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FLARR Pages #52: The Language of Medieval Mystics: Teaching with Hildegard of Bingen and Catherine of Siena

Jennifer Deane

University of Minnesota - Morris

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FLARR PAGES # 52

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- Catherine of Siena

The Language of Medieval Mystics:

Teaching with Hildegard of Bingen and Catherine of Siena

Jennifer Deane; University of Minnesota, Morris

Between roughly the years 1050 and 1500, a flowering of new spiritual expressions, forms and ideas took root in western Europe. One of these was mysticism, the belief that one can achieve direct consciousness of (and connection with) the divine through contemplation, intuition and meditation. The compelling stories and writings of medieval female mystics such as Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) and Catherine of Siena (1347-1380) offer unique ideas, images and topics for German, Italian and Latin language instruction.

Christian mysticism was not new in the Middle Ages, for it was rooted in the earliest days of the Church; however, the later medieval centuries brought a new type of mystical expression to the forefront, particularly among female visionaries. Medieval mystics often saw visions which they recorded and interpreted for their contemporaries, thus acting as a spiritual channel between God and humanity. While one might expect that the primarily masculine world of official medieval Christianity would have produced in turn a wave of male mystics, the reverse was the case – the vast majority of influential mystical visionaries and thinkers were women.

Female mystics posed a challenge to the Church, since women's roles within the church were severely limited in the Middle Ages, and because visions were not (and by definition could not be) mediated through clerical institutions. Of particular interest to students, however, is that these women were forceful individuals who drew on the authority of their visions to critique kings, emperors, popes and the Church in fierce and resonant voices. The lives of two medieval mystics in particular provide rich material for use in foreign language classroom instruction: Hildegard of Bingen for German/Latin and Catherine of Siena for Italian/Latin. (While Hildegard wrote in Latin, modern German translations of her works are widely available; Catherine wrote in both the vernacular and Latin, but updated Italian translations are equally accessible today). A quick overview of each woman's life and writings is thus in order, followed by a few specific pedagogical ideas for the classroom.

Hildegard of Bingen

Hildegard of Bingen (1078-1179) was a Benedictine nun, mystic, and visionary from the German-speaking Rhineland, and was one of the most creative, productive and unique minds in western history. Renowned in her day as a vibrant religious figure, she was also known as a prophet, healer, musician, dramatist, scientist and critic of kings, emperors and popes. In the last twenty years, she has been the subject of intense scholarly and popular interest, and collections of her writings, illuminations and music are widely available today.

Born into a noble family, she was raised from a young age in a Benedictine cloister where she received an outstanding education for a girl of the 12th century. But Hildegard's fame among contemporaries was based primarily upon her prophecies and visions. She records that from early childhood, she had special psychic gifts, visions (*Gesichte*) and auditory messages, which she did not report to others for fear of rebuke. At the age of 43, she finally came forward to her confessor; soon thereafter, her visions were not only approved by church authorities, but she was encouraged to express them in writing. Hildegard accomplished this with assistance from a monk and friend named Volmar, who collaborated with her from 1141-1150 as she wrote her principal work called *Scivias* (Know the Ways of the Lord). In stunning, multicolored illuminations, Hildegard also recorded what she saw in her visions – the images have been reproduced in a volume edited by Matthew Fox (see bibliography). Consistent throughout her life was the description of the source of her visions as the "Living Light," a central metaphor of her mysticism.

Shortly thereafter, Hildegard also wrote the *Liber vitae meritorum* (The Book of Life's Merits) in which she discusses vices and virtues, sometimes engaging them in dialogue with each other: for example, the character Hardness of Heart says to Mercy, "If I became involved, even just a little in other people's affairs, what use would it do me?" Mercy replies, "What are you saying, you creature of stone? Every creature yearns for a loving embrace. . . all you are is a pitiless stare, an evil cloud of smoke in the darkness!" Her *Physica* (The Natural History) and *Causae et Curae* (Causes and Cures) are equally interesting, describing the origins and healing powers of plants, elements, trees, jewels, animals and metals, as well as the constitution of the human body, its diseases and remedies.

