherine of Siena" 297):

- T298, T320, T329, T332, T319 can be found in Siena's Biblioteca comunale degli Intronati T.III.3
- T365, T192 can be found at the Church of Santa Lucia in Siena
- F16 (discovered by Robert Fawtier) is in the Church of Saint Aloysius at Oxford.

The major manuscripts containing letters that exist are grouped into "various 'families' of codices ... suggest[ing] that, at a quite an early stage, individual disciples made small collections of letters that had some personal meaning for them" (Noffke, "The Writings of Catherine of Siena" 299). The major families of codices are the Pagliaresi, Maconi and Caffarini, which Noffke describes at length in "The Writings of Catherine of Siena: The Manuscript Tradition" (296-324).

Caffarini's manuscripts which contain a total of 294 letters are the major source of the printed editions, with T.II.2 and T.II.3 at Biblioteca comunale degli Intronati in Siena as the most significant of the group. Comprised of two volumes from the early 15th century, the first volume is no longer fully extant, as pages sent to the Vatican in 1658 have not yet been returned. Today in Siena the collection totals 219 letters, with 80 letters in the first volume and 139 letters in the second volume.¹⁰⁴ Caffarini's scriptorium in Venice, which he tasked with propagating Catherine's texts, was the source of this collection. What is most striking about this edition of letters is the degree to which it was illustrated, with 19 full-width drawings in total — nine (extant) illustrations in the first volume, and ten in the second. With a professional scribe, a very orderly and clean aesthetic, impressive illustrations, and large size, "the volumes of letters are in format and script clearly library desk books," and the breadth of the letters forecasted Aldus Manutius's printed edition of Catherine's letters (Luongo, "Saintly Authorship in the Italian Renaissance" 153). As Jeffrey F. Hamburger and Gabriela Signori argue, while Caffarini was not alone in promoting Catherine's canonization, he took a "multimedia" approach, "in which copies and translations of texts play as important a role as images and relics," and I would add that he ties these together through binding image and text together in books (3). The orderly aesthetics of the manuscripts are echoed by the very structured organization of the books that was in keeping with 15th century values.

Apart from manuscripts, the letters were first printed in a small collection of 31 by Fontanesi in Bologna in 1492 (Cavallini xiv). Aldus Manutius worked from the 294 letters in Caffarini's volumes, and through research found another 74 in various other manuscripts, producing a large print edition of 353 letters in Venice in 1500 (Noffke, "The Writings of

¹⁰⁴ Noffke has the total number of letters in the volumes as 220, with 81 letters in the first volume and 139 in the second (318); Luongo has the total number as 223 letters and does not offer a breakdown by volume (153). My count is from looking at the manuscripts in June 2015, and the letters are numbered in the margins.

Catherine of Siena” 302). Worth noting is that Aldus Manutius’s printing of Catherine’s letters predate his editions of Dante and Petrarch, which were completed in 1502 and 1501 respectively. Over time, additional letters were added or new versions were brought to light, with an edition by Girolamo Gigli in 1721 that added 21 letters; Edmund Gardner’s 1907 appendix to *Saint Catherine of Siena* included eight additional letters; Robert Fawtier published two new letters in 1914; and Eugenio Dupré Theseider published another two new letters in 1931 raising the current total of letters that we have today to 386 (Noffke, “The Writings of Catherine of Siena” 303). Today’s critical edition of the letters was completed in English translation by Suzanne Noffke. Her four volumes are grouped in chronological order, as much as she was able to do so, which she arranged based on her archival research and through linguistic analysis across the corpus. I have followed Noffke’s chronology though the data we have available cannot be absolutely precise. There is no current critical edition of the letters in Italian, though there is a CD-ROM edition of *Le Lettere* edited by Antonio Volpato available in the larger corpus *Santa Caterina da Siena: Opera Omnia*, edited by Fausto Sbaiffoni and published in Pistoia in 2002. Volpato is currently working on a critical edition with a critical apparatus to be published, though the CD-ROM edition contains Volpato’s texts of the letters.

In his book *The Art of the Network: Strategic Interaction and Patronage in Renaissance Florence*, Paul D. McLean discusses the role that letters play in building and sustaining relationships in 15th-century Italy. As a sociologist, he reflects broadly on how social interactions shape the lives of individuals, and how individuals are defined by those around them (1-2):

Our careers are made — and we are made — through our interactions with others, as well as through the performance of those tasks to which we have access by virtue of our connections to others. We become more fully the persons we are through interaction, our personhood being constructed out of a number of different identities we adopt, singly or in combination, in different interactional settings. We may achieve autonomy, and achieve a private conception of self independent of attributions of identity put upon us by others, through the accumulation of multiple network ties and participation in social interaction coursing across multiple networks and diverse cultural domains.

Despite her status as a 14th-century woman, Catherine managed to interact with people of high position through her persuasive writing (and speech acts),¹⁰⁵ spirituality, and commitment to the social good. She maintained interactions across multiple networks — the lay, religious, and nobility — and through diverse cultural domains that extended from and beyond her home city of Siena. A daughter of a wool-dyer father, Catherine grew up in a non-noble family that had some ties to religious professions. Her career — which included the roles of mystic, writer, ambassador, spiritual advisor, and what we may anachronistically call social worker — was largely successful due to the formation of her social ties. Though today we cannot fully examine all the historical temporal-based works that she did to develop the network around her, the collection of her letters that we have provides an indication of the remarkable life that she negotiated for herself.

¹⁰⁵ “[Catherine] had attracted followers, to whom she had communicated her insights in friendship in hundreds of letters, in her prayer as she meditated aloud in their presence, and in the book she had written as a summary of her teaching for them and others like them. She had wanted to preach, and she had preached, even to cardinals and popes. She had influenced common folk and politicians, clergy and hierarchy, by her words and by the power of her life” (Noffke, *Vision Through A Distant Eye* 63).

Catherine's letter-writing career begins before 1374 and extends to February 15, 1380, about two months before her death at the age of 33. Her letters were addressed to men and women geographically located throughout Siena, Tuscany, and beyond the Italian peninsula. Collected as part of a canonization project, today we cannot be certain that we have access to some form of all the letters that she wrote, nor can we be absolutely sure that these letters are written and copied as Catherine intended as there were many opportunities for alterations.¹⁰⁶ I agree with Noffke's assertion that "There is little cause ... to question the essential authenticity of the text as we have it, even though it is not in Catherine's own hand" (Noffke, *Letters* xxiii).¹⁰⁷ This collection of letters, therefore, provides a revealing glimpse into Catherine's historical reality and serves as a document of her literary power.

Though Catherine opted to use the Italian language throughout her writing and correspondence (as discussed above), her reach crossed linguistic barriers and into greater Europe through letters to the Avignon papal court; Charles V, King of France and his brother Louis, Duke of Anjou; Louis the Great and Elizabeth of Hungary. The heatmap of Catherine's recipients (Fig. 1), which takes into account the known locations of letter recipients (308 of the total), shows how Catherine's output radiates from Siena, reaches to the north and to the south,

¹⁰⁶ "There are a number of possible levels at which alterations could have entered into the text of the letters: at the initial dictation, in the making of original or dictation copy for a collection, and finally in any later transcription from collection to collection. But at each of these levels we are dealing with scribes who, as devotees of Catherine, had every reason to be as faithful as possible to the *sense* of their text if not always to the minor peculiarities of its expression (e.g., orthography and grammar)" (Noffke, *Letters* xxiii).

¹⁰⁷ At length, Noffke has this to say about the authenticity of the letters: "Both in these originals and in the letters which have survived only through later transcription and editions, minor differences from letter to letter and frequent suppression of Siennese dialectal forms would indicate some influence of the individual scribes' backgrounds on what each transcribed. It would be surprising if this were not true, given the scribes' linguistic, cultural and professional diversity and the speed at which Catherine was accustomed to dictate. Overall consistency in style and in conceptual development, however, make it certain that in substance the wording is Catherine's own — especially since the tenures of the various scribes and the nature of the first manuscript collections precludes any effort on their part to create a unified style, whether by collusion or by an individual scribe. In addition, her scribes' veneration for this woman they called *mamma* would hardly have been compatible with their doing any conscious violence to her thought. Linguistic analysis has in fact established that, other than for very minor details of grammar and orthography, the language of the letters is indeed Catherine's" ("The Writings of Catherine of Siena" 297-8).

and trickles into Europe. This is also reflective of some of the travels that Catherine made during her lifetime, throughout Tuscany, to Avignon and to Rome. The spread of her letters does not speak only to geographical diversity, but to linguistic variety as well. Italian, a relatively new vernacular language, was even more formally varied at the time of Catherine's writing than it is in contemporary dialects today, as the language developed and clustered throughout what would become Italy. Catherine's recipients within Italy did not consist solely of native Italian speakers, as she wrote to the Englishmen William Fleet and John Hawkwood while both were in Italy, the French-born Pope Gregory XI in his travel to and settlement in Rome, and many of her bilingually educated male correspondents may have been more accustomed to writing in Latin than in Italian, especially as a lingua franca.

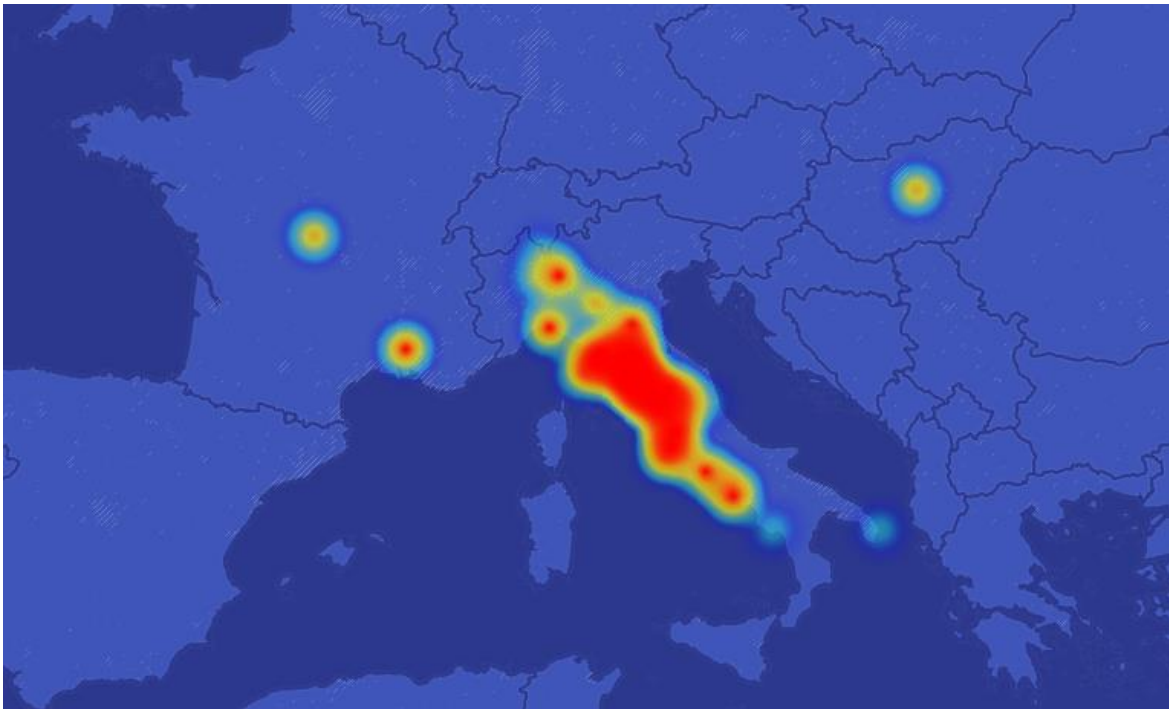


Fig. 4. Recipient locations of Catherine of Siena's letters

Interactive online version: <http://bit.ly/CatherineLetterMap>

Catherine's adeptness at cultivating her network probably began with her decision to join the *mantellate* at about 18 years old, as it was a tertiary group that allowed her access to the Dominican Order and also provided her with relative autonomy as a lay practitioner. While in Pisa in 1375 on a diplomatic mission working to sway Pisa and Lucca in favor of the papacy, Catherine began to write letters frequently and in a manner that would continue to be developed throughout her letter writing career, which persisted for the rest of her life. F. Thomas Luongo notes (*Saintly Politics* 81),

Catherine's letters from Pisa reveal an increasingly intense preoccupation with the dispute and its threat to church unity, and develop what was to become a familiar theme in her letters to secular and clerical leaders: a three-pronged program for peace in Italy and the church, consisting of the interdependent goals of Crusade, return of the pope to Rome, and ecclesiastical reform.

What is particularly noteworthy about Catherine's letters beyond the political is that they present to us a literate community of women from the 14th century, providing material echoes of exchange between *mantellate* and other women who wrote letters to each other in absence, or to offer advice and spiritual guidance. Of her letters that survive, one-third of them were written to women, proving the significance of her relationships with women, as well as her esteem of them, as she chooses to address not only the Pope, political leaders and her confessors, but also women belonging to her order and those from different classes. The female community she belonged to was also significant in the propagation of her letters, as they were her first scribes. The dispersal of Catherine's letters therefore establishes a group of women capable of reading and writing in the vernacular and, though this was not considered to be literacy in a Latinate world, reveals the community-based education attained by these individuals.

More than negotiating the various intricacies of a classed society, the letters Catherine wrote also straddled the public and private realms of her cultural context; Catherine wrote on both political and spiritual matters, often to public figures, but did so in the intimate medium of the personal letter. Letters to the Pope, Catherine must have known, would not have been read solely by him, and indeed the personal letters arrived with a public performance, as Raymond sent an accompanying messenger to Pope Gregory XI in order to interpret, *viva voce*, Catherine's Italian words into Latin (Tylus 161). Her letters were also often written in a communal manner with fellow *mantellate* nearby serving as her scribes, as in T204 addressed to Bartolomeo Dominici, which shows community and jocularly at once: "Dice Alessia grassotta, che voi preghiate Dio per lei e per me, e per Cecca perditrice di tempo."¹⁰⁸ Catherine's acts of mediation are further embodied by the language registers she employs in the texts of the letters themselves.

F. Thomas Luongo observes that Catherine (*Saintly Politics* 74)

mixes elements of high formality (for example, the superpapal self-identification as "servant and slave of the servants of Jesus Christ") with a chatty style typical of a personal letter (for instance, the informal and simple closing, "I won't say more," a typical element of Tuscan secular and mercantile letters). The tone of Catherine's letters is not popular or colloquial, but frequently strikes a lofty and prophetic register; nevertheless, consistent with the style of the personal letter, the language is her own Sieneese vernacular, immediate and familiar, a "low" form of language.

Through mixing registers between her opening and closing statements, Catherine shows her relative ease with negotiating a more learned rhetorical approach indicative of a public document with the features of a textual conversation between friends. Catherine mixes her serious religious

¹⁰⁸ "Fat Alessa asks you all to pray to God for her and for me, and for Cecca the time waster" (translation mine).

guidance with “small shreds of gossip and conversation,” as Jane Tylus notes (33).¹⁰⁹ Catherine works to blend the orality of chattiness with a strict and consistent formality that is in keeping with her spiritual mission.

The vast majority of Catherine’s letters include a strict formal opening that adheres to the literary genre of the letter, and closely follow the example of papal letters. While positioning herself as a humble servant in a rhetorical move on which to base her persuasion, Catherine then continues on to convey to her correspondent what she wants for them to do. The introductory sentences of letter T236 to the nobleman Bartolo Usimbardi, for instance, exemplifies Catherine’s practice:

Al nome di Gesù Cristo crocifisso e di Maria dolce. Carissimo figliuolo in Cristo dolce Gesù. Io Catarina, serva e schiava de’ servi di Gesù Cristo, scrivo a voi nel prezioso sangue suo; con desiderio di vedervi ardere nella fornace della divina Carità ...¹¹⁰

Breaking this format down, the formal openings to all her letters almost always follow this formula:

1. Invoking Christ and sometimes Mary
2. Referring to the addressee as her dearest son or daughter in Christ
3. Self-referencing as the servant and slave of Christ
4. Stating that she writes to the recipient in the precious blood of Christ
5. Stating what she desires to see the addressee do.

¹⁰⁹ This is shown in letters such as T204 and others in which the scribes refer to themselves, including Giovanna self-referencing as “Giovanna pazza,” for example (T144, T152, T208)

¹¹⁰ “In the name of Jesus Christ crucified and of gentle Mary. Dearest son in Christ gentle Jesus[.] I Caterina, servant and slave of the servants of Jesus Christ, am writing to you in his precious blood. I long to see you on fire in the furnace of divine charity...” (trans. Noffke).

This trajectory enables Catherine to create hierarchies that tie both herself and the addressee to Christ and sometimes the Virgin, while also positioning herself in the dual role of both a mother to the addressee and a slave of Christ. Evoking the blood of Christ as her ink connects her letters to a common literary trope of the Middle Ages while also connoting the precious nature of her missive. By setting up these relational values, Catherine's request to her recipient is justified and even expected; it is as though Catherine is submitting a resume showing her qualifications prior to making demands. This careful positioning, along with her ability to write comfortably in very formal and very candid registers appropriate to each addressee reveals Catherine's adeptness at negotiation.

Though her letters are offered as personalized correspondence typically tailored to an individual, they also provide a general spiritual value to her direct followers and even future Christians. Catherine was aware that her letters to the Pope were being read to him aloud, likely before a larger audience of his counselors and others. Moreover, she would know that items in the Pope's possession would enjoy a life beyond that of its owner, being of interest not just to those of his own time, but to those in the future. She knew that her letters, like other spiritual texts that circulated through churches would have been saved in church registries, especially as her reputation grew. Even in her own capacity, Catherine would sometimes tell her recipients or messenger-scribes to share the letters with others by passing them along or reading them aloud, so that a wider audience would be able to benefit from them (Tylus 190, 201). Indeed, the major themes of her letters were often general enough to be applicable to many. As Karen Scott notes, Catherine's letters typically discuss a "main virtue which she wishes her correspondents to understand and practice better" demonstrating that her letters can be situated in a wider spiritual discourse applicable to many (100). Her request to preserve not just her *Dialogo* but her "other

writings” as well affirms that Catherine is aware of the textual legacy of her letters and believes that the work will continue to serve God by reaching living people.

The Corpus of Letters and Network Analysis

Using digital network visualization to analyze Catherine’s output through her extant letters renders some of the trends of her letter-writing career more obvious. Social network analysis investigates social structures, using nodes (people and things) and the ties that connect them to visualize data. In the visualization below (interactive version online), done in the statistical programming language R and the JavaScript D3 library, the nodes are comprised of letter recipients and letters, and the curved lines represent links between and among letters and their respective recipients. The nodes here are rendered as names of the recipients in text, and the letters are referred to by numbers as used in the Noffke edition of the letters. Time is also represented in this visualization, moving clockwise from the top with letter T61 to Agnesa Malavolti and the *mantellate* (likely written before the plague of the summer of 1374), and follow through to letter T373 (written to Raymond of Capua on February 15, 1380), the break of which can be seen through the orientation of the text describing those nodes. Note that “Raimondo da Capua” does not appear next to letter T373; this is because recipients appear in chronological order based on the first instance that Catherine writes to them. When one hovers over the name of a letter, the recipient(s) and the tie connecting the letter to the recipient(s) is rendered in a red-orange color, making it readily apparent which letters are being written to a single addressee, and which are addressed to a non-collective group. When one hovers over the name of a recipient, the relevant letters addressed to him or her are displayed in a violet color, immediately showing how many letters that recipient received, and whether the letters were

clustered throughout Catherine's letter-writing activity or if they were limited to a particular time period.

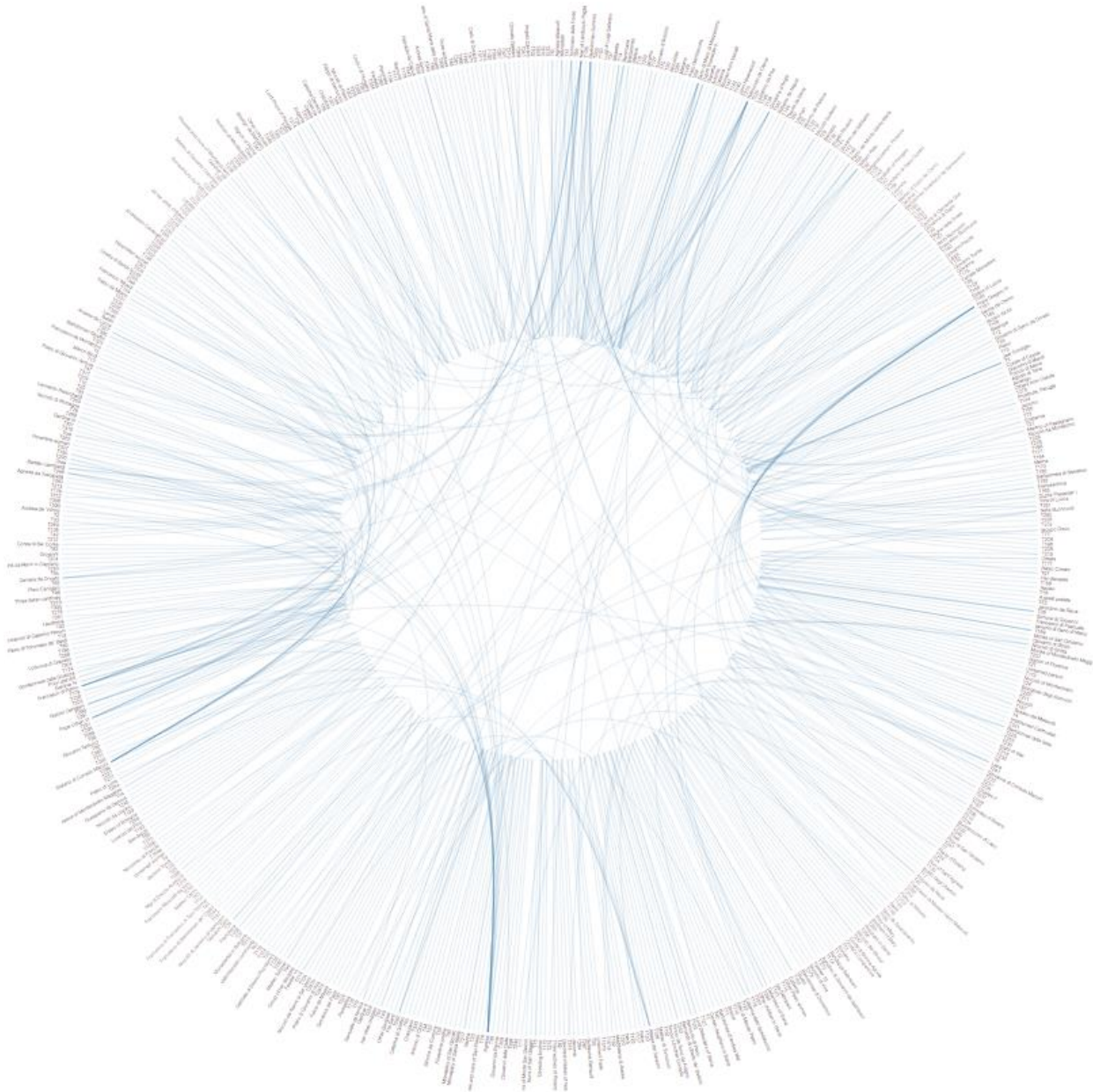


Fig. 5. Flare Network Diagram of Catherine's Letters and Their Recipients

<https://caterina.io/flare.html>

As the ties connecting letters and recipients will cluster more dramatically to certain recipients, it becomes more obvious who are the most important nodes in Catherine's written output. Though one would expect Catherine's confessor, Raymond of Capua, to play a significant role throughout her letter production (and we do have 16 extant letters addressed to him), a lot of activity can be seen with respect to some other recipients: Monna Agnesa, wife of the Florentine tailor Francesco di Pipino (and with whom she shares some addressed letters); Bartolomeo Dominici, a Dominican friar, sometimes confessor, travel companion, and who provides a testimony in the *Processo Castellano*; Neri di Landoccio Pagliaresi, a Sienese nobleman and poet, disciple, scribe, and eventual hermit, who was responsible for the earliest gathering and dissemination of Catherine's correspondence. Clustering around the times when they served as pope, Gregory XI received 14 extant letters between 1375 and 1377, showing the extent of Catherine's work to bring him back to Rome, with about 70% of the extant letters sent prior to his decision to return. Pope Urban VI received eight extant letters between 1378 and 1380, revealing a continued literary-based outreach and spirituality on Catherine's part after her great achievement of convincing Gregory XI to return to Rome. The Queen of Naples, Giovanna d'Angiò, received seven extant letters between late 1374 and 1380, exemplifying Catherine's political involvement that persisted throughout, and likely drove her letter writing career at least in part.

