The Radical Rhetoric of Caterina da Siena

The elusive and enigmatic Catherine of Siena was a woman ahead of her time, the first woman writer in the Italian literary tradition of women writers. A consummate letter writer, she wrote with extraordinary power and bluntness to the political and religious leaders of her day, as well as to ordinary citizens. Not only was she a savvy rhetorician and radical thinker, but she used an androgynous rhetoric that helps to answer why she attracted so large a following during her life, why high and low alike sought her advice, and why her letters and prayers remain so intriguing today.

"Le donne, dunque, scrivono; hanno sempre scritto."

"Women, then, write; they have always written," explains Marina Zancan in the introduction to her book, Il doppio itinerario della scrittura: La donna nella tradizione letteraria italiana. And the first of the three women who concern the Italian feminist critic is the patron saint of Italy, Caterina da Siena; she is my concern as well.¹

It would be wrong—and a disservice to Italian culture and letters—to underestimate or discount the importance of this medieval woman. Her name still comes up frequently in newspapers and magazines, from trivial references to the more profound. For instance, Luciano Pavarotti tells an interviewer that his ex-wife was named for the saint, perhaps an implicit compliment (the story discussed Pavarotti’s upcoming marriage to his longtime mistress). Tour guides from Rome to Venice point out statues, relics, and paintings, and of course Catherine is the star of any tour of her hometown, Siena, in the heart of Tuscany and the val di chiana. A well-read tour guide would have little trouble connecting the region’s renown for wine with Catherine’s own letters and prayers (unfortunately, most tour guides are not that well read).

To understand the female literary tradition of Italy, according to Zancan, we must start with Catherine.² For those who might be unfamiliar with her biography, let me provide a brief sketch before turning to her discourse. Born on
March 25, 1347 (the Feast of the Assumption), the twenty-third or -fourth child of twenty-five (sources differ), Catherine, like most girls of her day, received no schooling and thus grew up illiterate. But unlike most girls, she intended to control her destiny; according to “legend,” while still a child she decided to reject the only two paths open to a woman: earthly marriage or heavenly marriage, wife or nun. When she was six, she had her first spiritual vision and at seven vowed to remain a virgin (calling to mind the age when vestal virgins were selected, that group of powerful, independent women of ancient Rome). At sixteen (all dates are approximate) she announced her intention to remain single. Her desire was to spend her life in prayer and contemplation—a private life, solitary; at this point she had no desire or vision for the public ministry that eventually consumed her.

Because her father was a wool-dyer (last name Benincasa), the family, while not rich by medieval standards, was certainly not poor. Catherine knew something of textiles, of wine, of food, of sweet delicacies, of gardening, as we discover in her metaphors, albeit that she grew up in an urban setting. During her ministry she also spent time in southern Tuscany in areas near Montepulciano, Pienza, Montalcino, even today largely agricultural and known for its wine production, in particular the great Brunello. She and her family worshipped in the austere Dominican basilica that dominates Siena—less impressive outside than within, a church with few adornments and a space intimidating in size. For those with a Renaissance or baroque vision of Catholicism, the church more resembles a warehouse or stone barn than a place of prayer, though its size would indeed have encouraged silence and contemplation. One would need a formidable voice and presence to fill such a space. And yet Catherine, slight in stature and body (about five feet tall), had such a voice and such a presence; people packed the church to hear her preach.

Today the basilica serves as a kind of reliquary for Catherine, with a side altar where visitors can view her head (yes, her head); on the wall near the altar, a glass case holds one of her fingers (Rome has her bones, buried in the church in the Piazza della Minerva, Santa Maria, near the Pantheon; a church in Venice has one of her feet). As Garry Wills notes in his recent book, Venice: Lion City:

[It is hard for a modern tourist to understand the devotion to relics. Of all the superstitions we find registered in the history, politics, and art of the Middle Ages, relics can seem the most unconvincing, even the most absurd. It takes some historical imagination to re-enter the value system that structured communities around these sacred items.]

(235)
This can be true for students and scholars as well as tourists, and thus the venera-
tion for the relics of Catherine (not to mention the medieval practice of dis-
memberment) can be as off-putting as the religious texts themselves. And yet this is crucial background for understanding the rhetoric, the power, and the draw of Catherine, then and now.

For as Claudia Rattazzi Papka points out, though dismemberment was “an act of violence,” at least from our perspective, it was first an “act of devotion” (131)—devotion to the life and work of a woman. People believed that relics of a saint had mystical power, were in some sense divine, and thus the drive to pre-
serve body parts, a way to venerate the life and work of that person. I suggest that as we begin to read Catherine, we must exhibit a strong “historical imagina-
tion” and so “re-enter the value system that structured communities around these sacred items” (245).