Hildegard is known for her organic, holistic vision of a universe in which human beings and nature and the divine are part of a single unity. Modern readers are often attracted to her use of natural imagery and an emphasis on “greenness” (*viriditas*) as an image of spiritual health. For example, speaking as the divine voice which she heard throughout her life, she records: “I, the highest and fiery power, have kindled every living spark and I have breathed out nothing that can die. . . I flame above the beauty of the fields; I shine in the waters; in the sun, the moon and the stars, I burn. . . for the air lives in its green power and its blossoming; the waters flow as if they were alive.”¹

But wait – there’s more! Hildegard wrote and composed the music for seventy-seven songs, of which the language is particularly beautiful – musical scholars agree that the compositions themselves are strikingly original. Her corpus of songs is known as the *Symphonia*, and extensive selections have been performed and recorded in recent years. As a correspondent with popes, emperors, kings, archbishops, priests, laypeople and more, she also penned hundreds of letters, of which about 300 survive. In tone, they are often forceful and critical, as well as encouraging, loving, grieving and compassionate. And of particular interest to language instructors will be the fact that she wrote a mysterious work entitled the *Unknown Language* (*Litterae Ignota*), a glossary of approximately 900 words which she invented and arranged into thematic groups. The range and breadth of Hildegard’s thought and works is vast, but even short descriptions and small selections should serve to pique student interest.

Catherine of Siena

The story of St. Catherine of Siena is one that may turn stomachs as well as move hearts. Born in Siena in 1347 (the year before plague swept through Europe, wiping out approximately a third of the population), Catherine was the twenty-fourth of twenty-five children in the family of a wool dyer. Catherine was according to all sources a bright, vivacious child who nonetheless had a tendency to privacy and a deep inner life. At the age of six, Catherine had a vision of Christ and the saints that shaped her lifelong decision to live a chaste and spiritual life. As years passed and she grew into adolescence, her spirituality transformed into a fierce ascetic practice. Fasting to the point of starvation, she also endured self-inflicted beatings and scaldings, as well as disturbing food practices, such as eating lepers’ scabs or pus from sick bodies as an expression of humility and redemptive spiritual power. This material is guaranteed to grab student attention! (Like many of the other medieval female mystics, Catherine’s emphasis is on suffering and service to others, and that is the context in which these practices should be understood.)²

Unlike Hildegard, Catherine never received formal education and yet she began to write stunning and sophisticated works in this period: nearly 400 letter-sermons, a collection of 25 prayers, and her masterpiece, a book called “The Dialogue of Divine Providence” which she referred to simply as “my book.” Intended to instruct and encourage others, this work was one of the first ultimately to be printed as widely as Spain, Germany, Italy and England. Catherine’s concern for loving service is made clear in passages such as this, in which she speaks for the divine: “It is your duty to love your neighbors as your own self. . . in love you ought to help them spiritually and materially in their need – at least with your good will if you have nothing else.”

Catherine’s letters are also concerned with the relationship between people (as well as their relationship to divinity), and are addressed to diverse people, ranging from popes and kings to family, friends, prisoners, prostitutes and political opponents. In fact, Catherine’s spiritual and political gifts brought her into first local and then European-wide issues of royal and papal politics. At the age of thirty-three and after years of severe fasting, Catherine gave up water for an entire month, offering up her suffering to heal the crisis of the church in Italy. She died shortly thereafter, emaciated and wracked by stomach pains. She was canonized in 1461, and in 1970 made a doctor of the Church – one of only two women to ever receive the honor.³

Touching on issues of history, gender, power, spirituality, medicine, politics, artwork, cultural critique, music health and medicine, the lives of these two mystics provide plenty of material for lively discussion. The possibilities for teaching are endless, but here are a few thoughts to get things started (please keep in mind that these are a historian’s ideas and not those of a language specialist!):