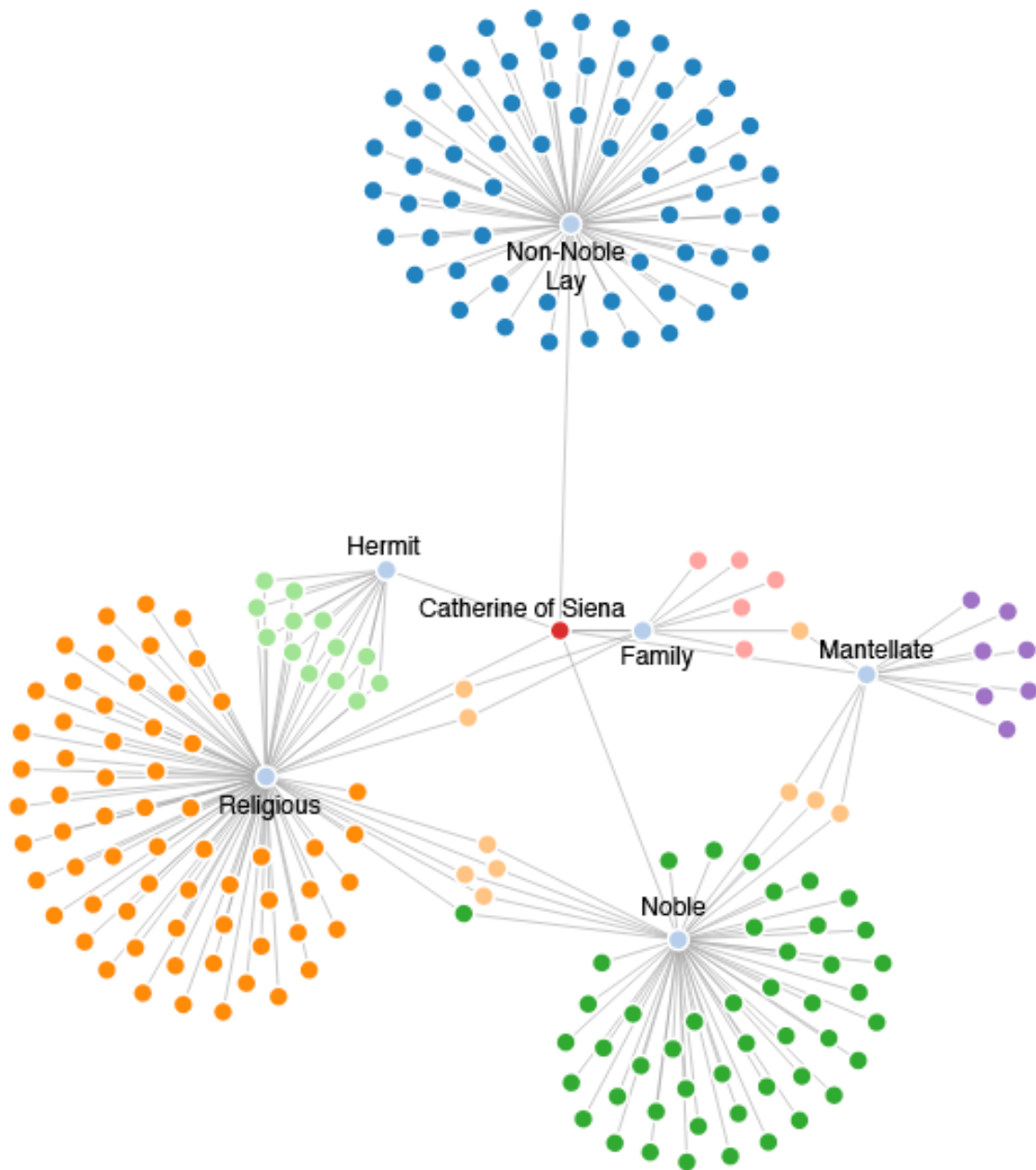


Fig. 6. Catherine of Siena's Network

<http://caterina.io/network.html>

In the network diagram above, done in JavaScript and the D3 library, Catherine is the red node in the center connected to various groups shown in light blue, with several intersections for

each group. The dark blue group at the top are the non-noble secular people in her network, including figures like Niccolò di Toldi, whom she comforted during his execution, and the tailor Francesco di Pipino and his wife Agnesa from Pisa. Moving clockwise, the pink nodes are part of a family cluster, and the purple nodes are part of a *mantellate* cluster, both of which include the orange node of Lapa, Catherine's mother who was both a biological family member and later became a member of Catherine's order. The green cluster shows the members of the nobility that Catherine had interactions with, along with three orange nodes that were both nobles and *mantellate*: Alessa dei Saracini, Francesca di Clemente Gori, Agnesa di Orso Malevolti. These three women, who were educated as members of the nobility, were instrumental to Catherine's learning to read and write. Though the network of nobles that Catherine had connections with was not as large as the non-noble lay or religious networks, it is clear that they are still a numerous group, and the overlap with the *mantellate* show how close some of the members in this group were to Catherine. Between the nobility on the bottom right and the orange cluster of the religious on the bottom left are some more overlaps, including Giovanni della Celle, a Benedictine priest at Vallombrosa, and Tora di Piero Gambacorta, a Dominican *mantellata* who accompanied Catherine to Avignon. Another hybrid node, Francesco di Messer Vanni Malavolti, is rendered in green because he was a nobleman during Catherine's life and became a Benedictine later, showing how Catherine's persuasiveness continued to resonate with those in her network even after her death. The light green group is comprised of the religious hermits that Catherine interacted with, all Augustinian from the community in Lecceto, including the Englishman William Flete.

Letter recipients are also visualized by group and sex in two states of the interactive diagram below:

Catherine of Siena's Letter Recipients

Recipients **Recipient by Group** Recipient by Sex

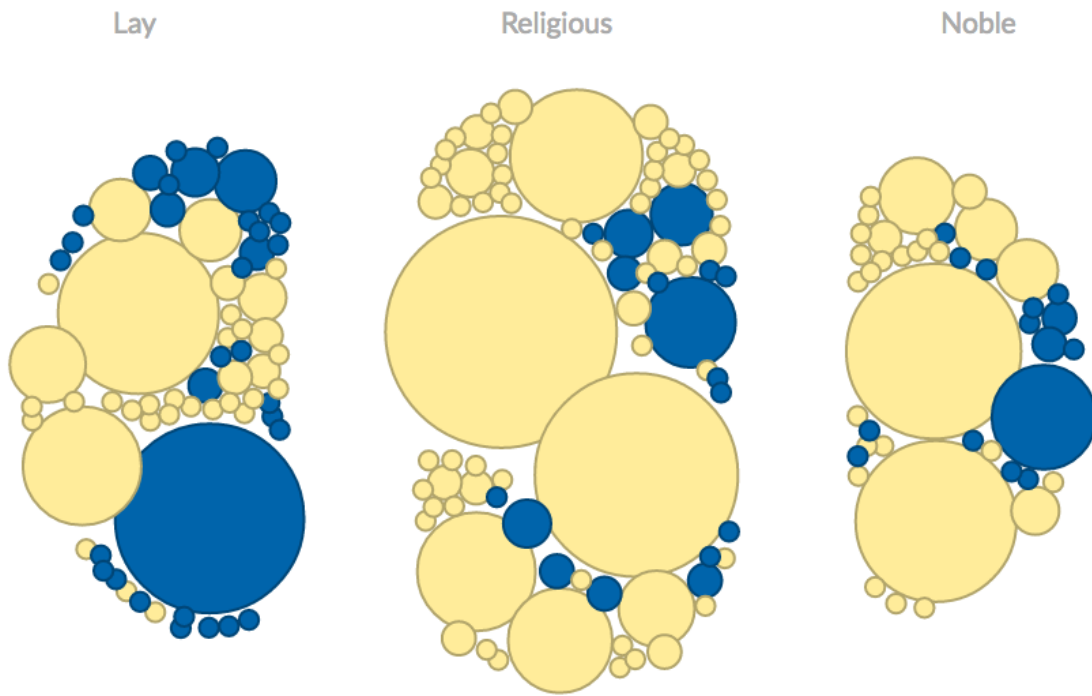


Fig. 7. Catherine of Siena's Letter Recipients by Group

<https://caterina.io/bubbleTest/>

Catherine of Siena's Letter Recipients

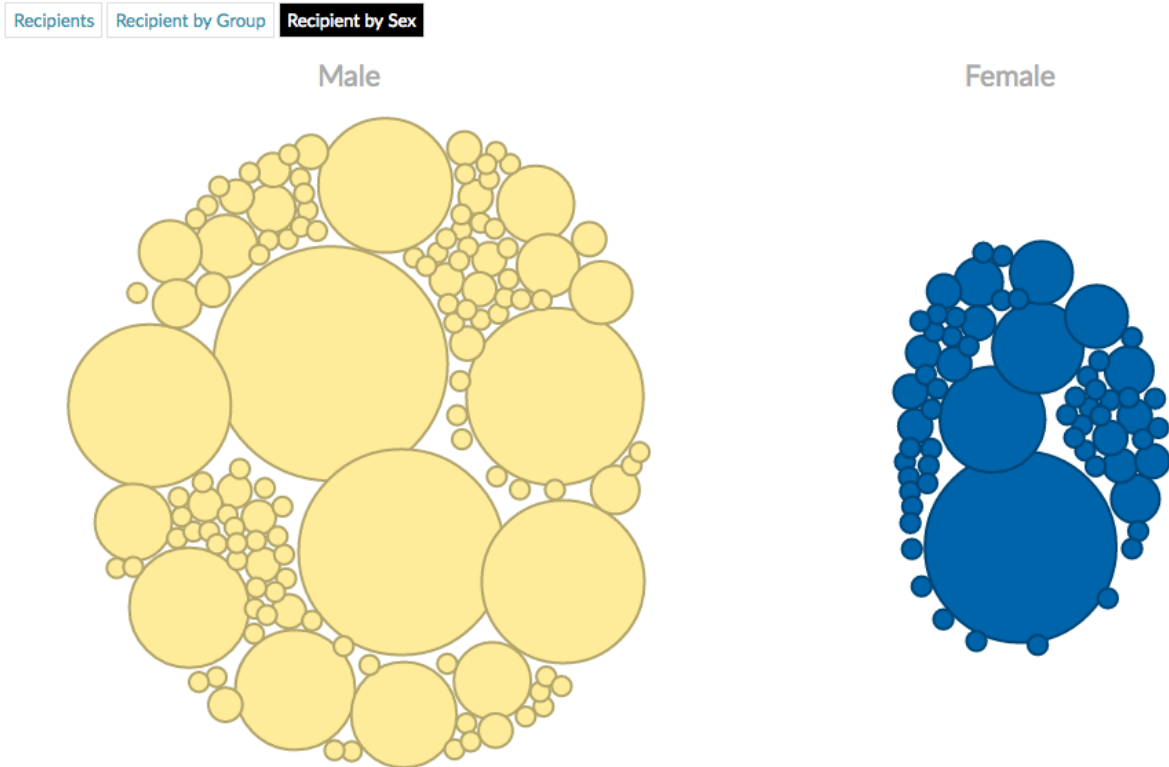


Fig. 8. Catherine of Siena's Letter Recipients by Sex

<https://caterina.io/bubbleTest/>

The size of each of the circles is indicative of the number of letters that each recipient received. Yellow circles represent male recipients and blue circles represent female recipients. We see that the woman who received the most letters from Catherine was a laywoman, Agnesa di Francesco di Pipino, having received 13 total. Her husband who was also included as an addressee with Agnesa, received 11 total. The person who received the most letters, as one may expect, was Catherine's confessor Raymond, who was the recipient of 16 letters total. In terms of total number of letters, Pope Gregory XI received the second highest number of letters, having received 14 from Catherine. With the diagram divided by groups, we can see that the religious group received the most letters, with non-noble secular and noble more equal in distribution.

Men also received more letters than women did, and many individual men were frequent recipients of Catherine's epistles.

The professions that Catherine interacted with are visualized in the following bubble diagram, that breaks down the groups by religious orders (Benedictines, including an inner circle of abbots; Dominicans, including an inner circle of *mantellate*; Augustinians, Franciscans, and Carthusians), other abbots, priests, archbishops, cardinals, popes of the Holy See, and the non-religious (poets, lecturers, lawyers, notaries, military, politicians, and titled nobility).

Catherine of Siena's Network by Professional Group

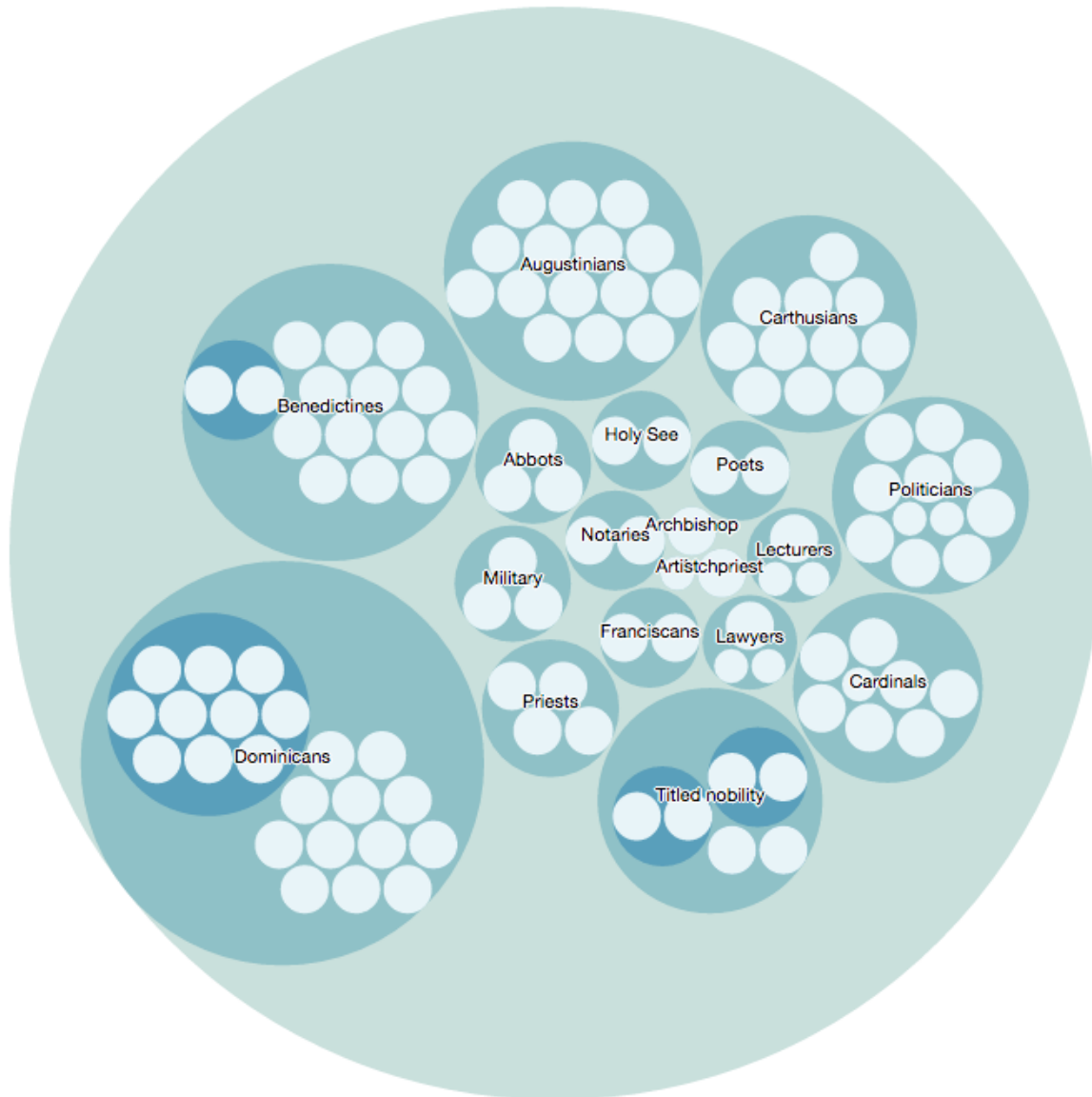


Fig. 9. Catherine of Siena's Network by Professional Group

<https://caterina.io/bubbles.html>

In the diagram it is clear that the Dominicans make up the largest group that Catherine interacted with, but it is significant to see that she is well-connected among politicians and religious people

who are of high rank, like cardinals. Catherine also enjoyed network connections to other professionals such as lawyers, lecturers and notaries, and even enjoyed the company of the poets Giannozzo di Benci Sacchetti and Neri di Landoccio Pagliaresi.

The final visualization shows Catherine's letter activity over time to three groups: religious, noble, and non-noble lay. Over the course of the period of Catherine's letter-writing career, spanning from 1374 through 1380 (the year of her death), we see the number of letters proliferates between the years of 1377 and 1379. The dip in letters in 1376 is the year that Catherine traveled as ambassador to Avignon. Catherine only wrote five letters in 1380; two to Pope Urban VI, and three to Raymond of Capua, with the last two dated February 15, a few months before Catherine died on April 29. What is particularly interesting is that the letters to the nobility continue to increase over time until 1380, with three letters written to noblemen in 1374, nine in 1375, ten in 1376, 13 in 1377, 26 in 1378, and 34 in 1379. This suggests that Catherine has a greater need to write to these connections as she becomes more politically involved and needs greater support in terms of powerful interlocutors and perhaps financial backing. It also suggests that she was able to build her network of these well-connected individuals as her reputation grew.

Steamgraph: Letters by Group over Time

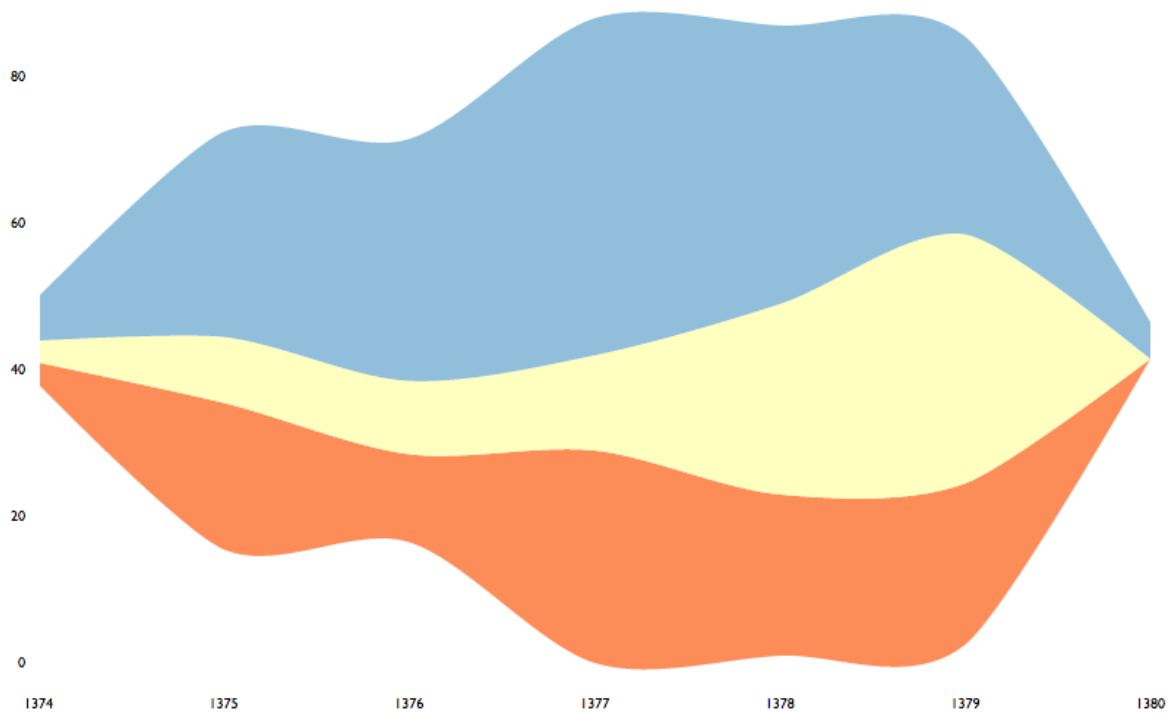


Fig. 10. Steamgraph Diagram of Catherine of Siena's Letters by Group over Time

<https://caterina.io/steamgraph.html>

As many of the correspondents with whom Catherine wrote were scribes, translators, writers and orators, collectors of her writing, and attested to her sanctity, Catherine successfully developed a literary network around herself. The community-building nature of Catherine's outreach and expression of religiosity is evidenced in the archive of letters that we have extant today. Of the nearly 400 letters that remain, 46.2% of the letters were addressed to more than one recipient. That is, for almost half of the letters that Catherine wrote, she intended more than one recipient, whether it was a group of the *mantellate*, a Sienese political group, or a husband and wife (as with the letters addressed to Francesco di Pipino and Monna Agnesa). By writing to the plural *voi*, Catherine is consciously spreading her writing, connecting with many more recipients

and getting more value and potential outreach for a single letter. Though there are some instances when she writes similar letters to different recipients (as when she writes to people she does not know well), she is more often writing to recipients who are already connected to each other, tapping into a community that connects through and radiates around her.

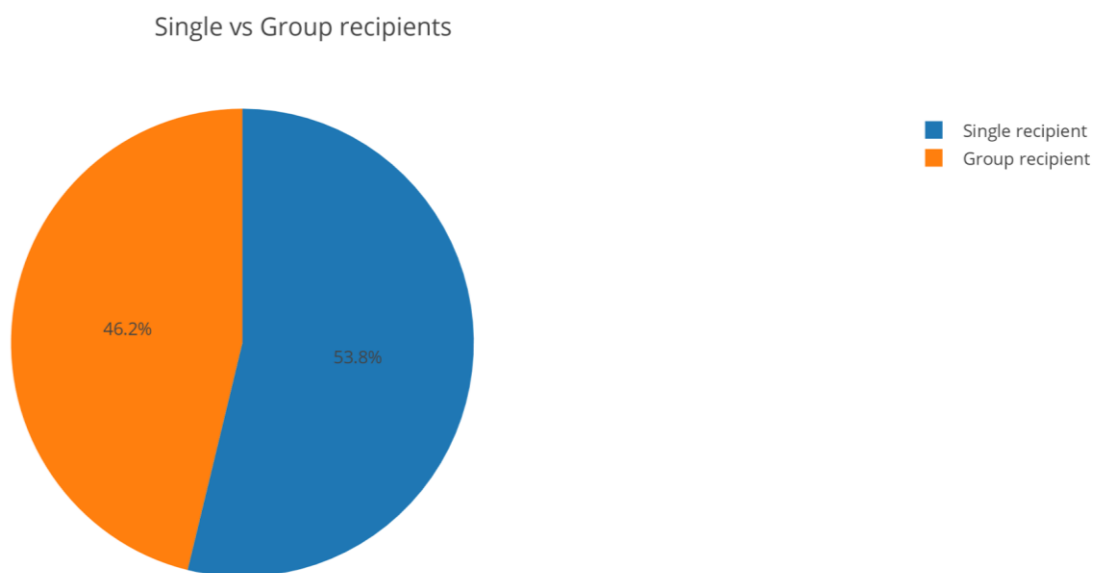


Fig. 11. Pie Chart of Single Letter Recipients vs. Group Letter Recipients

Indeed, Catherine works to develop this community further as the majority (73.7%) of her correspondents are the recipients of more than one letter over the course of her letter writing career. The remaining 26.3% of her extant letters are written to recipients who only received one known letter from Catherine, which in many cases is indicative of a one-off requirement of Catherine's, as when she wrote to a prostitute from Perugia on behalf of the prostitute's brother (T276). In other cases the recipients may have in fact received more than one letter but they are

no longer extant. This is likely the case in letter T151b, which is no longer decipherable beyond the title of “Frate” for its having been overwritten so much. The overwriting is, however, indicative of a continued literary engagement with Catherine’s texts, as people continue to interact with these physical objects that were collected and maintained to testify to Catherine’s spirituality as well as her productive writing career. With all of this in mind, when considering the circular flare network diagram, it is important to realize that it is Catherine of Siena who is at the center of this network, serving as the connecting force among all of these recipients and letters.

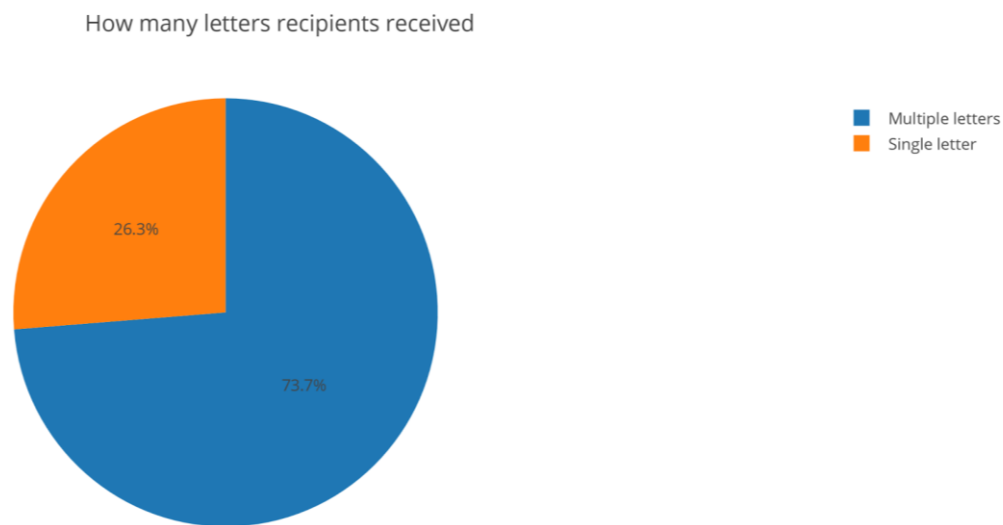


Fig. 12. Pie Chart of Single Letters Received vs. Multiple Letters Received by a Particular Recipient

Among the people in her community of literary exchange were female friends and disciples including Alessa dei Saracini, Francesca di Clemente Gori (often referred to by her nickname “Cecca”), Giovanna dei Pazzi, and Giovanna di Capo, who also served as her earliest scribes and who are recipients of several of her letters. Alessa dei Saracini, a young woman of a

noble family who took the habit of Saint Dominic, served as a travel companion to Catherine and also offered her house in Siena as a place of refuge for her outside of the crowded Benincasa household. As a noblewoman, Alessa was educated at least in the vernacular language, and taught Catherine to read Italian (Noffke, *Vision Through A Distant Eye* 40). These women, including other female recipients of letters, are indicative of a female literacy throughout Italy and beyond, and also point to a literary network of women in the vernacular language. Though many of these women likely did not read and write in Latin due to their being precluded from masculine discourse, they were still capable at creating this broader community of written discourse and exchange in Italian.