When Catherine turned eighteen, she joined the Mantellate, part of the Do-
minican order. Members were not nuns but laywomen who served the poor—an active, not a contemplative group. And the members were all widows, though Catherine, in an early demonstration of her persuasive rhetorical powers, con-
vinced them to let her join their number. Yet immediately upon acceptance, she lived in almost near isolation for three years, a time of intense prayer, introspec-
tion, and learning. Again if sources and certain textual evidence are to be be-
lieved, during this time she taught herself to read, if not to write, whether alone or with the help of a tutor; again, sources differ. Suzanne Noffke says that Catherine learned to read at a rudimentary level, helped by her disciple Alessa dei Saracini, and that in her late twenties she also learned to write somewhat, though she used scribes for most of her letters (382 survive) and for Dialogue, her culminating theological work.

Catherine did not use Latin, however, but one of the vernacular (muscular) Tuscan tongues, the first woman to do so, which was unusual, Dante notwith-
standing. Serious religious or theological work remained squarely in the lan-
guage of Latin. Indeed, I do not see how the singular discipline of Latin syntax would have served Catherine well, for, as Noffke argues and I agree, Catherine’s style is “spontaneous” and “laced with marvelously effective and largely original imagery” (Letters xx). It is, Noffke adds, the style of the preacher, not the poet. Here I would demur. If by “preacher” Noffke is pointing to the oral qualities of Catherine’s discourse, then certainly she is accurate. But if she is distinguishing between the preacher as oral and the poet as literate (spoken versus written), then this alters the judgment I would make. For Catherine in her prayers is highly poetic; even parts of her letters demonstrate a poetic, as well as a preacherly, turn of thought (Noffke might have Catherine’s didactic purposes in mind). I would also add that Catherine’s style is strikingly masculine at the same
time that it is (unsurprisingly) feminine—a style that today we might call androgynous. And I suggest that because of her androgyny—her use of both the masculine and the feminine—she drew disciples and crowds: a small woman who knew who she was and what she was about and who in so many ways refused to accept the cultural roles laid out before her—even the role(s) she originally laid out for herself.

For despite Catherine’s desire to live a contemplative life, she became convinced that God was calling her to an active ministry. So she put on the white tunic and black mantle of the Dominicans that the Mantellate wore and began her itinerant preaching and teaching ministry. If it is hard for us contemporary students to imagine the intense devotion that led to her decapitation after death, it is almost as hard to understand how revolutionary was her career: an unmarried woman of the late medieval period traveling with a group of disciples, men and women. It is hard to understand how an uneducated woman could write so peremptorily to the power brokers of the era (popes, kings, queens, ambassadors, financiers); how she could presume to teach theology to theologians and highly educated clerics; how she could both conform to and twist the basic images and ideas of orthodox Christianity; how she could write of Mother God or often explain her views in fundamentally domestic images (as from the Latin domus, or home, for Catherine sees that God is quite literally our place of abode); how she could do all this and more and not suffer censure or worse (I think, for instance, of Madame Guyon several centuries later, who did not fare as well at the hands of the Catholic hierarchy). Yet Catherine did not so suffer, though she did believe that there were people working against her, and she did talk about minor persecution, more irritating than excruciating (gnats and mosquitoes, not molotov cocktails). We can speculate, of course, but we can never truly know how she managed to flout the rules and come to be more than respected by high and low alike, sought out for her advice, her wisdom. Catherine is, then, one of the more fascinating of enigmas, standing on the cusp of the medieval and Renaissance eras.6

Today Catherine stands (as it were) at the foot of the Vatican, a white marble sculpture near the start of Via della Conciliazione, with four bas-relief squares that summarize her life and work. Not only is she the patron saint of Italy, as I said, but in 1999 the pope declared her the patron saint of Europe, a fact most Europeans probably do not know (nor that she has her own website, www.caterinati.org, in Italian, though with a UK branch). She is also one of only two women named as doctors of the Church (Teresa of Avila being the other; Catherine was first). Clearly, she is an important religious figure. But why is she an important literary figure? Why should we read and study her, a semiliterate Italian woman?
Pier Alberto Merli, a friend and former professor of church history, once insisted to me that many religious women composed the same kind of devotional literature as Catherine, his argument being that she was not all that unusual for her time (Zancan, however, argues the opposite, as do I). But then how to explain Catherine’s following and the survival of her work when other such work has not survived? I asked him, without receiving what I considered a satisfactory answer (Merli is not a rhetorician, no slight intended). And it is true that we cannot know with utter certainty why Catherine became Catherine (so to speak), why, in modern terms, a legend. My argument lies with the power of her discourse, of her androgynous rhetoric, of her view of herself not as a woman perhaps but as a voice for God during a turbulent time. Also, she was, I argue, a woman who knew how to “write” stylishly and exceptionally for her audience; she was, in other words, a savvy rhetorician. The answers, then, such answers as we can find, lie with her texts; but even after such an analysis, she remains a mystery, remains elusive, and perhaps in the final analysis, the very inability to define her greatness is itself that definition.