- Project some of the colorful, geometric and unsettling images from Hildegard’s illuminations and have students describe them using vocabulary words, or practice conversation/discussion about looking, seeing, perceiving, etc.
- Play one of Hildegard’s musical works, and have students describe the piece using vocabulary words about hearing and sounding, or compare it to another piece of music and discuss.
- Use descriptions of Catherine’s treatment of her own body as a means of discussing the body, or historical differences between the medieval and modern world, or how beliefs shape behavior (I think this can be done within a broad context, and with an eye towards understanding different cultural practices distant either in time or geography).
- Assign students a portion of one of Hildegard’s or Catherine’s particularly ferocious or loving letters to read; then have them write a letter of their own in the relevant language.

¹ Bowie and Davies, p.91 (see bibliography)

² Caroline Walker Bynum brilliantly interprets the medieval significance of these and other disturbing food practices of medieval mystics in her classic *Holy Feast, Holy Fast* (see bibliography)

³ The other is the sixteenth century Spanish mystic St. Teresa of Avila.

- Give students a short text from one of Hildegard's medical works, and use it as a starting point for a conversation about health and medicine—here are of course some assumptions and practices that seem quite outlandish today, and will likely amuse students.

Suggested Bibliography

Hildegard of Bingen:

Fiona Bowie, Oliver Davies (eds), *Hildegard of Bingen: Mystical Writings* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1990) Matthew Fox, *Illuminations of Hildegard of Bingen* (Bear & Co, 1985) Barbara Newman (ed), *Voice of the Living Light: Hildegard of Bingen and Her World* (University of California, 1998) Music CD: Emma Kirkby, *Feather on the Breath of God*, (Hyperion, 1993)

Online reference: <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/med/hildegarde.html>

(New studies are being published all the time – for more information, do a quick Amazon search to bring up titles on her other works)

Catherine of Siena:

Suzanne Noffke, Giuliana Cavallini (eds), *Catherine: The Dialogue* (Classics of Western Spirituality Series (Paulist Press, 1980)

Suzanne Noffke (ed), *The Prayers of Catherine of Siena* (Paulist Press, 1983)

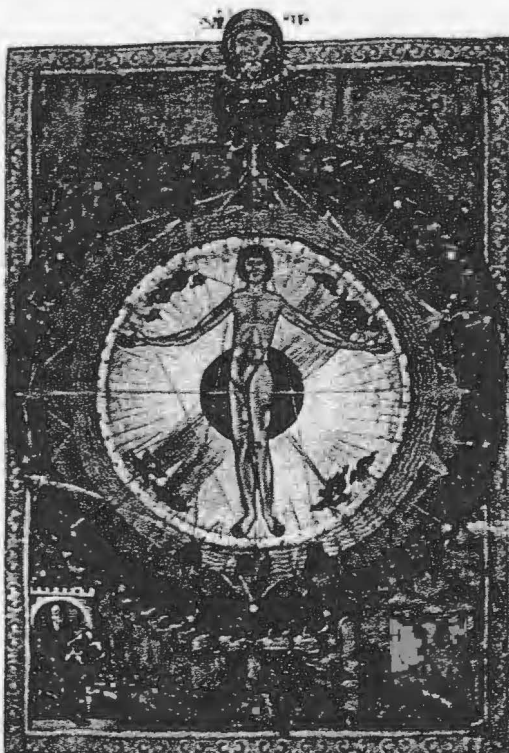
Online reference: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03447a.htm>

General:

Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast, Holy Fast: The Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (University of California Press, 1987)

Katharina Wilson, *Medieval Women Writers* (University of Georgia Press, 1984)

A useful bibliography of medieval women writers, including mystics, is at:
<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/med/womenbib.html>





St. Teresa of Avila

Drawing after an 1827
Painting by François
Gérard (detail), Paris
France

TCT
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