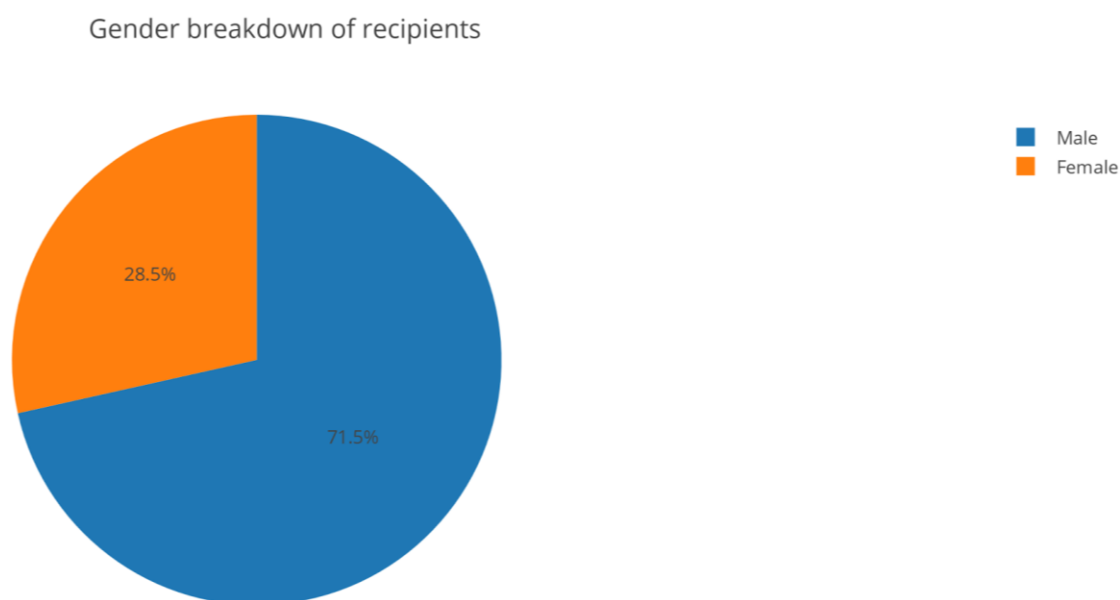


Fig. 13. Pie Chart of the Gender Breakdown of Letter Recipients

Though women serve as a significant part of her community, they make up about a third of her letter correspondence, with men comprising the bulk of the recipients of her letters. This is

likely due to women's lack of access to education, but also speaks to Catherine's ability to penetrate the more exclusive masculine religious community of her time, and how she did so through adept written exchange. During a time when the vast majority of Italian spiritual women were considered to be "witches" or otherwise transgressive in some way, Catherine was able to advocate persuasively and successfully for her authentic mystical experiences and knowledge of God (King 145).

An instrumental figure in asserting and maintaining Catherine's reception and legacy was her confessor and advisor from 1374 on, Raymond of Capua (Raimondo della Vigne da Capua). Destined for a legal career and student of law at the University of Bologna, Raymond instead chose to enter into the Dominican Order while still a student in 1350. First assigned to Montepulciano, he served as chaplain to nuns of the Dominican Second Order in the monastery there. Agnes of Montepulciano, a former prioress of this monastery, was highly regarded by the community, and Raymond became her first biographer when he wrote of her life about 50 years after her death. Clearly, as someone educated in law and someone who was writing hagiography even before his encounter with Catherine, Raymond was a person who realized the power of writing. And in fact this early writing did eventually prove to be fruitful as Agnes was canonized by Pope Benedict XIII in 1726. Raymond was sent next to Rome and then to Siena, where the Master General assigned him to be the spiritual director and confessor to Catherine of Siena, who was already a notable figure by the time Raymond began to work with her, and she in turn helped his career by causing him to be noticed by the pope. Because of his important relationship to her, Raymond received a large number of letters from Catherine, including letters that describe important turning points in her life, such as when she describes learning to write by her own hand (T272), and when she recounts the execution of the Perugian Niccolò di Toldo in 1375

(T273). Becoming the Master General of the Dominican Order in the year of Catherine's death, he worked on the authoritative *vita* of her life between 1385 and 1395. The result of this work, a hagiographical text that is known as the *Legenda maior*, would establish itself as the most influential biographical narrative on Catherine.

Among her male scribes were her disciples Francesco di Messer Vanni Malavolti, Neri di Landoccio Pagliaresi and Stefano di Corrado Maconi. Francesco, who was first a married nobleman then became a Benedictine, received only one extant letter of Catherine's. He provided testimony for the *Processo Castellano*, a document compiled in the beginning of the 15th century, and which proved to be instrumental to the canonization of Catherine. Neri, as discussed above, received many of Catherine's letters, and was an important correspondent for Catherine as he helped to secure her literary legacy through collecting and disseminating a group of her letters. Stefano was also responsible for a collection of Catherine's letters. A member of the lesser nobility of Siena and a travel companion, like Francesco he also provided one of the 24 testimonies to the *Processo Castellano*, and entered the Carthusian Order after Catherine's death. With two scribes among the men who collected Catherine's letters for posterity, as well as two who bore witness to her saintly acts, it is clear that her scribes greatly respected Catherine's good works and writing, honoring the latter through maintaining and circulating it.

Among the other correspondents of hers who provided testimony for the *Processo Castellano* are Bartolomeo Dominici, a Dominican friar, sometimes confessor and travel companion who received nine extant letters from Catherine; Martino, Abbot of the Vallombrosan monastery of San Michele in Passignano, who received two extant letters; Pietro di Giovanni Ventura, an early disciple who was converted by Catherine to become a Dominican friar and served as Catherine's emissary and also received two extant letters. Tommaso d'Antonio da

Siena, also known as Caffarini, was a very important figure in Catherine's life and her afterlife. Responsible for beginning work on the *Processo Castellano* through the solicitation of testimonies, and providing a testimony himself, Caffarini also campaigned to seek papal approval of the Dominican *mantellate* and worked to develop and legitimize the saintly cult around Catherine of Siena (Ferzoco 187). A native of Siena, devoted follower of Catherine, and the director of the Sienese *mantellate* in the year of her death, Caffarini proved to be extremely influential in promoting reform within the Dominican order, receiving recognition for the *mantellate*, cultivating Catherine's cult and verifying her sanctity (Parsons 16). Together with Raymond of Capua, Caffarini is responsible for much of the hagiographical writing about Catherine in the decades after her death. Creating an abbreviated version of Raymond's *Legenda maior*, called the *Legenda minor*, Caffarini would go on to write the much longer *Libellus de Supplemento* to include additional biographical as well as hagiographical details about Catherine.

Cristofano di Gano Guidini, a follower of Catherine's who did not fully commit to a religious life, choosing instead to marry and have children, served sometimes as a scribe for Catherine, according to Caffarini, and most importantly rendered her *Dialogo* into the Latin text that would be used in the Middle English translation the *Orchard of Syon* (Luongo, *Saintly Politics* 136). A Sienese notary who was active in politics, Cristofano was aware of what was required to gain legitimacy through textual distribution in contemporary Europe. Though Catherine exercised control over her texts through use of the Sienese vernacular, Cristofano and Raymond — who wrote his *Legenda maior* in Latin — and more than likely Catherine herself, realized that Latin translation would be necessary to guarantee true circulation of her writing. Were it not for this Latin translation by the notary Cristofano, who was also a writer of his own autobiography, the *Libro di memorie* which includes vivid recounts of his relationship with

Catherine, the *Dialogo* likely would not have been later translated into Middle English for the nuns of Syon Abbey. Though Catherine would always assert that spiritual priorities were more important ones, including in her letters to Cristofano, she likely understood that his political involvement was an important node in her larger network, and his spirituality proved to be more civic in nature, particularly in his devotion to the Spedale della Scala. Indeed, F. Thomas Luongo reads Catherine's tone in her letters to him not necessarily as reproachful, but suggests that it is only "affectionate mocking of a follower whom she knew to be committed only so far" (*Saintly Politics* 137). I believe that it is Cristofano's "civic piety," as Luongo calls it, which leads to Cristofano's taking action with the translation of Catherine's book, as he ensures that the educated elite and those with political power can read it and take it seriously.

Catherine, however, also exerted her own power over the afterlife of her texts, by entrusting her writing into the hands of Giovanni Tantucci, one of her early followers. A priest and scholar, likely educated at Cambridge along with William Flete, Giovanni was convinced by Catherine to "renounce his comfortable worldly life as a priest and dedicate himself to the ascetic life" as early as 1365 (Russell 79). He became part of the Augustinian hermit community of Lecceto, and Catherine probably was provided access to this network through Giovanni. She would continue to correspond with this network frequently throughout her letter writing career (Jorgensen 146). Because of this long history, and likely because of his scholastic approach to religiosity, she had a great deal of respect for him and she entrusted him with her writings including her letters before her death (Noffke, "The Writings of Catherine of Siena" 333). He absolved her on her deathbed, and also delivered her eulogy. While Caffarini suggests that he was at a loss for words, his taking on the duties of her absolution and funerary oration indicates that he took care of her afterlife in every sense of the word, including that of her work.

In her last letter, written to Raymond, Catherine entrusts the *Dialogo* in particular to four men, the addressee along with Bartolomeo de' Dominici, Tommaso della Fonte and the "Master" Giovanni Tantucci (T373):

Anco vi prego che il libro e ogni scrittura la quale trovaste di me, voi e frate Bartolomeo e frate Tomaso e il Maestro, ve le rechiare per le mani; e fatene quello che vedete che sia più onore di Dio, con missere Tomaso insieme: nel quale io trovava alcuna recreazione. Pregovi ancora, che questa famiglia, quanto vi sarà possibile, voi gli siate pastore e governatore, siccome padre, a conservarli in dilezione di carità e in perfetta unione; sicchè non siano nè rimangano sciolte come pecorelle senza pastore. E io credó fare più per loro e per voi dopo la morte mia, che nella vita.¹¹¹

Catherine here anticipates her death and, after an account of her experiences of January 20, 1380, goes on to explain her dying wishes. This letter, explicitly dated February 15, 1380 in three manuscripts, is very likely her last dictated letter, written the same day as T371, which was also written to Raymond, but done in her own hand. What I would like to highlight here is that for Catherine her writing and her greater community are thought about nearly simultaneously — for her, this is her legacy, and she cares about what happens to both her writing and her *famiglia*. In requesting that several of her followers be responsible for her book and whatever other writing they can find, she ensures that there are several guardians to keep track of her archives. She has found "recreazione" in them, from the Latin "recreate" as in "create again, renew," which would

¹¹¹ "I also ask you and Frate Bartolomeo and Frate Tommaso and the master to take care of the book and any other writing of mine you may find. You, together with Messere Tommaso, do with them whatever you see would be most to God's honor. I've found some recreation in them. Also, as much as you can, please be shepherd and governor to this family, as a father, and keep them in the love of charity and perfect unity so that they may not be left cut loose like little sheep without a shepherd. As for me, I believe I can do more for them [and you] after my death than I have been able to do during my life." (Trans. Noffke)

have been used similarly in Old French. In Middle English, “recreation” was more indicative of “mental or spiritual consolation.”¹¹² Italian etymology shows that *ricreare* deals with a sense of “rianimare” alongside rebuilding and restoration, but also with the joy that comes after the strain of rebuilding: “ogni sorta di piacevolezze per distrarre l’animo.”¹¹³ If we think of her writing as a re-creation, it speaks to the reforms that she began to make in the Dominican Order as well as in her special kind of spirituality that engages with the community through good works and writing, and it can also speak to the reflection and the pleasure that can be found after doing this work. Together with her greater network, her *famiglia*, Catherine is able to spread the commitment to reform as well as the joy that can be found in recreating.

¹¹² Oxford English Dictionary.

¹¹³ Dizionario etimologico online.

<http://www.etimo.it/?cmd=id&id=14623&md=1fe8106bb448cfb90e84749a5523d247>

Chapter IV

“Ogni cosa passa”: How Catherine’s Letters Negotiate This World and The Next

As indicated in the previous chapter, Catherine of Siena was incredibly effective in building a network of interlocutors around her, the echoes of which are exemplified through her letter production. Much has been written about Catherine’s relationships with the two popes to whom she wrote letters, Gregory XI and Urban VI, with recent works by Blake Beattie, Cristina Mazzoni, and F. Thomas Luongo. Though her correspondence with these two men who were among the most powerful figures in Europe during her lifetime shows her success in navigating social networks, looking at her letters written across the various groups she intersected with offers a more complicated perspective. Catherine writes with her audience in mind, tempering her recommendations and advice as needed. This is especially so when others may prove to be effective in helping her causes through financial or political means. This is not to say that her interpersonal relationships did not matter a great deal, as she did correspond with many of the same individuals throughout her letter-writing career, as shown in the flare network diagram of the previous chapter (Fig. 5). She also offered spiritual guidance and advice to many who came seeking it from her. The letters to her fellow *mantellate* offer compassion and are written with the addressees’ best interests at heart, guiding them through forms of piety that are within their physical capabilities.

This chapter takes a more granular approach to the letters, exploring first the theme of financial language that is used throughout the corpus, and then letters that offer advice to women. Because Catherine engaged with people across classes, professions, and titles, her letters that treat financial subjects are extremely telling, as she will temper her rejection of money to

some, but insist that others do more with less. In either case, her use of financial language grounds her more solidly in the economic realities of her biological life, showing that her other-worldly spirituality is dualistic with a this-worldly approach. This balancing act takes into account that various people have different relationships with money, and that sometimes money in the right hands can prove to help spiritual matters.

As stated above, Catherine wrote about a third of her letters to women, and these letters are often friendly, written in groups or to groups, and offer advice to those who are attempting to model themselves after Catherine herself. Though in theoretical terms Catherine offers a nearly impossible balance between public and private devotion, she tailors the ideal to her recipients. As with issues dealing with monetary realities, Catherine recognizes that her female audience is not homogenous, and that not every individual woman could hope to be as steadfast in their bodily punishment or public charity as Catherine. Instead, Catherine recommends that women do what they can based on their own abilities and limits. In examining these letters, we see a practical expression of spirituality that reveals Catherine's ability to carefully negotiate this world and the next, attempting to retain her followers and bolster their outcomes in the afterlife.

Financial Language in the Letters

Catherine's letters prove to be quite pragmatic and aware of her readership, providing worldly language, and monetary language in particular, as a means to drive home spiritual teachings. Though one may expect monetary analogies to be most effective with a non-noble lay and noble audience, Catherine also employs economic metaphors when writing letters addressed to religious recipients. As Catherine and her contemporaries were living during a time when the mercantile class was flourishing, trade was increasing, and written language was becoming more

accessible to the general population (i.e., the rise of the vernacular in Europe), commercial and monetary concerns touched a greater portion of society. This blending of the spiritual and the earthly shows a careful negotiation of mixed signs that can at times seem contradictory, especially as Catherine’s teachings encourage poverty. The letters to nobles in particular must achieve a prudent balance between efforts to be complimentary to those who are likely providing some financial or political support to Catherine herself and theological teachings that favor poverty over riches.

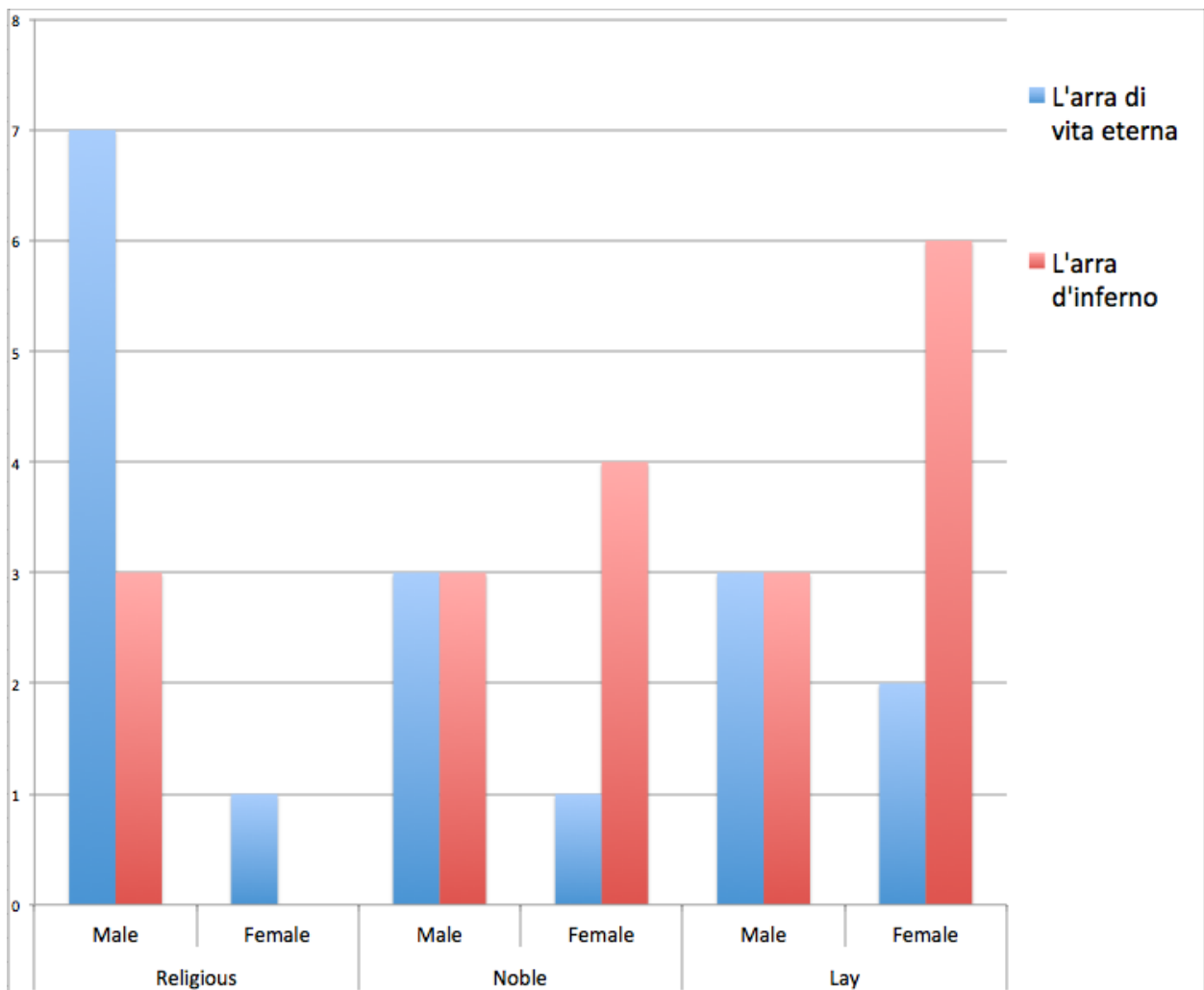


Fig. 14. Bar Chart of Language Use to Recipients across Group and Sex

In 39 letters, 15 of which were written to women, Catherine uses the economic metaphor of “l’arra,”¹¹⁴ a word that Catherine also uses in the *Dialogo*¹¹⁵ and which Suzanne Noffke explains “has the sense of a down payment, a pledge of future payment in full” (*The Dialogue* 68). The 1612 edition of the *Vocabolario dell’Accademia della Crusca* (Venezia) provides the following definition for the word *arra*: “propriamente parte di pagamento della mercatantia pattuita, che si da al creditore per sicurtà, laquale, in caso, la mercatantia non si volesse, si perde.”¹¹⁶ The word therefore has a sense of a deposit, a payment installment, or a guarantee that the item will be paid in full at a future point in time. In her letters, Catherine uses the phrases “l’arra d’inferno” (“down payment on hell”) and “l’arra di vita eterna,” (“down payment on the eternal life”) most frequently, with just “l’arra” used twice and “l’arra della morte eternale” used once to Raymond.¹¹⁷ In the chart above, we can see that she uses the phrase “l’arra di vita eterna” most often for male religious, and more so for men than for women throughout each class (religious, noble, and non-noble lay), respectively. Women were far more likely to receive the phrase “l’arra d’inferno,” except in the case of female religious. Catherine is therefore much more likely to tell women that they are making a down payment on hell while telling men that they are making a down payment on the eternal life in paradise.

Striking a parallel between financial language and spiritual matters is not original, but Catherine uses this analogy frequently. The Latin Vulgate version of the Bible (the one Catherine would have been familiar with) of the Epistle to the Ephesians (the tenth book of the New

¹¹⁴ In modern Italian editions, this word is rendered as “la caparra,” as in the 2006 Edizione Cantagalli.

¹¹⁵ Chapter 28, “Bene è dunque macto colui che schifa tanto bene, ed elegge innanzi, di gustare in questa vita l’arra de l’inferno, tenendo per la via di sotto, dove va con molte fadighe e senza neuno refrigerio e senza veruno bene; però che per lo peccato loro sonno privati di me che so’ sommo ed eterno Bene” (emphasis mine).

¹¹⁶ Available via http://vocabolario.sns.it/html/s_index2.html.

¹¹⁷ T65, T322, T76, T359, T39, T331, T244, T83, T124, T241, T216, T64, T85, T301, T340, T335, T44, T38, T151a, T369, T355, T361, T299, T264, T360, T111, T310, T5, T20, T194, T258, T3, T276, T304, T48, T84, T143, T221, T104.

Testament) includes the passage “qui est pignus hereditatis nostrae in redemptionem acquisitionis in laudem gloriae ipsius” (Ephesians 1:14).¹¹⁸ Both “pignus” and “acquisitionis” have economic connotations, with “pignus” referring to a pledge (or security for debt) or a mortgage, and “acquisitionis” referring to an acquisition.¹¹⁹ Following the canonical text of the Bible ensures that Catherine is not using language that is far removed from tradition, which could serve to protect her as a woman writing about spiritual matters. As neither of the Latin words used in Ephesians is a cognate for “arra,” it is worth noting that Dante does use this word in *Purgatorio*: “Lo sommo Ben, che solo esso a sé piace, / fé l’uom buono e a bene, e questo loco / diede per **arr’ a lui d’eterna pace**” (28, 91-93, emphasis mine).¹²⁰ Dante uses this language in the passage narrated by Matilda in the earthly paradise, where she gives the historical context of Eden and explains that “the high Good” paid a down payment to man for eternal peace. Even predating Dante is the work of female mystic Angela da Foligno, whose Latin text, often referred to as her “*Libro*” (as with Catherine’s *Dialogo*), also uses the word “arra:”

Studeamus igitur sustinere tribulationes temporales cum patientia, immo & cum gaudio. In eis enim signum recipimus, quod sumus dilecti & electi ab amato, & **recipimus arram suae hereditatis**. (Angela da Foligno, *Angela de Fulginio* 390, emphasis mine)¹²¹

¹¹⁸ Available via <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ephesians+1%3A14-16&version=VULGATE>. “which is the pledge of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of His glory” (<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ephesians%201:13-15&version=KJ21>)

¹¹⁹ Definitions available via <http://latin-dictionary.net/>.

¹²⁰ “The Highest Good, whose sole joy is Himself, / made man to be — and to enact — good; He / gave man this place as pledge of endless peace” (trans. Mandelbaum).

¹²¹ An Italian translation from 1604 reads: “Affatichiamoci di soffrire co[n] patientia le tribolazioni té porali, poiche i[n] esse riceviamo il segno, che dall’amato nostro siamo tenuti cari, & riceviamo **un’arra** dell’heredità del Paradiso” (trans. Girolamo Giovannini, 123 v, emphasis mine).

Angela is directly referring to the Epistle to the Ephesians, which may indicate that in oral language people were substituting the word “arra” for “pignus” in 13th- and 14th-century Italy. Even if this were not the case, the use of the common word “arra” suggests again that there is an exchange between mystical and poetic writing, as writers in both genres are using this specific financial word to write about spirituality.

