

## Reviews

Jane C. Tylus. *Reclaiming Catherine of Siena: Literacy, Literature, and the Signs of Others*.

Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009. xiv + 324 pp. index. illus. bibl. \$45. ISBN: 978-0-226-82128-3.

*Reclaiming Catherine of Siena* is a meditation on the writings of the fourteenth-century saint Catherine of Siena, with a particular interest in her relation to literacy. It also finds parallels with the writings of Dante and Petrarch. It is illustrated by sixteen drawings from the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries depicting Catherine and other saints, and it includes a bibliography and index. The book is divided into seven chapters discussing aspects of Catherine's career, but with considerable overlap among chapters.

Tylus begins with Girolamo Gigli, the eighteenth-century editor of Catherine's writings and author of a "vocabolario cateriano" of words Catherine used. His aim was to defend the Sienese dialect against the linguistic scorn of the Florentine Accademia della Crusca, and to insist that standards for Italian be based on the spoken language as well as the literary language. Gigli's sarcastic attacks led to exile from Florence and Rome: language could be a serious matter.

Gigli believed that Catherine could write, and he began his *vocabolario* with her letter describing how God miraculously taught her to write during one night. A Dominican Third Order lay sister, Catherine had begun having mystical experiences at a young age. She also subjected her body to extreme ascetic practices. Paying little attention to gender, she believed God had called her to serve through charity in her native Siena, and by traveling to fulfill the larger goals — the return of the pope to Rome from Avignon and a crusade to regain the Holy Land. She reconciled the active life and the contemplative life with her doctrine of the "cell of self-knowledge," according to which one could withdraw inside oneself to commune with God even in the midst of crowds. She left behind 380 mostly dictated letters, and spiritual writings that include *Il libro della divina dottrina*. Catherine achieved her goal of the return of the pope to Italy, but it turned sour when it caused political upheaval, and she gave up on the crusade. She died worn out at age thirty-three.

Her best-known biographer, her confessor Raymond of Capua, was defensive about her travels — as a woman this behavior was open to criticism. He emphasized that she was the passive conduit for God, who ordered her against against her will to go out into the world. According to Raymond, she was an orator who could read but not write. On the other hand, her lesser-known contemporary biographer, Caffarini, rediscovered by Gigli, pointed to the disputed letter about her miraculous writing lesson as evidence that she could write, and he had no doubt about the value of her active mission.

Tylus is inclined to accept evidence of Catherine's knowledge of writing, although it is unprovable, Catherine's surviving letters being copies. However, to Tylus it is less important whether Catherine personally wrote her letters than that Catherine understood the significance of writing. Catherine demanded that her letters be in Italian — preferring messengers rather than Latin translations, even when writing to a French pope or the Queen of Hungary — showing awareness of the relationship between her speech and writing. Catherine addressed the issue of literacy directly by advocating literacy based on spiritual aptitude rather than on study. She also believed in the similarity between the written characters on her pages, the marks on her body (invisible stigmata), and the marks on the crucified Christ's body, saying that all of these contributed to sharing the suffering that Christ underwent on behalf of humanity.

In conclusion, Tylus's book convincingly demonstrates Catherine's respect for writing. The book is also scholarly, mentioning many relevant studies. This reviewer has a few criticisms: Tylus's writing style is sometimes opaque. Also, more details about historical setting would have been useful. Tylus mentions as an aside that Catherine was called to Florence in 1374 to be investigated for heresy, which should have been dealt with more fully. Tylus also frequently mentions Catherine's familiarity with the Bible, while saying little about the sources of Catherine's knowledge. However, these criticisms are minor points that do not detract from a thoughtful and original study.

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