In one of Catherine’s letters to Don Giovanni dalle Celle, a Vallombrosan whom she met at his hermitage outside Florence in 1374, she explains that those who are full of love for God taste the down payment they make on the eternal life, while those who direct love to themselves taste the deposit they make on hell (T322):

Non gli è duro il portare pena nè fadiga; anco gli è diletto, perchè con odio santo ha abbandonato sè medesimo, onde riluce in lui la virtù della pazienza, con le sue sorelle, cioè forza e longa perseveranzia. Questi gusta l’arra di vita eterna: siccome quegli che stanno nell’amore proprio, gustano l’arra dell’inferno; perchè sono fatti incomportabili a loro medesimi, amando disordinatamente sè e le creature e le cose create.¹²²

The letter, believed to be dated shortly after December 13, 1378, is the second letter she has addressed to Don Giovanni dalle Celle, and in it she encourages him to follow through to be present at the council of the servants of God that Urban VI had invited him to join in Rome. The letter deals with the theme of charity, which she refers to as a “dolce madre” (“sweet mother”), and she explains that she is sure that if his love were to be consumed in the oven of divine

¹²² Noffke translates “gusta l’arra” as “foretaste” rather than “taste the deposit”: “It’s not hard for them to bear pain and labor; in fact, it’s a joy because they have in holy hatred let go of themselves, and so the virtue of patience shines brightly in them, along with her sister virtues, fortitude and enduring perseverance. They have a foretaste of eternal life, just as those who live in selfish love have a foretaste of hell because they have become unbearable to themselves by loving themselves and other people and created things in a disordered way.”

charity he will certainly leave behind his selfish love, but she constructs her letter to suggest that his responding positively to the invitation from the pope is a kind of test of this love:

Or m'avvedrò se voi sarete amatori di Dio e della reformazione di santa Chiesa, e se voi non ragguarderete alle proprie consolazioni. Son certa che, se voi averete consumato l'amore proprio in questa fornace, voi non curerete d'abbandonare la cella e le vostre consolazioni; ma piglierete la cella del cognoscimento di voi, e con essa verrete a ponere la vita, se bisognerà, per la verità dolce. Altrimenti, no. E però vi dissi ch'io desideravo di vedere consumato ogni amore proprio di voi nella fornace della divina carità.¹²³

As one of her “staunchest defenders,” Don Giovanni dalle Celle was likely living a life consistent with what Catherine describes as being a lover of God, but in this letter she is setting out to ensure that he will dedicate himself to reform the Church (Noffke, *Letters* vol. IV 35). By setting up the financial dichotomy between those who direct their love towards God in the act of divine charity and those who direct their love inwards towards selfish comforts, Catherine is able to emphasize that these choices serve as deposits on the eternal life.

In a series of letters Catherine uses variations on the theme of the down payment, which seems to be indicative of the spiritual growth of the addressee. Serving as a patron and disciple to Catherine, Ristoro di Piero Canigiani was a learned lawyer as well as a leading Guelf in Florence. The son of Piero Canigiani and older brother of Barduccio, he acted in a political capacity on behalf of Florence in dealings with Queen Giovanna of Naples and Gregory XI. Catherine first writes to support him through the Revolt of the Ciompi, a rebellion of

¹²³ “Now I shall see whether you are a zealous lover of God and of the reform of holy Church, and whether you are unconcerned about you selfish comforts. I am certain that if you have had your selfish love consumed in this oven you won't mind leaving your cell and your comforts. Instead you will take to the cell of self-knowledge, and there come to the point of laying down your life, if need be, for sweet Truth. But not otherwise. And this is why I said I long to see all your selfish love consumed in the oven of divine charity” (trans. Noffke).

unrepresented laborers that began in Florence in 1378. The houses of prominent Guelfs — considered to be enemies of the people — were looted and burned around June 22, 1378, and his house and his father’s were among those that were damaged. His father was also exiled from the city. Catherine does not explicitly mention these events in her first letter to Ristoro, T299, but mentions a tragic event in his life, causing Noffke to date this to July 1378 (*Letters* vol. III 160). In this letter, she discusses how loving material goods is problematic, because those are only loaned to us, and we will be parted from those goods either during life (when God wills it), or when we die. If people love with sensual love, and with love of the world and its pleasures, people make down payments on hell, as she mentions twice in this single letter:

Questo è quello miserabile amore che tosse il lume della ragione, e non lassa
cognoscere la verità; tosse la vita della Grazia, e dacci la morte; tolleci la libertà, e
facci servi e schiavi del peccato, che è quella cosa che non è: onde in questa vita gusta
l’arra dell’inferno.¹²⁴

...

Egli è fatto incomportabile a sè medesimo: onde gusta l’arra dell’inferno; però che il
vermine della coscienza sempre rode.¹²⁵

What is significant in these instances is that Catherine contextualizes the love of money and possessions with the idea of a down payment, striking a very apt parallel that can prove to be effective for those in the noble class, especially at a time when those in Florence are suffering from having lost many of their earthly possessions. Catherine’s letter continues to explain that

¹²⁴ Noffke again translates the two instances in this letter as a “foretaste of hell:” “This is the wretched love that takes away the light of reason and keeps us from knowing the truth. It robs us of the life of grace and gives us death. It deprives us of liberty and makes us servants and slaves of sin, the thing that is not. And so in this life we have a foretaste of hell.”

¹²⁵ “We become unbearable to ourselves. We have a foretaste of hell because the worm of conscience gnaws away continually” (trans. Noffke).

the love of God, which can be manifested in acts of charity, is a love that cannot be taken away as sensual love can. She writes, “E però questi cotali di neuna cosa possono avere pena, perocchè hanno posto l’amore e l’affetto in quella cosa che non gli può essere tolta,”¹²⁶ insisting that those who order their lives around God — acting with integrity in marriage, raising children to love God, and doing works of charity — will suffer no pain because love and affection cannot be taken away from them.

Based on the next letter addressed to him (T258), it is clear that Catherine had received a letter from Ristoro in which he described his commitment to reforming his life. She responded some time prior to August 10, “when the lifting of the interdict was publicly proclaimed in Florence” (Noffke, *Letters* vol. III 170). In this letter, Catherine discusses her happiness to see his “santo desiderio” (“holy desire”), explaining that his effort to forgive those who had wronged him will ensure that he lives in grace and peace. Those who live in hatred, however, “è privato di Dio, e sta in stato di dannazione; e in questa vita gusta l’arra dell’inferno: perocchè sempre si rode in sè medesimo, e appetisce vendetta, e sta sempre con timore.”¹²⁷ Again, there is the worldly image of making a deposit on the infernal afterlife through hatred, revenge, and fear. As the analogy had worked effectively in letter T299, Catherine uses it again, urging the noble Ristoro to continue to redirect his devotion from temporal possessions towards God instead. Catherine’s letter moves on to advise him to unburden his conscience of whatever he thinks is weighing it down, offering him concrete actionable tasks that she enumerates for his benefit. The fourth item that Catherine advises Ristoro on is his marriage:

¹²⁶ “People who act in this way are pained by nothing, since they have set their love and affection on what cannot be taken away from them” (trans. Noffke).

¹²⁷ “have lost God and are living in damnation; even in this life they experience a foretaste of hell. They are constantly eaten up inside, hungry for revenge and in continual fear” (trans. Noffke).

Aggiungoci una cosa: che nello stato del matrimonio voi stiate con timore di Dio, e con riverenza v'andiate come a sacramento, e non con disordinato desiderio. E i di che sono comandati dalla santa Chiesa, abbiate in debita riverenza, siccome uomo ragionevole, e non come animale bruto. Allora di voi e di lei, siccome arbori buoni, producerete buoni frutti.¹²⁸

Despite her lack of earthly experience in the domain of human marriage, Catherine is able to offer advice on best practices, revealing her adeptness at being aware of her audience and constructing spiritual paths that are attainable across personal circumstances.

In T301, her last letter to Ristoro, which Noffke dates later than T279 to mid-November 1378, Catherine implies that the recipient and his wife are earnestly considering the abstinence she had recommended in previous letters (*Letters* vol. III 332). Catherine is very happy for his commitment to spiritual love, and as she wants to see him continue to grow in “il lume e la virtù” (“light and virtue”), she tells him to focus on a few things. Again, these are very task-oriented, providing Ristoro with particular actions to carry out. As part of contextualizing the list as well as encouraging him to follow a virtuous path, she writes, “La virtù gli è tanto piacevole, che dell’uomo virtuoso egli ne fa un altro sè per affetto dolce d’amore; e in questa vita gli fa gustare l’arra di vita eterna: che stando nel mare tempestoso delle molte fadighe e amaritudini, gusta la pace e la dolcezza.”¹²⁹ In this letter there is a shift from a down payment on hell to a deposit or a pledge of eternal life. Catherine’s letters to Ristoro reveal a trajectory towards spiritual growth including some kind of virtuous spiritual attainment through Catherine’s financial knowledge

¹²⁸ “I’ll add one thing more. Live in the state of marriage with fear of God; approach it with reverence as a sacrament, and not with uncontrolled desire. Have due respect for the days commanded by holy Church, as a reasonable man, not as a brute animal. Then the two of you, like good trees, will produce good fruit” (trans. Noffke).

¹²⁹ “Virtue ... is so pleasing to God that in love’s affection he makes the virtuous person another himself; in this life he lets that person experience eternal life, so that he or she tastes peace and sweetness even on the stormy sea of bitterness and difficulty” (trans. Noffke).

that moves the recipient from paying down for a place in Hell to securing a position in Paradise instead. However, rather than Ristoro pledging money on eternal life, it seems more likely in this context that in return for virtuousness, God is offering a backed pledge on the eternal life to Ristoro, such that he can taste peace and sweetness during his time on Earth through doing good in the world.

Indeed, people on Earth are not the only ones engaging in financial exchanges, as Catherine explicitly discusses Christ's making a financial pledge to his followers in a letter to the Queen of Naples, Giovanna d'Angiò (T143). By adding the verb "pagare" ("to pay") alongside "l'arra," Catherine makes the monetary image even more explicit. She writes:

O dolcissimo amore Gesù, in segno che tu l'avevi presa per sposa, in capo degli otto dì tu le donasti l'anello della dolcissima e santissima mano tua, nel tempo della santa Circoncisione. Così sapete voi, venerabile madre mia, che in capo degli otto dì, se si levò tanta carne quanta è un cerchio d'anello, e cominciò a pagarci l'arra, per darci pienamente speranza del pagamento, il quale ricevemmo in su 'l legno della santissima croce, quando questo sposo, Agnello immacolato, fu svenuto, e da ogni parte versò abbondanza di sangue col quale lavò le immondizie e peccati della sposa sua, cioè l'umana generazione.¹³⁰

Catherine's imagery of Christ's circumcision is unique to her, though Dupré Theseider suggests that there may be a basis for it in Exodus 4, 25-26 (n. 4).¹³¹ In comparing Christ's foreskin to a

¹³⁰ "*Oh Jesus, gentlest love, as a sign that you had espoused us you gave us the ring of your most holy and tender flesh at the time of your holy circumcision on the eighth day. You know, my revered mother, that on the eighth day just enough flesh was taken from him to make a circlet of a ring. To give us a sure hope of payment in full he began by paying this pledge. And we received the full payment on the wood of the most holy cross, when this Bridegroom, the spotless Lamb, poured out his blood freely from every member and with it washed away the filth and sin of humankind his spouse*" (italicized text Noffke's).

¹³¹ "Then Zipporah took a sharp stone, and cut off the foreskin of her son, and cast it at his feet, and said, Surely a bloody husband art thou to me. So he let him go: then she said, A bloody husband thou art, because of the circumcision," King James version, available <http://biblehub.com/kjv/exodus/4.htm>

ring, she is giving it earthly value. In other letters in which she describes Christ's foreskin as a ring given to his followers, she provides additional details *in absentia* for the ring: it is neither gold nor silver.¹³² Christ's foreskin being implicitly likened to precious metals provides added financial value to the ring, yet Catherine emphasizes that the foreskin is worth so much more, as it is made of Christ's flesh and indicative of his first pain, that it is even better than a monetary pledge of the crucifixion to come. As Caroline Walker Bynum notes, "But Catherine herself, in letter after letter, says we do not marry Christ with gold or silver but with the ring of Christ's foreskin, given in the Circumcision and accompanied by pain and the shedding of blood ... shed for the sake of the world" (*Holy Feast, Holy Fast* 175). The blood and flesh shed during Christ's circumcision are a small sacrifice that show Christ's commitment to his followers, and is the first payment he makes to them. Eventually, he pays for all of their sins in full through his crucifixion, inviting them all to the wedding feast that they will find in Paradise.

The imagery of the wedding is canonical in Christian writing, bringing with it additional layers of earthly and financial imagery. Following the excerpt quoted above in T143 to Giovanna d'Angiò, the letter continues:

E attendete, che il fuoco della divina Carità ci ha donato l'anello non d'oro, ma della purissima carne sua; e hacci fatte le nozze, questo dolcissimo Padre, non di carne d'animale, ma del prezioso corpo suo: ed è questo cibo e Agnello arrostito al fuoco della Carità in su il legno della dolce croce. Adunque io vi prego dolcissimamente in Cristo Gesù, che il cuore e l'anima con ogni suo affetto e movimento e sollecitudine

¹³² Other letters that have the imagery of the foreskin ring are T221, T50, T261. See also Prayer 25.

si levi ad amare e a servire sì dolce e caro padre e sposo quanto è Dio, somma e eterna Verità, quale ci amò veramente, e senza essere amato.¹³³

As in other letters, the ring here is described as being more valuable than gold, and the feast of the wedding is a feast on the body of Christ. The flame that cooks the flesh is the fire of *caritas*, and the wood on which it is cooked is that of the cross. All of the material goods of the wedding are brought by God, including the ring and the banquet, and love is paid to the followers of God with no expectation of reciprocation, though Catherine urges followers to love and serve. Paying for a wedding, and paying a dowry (though Christ is typically depicted as the bridegroom rather than the bride), are all financial circumstances that Catherine's contemporaries would have understood. They would also understand faithfulness as an integral component of marriage, which Catherine goes on to describe later in the letter: "prima che romper la fede allo Sposo eterno suo."¹³⁴ Catherine's letters explain to their recipients that Christ makes a down payment with his circumcision and a full payment with his crucifixion to ensure that his followers can live an eternal life, but it is necessary that his followers do not counter this payment with their own payments on hell instead.

As Christ has made a full payment on the eternal life for the sake of his followers, all are indebted to him. To capture the significance of what Christians owe to God, Catherine uses the language of being in debt, and of sinners as being debtors (and indeed, all humans are sinners to some degree). This symbolism is used in chapter 25 of her *Dialogo*, where she asks why he is so merciful: "Chi ti muove a fare tanta misericordia? L'amore; non **il debito** o il bisogno che tu

¹³³ "Notice that the fire of divine charity gave us a ring not of gold but of his own purest flesh. This gentlest of fathers celebrated his wedding with us in a feast not of animal flesh but of his own precious body. This food is Lamb, roasted over the fire of charity on the wood of the sweet cross. So I beg you most courteously in Christ Jesus to lift up your heart and soul with all your affection, energy, and caring, to love and serve so gentle and dear a Father and Spouse as God, high eternal Truth, who tenderly loved us without being loved" (trans. Noffke).

¹³⁴ "...we would sooner die than break faith with our eternal Spouse" (trans. Noffke).

abbia di noi, poiché noi siamo rei e malvagi **debitori**” (emphasis mine).¹³⁵ The answer being that it is love that compels God to be so merciful to his followers, as he has no real need of the wicked debtors. Catherine uses the word “debito” in 101 of her letters, about 26% of her extant letters. Indebtedness, and its intersections with broader economic language, is an important aspect of Catherine’s spirituality, and throughout her corpus of letters, she uses the symbolism in a different manner. To exemplify her varied approaches, we will consider three letters in particular, one to Niccolò Soderini, one to a man believed to be a homosexual, and one to the Defenders of the People and the City of Florence.

Noffke dates letter T171 to late February 1376, when Niccolò di Ruggero (Geri) Soderini was one of the *priori delle Arti* in Florence (Noffke, *Letters* vol. II 22). It is likely that Soderini had become Catherine’s friend and disciple during her 1374 stay in Florence, and we have three letters in total written to him (T131 is dated earlier, and T247 later). In addition to focusing on the idea of indebtedness, this letter also takes up the words “legare” (to bind), “lega” (league), and “legame” (bond), suggestive of Florence’s intention to join the antipapal league which was not formalized until July 24th of that year. Throughout this letter, Catherine makes use of several themes and word plays, showing her ability to imbue her letters with complicated and intertwined messages. The language around indebtedness in this letter likens the relationship between Christians and God to the relationship between a son and his father. The son is forever indebted to his father for having been made of his flesh, and for having been given this flesh without having asked. She writes:

O non può mai offenderlo (né debbe offendere) che non sia in pericolo di morte, e in stato di dannazione. Egli è sempre debitore a lui, per l’essere che gli ha dato: e non

¹³⁵ “What could move you to such mercy? Neither duty nor any need you have of us (we are sinful and wicked debtors!) — but only love!” (trans. Noffke).

pregò mai il figliuolo il padre, che gli desse della sustanzia della carne sua;
nondimeno il padre, mosso per l'amore ch'egli ha al figliuolo prima ch'egli abbia
l'essere, gliel dà. Oh quanto maggiormente noi ignoranti ingrati sconoscenti figliuoli
possiamo patire di offendere il nostro vero Padre! Conciossiacosaché ci abbia amati
senza essere amato; perocché per amore ci creò e anco ci ricreò a Grazia nel sangue
suo ... e tutto ci ha dato per grazia, e non per debito.¹³⁶

As the son should never offend the father, Christians should never offend God, indeed it would be considered a worse transgression, and is viewed as pursuing death for having flagrantly gone against the one who granted life. Catherine is also incredibly clear in her analogy, not only does she refer to “vero Padre” in the quote above, but earlier in the letter she also writes, “Adunque con sollicitudine d'andare a dimandare l'adiutorio del Padre, cioè di Dio, conviencelo addimandare.”¹³⁷ Other imagery in the letter calls to mind Dante's schismatics of *Inferno's* Canto XXVIII, as she discusses cutting and joining, conflating their schism-inducing behavior of considering to join the antipapal league with the financial trope of being in debt and not making the appropriate payments, as though being in debt cuts one off from the greater whole.

Letter T21, dated to between February and April 1376, and believed to have been written during Holy Week (April 6-11), is written to a man who, critics believe, “has been involved in homosexual behavior,” due to the references to homosexuality (or “sodomy”) from biblical times (Noffke, *Letters* vol. II 144). Catherine addresses this person in the formal *voi*, but his name has since been scratched out by archivists who were perhaps contemporaries. Noffke notes that the

¹³⁶ “No, the son neither can nor should offend his father without courting death and condemnation. He is forever indebted to his father for the existence his father has given him. The son never asked his father to give him a share of his own flesh, and yet he did, moved by the love he had for his son even before he existed. How much less, then, should we foolish heedless ungrateful children be able to bear offending our true Father! For he loved us without being loved. Out of love he created us, and then created us anew to grace in his blood. ... and all this not because it is due us, but by grace” (trans. Noffke).

¹³⁷ “So you must go — and quickly — to ask for your Father's (I mean God's) help” (trans. Noffke).

rubric reveals that here is a place where the copyist deliberately removed the name of the recipient, and also omitted “some words unfitting for anyone to know,” which Noffke posits to be “something Catherine regarded as even worse than homosexual behavior” (*Letters* vol. II 144). Using similar language to the down payment, but instead constructing it as a debt, she uses variations of the word *debito* 11 times throughout this 1,400-word letter. In the first few lines alone she writes the word five times (emphasis mine):

scrivo a voi nel prezioso sangue suo; con desiderio di vedervi **debitore** reale, che rendiate il **debito** vostro al vostro Creatore. Sapete che siamo tutti **debitori** a Dio... Non pregammo mai che ci creasse: mosso dunque dal fuoco dell'amore; creocci all'immagine e similitudine sua.... Questo è il **debito** che noi abbiamo tratto da Dio: e questo **debito** vuole che gli sia renduto: cioè amore per amore.¹³⁸

As in letter T171 above, here Catherine again discusses the debt that must be repaid as love for God, as humanity is created in God's image due to his being moved by the fire of love. As a debtor, the recipient is constructed as an ignorant thief — “O ladro ignorante debitore”¹³⁹ — who steals from his creator. Significantly, both in this phrase and in the phrase “debitore reale” at the start of the letter, Catherine calls this man a debtor outright, though in other letters she refers to all Christians as debtors. Because of the perceived gravity of her addressee's sin, Catherine believes herself to be justified in being more direct and does not speak in analogies.

As the letter continues, Catherine writes that we all shall pay our debts, but if the debt is not properly repaid, her addressee will suffer the consequences: “renderemo il debito che dobbiamo rendere a Dio. Sappiate che se voi nol rendeste, voi cadereste nella più scura prigione

¹³⁸ “[I write to you in his precious blood with the desire] to see you an honorable **debtor**, paying what you owe your Creator. You know we are all in God's **debt**... We never asked to be created. Moved by the fire of love, God created us in his own image and likeness... This is the **debt** we have incurred with God, and God wants this **debt** repaid: love for love” (Trans. Noffke, emphasis mine).

¹³⁹ “Oh foolish debtor thief!” (trans. Noffke).

che si possa immaginare” (T21).¹⁴⁰ This man must confess and hold his sin in contempt to return his debt or he will fall into the darkest prison imaginable (i.e., Hell). Of course, this is not entirely without reference to a Scriptural basis, as she echoes Mark 12:17 when she tells the man believed to be a homosexual to give to God what is his and to the earth what is the earth’s (give to Caesar what is Caesar’s), but her choice of words and repetition shows her position as a public and rhetorical figure working to persuade others. As Cheryl Forbes notes, “Catherine’s images here ... are earthly, not heavenly; they are concrete, not abstract” (135). Using language that conjures the economic realm, Catherine is able to appeal to her contemporaries in words that they can easily relate to as metaphors for what is at stake in their spiritual lives.

Letter T311 differs from the previous two in that it is more explicitly political, addressed to the Sienese government writ large (“A’ signori difensori del popolo e comune di Siena”).¹⁴¹ Believed to be written some time between October and mid-November 1379, this letter does not shy away from the language of indebtedness, employing variations of the word 12 times in a 1,460-word letter, but the use of the word “debitori” (“debtors”) is more tempered here. Unlike in T21, Catherine does not directly call the *signori* this word as such, instead explaining that “we” are debtors: “A cui siamo noi debitori?”¹⁴² She explains that we are debtors to God, Church, our neighbors, and ourselves. In the second instance of the word “debitori,” it appears as an analogy: “come ladri a malvagi debitori, tollendo l’altrui con molta ingiustizia.”¹⁴³ Whereas the unnamed man believed to be a homosexual in the letter above is referred to as a thieving debtor outright, the political leaders of Siena are only compared to thieving debtors. This discussion of indebtedness touches on themes similar to the other letters, and ends with a call to

¹⁴⁰ “We shall pay the debt we owe to God. Realize that if you don’t pay it, you will land in the darkest prison you can imagine” (trans. Noffke).

¹⁴¹ “To the Defenders of the People and the City of Siena” (trans. Noffke).

¹⁴² “To whom are we debtors?” (translation mine).

¹⁴³ “Like thieves and wicked debtors, we take from others very unjustly” (trans. Noffke).

action, as do many of her letters, and as discussed above with regards to her letters to Ristoro. She appeals to the Defenders to repay what they owe to God and to give Christ deeds rather than words:

Adunque, vedete che per ogni modo sete tenuti e obligati di rendere il debito alla santa Chiesa e al padre vostro ... Pregovi per l'amore di Cristo crocifisso, che voi non diate più parole a Cristo in terra; ma dategli de' fatti, e rendetegli di quello che egli ha dato voi.¹⁴⁴

Catherine wants the Sienese to remember that they are obligated to pay gratitude (their debts) to Urban VI for his having lifted Gregory XI's interdict that prohibited Florence and allied cities from participating in public worship and receiving sacraments, and also to recall that Urban VI is the legitimate Pope.

If the Sienese are successful in repaying their debts in the actions she details, Catherine explains that they will be rewarded not just in the afterlife but on Earth as well. By the end of the letter, she becomes quite specific to her point, explaining how their good deeds can help them recover the port of Talamone from the Pisans through the mediation of the Pope that she will help to orchestrate.¹⁴⁵ Thus, even though Catherine generally constructs indebtedness as loving oneself over God, and favoring time on Earth over concern about the eternal soul, Catherine makes allowances. Understanding the political gains that could be enjoyed through Siena working to legitimize Pope Urban VI against the antipope, Catherine promises earthly power to the government in the form of their regaining access to a port-hold at Talamone. Though

¹⁴⁴ “Therefore, you all see that for each way you are held to and obliged to return the debt to holy Church and your father ... I pray to you all, for the love of Christ crucified, don't continue to say more words about Christ on earth, but give him deeds, return to him that which he has given you” (translation mine).

¹⁴⁵ After Siena did reconcile with the papacy and Urban VI offered to return Talamone to Siena, however, the Pisans refused. Siena did eventually recover the port in February 1379 through the mediation of Cardinal Badoero (Noffke, *Letters* vol. VI p. 311).

Catherine can afford to be more spiritually minded in her interactions with individuals, even when incorporating worldly financial language, she must be pragmatic in her political dealings for what she must have perceived to be the greater good of the Church and the faith.

Because many of Catherine's interlocutors have the earthly power and financial backing to help her spiritual causes, she must often tread carefully in her letters to them. Though she may say to Madonna Jacoma, the widow of the Lord of Foligno, that "Elle danno, dico, molestia e scandalo le cose del mondo a chi le possiede fuori di Dio,"¹⁴⁶ her advice is generalized, and can be shifted depending on what she hopes to achieve (T264). Sometimes, she grants that God does give us enjoyable belongings and feelings on Earth, but that these pleasures are intended to serve a greater good, as she notes in a letter to Monna Stricca, the wife of Cione di Sandro Salimbeni (T110):

Onde la ricchezza ci permette, perchè ne siamo dispensatori a' poveri; le delizie e stati del mondo, non perchè noi leviamo il capo per la superbia: anco, molto maggiormente ci dobbiamo umiliare con un santo ringraziamento della divina bontà.¹⁴⁷

Riches are permitted, but they should be redistributed to the poor; prosperity should remind us to be thankful to God. This is to say that the meditation on wealth, objects, and opportunities should be directed towards God and the eternal soul rather than to the earthly possessions or temporal states themselves; when one is presented with favorable fortune, they should ask themselves how they can do good works and serve God with it.

¹⁴⁶ "The things of the world are stumbling blocks and trouble for those who possess them apart from God" (trans. Noffke).

¹⁴⁷ "God permits us to have wealth so that we may be its administrators for the poor. [He gives us] worldly pleasure and prosperity not to make us lift up our heads in pride, but rather that we should humble ourselves all the more in holy thanksgiving for divine goodness" (trans. Noffke).

Unlike what is recounted in Matthew 19:24, that “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God,” Catherine — with her mercantile background and desire to see political stability between Europe and the Church — accepts that there is a time and a place for wealth and power. Lorenzo del Pino, a nobleman from Bologna and a doctor and lecturer in ecclesiastical law at the university there, had inherited substantial wealth by the time Catherine writes letter T193 to him. While she mentions that “Cristo abbracciò la povertà volontaria,” she attempts to strike a middle ground with Lorenzo, who must be living like the wretches mentioned in the letter who hate truth. She writes:

Le ricchezze e lo stato del mondo, se l’uomo le vuol tenere, il può; e non offende Dio né l’anima sua; ma se egli le lassasse, sarebbe maggior perfezione, però che maggior perfezione è a lassare che a tenere. Ma s’egli non vuole lassare attualmente, debbe lassare e rifiutare col santo desiderio, e non ponere in loro il suo principale affetto, ma solo in Dio; e tenerle per uso a’ suoi bisogni e della sua famiglia e come cosa prestata, e non come cosa sua. Facendo così non riceve pena mai d’alcuna cosa creata; perocché la cosa che non si possiede per amore, non si perde mai con dolore.¹⁴⁸

Riches and status in the world do not offend God or the eternal soul, even though it would be more perfect to let these things go. The important aspect of one’s relationship with that status and money or possessions is to perceive them as the temporal states and objects that they are. Catherine recommends seeing prestige and riches as that which is lent to the possessor, rather than that which is owned outright by them. This important relationality, the knowledge that “ogni

¹⁴⁸ “If you want to have wealth and worldly prestige you can, without offense to God or harm to your soul. Still, it would be more perfect to abandon these things, because it is more perfect to let them go than to possess them. If you don’t want to leave them in actuality, then you ought to let them go and renounce them in holy desire by giving your first love not to them but to God alone and by using them according to your own needs and your family’s, as something lent to you and not your own. If you do this you will never suffer harm from any created thing, because [the thing that is not possessed through love is not lost with sadness]” (trans. Noffke).

cosa passa,”¹⁴⁹ serves to redirect vices towards virtues that mediate on a power higher than the self, while also allowing Catherine to make use of these temporal states in her work for the Church (T193).

Though Catherine lived in poverty by choice and did good works for the poor, Catherine had a large network of support that intersected with well-connected nobility and religious figures, perhaps leaving her with less of an understanding of all the possible realities of others. Towards the end of a letter to a prostitute of Perugia, she writes: “E se tu mi dicessi: «il non avere di che vivere mi ritrae»; e io ti dico che Dio ti provvederà”¹⁵⁰ (T276). Though we do not know the circumstances of this woman, she likely did not have a choice in the way she chose to support herself. While Catherine states that she hears the prostitute’s brother will support her (the letter was written at the request of one of the woman’s brothers), clearly the woman in question had not previously had this support, so the implied assistance seems tenuous at best. Though economic imagery is particularly fitting for a prostitute addressee, it seems uneven for Catherine to grant to rich patrons the solace that they are not living in sin despite their wealth, while to a prostitute she does not offer much other than empty words relating that “God will provide for you” when evidently he has not. To the prostitute as well as to the man believed to be a homosexual in letter T21, Catherine is less tempered and more dogmatic in her condemnation of their particular sins of the flesh, offering them less comfort than she does for those who are valuable to her cause.

Catherine’s use of financial metaphors can make the spiritual more commonplace and quotidian, and perhaps easier for some to understand. As a spiritual woman, Catherine remains outside of city commerce, as she lives more for her future heavenly life than for her current

¹⁴⁹ “all things pass.” (Trans. mine)

¹⁵⁰ “And if you should say to me, ‘Not having anything to live on keeps me from [withdrawing]’ I tell you God will provide for you.” (Trans. Noffke).

earth-bound one, but her use of monetary language shows her civic-mindedness, as she is employing a tangible financial contract in order to relate spiritual matters to a class of people within an increasingly mercantile society. In utilizing monetary language in letters about spiritual matters, Catherine strikes a careful balance between two often oppositional schools of thought, bringing them to bear on each other in a meaningful way to better teach her readers and remain as a figure embedded within two spheres. Ultimately, this speaks to her positionality as a mystic who is concerned with both this-worldly and other-worldly concerns at once.

Catherine's Advice to Women

With one-third of her letters addressed to women — many of whom were fellow *mantellate* — Catherine is able to take on the role of a spiritual advisor in the manner of a friend, sister, or mother, and able to write in a register that negotiates between the seriousness of the word of God and the playfulness of informal companionship. By group, the majority of her letters to women are addressed to lay women (33 individuals), with letters also written to 17 individual religious women, and 15 individual noblewomen, as can be seen in Fig. 7 of Chapter 3. Of the non-noble lay group, she writes three or more letters to Agnesa di Francesco di Pipino (13 letters), Lapa her mother (four letters), and Nella di Niccolò dei Buonconti (three letters). Within the religious group, she writes three or more letters to Alessa dei Saracini (six letters), Daniella da Orvieto (four letters), Giovanna di Capo (three letters), and Agnesa di Orso Malavolti (three letters). Giovannà d'Angiò, the Queen of Naples, received 7 letters from Catherine, but only two other noblewomen received more than one: Bandeçça di Giovanni dei Salimbeni (two letters), and Tora di Piero Gambacorta (two letters).

The laywoman Agnesa di Francesco di Pipino was the woman who received the most letters from Catherine, many of which she received addressed to herself and her husband Francesco di Pipino. She and Catherine became friends (and Agnesa became a disciple of hers) while Catherine was staying in Florence in 1376, and Agnesa and her husband hosted Catherine in the last few weeks of her stay in Florence in 1378. Receiving six letters was the Sienese *mantellata* of noble background Alessa dei Saracini; an important friend and disciple of Catherine's, who had taught Catherine to read, served as a scribe, and had Catherine live with her following the death of Catherine's father. Alessa traveled with Catherine on nearly all of Catherine's journeys, and died not long after Catherine did. Daniella da Orvieto, Giovanna di Capo, and Agnesa di Orso Malavolti were also *mantellate*, and Giovanna also had served as a scribe of Catherine's. It is worth noting that some letters are addressed to Catherine's disciples or *famiglia* as a group, and the individual *mantellate* indicated here could have received more letters than what is counted. Catherine wrote to Giovanna d'Angiò frequently to convince her to remain a supporter of the pope — Giovanna had sold Avignon (as the Countess of Provence) in 1347 to the pope, and control over her kingdom was reliant on papal favor. F. Thomas Luongo notes that though Giovanna's "loyalty to the pope could have been considered solid, she also had fostered strong economic and political ties with the Florentines during the years of anti Visconti wars," so Catherine would urge Giovanna to contribute to the Crusade effort and continue to support the pope (*Saintly Politics* 88). Bandeçça di Giovanni dei Salimbeni was the daughter of the deceased Giovanni d'Angolino Salimbeni and lived in exile in the family fortress at Rocca d'Orcia, and Tora di Piero Gambacorta was from a powerful Pisan family though eventually would become a Dominican later in life and was beatified after her death.

To approach her letters to women, we will look at a series of letters in particular as a way for entering into common themes in her writing within this gender category of which Catherine generally considered herself to be a member. The letters addressed to Daniella da Orvieto — “vestita dell’abito di Santo Domenico,” who later attained the state of blessedness, but of whom we do not know many historical details — are particularly provocative and show the full register of Catherine’s writing to women. Daniella is the recipient of four very long and intense letters that were written between the fall of 1378 and early 1380. She appears to be viewed as a spiritual equal by Catherine, though perhaps younger, and seems to have been trying to imitate Catherine’s extreme fasting and penance (Noffke, *Letters* vol. III 232). Catherine offers advice and guidance to Daniella, as she does to many similar women in terms of health, behavior and voice, but she also presents some contradictory suggestions. As to whether a woman should speak freely, as Catherine did, or resign herself to silence, to Daniella Catherine recommends both. This appeal to both speaking and silence suggests that a female voice must follow a certain paradoxical standard, or may evolve from one approach to the other. Also, though Catherine does tend to emphasize the corporeal, with Daniella this is pronounced.

Her first letter to Daniella is T65, believed to have been dated in September or early October 1378. Focusing on the consecrated life, T65 is very similar to a letter written to William Flete (T64) and a section of the *Dialogo* on “Truth.”¹⁵¹ In fact, because letters T64 and T65 predate the composition of the *Dialogo*, these letters (as well as T272 written to Raymond which presents a mini-outline of the *Libro*) “would later be amended and inserted in [the *Dialogo*] through a typical process of interpolation” (Ragazzi 46). This is to say that the letters prove to have as much literary merit as her *Libro*. Each of the letters T64 and T65 follows a parallel structure, but the endings of the individual letters are unique and the similar content “is used in

¹⁵¹ Chapters 98-101.

each letter with quite different intent” (Noffke, *Letters* vol. III 232). In T65 to Daniella, Catherine first mercilessly analyzes the dangers of the ascetic life (though she was clearly a practitioner), then rises to the ardent contemplation of divine love. She discusses two points in particular that she wants Daniella to observe: to be absent of judgmental thoughts of fellow humans, and to understand the importance of a life of mortification (a life that Catherine believes they have both been called to). By the end, however, she writes very personally on her own failings at moderation, “Dolgomi io miserabile, che non seguitai mai questa vera dottrina; anco, ho fatto il contrario, e pero mi sento d’essere caduta spesse volte in dispiacere e in giudizio del prossimo” (T65).¹⁵² Catherine divulges her own difficulties in moderating her practice of penance and in judging others’ practices, wrongfully having believed that if they were not as self-punishing as she that they were not worthy of divine light. In this way, the letter offers Catherine herself as a human being who is not always a supreme example of spiritual devotion, allowing a personal register alongside her more general and mystical approach to offering guidance.

Although in many ways Catherine of Siena acted as an extremely public figure, she also worked to harmonize her life in terms of an outside, public-facing one alongside a meditative one of self-imposed private contemplation. Daniella attempted to live extremely ascetically in a self-imposed cloister, following a more traditional expression of feminine spirituality. Catherine, too, makes use of this trope, and to some of her letter recipients, she addresses the concept of the “cell of self-knowledge.” For Catherine, this is dualistic in nature as it requires a mental cloistering of the self while going about as a person in the world amid earthly obligations and distractions. In one letter to the Countess Benedeçça Salimbeni, this image is particularly lucid.

¹⁵² “Wretch that I am, I regret that I have never followed this true teaching. I have, in fact, done the opposite. And this, I believe, is why I’ve so often fallen into unhappiness and into passing judgment on my neighbors” (trans. Noffke).

She writes about the planting of the tree of love for God, explaining where it should be planted (T113):

La terra è la vera umiltà ... e 'l luogo, dov'ella è, è'l giardino chiuso del
cognoscimento di sè. Dico che è chiuso, perchè l'anima che sta nella cella del
cognoscimento di sè medesima, ella è chiusa, e non è aperta, cioè che non si diletta
nelle delizie del mondo. ... non spande il cuore suo per confusione nè per tedio di
mente.... Anco si serra e si chiude colla compagnia della speranza e col lume della
santissima fede.¹⁵³

This description of self-knowledge as an enclosed garden resonates with the idea of the cloister, but is kept inside oneself, rather than the more traditional and opposite approach of keeping oneself within a cloister. The person who has this garden or cell can lock herself up in it, and not take part in worldly delights, though she is part of the world. By cultivating her own self-knowledge, Catherine was able to maintain a private internal refuge for herself to continue her solitary contemplation of God while publicly doing God's work in the world.

Through living within harmony between public and private, Catherine also advises other women to strike this moderate accord that acknowledges spiritual life but directs energy toward the eternal life. In letter T61 to Monna Agnesa Malavolti and other *mantellate* — perhaps Catherine's earliest surviving letter — Catherine meditates on Saint Agnes of Montepulciano and Mary Magdalen, pointing out the former's holy humility and the latter's passionate “drunken” love. It is between this dichotomy of saints — the meek and the fervent — that Catherine advises the women to behave. She writes, “io vi prego e vi comando che voi entriate in questo santissimo

¹⁵³ “The soil is true humility ... and the place you'll find it is the enclosed garden of self-knowledge. I say it is enclosed because if you dwell in the cell of self-knowledge, you are enclosed. You are not wide open, because you are not dissipated in worldly delights. ... You don't let confusion or spiritual vexation dissipate your heart ... No, you lock yourself up, in the company of trust and the light of most holy faith” (trans. Noffke).

mezzo” — “I beg you, I command you: enter into this most holy middle —”¹⁵⁴ or as Tylus interprets it, this “balance between the two saints” (T61, 197). In either case it is necessary for spiritual women of the 14th century to be paradoxically both a cloistered mystical abbess like Agnes and a public preacher and converter like the passionate Mary Magdalen. Catherine’s own approach to balancing the public and private aspects of her life can be seen as a blend between Agnes and Mary Magdalen, as she worked to cultivate an inner cell and was blessed with intimate visions, while also doing charitable and political work in the world. In this manner, the addressees of this letter should learn to follow each of the saints, and find a proper equilibrium of neither too humble nor too ardent. The mediation between a quiet charity and an impassioned zeal also elucidates Catherine’s advice regarding speech. She suggests that perhaps her fellow *mantellate* should still the tongue but not too much while also striving to be quite loquacious when speaking God’s will.

In her second letter to Daniella, Catherine is explicit regarding the degree of moderation — or discretion as it informs the other virtues, as Grazia Mangano Ragazzi argues — that Daniella must seek to balance worldly and spiritual affairs (78-81). This epistle, T213, is dated to mid-October 1378, and as Ragazzi notes, “Tommaseo regards letter 213 as one of the masterpieces of Italian prose” (78). Like Catherine in her teenage years, Daniella opted to remain in a self-imposed cell. She experienced difficulty due to her asceticism, and found herself very sick due to scoring her body to an unhealthy degree. Though Catherine makes clear that it is within normal spiritual bounds for Daniella to discipline her body so that it may be more compliant, she should not do so if she is weak from illness: “Anco, debbe non solamente lassare il digiuno, ma mangi della carne: e se non gli basta una volta il dì, pigline quattro. Se non può stare in terra, stia in sul letto; se non può inginocchioni, stia a sedere e a giacere, se n’ha

¹⁵⁴ My translation.

bisogno.”¹⁵⁵ The implication here — that Daniella should not only give up fasting but eat meat, and eat it several times a day, and that she should repose as needed — indicates that her health is an important aspect of serving God. In this letter it is made clear that she does not expect the same fortitude of others that she expects of herself, and she does not wish others to be in poor health trying to follow her example. When writing to Daniella, we can see a caring and motherly Catherine who offers sound advice to others when they cannot follow the example that she herself puts forth as a mystic who constantly fasts and beats her own body.

The importance of health is central to Catherine’s spirituality, as she acted as a force in the world. Those who have been to Siena today may have noticed the escalators that are located throughout the city in order to accommodate easier passage among the steep hills. Catherine, who did good works in her own city and traveled throughout Italy and to France in the 14th century, relied very much on her good health in order to accomplish her acts of community building, political engagement, and promoting the social good (Catherine uses the word “cammino” in seven of her letters, half of which were written to women)¹⁵⁶. Therefore it is in keeping with Catherine’s spirituality to encourage Daniella to get better so that she may bring her entire body to bear on the production of charity. In this same letter, she delineates and dismembers the body to explain how the entire corporeal being can be utilized for the word of God (T213):

A tutte le membra del corpo dà ordine, acciocché siano modeste e temperate: l’occhio non ragguardi dove egli non debbe, ma dinanzi a sé ponga la Terra, e ‘l Cielo: la lingua fugga il parlare ozioso e vano, e sia ordinata ad annunziare la parola di Dio in

¹⁵⁵ “In that case, in fact, not only should you give up fasting, but you should eat meat — and if once a day isn’t enough, have it four times. If you can’t stand up, stay in bed. If you can’t kneel, remain sitting — or lying down if necessary” (trans. Noffke).

¹⁵⁶ One having been written to Francesco di Pipino and his wife Agnesa.

salute del prossimo, e confessare i peccati suoi: l'orecchia fugga le parole dilettevoli, lusinghevoli, dissolute, e di detrazione, che gli fossero dette; e attenda a udire la parola di Dio, e il bisogno del prossimo, cioè volontariamente udire la sua necessità. Così la mano nel toccare o nello adoperare, i piei nell'andare; a tutti dà regola. E acciocché per la perversa legge della impugnazione che dà la carne contra lo spirito, non si levi a disordinare questi strumenti, pone la regola al corpo, macerandolo con la vigilia, col digiuno, e con gli altri esercizi, i quali hanno tutti a raffrenare il corpo nostro.¹⁵⁷

With this letter, which is offered as advice to another, we can infer how Catherine governs her own individual body parts. Though Catherine is loquacious, we must reason that her mouth is tempered to only speak and proclaim the word of God — never talking idly, as her ears must selectively listen, as her eyes must look to the ground or to the heavens, her feet run, and her hand touch and bring things to fruition. For Catherine, the hand and the tongue must work in harmony, which may be informed by traditional Dominican spirituality, as is consistent with the early preacher Humbert who writes that “one should preach not only with his voice, but with all that he is” (Tylus 184). Not only must Catherine bring her voice to bear on sharing the word of God, but she must make use of her body as well.

The position of the tongue in this letter may be of particular interest, as Catherine recommends neither that a woman speak freely nor that she should resign herself to silence —

¹⁵⁷ “To all the members of the body, that they be modest and temperate: let the eye not look where it should not, but hold before itself earth, and heaven; let the tongue flee idle and vain speech, and be disciplined to announce the word [she uses “parola” and not the usual “il Verbo”, more related to “speech” / “parlare”] of God for the salvation of the neighbor, and to confess its sins: let the ear flee agreeable, flattering, dissolute words, and any words of detraction that might be said to it; and let it hearken for the word of God, and the need of the neighbor, willingly listening to his necessity. So let the hand be swift in touching and bringing realization, and the feet in going: to all, discretion gives a rule. And that the perverse law of the flesh that fights against the spirit may not throw these tools into disorder, it imposes a rule upon the body, mortifying it with vigil, fast, and the other exercises which are all meant to bridle our body” (trans. Noffke).

indeed, she advises that Daniella do both, suggesting that a female voice must follow a certain standard, or may evolve. Though other *mantellate* were engaged in charitable works in hospitals and involved in lay society, Catherine was certainly the most politically and publicly engaged of her group. Her advice to other *mantellate*, from letter T40 written in 1377, addressed to “certain of her daughters in Siena,” offers another compromise between conversation and choosing not to socialize: “che questa purità di mente e di corpo non si potrebbe avere con le molte conversazioni delle creature, nè col ponere l’affetto e l’amore nostro in loro nè in cose create, fuori della volontà di Dio.”¹⁵⁸ Again, there is this emphasis that speech should be withheld when it does not serve God, and that speech is made acceptable when conversations occur within the realm of charity for God. When the *mantellate* care for the ill in the hospital, they are to weep or rejoice with those who weep or rejoice: “e godendo con coloro che godono, che sono veri servi di Cristo crocifisso; e sempre dilettrarvi della loro conversazione” (T40).¹⁵⁹ Catherine identifies two separate kinds of speech, but interestingly she uses the same word — “conversazione” — in both cases, causing the speech done outside of God’s love and within God’s love to be quite ambiguous. While Catherine can demonstrate that there are two ways to speak, and that women should indeed speak to serve God, women should not speak in all instances.

Letter T213, which is very lengthy within Catherine’s corpus at 3,100 words, shifts to focusing more on the body and punishment of the body than it does toward speech acts and the tongue by the end of the text. Though there is a transition, Catherine continues to advise Daniella:

¹⁵⁸ “you cannot have this purity of mind and body if you are having many conversations with other people and setting your love and desire on them or on created things apart from the will of God” (translation mine).

¹⁵⁹ “And you will rejoice with those who are glad because they are true servants of Jesus Christ crucified, always delighting in their conversation” (trans. Tylus).

io invito te e me a fare quello che per lo tempo passato io confesso non avere fatto con quella perfezione ch'io debbo. A te non è intervenuto come a me, cioè d'essere stata e essere molto difettuosa, né d'essere andata con larghezza di vita, e non con estrema, per lo mio difetto; ma tu, come persona che hai voluta atterrare la gioventudine del corpo tuo, acciocché non sia ribello all'anima, hai presa la vita estrema per siffatto modo, che pare che esca fuore dell'ordine della discrezione.¹⁶⁰

Paradoxically, Catherine is both esteeming Daniella's commitment to asceticism as being greater than what she herself was able to achieve, and reprimanding Daniella for going beyond discretion. Catherine confesses that she has not been perfect in her complete humility, and she says this in close proximity to addressing again Daniella's body, with the description of it being youthful. Employing the noun "gioventudine" rather than the adjective "giovane," she further emphasizes the idea of youthfulness, and in placing the "tuo" after "corpo," the reader sees "gioventudine" and "corpo" in close succession. Despite a tone that is becoming more corporeally concerned, there is still the mother's scolding evident in this letter; the word "estrema" is used positively, but going out of the confines of discretion is unacceptable. Tylus notes that Catherine "cultivated the persona of the 'mamma' (perhaps partially to guard against sexual overtones of her relationships with young men her age)," so this wavering between a maternal and more sexualized tone is not limited to Daniella in particular or her female companions in general (117). The concern with the body coupled with the advice and even scolding of Daniella shows that Catherine has a special relationship with the young woman that differs in tone from many of her more friendly letters to other *mantellate*.

¹⁶⁰ "I summon you and me to do what in past time I confess not to have done with that perfection which I should. It has not happened to you as to me, to have been and to be very faulty, or over-lax and easy-going in my life, instead of strict, through my fault; but you, as one who has wished to subdue the youthfulness of your body that it not be a rebel to the soul, have chosen a life so extremely strict that apparently it is out of all bounds of discretion" (translation mine).

In early November 1378, Catherine writes letter T316 to Daniella in anticipation of a visit to Orvieto on her way to Rome. In this letter, she continues to offer advice to Daniella, explaining to her that she understands the tension between what the young woman is perceiving God is telling her to do, and what other religious are advising her to do. She encourages Daniella to respond to what she feels called to, and notes that both herself and Daniella enjoy being in the special light of God. This letter is full of literary symbols — though it was common in the Middle Ages to liken Christ to a book, it is not often that we see two women in correspondence to each other discussing this. We know that both women are reading and writing as Catherine mentions a letter that she recently received from Daniella, showing again the community of literate women around her. Explaining the rule of eternal Truth, Catherine writes:

scrissela nel corpo suo con lettere sì grosse, che veruno e di sì basso intendimento che si possa scusare; non con inchiostro, ma col sangue suo. Bene vedi tu i capoversi di questo libro, quanto essi sono grandi¹⁶¹

In this imagery, Catherine touches on the common tropes of Christ as parchment, his blood as ink, and the concept of God as author. Though this would likely be familiar imagery to people of this time, it is remarkable that it is written in the context of one woman to another. There are two other letters in which Catherine uses book imagery: T309 to Giovanni da Parma, and T318 to Sano di Maco and the other Christian laity of Siena. The first of these two letters, written to the layman Giovanni da Parma is dated October 23, 1377, and the second is written to a lay woolworking man and perhaps a mixed-gender group of her other followers, and is dated late January 1379. This second letter makes the imagery of Christ as book even more explicit in one

¹⁶¹ “he wrote it [the eternal Truth] upon his own body in letters so large that no one, no matter how dull-witted, has an excuse for not reading it. And he wrote it not with ink, but with his own blood. You can see clearly the illuminated initials of the book and how large they are” (trans. Noffke).

phrase: “scritta nel corpo suo: e fece di sè un libro,”¹⁶² and contrasts the book of life and Christ with the book of sin and “sensualità.” Catherine used this literary imagery in three different years of her letter production, but only to lay people. These letters, particularly the letter to Daniella, assume a familiarity with books, and with large initials that would be contained in expensive manuscripts, suggesting that both women had some form of access to or knowledge about books and their design. The diction around books and literacy moves into Catherine’s recommendation for Daniella to follow her own sensibilities, empowering her not to listen to those who she may wrongly think know more than she does, which seems validated after considering Daniella’s knowledge of books, writing, and the eternal Truth of God.

Towards the end of the letter, Catherine provides Daniella with more advice, telling her not to sleep, not to be negligent, to be humble, and to pray continuously:

Non dormiamo più, destianci dal sonno della negligenza, muggiando con umili e continue orazioni sopra il corpo mistico della santa Chiesa, e sopra il vicario di Cristo. Non cessare d’orare per lui, che gli dia lume e forza a resistere a’ colpi de’ demoni incarnati, amatori di loro medesimi, i quali vogliono contaminare la Fede nostra.¹⁶³

There is a focus on the mystical body of the Church, which is always rendered as a woman and is grammatically gendered feminine, bringing back a corporeal aspect to the letter. Then there are the fleshy demons who are “amatori di loro medesimi,” seeking to contaminate the Christian faith. In other letters, Catherine makes use of these two phrases — the lovers who love themselves and the “demoni incarnati.” She typically discusses men who love themselves as

¹⁶² “Written on his body, and he is made into a book” (translation mine).

¹⁶³ “Let’s not sleep anymore, let us wake from the slumber of negligence, groaning with humble and continual prayers, over the mystical body of the holy Church, and over the Vicar of Christ. Do not cease to pray for him, that Christ may give him light and fortitude to resist the strokes of incarnate demons, lovers of themselves, who want to contaminate our Faith” (translation mine).

being evil and seeking to do harm, as in a letter dated October 5, 1378 to Pope Urban VI: “con desiderio di vedervi vestito del vestimento forte dell’ardentissima carità, acciocchè li colpi che vi sono gittati dagl’iniqui uomini del mondo amatori di loro medesimi, non vi possano nuocere.”¹⁶⁴

Her references to the incarnate demons are equally negative, though she only suggests that they could be likened to the letter recipient or other Christians in T190 to the tailor Francesco di Pipino and his wife Agnesa in late October 1378:

Voglio dunque che a questo abbiate una grande avvertenzia, di sempre conversare con i servi di Dio, e serve; e gli altri e l’altre fuggire come fuoco. E non vi fidate mai di voi, dicendo: «io son forte, e non temo che questi mi faccia cadere». ... Ma con vera umiltà cognosciamo che, se Dio non ci tiene egli, noi saremmo dimoni incarnati.¹⁶⁵

This is to say that associating with those who have no faith can cause God’s followers to lapse, even if they think they are strong enough to resist. Catherine makes it clear that without God holding on to us, we would all be devils in the flesh.

With these images in mind, let us continue to T308, the last letter Catherine writes to Sister Daniella da Orvieto, dated to late 1378 or early 1379. Noffke glosses the tone of this letter as being “quite general, except for Catherine’s plea for prayer for the Church,” but I believe it is unusual in its use of diction, though Noffke translates some of the distinctive phrases in a non-literal manner (*Letters* vol. IV p. 64). Throughout this letter there is a focus on beauty, blood, and love. She uses the word “bellezza” five times in the first third of the letter, and she only uses the

¹⁶⁴ “I long to see you clothed in the strong garment of blazing charity so that the blows rained on you by wicked, worldly, [men of the world who love themselves], will not be able to hurt you” (trans. Noffke).

¹⁶⁵ “I want you then, with great deliberateness, always to associate with God’s servants and avoid the others like fire. Never rest your confidence in yourselves, saying ‘I’m strong, and I’m not afraid of these people making me fall!’ ... Instead, with sincere humility let’s recognize that unless God were holding us back we would be devils incarnate” (trans. Noffke).

word “bellezza” in 54 of her letters total (just under 14% of her corpus of letters). The beauty she sees in Daniella is in her soul, innocence, and within “his creature” — which could refer to humanity in general or Daniella in particular. She also describes God being “ebbro d’amore” (“drunk with love”) due to the beauty he finds in his creation, which is a common phrase throughout the *Dialogo* (see Chapter 2 above), but only occurs in three of her letters.¹⁶⁶ In the last few lines of T308 Catherine invokes the mystical image of bathing and drowning in Christ’s blood, which appears in six letters and in some places in the *Dialogo*, but she also uses the phrase of Daniella and Catherine being “amatori di noi,” so similar to how she describes the demons in other letters. She writes:

Bàguati nel sangue, acciocchè scrupolo veruno non caggia¹⁶⁷ mai nella mente tua, nè per timore servile. Ma nascondianci nella caverna del costato di Cristo crocifisso, dove hai trovato l’abondanza del sangue. In altro modo anderemo in tenebre, e saremo amatori di noi. Considerando me che altro modo non c’era, dissi ch’io desideravo di vederti bagnata e annegata nel sangue di Cristo crocifisso: e così voglio che tu facci. Altro non ti dico. Permani nella santa e dolce dilezione di Dio: abbi fame del suo onore e desiderio. Gesù dolce. Gesù amore.¹⁶⁸

This letter to Daniella seems particularly graphic and corporeal, even for mystical standards, because of its specificity. She discusses the ribcage of Christ — it is Christ’s side and the blood there that correlates to Catherine’s mystic vision. Generally, in Catherine’s mystical vision as described in Heather Webb’s essay “Catherine of Siena’s Heart,” there is the depiction of

¹⁶⁶ T52, T210, T308.

¹⁶⁷ A form of the verb “caggiare” as in “cadere.”

¹⁶⁸ “Bathe yourself in the blood, so that no scruples will ever pervade (fall) into your mind, neither subservient fear. But let’s hide in the cavern of the ribs of the crucified Christ, where you have found the abundance of blood. Through other paths we will enter the shadows, and we will be lovers of ourselves. Considering that there was no other way, I said that I desired to see you soaked and drowned in the blood of the crucified Christ: and this is what I want you to do. I say nothing else to you. Persist in the holy and sweet enjoyment of God: have hunger for his honor and desire. Jesus (who is) sweet, Jesus (who is) love” (trans. Dana Stewart).

Catherine and Christ as containers of each other, depending on perspective. In this instance, though, it is Catherine and Daniella who are hiding themselves in the cave of Christ's ribs.

Though she does only mention bathing and drowning in the blood of Christ in six letters, Catherine does use the same imagery in a few instances in the *Dialogo*, though sometimes she uses the word "annegata" in terms of drowning in the will of God rather than in blood. In *Dialogo* 131 she does explicitly mention drowning and bathing in the blood of Christ, both in the middle and towards the end of the section:

Passando subito per la porta stretta, che è il Verbo, e poiché è annegata nel Sangue,
giunge a me, mare pacifico, essendo una stessa cosa io, mare pacifico, e la porta che è la
mia Verità, l'Unigenito mio Figlio.¹⁶⁹

...

Passano così, gloriosamente, da questa vita, bagnati nel Sangue, con la fame della salute
delle anime, tutti affocati nella carità del prossimo, attraverso la porta, che è il Verbo, ed
entrano in me.¹⁷⁰

These two descriptions of being drowned and bathing, respectively, in the blood of Christ can also be understood in general terms as it concerns the proverbial "every man" soul, or the specific soul that belongs to Catherine. Like the letter to Daniella, this imagery can be read rather erotically, as the sea and the gate are joined and made to be one and the same, facilitating the hungry blood-soaked souls to enter into the gate. Christ as gate seems to gender him as feminine in terms of both Italian grammar and in terms of being the open receiver rather than the souls that are pushing through (though these are also gendered feminine). The drowning and bathing

¹⁶⁹ "And as soon as she [the soul] has passed through the narrow gate of the Word, immersed in his blood, she comes to me, the sea of peace. For we are joined as one: I the sea with him the gate, because I and my Truth, my only-begotten Son, are one and the same thing" (trans. Noffke).

¹⁷⁰ "Thus gloriously they [the souls] pass, bathed in the blood, hungry for the salvation of souls, all ablaze with charity for their neighbors, coming through the gate of the Word and entering into me" (trans. Noffke).

imagery is corporeal, erotic and tends to connote Christ in feminine terms. This is also the case for letter T308 as it is Catherine and Daniella who are inside of Christ who receives them.

When Catherine writes to Daniella, is she hoping to share her mystic qualities with the woman in whom she sees so much of herself? Entering the darkness, Catherine and Daniella, together, will be lovers of themselves, with language identical to the letters that discuss demons who are loving themselves. This can be interpreted as falling under a category of self-love that is in turn love that is directed to God by virtue of the self being God's creation, but it is unusual that demons and wicked men are also engaging in this behavior throughout Catherine's letter corpus. This erotic language is therefore quite ambiguous when considered alongside Catherine's common tropes. Why does she use this language, when it seems obvious that she would not want to liken herself or Daniella to sinners? The diction that includes shadows, hiding, and being lovers of ourselves, suggests that there may be more to their relationship with sin than may be obvious. In this short letter, Catherine soon has nothing more to say to Daniella beyond stating that she would like to see the young nun be soaked and drowned in Christ's blood, and wanting Daniella to have "hunger" for God's honor and desire. Finally, as is customary, she ends the letter with the often employed "Gesù dolce, Gesù amore," returning back to her use of the rhetorical structure of letters.

Erotic overtones are not unusual in medieval mystic writers, and, given that women who pursued religious vocations are said to be the wives of Christ, the eroticism directed towards the divine seems almost natural. Previous medieval writers such as Boccaccio and Heloise, among others, write about nuns with voracious sexual appetites in their stories and their letters.¹⁷¹ Since

¹⁷¹ In the third day, first story of the *Decameron*, Boccaccio talks of the sexual appetites of nuns. Heloise insinuates homoerotic desire in Letter 6, which she writes to Abelard: "Even if they [the nuns] admit to their table only women to whom they have given hospitality, is there no lurking danger there? Surely nothing is so conducive to a woman's

we have so few texts from women living lives similar to Catherine, and given a context of eroticism in medieval religious literature, perhaps this current of corporeality is merely another transference of orality to textuality. As a bride of Christ, Catherine's spirituality is decidedly erotic at times, and it transfers to her followers — both female and male — on occasion. When writing to other women, many of whom were living in a way similar to her own life as *mantellate* who balanced their time between this world and the other world, Catherine conflates and complicates their relationships by being a friend, mother, possible lover, and religious leader, offering advice that would be difficult for anyone to follow due to its paradoxical nature, but in keeping with her own approach to spirituality.

As Catherine had much success in building a network of individuals around her who served as literary interlocutors and as supporters of her spiritual endeavors, she was acutely aware of her audience and readership. Carefully negotiating spiritual and earthly concerns, Catherine introduces financial language into her letters as a method for explaining divine matters to everyday people of the 14th century. With this financial language, she is prudently cognizant of each addressee, ensuring that she is not offensive to potential patrons, yet also strongly condemns those who she believes are committing grievous sins. In terms of the financial language, she tends to be harsher on women than men, suggesting that they are making down payments on hell more often than deposits on the eternal life. However, the full corpus of her letters to women indicates a more nuanced approach in her writing to this group. Catherine offers advice as a friend or female relative to many women, though she does expect women to be able to conform to contradictory spiritual ideals in a manner that Catherine was able to perform due to

seduction as woman's flattery, nor does a woman pass on the foulness of a corrupted mind so readily" (p. 95 of Radice's translation).

her remarkable nature. Catherine's letters offer us the insight to see how she expected herself to be received. By tailoring her letters by group, gender, and class, Catherine shows her political intelligence and awareness of literary reception.

Chapter V

The English Reception of Catherine of Siena's Texts and Spirituality

Catherine's writing moved into the English vernacular starting in the first half of the 15th century, having been rendered first into Latin to allow for subsequent translations. Primarily intended for a female religious audience, Catherinian texts are particularly connected to Syon Abbey of Bridgettine nuns, as the *Dialogo* became known as the *Orchard of Syon* by the time it was printed in 1519 by Wynkyn de Worde, 19 years after Aldus Manutius's printed edition of Catherine's Italian letters, and 47 years after the first printed edition of Catherine's *Dialogo*. This chapter will look at the transposition of Catherine's texts into the historical context of the Syon Abbey and English feminine spiritual devotion at large. The use of Latin as an intermediary language is considered, as well as the gendered implications of a male rewriting the words of a female author for female readers. Exploring the manuscript tradition alongside its possible readers, the chapter will move into a close reading of the framing of the English text with an examination of Catherine's construction as a teacher of religious women. This chapter will conclude with a comparison of Catherine's mystical writing and viability as a spiritual model with the writing and figures of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe to contrast the approaches to spirituality found within England and continental Italy.

Because Catherine's works were written in the vernacular and grounded in popular discourse, her followers saw the need to render them quickly into Latin, the language of the religious, the elite, and the powerful. Catherine's *Dialogo* was translated into three Latin

versions by three of her followers: Cristofano di Gano Guidini,¹⁷² Stefano Maconi,¹⁷³ and her confessor Raymond of Capua.¹⁷⁴ Her letters survive in Latin translations done by her followers in several manuscripts,¹⁷⁵ and her life would also be treated in Latin texts such as Raymond's *Legenda maior*, and Caffarini's two works — the abridged *Legenda minor* and the more robust *Libellus de Supplemento*. The significance of rendering Catherine's texts into Latin proved to be crucial for Catherine's eventual canonization, but this translation work was equally important to enable the dispersion of her texts into other European vernaculars. In many ways, these two pathways may have aided each other, as increased awareness about Catherine throughout Europe potentially served her in a religious context, and a religious interest in her may have driven the adoption of her texts in religious houses and homes of the pious laity outside of Italy.

It is Cristofano's translation of Catherine's *Dialogo* into Latin that became the source for the early 15th-century Middle English translation of Catherine's book, which would eventually be known as the *Orchard of Syon* (Schultze 189). Later printed by Wynkyn de Worde in 1519, the manuscript versions of the *Orchard of Syon* are the earliest English texts we have of Catherine's writing. The translation of Raymond's *Legenda* into the *Lyf of Katherine of Senis* is only extant in printed form, with productions run in 1492 and 1500. The English version of Catherine's *Dialogo* seems to have been specifically done for the nuns of the Syon Abbey, while the translation of Raymond's *Legenda* was read by Dominican nuns at Swine Priory in Yorkshire and Cistercian nuns at Dartford Priory, and a copy was also found in the monks' library at Syon (Grisé, "Catherine of Siena" 217). Though these texts had their origins in religious houses, they

¹⁷² Siena, Biblioteca comunale degli Intronati T.II.4, early 15th century.

¹⁷³ Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España 134 (B120), 14th century.

¹⁷⁴ Roma, Archivio Generale dell'Ordine dei Predicatori XIV .24, 14th century.

¹⁷⁵ Grenoble, Bibliothèque Municipale 404 (15th century); Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, n.a.lat. 1250 (15th century); Città del Vaticano, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. Lat. 939 (15th century).

also would circulate into lay communities, particularly among the pious lay and those who had connections in the religious houses.

In the production of the English text of Catherine's writing, there are several important linguistic and gendered implications to consider. For one, Latin is used as an intermediary language, with Latin translation being completed exclusively by men. The Latin texts of the *Dialogo* were done for their own purpose: serving as official documents for the Church that translated Catherine's text not only into a different language but also to be within the purview of masculine discourse. The translation of Catherine's words certainly benefitted her in the process towards canonization — other Italian religious women, such as Elena da Udine, would not reach sainthood with only vernacular texts. As Alison Knowles Frazier writes (233):

Vernacular accounts were especially aimed at women ... But the cases of Birgitta of Sweden, Catherine of Siena, and Francesca Bussi indicate that a vernacular account would not have been sent to Rome, at least not unaccompanied by a Latin narrative ... Fifteenth-century practice demanded a Latin account.

While these Latin texts aided Catherine, they also helped her male followers who produced these works in their political aspirations and religious professions, as they were connected to someone on her way to sanctity. Though vernacular texts were intended for a female audience, the Latin translations and original Latin texts were designed with high-office male religious in mind, even if they would later become the vehicles through which subsequent vernacular translations were made possible.

Unlike the intended professional male readership of the Latin texts, the English texts — though written by men and following the masculine transmission of a text written by a woman — were written with female readership in mind. As the mystical figure — and particularly the

female mystical figure — is often viewed as a conduit that serves God’s words to Christians, it is worth examining how men have served as the conduits for Catherine’s words, especially as they migrate into English.¹⁷⁶ The general perception of women serving as conduits of the divine is that it is the divine speaking through a female vessel. On the other hand, when men engage with women’s words, the presumption is that it’s men who are shaping the words of women in some way. As has been stated above, it seems unlikely that, at least in terms of the Italian tradition, the men around Catherine were seeking to change her message. Though some, like Caffarini, had their own political motives to canonize Catherine, the tenor of themes of the texts are consistent throughout the *Dialogo*, letters, and prayers. That being said, there is a shift in Raymond’s construction of Catherine in the *Legenda* that he authors from Catherine’s own self-construction within her texts. Raymond tends towards casting Catherine within a more traditional role of feminine spirituality that carefully de-emphasizes her voice and actions through situating her as a conduit of God’s work. Though he does address Catherine’s public engagement and her charitable work in particular, her community involvement is tempered in order to privilege her as a solitary spiritual figure, miracle worker, and contemplative mystic.

Expressions of spirituality, especially feminine spirituality, greatly differed between Italy and England during the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance period, causing the translation of the text to be not only a linguistic endeavor, but also a theoretical and theological one. The adoption, therefore, of the *Lyf of Katherine of Senis* into a Middle English spiritual context seems more in keeping with the motives of both the text and the approach to cloistered and meditative feminine spirituality that was idealized in England. The translation of the *Dialogo* seems more unusual as it depicts a much more publicly engaged spirituality that pivots on acts of charity in

¹⁷⁶ Though this may be somewhat the case in the Italian tradition, a number of Catherine’s letters were written by women, and she claims to have written in her own hand as well.

the world. Though the editorial work and framing within the *Orchard of Syon* render it a different text than the *Dialogo*, Catherine's words remain generally intact within a quite literal translation. This provided Catherinian spirituality with a platform within English culture, even if it was tempered in some way. In offering her own words to female readers, though mitigated through translation and editorial choices, the text constructs Catherine as a spiritual teacher — if not a precise model — for Catholic English female devotion.

Though not titled as such in the manuscripts, the English rendition of Catherine's *Dialogo* eventually became known as the *Orchard of Syon*, and may have been made available as early as 1420. This was also the year that first professions were made at Syon Abbey, five years after the placement of the foundation stone laid by Henry V on February 22, 1415 (Hodgson vii). The desire for a Bridgettine order in England likely began with the marriage between the daughter of King Henry IV, Phillipa, and the King of Sweden, Eric XIII of Pomerania. During her time in Sweden, Phillipa's head lady-in-waiting was the noblewoman Lady Katarina Knutsdotter who was also granddaughter of Bridget of Sweden. Phillipa also served as a benefactor of and frequent guest to Vadstena Abbey, founded by Bridget in 1346 (Flemberg 181-92). The Syon Abbey was a project that was a component of Henry V's effort to legitimize his dynasty, and proved to become the most important house for female religious established in England in the century prior to the Reformation. Remarkably, the abbey would survive into the twenty-first century, with the last nuns leaving as recently as 2011.

Being the only house in England of the Bridgettines or the Order of St Saviour, which was founded by Bridget of Sweden, it was suggestive of the contemporaneous ongoing movement that spoke to renewal and reform in spirituality. It enjoyed generous funding by Henry V, took a stand against Henry VIII's project of the Reformation, and helped to develop

Catholic recusant identity (Bainbridge 82). The role of Bridget of Sweden to the community should not be overlooked, as she was not a conventional saint, especially for contemporary English devotion at the time, which was concerned with Lollardy. Notably serving as a model for the English religious figure Margery Kempe, the noble-born Bridget was not a virgin but instead was a married woman who bore eight children and was widowed following a pilgrimage she took with her husband to Santiago de Compostela. Upon the death of her husband, Bridget joined the Third Order of St. Francis and devoted herself to a life of prayer, caring for the poor and the sick, and developing her community of double monasteries where men and women could live in poverty but still have access to books. Syon itself was originally a double monastery, possessing a separate community with a library each for men and women. We have inherited a large and thorough library catalogue from Syon Abbey that was preserved throughout the community's exile in Lisbon during the post-Reformation. The collection is now housed at the University of Exeter.

In addition to Bridget's interest in texts and literacy, community-building, and her status as a tertiary nun, she shared political aspirations with Catherine of Siena, traveling to Rome and working to return the papal seat there from Avignon. Bridget's status as a mother, a mystic and a non-martyr expressed a spirituality that clashed with English religiosity in which martyrdom served as the chief criterion for sanctity from the early Middle Ages through the Reformation (Despres, "Ecstatic Reading and Missionary Mysticism" 144). English devotional practices, especially for women, were very restricted, and continental figures that managed to develop a career of public spiritual advocacy and mystical practices would not prove to be suitable models. Though Margery Kempe suffered for her public displays of piety, Julian of Norwich's position as an anchoress allowed her freedom to express her mystical experiences in texts. While 15th-

century England does not immediately seem like a fitting environment for a figure like Catherine, not yet canonized, the local situation in the Brigittine Syon Abbey offered a more apt context for women to read an English translation of the *Dialogo*.

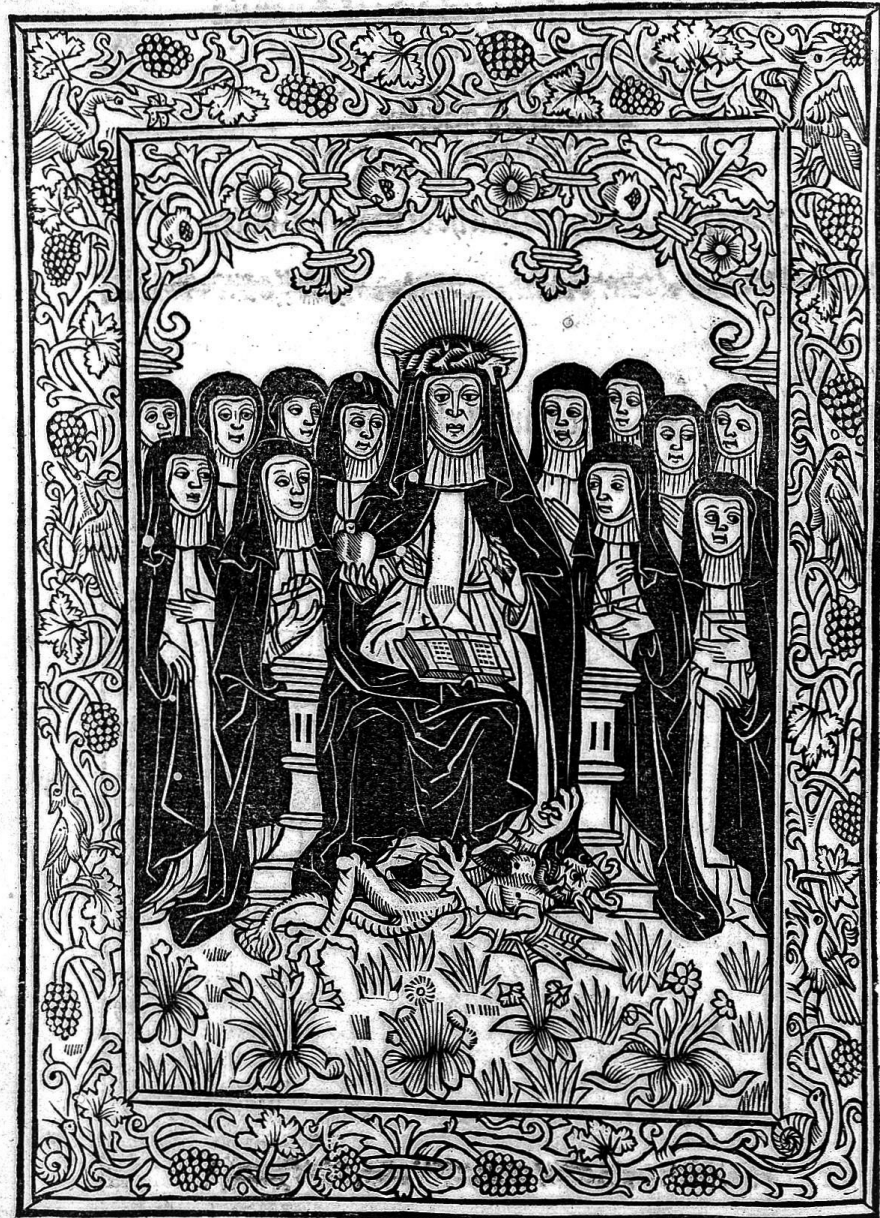


Fig. 15. Woodcut from Wynkyn de Worde's printing of the *Orchard of Syon*, 1519.

Image courtesy of [Wellcome Images](#).

As a text alone, the *Orchard of Syon* does not provide much available information and data regarding its provenance or the purpose behind it. Inevitably linked with the Syon Abbey and its nuns, it was likely intended for the first generation of these nuns specifically, and its primary translator was an anonymous one. As C. Annette Gris  notes, Wynkyn de Worde’s printing of the *Orchard of Syon* was “the first book to showcase its association with Syon and its nuns,” with the nuns being addressed directly in the second prologue and epilogue, in addition to woodcuts that are evocative of the female community there (“Syon Abbey and English Books” 132). From this originating text, many more books of the “Syon tradition” would establish references to the abbey among their framing materials, including the works of Richard Whitford in the 1520s and 1530s. The manuscript of this English translation of Catherine’s text was found within two copies according to an “Envoy,” and the writing of it was continued by another by the name of “Dan Jamys.” This second man may have been a monk in the Carthusian monastery of Sheen, across the Thames from the female Syon Abbey (Schultze 189). In many ways the text is a faithful one, with the major changes being editorial in nature, serving to recast Catherine’s unique spirituality to one that is more in-line with traditional English expressions of devotion. C. Annette Gris  maintains that “framing materials” — prologues, prefatory letters, woodcuts, incipits, explicits, and title-pages — were deployed to establish what amounted to a spiritual provenance within Syon Abbey, leading to substantiating a form of legitimacy on the part of the community (“Syon Abbey and English Books” 136).

The frame added to the *Orchard* served to allegorize the original Italian material, thus rendering Catherine’s concept of the vineyard and communal vineyards instead into a monastic image of a cloistered garden, and placing a greater emphasis on the “ghostly orchard” and “ghostly learning” rather than an active spirituality based on doing good works in the world. In

addition to the framing narrative, another editorial intervention occurs that restructures the rubric, moving away from the Italian formulation. In particular, the English version moves the treatise on tears from its own position within the colloquies to being appended to the fourth chapter on “Prayer.” Despres contends that this movement decreases the significance of tears in Catherine’s devotion and as a holy behavior independent of prayer, situating tears as a private form of worship and a component of praying in general terms (“Ecstatic Reading and Missionary Mysticism” 154). Though these interventions may be seemingly slight moves, and the women of Syon Abbey were still provided with access to the texts that Catherine originally wrote, rendered for them to read in their own vernacular language, the same textual control and attention to Catherine’s unique spirituality that were components of her reception in the Italian tradition are not preserved in England.

Though the editorial changes made by the English translators of Catherine’s dialogue suggest a closed-off and more private and contemplative approach to spirituality, the significance of a literate female community engaging with Catherine’s texts should not be overlooked. The provenance of a Brigittine monastery certainly points to an interest in literacy, reading and books, and Syon Abbey exemplifies this tradition with its great output and preservation of texts through the years, even maintaining them while the inhabitants were exiled. Reading practices within the monastery were not limited to private devotion, and were structured throughout the day in various ways, with reading done silently and out loud with the utilization of printed books and manuscripts, and both within communal spaces and privately in cells (Bowden 187). Of course, the women who would become the nuns and abbesses of Syon Abbey were from an elite class as they were able to read, unlike Margery Kempe who could not read and edit the autobiography she dictated to her scribes.

As one may expect from a literary community, these women circulated the books of Syon Abbey with a complex network of female lay patrons. In part due to a Carthusian influence of the 15th century, the laity were able to imitate continental ecstatic women in some ways, and were also able to intersect with the texts coming out of religious houses due to their having family members placed there. Denise L. Despres names Cecily, Duchess of York and mother of Edward IV; Alianore Roos; and Elizabeth Sywardby as among the female lay patrons who were most interested in reading continental devotional works. Though this should not necessarily suggest an extremely wide readership of Catherine's work in English, the lay patrons who were interested in the textual production at Syon Abbey were likely the reason behind Wynkyn de Worde's 1519 printed edition of the *Orchard*. Indeed, Elizabeth Strickland, a nun at Syon Abbey, gave her printed copy to the wife of Richard Ashton of Middleton who was her executor (Grisé, "Catherine of Siena" 219). As Jennifer N. Brown notes in her essay "From the Charterhouse to the Printing House," Wynkyn de Worde had access to one or more manuscript versions of this text that do not survive, as he includes a prologue not found in the three extant manuscript copies (33). Although it is unclear how many manuscript editions of the English translation of Catherine's *Dialogo* existed, there were at least four copies, with the three described below still available to us.

The two earliest extant manuscripts of Catherine's *Dialogo* rendered into English date from the first half of the 15th century: British Library MS Harley 3432, and Cambridge, St John's College MS C.25. These first two editions are from the early history of Syon Abbey (Grisé, "Syon Abbey and English Books" 50). The third extant manuscript is from the second half of the 15th century, Morgan M 162. There are additionally two manuscripts that contain a portion of the translation: an extract of part I, chapter 12 in Manchester, John Rylands Library,

MS Latin 395; and an extract of part V, chapter 2 in Oxford, University College, MS 14 (Schultze 190).

Though these manuscripts are now named for the Abbey, and though there is evidence that this text was read by the women there, and though Catherine of Siena was an important female figure venerated alongside the Virgin and Bridget of Sweden, “there is a conspicuous absence of evidence of manuscript production in the great women’s religious houses in England,” at Syon or any other convent (such as Barking, Dartford, Shaftsbury, Denny) (Despres, “Ecstatic Reading and Missionary Mysticism” 147). Ian Doyle writes that while many cloistered women did not enjoy literacy, women belonging to prestigious religious houses owned “a good many books, both for prayer and for reading, in French and English, besides for worship in Latin, and there is no reason why some anonymous manuscripts from the better-educated houses ... should not have been written, decorated and bound by them” (15). Therefore, though there is a clear connection between Syon Abbey and its readership and ownership of the *Orchard of Syon*, there is no concrete documentation that links the production of any of these manuscripts to the women or the Abbey outright.

The earliest extant manuscript, the British Library’s Harley 3432, includes an incipit by an anonymous cleric who was most likely Carthusian, addressed to the “Religyuos moder & deuoute sustren, clepid & chosen bisily to laboure at the hous of Syon,” positioning this book within the context of the Abbey in an immediate way. This manuscript is exquisitely decorated, particularly at its celtic-knot initials with red, blue, green and white ink, and gold leaf, though some initials are left unfinished. For each new part, there is an emphasis on the border around the two columns of text, setting the structural parts off as discrete units. There is every indication that more decoration was intended for this manuscript as there are light marks in the rulings of

many pages; good examples of this can be seen on fol. 77r, 103v, 104r, 137r, 139r, and 174v. Most of the marginalia present seems to have been done by the original hand, in the form of citations or lengthy additions that replace cross-outs of the text in columns (as on 117r). Some marginalia includes decoration, including a drawing of a male face in profile between the columns on 122v — there is a reference to “poor men” in the proximate text.

There is also the marginalia of others in the book, including historically much more recent lightly done marginalia on 105r. At the beginning and last pages of the book there are many male autographs from the 16th and 17th centuries, showing clearly that this book continued to be seen as a luxury item — if not a text to read — throughout its life prior to its inclusion in the British Library. The material nature of the book reveals that there has been continued care, as some pages that were ripped were repaired with new parchment paper (not animal hide), as can be seen on fol. 45, 50, 107 (small tear), 119, small repairs on 127 and 128, and on page 148. Some leaves are ripped and repaired with new paper (not animal hide), which can be seen on fol. 21, 45, 50, slightly on 107, 119, small repairs on 127 and 128, 148. In the instance of page 21, it is possible to see that someone re-wrote the missing letters on the new paper, which appears to have been added on the recto but transparent enough to see through to the verso. Though this repair was done with care it is an obvious remedy due to the use of much later paper. Despite this commitment to tending to the book, there is what appears to be a spill over some pages, particularly along the top, with fol. 172-174 and fol. 182-193 most damaged. These spills do not diminish the legibility, and instead suggest a continued engagement with the text beyond the book as a collectible.

Among the signatures in the front and back of the book is one from Walter Devereux, the 1st Devereux Earl of Essex. This became a book within John Batteley’s collection, who was a

Church of England clergyman and antiquary. The Harley Collection purchased Batteley's collection on November 5, 1723 (Wright 1966). Formed by Robert, Mortimer and Edward Harley, the Collection was bequeathed to Edward Harley's widow Henrietta Cavendish, then to their daughter Margaret Cavendish Bentinck, and was eventually sold to the nation of England in 1753, forming one of the foundation collections of the British Library. The lifecycle of the manuscript points primarily to masculine readership or at least ownership through the 16th and 17th centuries, and eventually returns to female ownership before becoming part of a communal reading space more in line with its provenance.



Fig. 16. Harley 3432, f. 101, decorated initial and border.

Image courtesy of the [British Library](https://www.bl.uk/).

The Cambridge, St John's College MS C.25 is in a much different style to the Harley MS, with plainer decoration and with vellum much smaller in size. Initials have some decoration in red and blue ink and include gold leaf, though initials were cut out in two instances, and the first three pages of the manuscript are no longer extant. There is some sketched floral decoration in black ink in the margins, as well as banner illustrations to show continuing text to aid those who would sew the pages together. There is some marginalia that highlights text with lines and curves, including playful marginalia that turns the curves into a face on 54r. There is light textual marginalia written in Latin on several pages. The ink of this text is very faint, and it appears that it could be in the original scribal hand, though this cannot be certain and may instead point to another reader contemporaneous with the scribe. In either case, this marginalia indicates that there is some educated readership engaging with this manuscript that itself has been the result of multilingual intertextuality.

Morgan Library's MS M.162 is dated to around 1470. It has 186 bound leaves, and is presented in one column rather than two. This book contains all the matter printed in Wynkyn de Worde's *Orchard of Syon* except for the first prologue. Among the owners of this text are included John Crosse, Joseph Ames, Richard How of Aspley, Beds., along with the later owners William Morris and Richard Bennett. William Morris (1834-1896), best known for his textile designs and as part of an artistic circle with Dante Gabriel Rossetti, was influenced in his art and writing by Italian Medieval and Renaissance literature. His book label reads, "FROM THE LIBRARY OF WILLIAM MORRIS KELMSCOTT HOUSE HAMMERSMITH," and it is affixed to the front inner page attached to the binding of the book. Known to be a voracious reader, Morris became an avid book-collector in his later years and amassed rare books dating

back to a 13th-century Bible (also in the Morgan Library, B2 264 A-B MS M.0109-11). Among his 15th-century books are included Seneca, Ovid, Boccaccio, Aristotle, and Bernard of Clairvaux. Morris also owned a copy of Wynkyn de Worde's printed version of the *Orcharde of Syon*, which is now part of the Wellcome Library's collection. The decoration of MS M.162 is primarily in red and blue with flourishes. There is red decorating the letters at the beginning of sentences, and new chapters have a blue chapter symbol throughout, and there are clever insertion marks, like the one that can be seen on 13v. This manuscript offers a later version of the text, perhaps one that would have originated near-contemporaneously with the manuscript that Wynkyn de Worde would eventually use in his printed 1519 edition of the *Orchard*. Together, these three existing manuscripts offer insight into how the text would become connected to female readership and devotion, though it is not clear how many women had access to each of these books early in their existence. The most interesting of the manuscripts is British Library Harley 3432 as it is the most complete version that also addresses the women of the Syon Abbey directly.

Other Catherinian Texts

Although this chapter is focused on the text of the *Orchard of Syon*, it is worth noting some of the other Catherinian texts that proliferated in England during the 15th-17th centuries. MS Bodley 131, dated to the 1430s, includes letters as well as short extracts of Catherine's *Dialogo* and Bridget of Sweden's *Revelations* in sequence. The inclusion of the two side-by-side suggests a linking between their approaches to spiritual devotion that was not limited to Syon Abbey. The provenance of this book was York, in the north of England, and it belonged to John Morton of York who was a member of an Austin friars lay fraternity along with his wife (Grisé,

“Catherine of Siena” 219). Notably, the manuscript also includes a text of one of Catherine’s interlocutors: William Flete’s *Remedies Against Temptations*.

As stated above, Raymond of Capua’s *Lyf of Katherine of Senis* was printed at two points (1492 and 1500), connoting its popularity. Differing from the Latin text, the English translator took liberties in shortening and editing the text so as to not go beyond the reader’s ability to understand. As Brown notes, the text was largely intended for the lay audience outside of the convent and charterhouse, which may explain why the text has been abbreviated (18). Within this English text, Catherine is put forth as an exemplary model of female devotion and sanctity, which is in keeping with Raymond’s construction of her as a less transgressive figure than she likely was during her time period. Interestingly, as Brown observes, the translator does not maintain the first person singular that Raymond used, but replaces the word “I” with the word “Raymond,” which was unusual for translations of vitae and other devotional texts of the same period (31).

Another printing of interest is a book of devotional excerpts published in 1521 by Henry Pepwell for the laity, British Library Royal MS 17 D V. This has been of interest to scholars because it uniquely contains printed excerpts from *The Book of Margery Kempe* in addition to including extracts from the *Lyf* of Catherine, as well as works by Richard of St Victor and Walter Hilton, and the *Cloud of Unknowing* and *Hid Divinite*. Brown’s analysis finds that the Catherine excerpts are truncated and included within this printing in order to appeal to a particular kind of reader who sought after an easily digestible female spirituality, with mystical elements removed (39). Eventually, the excerpts from Catherine’s *Lyf* would be physically cut out of the text by later readers as they were perceived to display anti-Protestant sentiments.

Finally, a 1609 translation of Catherine's *Life* was sold by John Heigham to English recusants. Translated by John Fenn, a Roman Catholic priest who was living in exile in Leuven, this text seems unaware of the previous English translation, and interestingly was done from Ambrosianus Catherinus's Italian version of Raymond of Capua's *Legenda maior*. The intertextuality at play seems to recall Catherine to the vernacular tradition in which she was embedded, by further removing her figure from the Latin language. As this text originated in exile, it was also intended to support other recusants living in exile, though the bookseller Heigham wrote the dedicatory address to a specific unnamed female reader in particular. Again, the female readership is invoked if not outright intended by the men translating and editing this book for an English audience, though Brown notes that this dedication engages in a false construction wherein the printed, public text lays claim to a personal, private reader (40). The bookseller was later arrested and imprisoned in England for his Catholic book trade. As Brown convincingly argues, Catherine is of significance to the recusants in England as her having returned the papacy back to its rightful place in Rome resonated with their desire to return England to the Church of Rome (40). Though the *Orchard of Syon* is the English text that is the focus of the present study, there is a larger context of Catherinian interest in medieval and early modern England, persisting from the early 15th century through to the 17th century, showing a continued engagement with Catherine's life and Catherine's texts.

The Framing of the *Orchard of Syon*

What is among the most intriguing qualities of the Middle English translation of Catherine's *Dialogo* is the framing of the text. This framing is original material that situates the translated text for the English audience and reception, which is of interest because of how it

formulates Catherine's writing as worthy of reading. Following the "Translator's Prologue," the "Kalender," and the "Prolog" is an introduction before the "Prima Pars." It reads (18):

Here begynneþ þe boke of diuine doctrine, þat is to seie, of Goddis techinge, ʒouen bi þe persone of God þe fader to þe intellecte of þe glorious virgyn, Seint Katerine of Seene, of þe Ordre of Seint Dominike, whiche was write as sche endited in her moder tunge, when sche was in contemplacioun inrap of spirit, and sche heringe actueli and in þe same tyme tellinge tofore meny what oure Lord God spake in her.

Along with Teresa of Avila, Catherine of Siena became a Doctor of the Church in 1970 under the Italian Pope Paul VI (Teresa was honored first in September, and Catherine in October). They were the first two female Doctors, and at the time of writing there are currently four. Having died in 1380, Catherine was canonized in 1461 by Pope Pius II. A Sienese man, Pope Pius II's city of origin and the fact that he was Italian likely played a role in Catherine's being canonized under his tenure. As one of the few women honored as a Doctor of the Church, the designation is a testament to her balance of the contemplative and active life, as Church Doctors are known for their deep religious knowledge and their preaching. The translator of the *Orchard of Syon* discusses Catherine's "intellecte" and how she was able to deliver "Goddis techinge," though there is certainly a displacement of knowledge, as it is ultimately God's knowledge that Catherine is able to convey through her intellect. Still, it is Catherine who is able to deliver this message through her intelligence or her knowing. From this, she was able to write the book in her native language, that would be transmitted into England even prior to her canonization.

Framing the narrative in this way, by placing the book as divine doctrine, and presenting Catherine as a writer who has the intellect of God, situates her as a figure in the position of someone who is about to share knowledge with the reader. The Middle English word "enditen"

has several meanings, including “(a) To write or compose (a book, poem, letter, etc.)...; (b) to write...; (c) to compose (a song, a Psalm); (d) of oral composition or expression: to tell (a story), to sing or chant.”¹⁷⁷ The translator may by an off-chance be referring to the oral composition definition when discussing Catherine’s book, but it is more likely that he is providing Catherine with the agency of a writer outright, as three of the four definitions are concerned with actual writing. While the purpose of sharing knowledge may be true of many books, the translator underscores this message by placing it at the front of the text. Even though God may be the originator of this knowledge, this does not detract from Catherine’s position because she is the one who is able appropriately to relay this knowledge to the reader in a manner that they will be able to understand. Catherine, who was in ecstasy when she heard God’s voice, was afforded a special connection to God, and the reason for it seems to have been her intellect. The translator talks about the ghostly nature of what is to come, which is indicative of mysticism and contemplation rather than doing good social works in the world, emphasizing again Catherine’s intellectual capabilities rather than her acts of public charity. Though mysticism can sometimes be taken to be an emotional rather than an intellectual state, the translator here is rendering it as the result of thoughtful meditation and contemplation.

As he will write later in the text, the translator favors an alternative form of intellectualism that is divorced from being well-read and studious. Catherine’s intellect is illuminated by the grace of God’s light, and this is in contrast to a “proud lettrid man” who learned from reading rather than by having a deep divine connection. The translator writes (187):

How þei, þe whiche ben come to þe forseif staat of unyoun, ben illumyned and
 liȝtned in her iȝe of intellecte by grace with a liȝt aboue nature. And how it is betire to

¹⁷⁷ From the University of Michigan’s Middle English Dictionary online, entry available here: <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED13700>

go for to haue counceil for þe soulis heelp to a meke man wiþ an holy conscience,
þan to a proud lettrid man.

Catherine's union with God afforded her an illuminated intellect that is light and is not proud. She is therefore more capable of giving counsel to help souls with getting into a state of holy conscience. Again, the idea of Catherine being a teacher is indicated by the idea of providing counsel for others. Moreover, her intellect is derived from a place that is above nature, so it is not something that can be read about in books written by humans for humans. Catherine, the mystic, straddles the spaces between humanity and the divine, and in so doing is able to convey her knowledge to others in a way that men with a knowledge of letters cannot do. Though one would suspect that the use of "man" here is in reference to a universal human and not the male sex, in the case of the "proud lettrid man" the translator is certainly referring to the male sex as women would not have had access to books in the same way as men at this time. If this is the case in the second instance, it is interesting to consider Catherine as a teacher for Christian men in a book that is intended for a female readership.

Catherine's knowledge is also referenced within the "Kalender" and is repeated in the text itself. The translator discusses Catherine's knowing so much of God's goodness: "How þis soule knowynge so myche of þe goodnes of God preyede not oonly for cristen peple and for holy chirche, but preyede also for al þe world" (3 and 56). Because of her deeper knowledge, Catherine is more empathetic, praying not only for those who are close to her and like her (that is, Christian people, and note the genderless word choice here), and praying not only for the Church, but praying also for the whole world. The knowledge that Catherine has access to allows her to consider a larger scope and commit to doing more for those people who are not like her

and those institutions that are not her own. This, of course, is part of the general wisdom to love one's neighbor as one loves oneself, but here the neighbor can be one that is quite unlike the self.

The "Prolog" itself also engages with the ideas of knowledge and learning, all centered around the allegory of the garden that is used throughout the frame of the translation. Along with this diction related to the intellect are words that pertain to the physical space of the garden, with its "manye walkynge paDes," which, though referencing a closed space in the case of the English nuns, is in keeping with the physical aspects of Catherine's spirituality and her interest in walking and movement to serve God. Within the garden, the translator speaks to the fruit and the weeds that are contained therein (16):

But, sustren lyke it to 3ou to knowe Þat in gaderynge delitable fruyt I foond ful bittire wedis. Bittir & soure Þei ben to taaste, but profitable to knowe. Siche wedis I purpose to sette among good fruyt, not for feedyng, but to 3oure knowinge. / Tasteþ hem and knoweþ hem, Þat 3e mowe beware of eny gostli enemy when Þei profre 3ou suche wedis.

Alongside the delectable fruit in the garden, which is sweet to eat, are weeds that are bitter to taste but are worth knowing about. In suggesting that the women of Syon Abbey be aware of both good and bad, he is providing them with agency to be able to discern the difference and not to indulge with sin and the enemy. Here is the full transmission of knowledge, from Catherine's original Italian text, to the Latin translations, to the Middle English translation, and finally to the women who will read it and are therefore empowered to know the difference between fruit that is good and bad as a result of this chain of teaching.

When considering this alongside the story of Genesis where it is Eve who takes a fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil only to plunge humanity into sin, there is markedly more

credit afforded to the nuns of Syon, and any spiritual laywoman who may encounter this text, for they are able to encounter the weeds of bitterness but the knowledge serves to benefit them rather than render them sinful. With a female author as the provenance of this dissemination, it seems that because Catherine is quite adept at encountering both good and evil and still choose the correct path, then other women are able to do the same in turn. Therefore, Catherine's teaching is such that it trusts in women to choose virtue, rather than assuming that they will commit sin as some form of a "weaker" sex more susceptible to coercion. The printed *Orchard of Syon* text is framed in such a way as to give Catherine agency as a writer, intellectual, and spiritual counselor who can make a valuable contribution through her writing to female devotional readers in England.

Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe: Textual Approaches to English Feminine Spirituality

In her letters to women, Catherine recommends that they behave somewhere between a saintly dichotomy that is meek on one extreme and fervent on the other. The English translation of Catherine's book is certainly closer to the meek end of the spectrum, but there is the opportunity for some interpretation, as the women of Syon Abbey are able to develop within their community, read and write, and teach and learn. This general tendency is in keeping with English female mysticism that the text of the *Orchard of Syon* inherited, which can be shown in the two most famous female mystics of the English Middle Ages: Julian of Norwich (c. 1342-1416) and Margery Kempe (c. 1373-1438). As Catherine came from an Italian tradition, she was provided with many more opportunities for the authorization of her sanctity than English spiritual figures had access to. Historically, there have been more Italian saints honored than

those from any other national origin (a term that I use anachronistically and loosely),¹⁷⁸ as well as many more Italian popes. In total, 196 popes have been from Italy (88 of whom were specifically from Rome), with the second-most represented nationality of popes being French with 15 popes total, and only one pope — Pope Adrian IV of the 12th century — has been English.¹⁷⁹ As stated above, Catherine was canonized by a Sienese pope specifically, and proclaimed a Doctor of the Church by an Italian pope. Though there is no reason for her not to have been canonized and so honored, her Italian origin was not working against her. The Reformation in England prevented many potentially saintly figures from being canonized for a long time, and this historical precedent may continue to marginalize historical English spiritual figures within the Catholic faith. Neither Julian of Norwich nor Margery Kempe would be canonized as Catherine was, but they each represent one extreme of the saintly dichotomy that Catherine discusses. Though it is not certain that either of these women read Catherine's works, they were both familiar with and influenced by Catherine's mysticism, despite their experiences being very different. Their approaches to spirituality as shown in their writing provide a contextualization of Catherine's reception in England, as they offer further elucidation of the English model of female spirituality as it differs from the Italian one.

Julian of Norwich was an anchoress of the Church of Saint Julian, the male saint after whom she named herself. Because of her position as a highly regarded religious woman who behaved in a manner consistent with an extremely pious form of English female spirituality, she was sought after for advice and visited by many, including Margery Kempe, who visited her around 1413 (Law 184). At the age of 31, believed to be the year of 1374, Julian had 16 visions

¹⁷⁸ Though this list does not capture every Catholic saint, it provides a sense of how very many more Italian saints there have been compared to those from other national origins:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Roman_Catholic_saints_by_nationality.

¹⁷⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2013/feb/13/popese-full-list>.

that she wrote down in the book known as *Revelations of Divine Love*, which she later expanded to a larger text in 1395. The only known extant manuscript of the short version exists today as British Library Additional MS 37790, dated to 1413. The shorter text is more personal and visceral, with the extended version becoming more generalized and more removed from Julian's own individual experience with the visions. Within the text she recounts that her mother and werefriends by her sickbed, so it is unlikely that she was an anchoress at the time of first writing the *Revelations*, but she would eventually withdraw to the church that belonged to the Benedictine nuns of Carrow. Despite her status as a recluse, she was still a prominent part of the community and was included in the wills of others in addition to being solicited for advice.

Educated, perhaps by Benedictine nuns, Julian was "relatively assured" yet offered a self-conscious meta-textual statement at the beginning of her short text, which would nevertheless not persist in the second longer-form version (McAvoy 1). She writes (Beer 33):

But God forbid that you should take me for a teacher. Such is not my intention and never has been. I am a woman, ignorant, weak and frail, but I know what I am saying: I have been shown it by the sovereign teacher. In truth, charity moves me to tell it you, for I wish God to be known and my fellow Christians aided, as I would be myself, in the greater hating of sin and loving of God. / Ought I to believe, simply because I am a woman, that I should not tell you of God's goodness? When I saw the vision I also saw that he wants it to be known — as you shall clearly see in the matter that follows, if it be well and truly received. Soon you will forget me, a mere wretch; you will cease to notice me, and will behold Jesus who is teacher of all.

In negating herself as a teacher she is inevitably constructing herself as one, though she lays the primary onus of teaching on Jesus and not herself; she is an intermediary teacher. Indeed, it is the

virtue of charity that moves her to share her knowledge with other Christians. Rhetorically she is able to temper her claims by offering herself as a meek woman and a “mere wretch” who will be forgotten despite the persisting of her text. Still, she is able to assert herself as being able to share her knowledge of God regardless of her gender in the claim, “Ought I to believe, simply because I am a woman, that I should not tell you of God’s goodness?” Just as Catherine is constructed as a teacher who relays what she learns from God to others, Julian fashions herself as a teacher through her mystical writing. Her writing is clear, rendered in the vernacular, and is intended to be accessible to others, further substantiating her assertion as a teacher.

Julian rejects classic dualisms that position good versus evil, the Virgin versus Eve, the earthly world versus the spiritual world, and men versus women. Julian does not offer any real contempt for the earthly world, constructing herself instead as a spiritual person who wanted to be closer to God to serve him. This does differ from Catherine’s approach which sees the earthly world and spiritual world intrinsically tied together. Though Julian does claim herself as an “ignorant, weak and frail” woman, she writes of God as mother and the doctrine of the motherhood of God in the text following the 14th revelation. She explains that “God is truly our mother as he is our father,” making mention specifically of the second person of the trinity, as it is he who never stops being the son of God who is also our mother (Beer 77). As discussed in Chapter 1, Christ’s nourishing body is often connected to femininity and motherhood as his blood and flesh feed Christians, much as a mother’s breastmilk feeds her children.

Julian of Norwich’s spirituality is quite consistent with the approach that is gestured towards in the *Orchard of Syon*, which calls for a cloistered woman who is yet able to be embedded within a community in some way, and who is permitted and even encouraged to teach and learn. The meditative and contemplative approach that Julian takes is similar to Catherine’s

initial reclusive impulse in which she remained in a room in her parents' house to dedicate herself to God. However, Catherine would eventually leave her self-imposed cell to travel about the world and do good works for the public. Julian is able to be connected to her community through her writing and through providing advice to those who seek it out. Despite Julian's traditional English approach, she did not enjoy the same afterlife as the Italian Catherine, whose work traveled widely in the centuries after her death, and who would be canonized within the first hundred years of her death.

Margery Kempe offers the other extreme of spiritual approach, opting for traveling on pilgrimages, being loudly tearful in the streets, being in public without her husband, and wearing white despite her marital status. *The Book of Margery Kempe*, the writing of which began in 1436, is often considered to be the first autobiography in the English language. The only extant manuscript, British Library MS Additional 61823, dates from sometime before 1450 and was found in 1934 within the private library of the Butler-Bowdon family. The manuscript had previously belonged to a Carthusian monastery in Yorkshire, likely due to the Carthusians' interest in mystical visions. A pamphlet of excerpts of *The Book of Margery Kempe* was printed by Wynkyn de Worde in 1501, and was later found alongside excerpts of Catherine's texts as stated above, printed by Henry Pepwell in 1521. Because of the disparity of these editions, it is not entirely clear what the reception of her texts were during her lifetime, but we know that she was often reprimanded for her behavior within England, according to her own accounts.

In the "Proem," Margery outlines the book's purpose, which is to invoke (3)
sinful wretches wherein they may have great solace and comfort to them and
understand the high and unspeakable mercy of our sovereign Saviour Christ Jesus...

All the works of our Savior be for our example and instruction, and what grace that he works in any creature is our profit if lack of charity be not our hinderance.

Just like Julian of Norwich and the translator of Catherine's *Dialogo*, Margery introduces and frames her text with the notion that the book is intended to help others, and that it offers "example and instruction," though particularly through Christ rather than through Margery herself. However, as it is a recounting of her life, it is suggestive that Margery is also offering an example and is in some way an intermediary between Christ and her readers. At the time of Margery's life, the *Legenda aurea* was widely available in the vernacular, making it popular among the laity and female readers in particular. Imitating the style adopted by the male authors of traditional "Lives of Saints" narratives, Margery refers to herself as "creature," which also lends her intensely subjective text a measure of objectivity and authority.

Additionally, her *Book* is punctuated with many references to saints and other highly regarded spiritual figures including Katherine and Margaret (both of English importance), Bridget of Sweden, Marie d'Oignies, Elizabeth of Hungary, and as is often the case with female mystical literature, the Virgin and Mary Magdalene. Bridget of Sweden, as discussed above, is a peculiar saint in that she was a wife and mother as well as a holy woman and author. Margery sees many similarities between Bridget's biography and her own, and employs Bridget's sanctity in an attempt at legitimize her own claims as a spiritual figure. Elizabeth of Hungary also entered the holy life after marriage and children, providing another bolster to Margery's unusual religious life. Although never canonized, the Blessed Marie d'Oignies, also in a chaste marriage, was famous for tears and other dramatic mystical displays, so Margery's invoking of her also fortified her choice of spiritual devotion through tears and her dramatic public acts.

Though Margery is able to rhetorically situate herself within canonical spiritual references, in her daily life she was sometimes accused of being a Lollard. Lollardy was a heterodox and academic threat to religion during Margery's time that originated in Oxford. Lollards were known to deny transubstantiation and question marriage, but over time anything that was considered to be heretical was equated with Lollardy. Margery, however, turns the accusations into her ability to show her gracefulness in the face of adversity. Moreover, she discusses the teaching that she had received in order to summon virtue (4):

For ever the more slander and reproof that she suffered, the more she increased in grace and in devotion of holy meditation of high contemplation and of wonderful speeches and dalliance which our Lord spoke and dallied to her soul, teaching her how she should be despised for his love, how she should have patience, setting all her trust, all her love, and all her affection in him only.

Here we see the use of the third person singular "her," as well as how she is able to be taught by God to endure the suffering of others in order to devote her attention to divinity alone. She speaks of "devotion," "meditation," and "high contemplation," as a nod to a more traditional feminine spirituality, even though she will go on to recount a rather unusual spiritual life especially within the context of England.

Because Margery would spend so much time going on pilgrimages, she was able to get a sense of what life was like for continental religious women, which contrasted greatly with her experiences at home. As Liz Herbert McAvoy writes, "Whereas in England her sojourns are characterized by arrests and accusations and physical intimidation, in Italy she tends to find greater acceptance and accord" (21). Italy proves to be far more favorable and tolerant to Margery's approach to mysticism, and continental pilgrimages succeeded in increasing her own

sense of spiritual authority. Women in particular are in a position to give Margery greater acceptance within Italy, as they are familiar with — if not a part of — the pious and literary female spiritual community, and the home to many female saints. Margery provides an account of being overcome and collapsing while on pilgrimage in Italy, only to have a group of women recognize this as a sign of her devotion to God and take her in to care for her (43-4). She also recounts her experience with the Italian noblewoman Margaret Florentyne who cares generously for her and seeks advice from her in spiritual matters (95-6). Through her travels, Margery is empowered to gather authority from sources outside of a patriarchal and English context, looking towards other traditions, and especially towards what is offered through continental female mysticism that may be epitomized by the figure of Catherine, identifying instead with a different kind of female literary production and sanctity.

In many ways the fact that neither Julian of Norwich nor Margery Kempe was canonized is indicative of their marginalized status as English figures as well as the English spiritual tradition's emphasis on martyrdom as a requirement of sanctity. However, there is more at play here as these two women did not enjoy the same type of network of well-connected religious, political, and literary figures that Catherine was connected to who worked to ensure that her afterlife was cared for and her sanctity legitimized. Though Julian of Norwich is revered due to her choice of becoming an anchoress, she does not have the mobility to make contact with others outside of her immediate geographical area. Margery Kempe, who does travel extensively, receives approval from Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Arundel, and also enjoys contact with Bishop of Lincoln Philip Repingdon and her own confessor Robert Spryngolde. Still, this is not enough in the face of the trials that she endured by other male religious who did not believe Margery's acts to be holy. As both women attempted to remedy their female bodies with their

religious devotion, they each took an extreme path that did not serve ultimately to legitimize them in the same way as Catherine was legitimized. However, between these two women, it is possible to see the approach to female mysticism that is rendered in the English translation of the *Orchard of Syon*, which rewrites Catherine's text to be more in keeping with a quiet and less external approach that does not work to create a network of key figures but allows the woman to become, as Julian writes, "a mere wretch" who is forgotten despite being a teacher of God.

Ultimately, English devotional books written by female mystics and mediated in various ways by scribes and translators serve as a means to reinforce English-held beliefs regarding female spirituality and displays of religiosity. These texts often serve as conduct books, offering models for women, and giving them the opportunity to think critically, but at the same time closing off the ability for English women to engage in the world without repudiation. Women are barred from reading Catherine's book without an intermediary frame and would read Julian of Norwich's book from the perspective of a woman legitimized but almost entirely closed off from society. If they had access to Margery Kempe's words at all, they would have understood that her behavior was transgressive and ought not to be imitated. However, the engagement with texts not just from at home but from abroad would serve women, and especially the women of Syon Abbey, over time as they were able to make their own choices regarding their approaches to spirituality and religiosity, as they would preserve these texts in their years in exile, and care for them to pass them on for future generations to interact with.

Conclusion

For a woman who lived for only 33 years, Catherine of Siena proved to be successful in multiple roles — as a writer, mystic, community builder, spiritual advisor, political figure, and ambassador. In many ways, each of these roles served to reinforce each other — Catherine was a mystical writer who wrote to build communities, advise others in spiritual matters, and engage in politics. In addition to putting her full physical body into her work, as she explains in many of her letters, Catherine also put technology to work. She wrote in the emerging Tuscan vernacular in order to have the greatest reach to the people whom she most wanted to or believed most needed to hear her message, and she wrote with a rhetoric that elevated the language to be consistent with Latin letters written by the Pope. She also leveraged the technology of writing to spread her message in her own time through letters across Italy and Europe, and ensured that her writing would serve as a legacy after her death by entrusting her texts to those she knew would be able to further disseminate them. Catherine's writing and her community served her well as they ensured that her reception would help to canonize her work, through Latin translations that would eventually become translations into other European vernaculars including Middle English.

Catherine's mysticism proved to be multivalent and extensive, as it embodied her dual-focused approach to spirituality that was both concerned with matters of this world and the afterlife. Like other mystics, Catherine not only trod a careful line that was outside of the economies of sex, gender, and society, but also worked to make her own space. As both a contemplative mystic and a mystic living the *vita activa*, Catherine was able both to learn from God and to teach God's word to others in the piazzas of Siena and in her letters to followers. Her dual-pronged approach proved to be successful as she was legitimized first as a saint in 1461 and

then as a Doctor of the Church in 1970, one of very few women who have received this honor. In 1999, Pope John Paul II named her one of the patron saints of Europe, alongside Benedict of Nursia, Cyril, Methodius, Bridget of Sweden, and Teresa Benedicta of the Cross. With Francis of Assisi, she has also been a patron saint of Italy since 1939. Although her Italian background helped Catherine in terms of her authority within the Church, the way she meticulously constructed herself in her writing, in creating alliances, and occupying herself in political dealings ensured that her legacy would be successful when many women — including Italian women with writing or hagiographies in the vernacular language — would not receive the same legitimacy.

As a mystical writer, Catherine was entering into a literary topos that was already historically rich with mystical figures like Bernard of Clairvaux, the Beguines, and Angela de Foligno. The mystical discourse that conflates divine charitable love with erotic love is picked up also in the secular writing of troubadours, lyric poets, and canonical Italian writers like Dante and Petrarch. This cross-pollination of literary tropes is indicative of the innovative use of language by Catherine and other mystical writers, who work to describe the ineffable as they encounter the godhead. The same language is used by writers like Guido Cavalcanti, who cannot quite comprehend their beloved. Today, the same tropes are still in use in the lyrics of popular love songs, as Beyoncé describes being both “drunk” and “crazy” in love, just as Catherine also describes both herself and God as they shift subjectivities throughout her *Dialogo*. Moreover, Catherine’s language itself works in patterns similar to that of her predecessor Dante and her contemporary Petrarch, serving as an illustration of her own innovations within the emerging Italian vernacular.

The success of Catherine's writing and its legacy is very much embedded within the community she worked to build around herself. As an active force in the world doing acts of charity, offering spiritual guidance, and engaging with the political landscape, Catherine very much cultivated a network around her that she both served and leveraged to help her on her mission. Although Catherine was legitimized in many ways, she also pushed against existing power hierarchies of Latinate masculine discourse, notably in her emphatic use of the vernacular Italian and in her public persona. The connections that she made throughout her life proved to keep her within the realm of sanctity and outside of the domain of the transgressive woman. Catherine fostered a community comprised of many people from many walks of life — from religious recluses to the two popes who lived during her lifetime, from poets to lawyers, from her fellow *mantellate* to kings and queens. Her ability to interact across these cross-sections of 14th-century urban life shows her tenacity and persuasive capacity, as she managed to be pragmatic and empathetic, while also making demands for what she wanted.

Catherine's letter writing career is very revealing of her spiritual, literary, interpersonal, and political successes. As F. Thomas Luongo writes (*Saintly Politics* 207),

Catherine's epistolary, her use of this relatively flexible genre of writing to mix mysticism in mundane affairs, should be appreciated as an apt expression of her investment in the political scene and of the entire enterprise of her career. Read in the context of the political discourse of the 1370s, Catherine's letters become part of the process whereby she created a community within which her saintly authority would be recognized, vehicles for her to interject her sanctity and prophetic authority into worldly affairs.

Catherine wrote letters that were accessible to those around her, being written in the Italian language that most of her interlocutors — especially those from marginalized communities — would be most comfortable with, and she used earthly language to describe spiritual matters, proving that the divine is approachable to all. Her letters also served her political agenda as she engaged with more and more nobility and high-ranking Church officials throughout her letter-writing endeavors, working to bring those who could wield power to assist her with spiritual missions. The familiar letter, combined with careful and persuasive rhetoric, proved to be an important vehicle in her earthly affairs while also working to secure her legacy and her eventual canonization.

Both the power of her writing and her network eventually serve Catherine in her reception throughout other vernaculars in Europe, particularly within 15th- and 16th-century England. Catherine was modeled as a teacher and spiritual guide within the very different readership context of the cloistered nuns of Syon Abbey and the lay religious who were connected to them. Though her message was filtered through a Latin translation done by men that was in turn transposed to Middle English with a framing and editing again done by men that mitigate her words, her texts still reach an audience of primarily female readers, recalling Catherine's own community of *mantellate* and other literate women that she read and wrote with in Siena. The force of Catherine's words and the care she took to ensure that her texts would persist after her life worked to continue her mission as an active mystic that offered guidance to her readers in a way that could illuminate earthly and spiritual matters in pragmatic and concrete ways that they could understand.

Catherine's writing and its legacy is a rich field that demands much more inquiry. In addition to literary studies of her Italian works, the texts that treat her (including the

hagiographies and Caffarini's *Processo Castellano*), the manuscript and printed book traditions, and contemporary readership networks, much more can be said about her historical reception through the Renaissance. Lucrezia Marinella's *Dei gesti eroici e della vita religiosa della serafica Caterina da Siena* (1624), for example, features Catherine as a historical protagonist engaging in writing and community-building within a work of epic poetry, while situating itself in dialogue with Catherine's own writing. There is also additional work to be done in terms of the English reception of Catherine's texts, particularly in considering the changing religious landscape as it shifts to Protestantism. John Fenn's 1609 translation of the *Life of Catherine* for English recusants is of particular interest, and can be considered in historical contrast with both Raymond's original hagiography and Wynken de Worde's 1492 English edition. A comparative investigation of these texts can bring to light how the cultural climate influences the construction and reception of a literary Italian saint.

Having learned to write through her own community, and being a publicly-engaged woman who addressed her fellow Sienese in speeches in the piazza or through dispatched letters, Catherine was a mystical and literary figure who worked in the earthly realm in order to serve the divine. As both a learner and a teacher, who was tasked with delivering spiritual messages to others, the local language of her time was incredibly instrumental to gain followers and communicate. In an era when it was possible that women who challenged the status quo could be considered witches, Catherine would eventually be made a saint. Building a network around her, Catherine connected disparate and diverse people together: she was a force that drove community engagement through the technology of writing.

Appendix

Python word cloud program

```
from os import path
import matplotlib.pyplot as plt

from wordcloud import WordCloud

def main():
    d = path.dirname(__file__)

    # Catherine's Letters file
    text = open(path.join(d, 'dialogo.txt')).read()

    # Stopwords file
    stopwords = open(path.join(d, 'stopwords.txt')).read()

    # Word Cloud attributes
    wc = WordCloud(
        background_color="white",
        max_words=2000,
        stopwords=stopwords,
        max_font_size=60,
        min_font_size=8,
        random_state=50)

    # Generate Word Cloud
    wc.generate(text)

    # Show Word Cloud
    plt.imshow(wc)
    plt.axis("off")
    plt.show()

if __name__ == '__main__':
    main()
```

Python script to combine Catherine's letters into one file for analysis:

```
import glob

read_files = glob.glob("*.txt")

with open("all_the_letters.txt", "wb") as outfile:
    for f in read_files:
        with open(f, "rb") as infile:
            outfile.write(infile.read())
```

Additional code and data:

<https://github.com/ltagliaferri/dissertation>

Topic Modeling

Dialgogo

- 0 9.13384 contrari virtuosi gionse adietro finisce reame vergini ciechi germina muovo strada ignoranti
cognosca fratello organi poverelli pecunia infernale perregrinazione parlarò
- 1 9.33998 reputazione vegono infermi schiecto siate uccidere glorioso corna calore disposta segni piccola
crescere riprendere possano povarelli passano dichiarato ingrassa parlandoti
- 2 8.89512 costato fondato distesamente principalmente acquistato giudicano adietro venuti dolcissima mirano
ordinate sicura acompagnata cuori crescendo inanzi tenuto avilendo erba garzone
- 3 60.39179 mia carità sancto fuoco cognoscimento intellecto ragione spirito vedi colpa ama ministri
onore carissima quegli umana pare possa perfecta coscienza
- 4 116.15924 loro amore anima virtù verità lume mio corpo pena bene sangue grazia desiderio decto
figliuolo affecto morte sancta dio miei
- 5 9.37581 obligati creai scala dono sacerdote gustato preducto disporre originale trovata misera
proponimento muore electi angeli aspecta empie seme lavoratore disposto
- 6 9.06 possibile rendo paresse essenza percuote dimostra venuto proximi adornamento vedesti strada
dilecta difendere pruovi provedesse abbonda disonesti potevi lesione davo
- 7 8.77981 signori temporalmente proprie confessione illuminato partí bere possibile debito aspecta preghi
sposo parturisce affliggitiva tempesta doctrina investigare ringraziando aprire portino
- 8 8.13811 mortale sottrago servizio incarnato pigliando sovenendo povaregli amici merollo tempestoso lacte
vedi obbedisce pensieri superbi levano appetisce signori dilonga mandò
- 9 9.8335 temptazioni volendo ami perduta menzione macti costringe rancore cerchi misurato cibi vedessi
vitoperio levi connectere differenza rimedio usata largo terminò

Lettere

- 0 0.51441 lume volontà fede dio dimonio mente virtù pena perfezione pazienza l'anima viva fusse dottrina
confusione orazione debbe loro umilità pare
- 1 0.31518 pazienza bene disordinato servire signore l'uomo fadiga delizie fratello vento ricchezza ch'è
mortale ch'egli povertà speranza l'affetto somma piacere signoria
- 2 0.21291 verità lume papa santa loro chiesa fede bene medesimi urbano sommo chè vero colpa cognoscere
bugia male sete terra debito

- 3 0.21046 mia sposa figliuola sposo vedi vederti figliuole mio voglio vestimento permani sai cibo carissima
carissime mie monna diceva mensa allora
- 4 0.1565 tilocblob dimonio battaglia carne fortezza nemici forte perseveranzia l'uomo nemico campo coltello
combattere l'arme colpi cavaliere morto virile l'ha pensieri
- 5 0.38635 carità fuoco padre figliuolo perocché croce santo legame siate inestimabile l'anima dolcissimo
amore disse mia spirito fratello letizia creatura divina
- 6 0.88699 dio carità virtù prossimo amore l'anima ama vuole lui l'amore vede grazia ragione creatore amare
vera bene creatura perocché cognoscimento
- 7 2.72183 dio cristo dolce gesù sangue crocifisso desiderio amore santa dico morte figliuolo servi bontà virtù
nome maria croce santo volontà
- 8 0.36271 padre loro chiesa santa timore pace santo giustizia sposa città mia contra salute pare pregovi
santissimo sudditi guerra difetti santità
- 9 0.0467 christo jesù gratitudine jhesù crocifixo sancta gratia honore necessità volontà fornace facto fonte
crocifixo iddio lettera sancto pretioso frate dilectione

Commedia

- 0 46.13202 serpente segnore appressa venian ardore seme breve affezione giardino padri quieto
stazio piacere incominciò metter vela difetto portò monti fiesole
- 1 44.58933 contrario dimandi ammirar preme morsi grotta fidanza lamenti disposto ride innamorata
folgór rivolta difalta ascondeva parnaso cantor appetito duci spazio
- 2 493.2479 mio lui occhi ben disse lor mia vidi pur amor terra fuor dio gente maestro veder lei ciel
mente sol
- 3 46.66983 letè natural picciola semo ritorno vòta marito novità volete spense spere traluze stolti
cantor seguì punita pensar scoperto lucerna poter
- 4 44.09171 cerchi solamente verno toglie cerchio morso scrive deh greve tace ahi parlato vel fiore
mosser conviensi insegna puosi scoscende varca
- 5 40.87182 frati aspetti pianger caduto orribil chiamar avessi puro tacendo tòrre stole nascendo
amando giustamente buca pecore siena sicuramente imago risponder
- 6 42.10966 porte effetto intender falso purga parti piega scender tant emme rimasa infiammata tacea
sùe cigli amai volgendo pianeta truova pensieri

7 44.02933 scorta perde scema gusto die veloci prim verdi deh pesi facendo passammo ombre
battesmo parvenza suggello sustanze vos cari meta

8 42.87266 splendori sazio seppe sanno parvente parrebbe ruote maggiore sequette ambascia scese
mare muro tenendo vermo muto bruto lagrime vide pate

9 42.19615 arca viene falla movendo sappiendo piombo parlarmi vinci ovra danni pensa sovrano pelo
spiriti malvagia poli facella suora libertate dimostri

Paradiso

0 384.96012 sete giro buon diverse infiamma sospesa seguiva attenta alti dolci onore veggi cristiani
segue splendor omo produce tante porti fissi

1 345.15462 move sesto alquanto pio festa vince processo mano nasconde barca veggion avessi
innocenza gloriose orazione ritrassi fosti costume potesse ricominciò

2 3,054.2931 mia mio amor occhi ben lui dio luce lume ciel vidi mente lor sol donna beatrice veder lei
grazia natura

3 355.66841 marte cerchi giardino popol novella nova costui morte meraviglia diletto fior spene cantor
frutto costei sante nascose parola sien alma

4 330.20577 mille accende alte spere ride vinse apparenza percosse chiaro veloci vinca affezione
ricorda prieghi corta cantor fier avëa angelo saria

5 381.54445 vera tesoro città antico nessun uscì danno intende primi segni creatura emisperio intrava
sopr dilata credenza proferta ferve ricorda leväi

6 363.09469 appunta ama allegrezza leva santo ramo tutt forti chiara alta ritorno costui duca dura mare
giusta bianca lieto lor cerchi

7 386.31652 udi farà guardando spirito luogo bernardo conforto volando oramai siate carco visione
grado virtute ammirar creature cominciò spirò sanz accosta

8 337.00208 giri vedi uscir nullo movea carica sigillo viste uomini disse contento canto ardito miro menti
nozze conti quinto scritto conosce

9 357.6609 facea persona accende spirito conio concetto grandi signor vederai venìa moïse accorsi
risponder cesare quant donnea ricorre cieco cintura mei

Rime sparse

- 0 384.96012 sete giro buon diverse infiamma sospesa seguiva attenta alti dolci onore veggi cristiani
segue splendor omo produce tante porti fissi
- 1 345.15462 move sesto alquanto pio festa vince processo mano nasconde barca veggion avessi
innocenza gloriose orazione ritrassi fosti costume potesse ricominciò
- 2 3,054.2931 mia mio amor occhi ben lui dio luce lume ciel vidi mente lor sol donna beatrice veder lei
grazia natura
- 3 355.66841 marte cerchi giardino popol novella nova costui morte meraviglia diletto fior spene cantor
frutto costei sante nascose parola sien alma
- 4 330.20577 mille accende alte spere ride vinse apparenza percosse chiaro veloci vinca affezione
ricorda prieghi corta cantor fier avèa angelo saria
- 5 381.54445 vera tesoro città antico nessun uscì danno intende primi segni creatura emisperio intrava
sopr dilata credenza proferta ferve ricorda leväi
- 6 363.09469 appunta ama allegrezza leva santo ramo tutt forti chiara alta ritorno costui duca dura mare
giusta bianca lieto lor cerchi
- 7 386.31652 udi farà guardando spirito luogo bernardo conforto volando oramai siate carco visione
grado virtute ammirar creature cominciò spirò sanz accosta
- 8 337.00208 giri vedi uscìr nullo movea carca sigillo viste uomini disse contento canto ardito miro menti
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