Rattazzi Papka in her analysis of Catherine’s style claims that Catherine never “employs the topoi often associated with female writers of the Middle Ages” or “speak[s] of herself as a woman” to explain Catherine’s power (132). Rather, as we shall see, particularly in her letter to the Pope or to a prostitute, she often, though not exclusively, uses masculine images when writing to women and feminine images when writing to men; she does not seem to make gender distinctions, which may be close to what Rattazzi Papka means. Karen Scott, on the other hand, focuses on three “domestic,” or feminine, images that convey Catherine’s position on “conversion as an on-going process” (vinegar and water, the dawn, a candied orange), though she says that the metaphors come from “mundane” or “ordinary” experience, rather than noting them as domestic, which they clearly are (92). My claim is that we need to look at both the feminine and the masculine if we are to understand what made Catherine such an extraordinary medieval figure.

Because most Italian literary scholars like Zancan or Giovanni Getto, Giacomo Devoto, and Giorgio Petrocchi, who have studied Catherine’s style and language, have focused on Catherine’s letters, I do so, as well, though I also include an example or two from a few of the twenty-six prayers we have. Of the more than three hundred letters that exist, most of them were composed between 1374 and 1380, the year of her death. She writes to mercenaries and queens and popes and housewives, priests and nuns and prostitutes and prisoners; she writes to wives and she writes to husbands. To demonstrate the breadth of her correspondence and so to provide a means of comparison, I have selected letters written to an English mercenary, John Hawkwood; to the Queen of Naples,
Giovanna d’Angiò; to a leather-worker and his wife, Giovanni and Monna Lippa Perotti; to Pope Gregory XI; and to an unnamed prostitute.

As Catherine writes, she targets her rhetoric to her audience at the same time that she writes in unexpected ways to each. Her letters demonstrate an agile mind, a quick wit, an unshakeable confidence in herself as the voice of God. There are also times when she exhibits impatience and what we might today call foolhardiness—at the very least a lack of diplomacy—if we imagine her words written to a head of state or a major religious figure today (a nondiplomatic diplomat, like undersecretary for arms control, John Bolton). She uses some standard medieval letter-writing rhetorical conventions (apologies for her lack of skill, for instance, ritual openings and closings); at the same time she never hesitates to state bluntly what is on her mind, whether to criticize her own confessor, to urge financial and military support for the Crusades, or to reassure a woman at odds with her priest (because he wants her to pray and fast more) that she should just do what she can, given the demands of her household. At times Catherine’s tone and language imply that she cannot afford rhetorical niceties, while she simultaneously uses a sophisticated rhetoric. In other words, Catherine never hesitates to flout authority if she thinks it necessary or, to put it in another vernacular, “to call a spade a spade” (the Queen of Naples, for instance, comes in for some frank talk). Ultimately, then, Catherine conforms to the rhetorical dictates of her culture. At the same time, she reinvents these dictates when she asserts her authority, uses novel metaphors and images, and reinterprets scripture.

The letter to John Hawkwood was written in 1375 after the plague had subsided in Tuscany and Catherine had gone to Pisa, having left Siena, where she had been working with the sick. According to Noffke, Hawkwood was a highly respected English mercenary, though not above using extortion to line his own pockets. Catherine writes to urge his participation in Pope Gregory XI’s plan for a crusade, sending the letter to Hawkwood at his military camp via her confessor, Raimondo da Capua. Clearly, Catherine thinks that a great deal is at stake. Her language is militant and blunt to the point of being belligerent, despite the fact that Catherine knew Hawkwood only by reputation. And from her perspective much is at stake, not only Hawkwood’s participation in a crusade to which Catherine is deeply committed but also the participation of the men whom he commands. If she enlists Hawkwood, she enlists his men as well. Given this situation, it might seem surprising not that she uses military language but that she is not more circumspect or more flattering (obsequious?).

Catherine addresses Hawkwood in language he would understand—the language of the military, of money, of service, but to the highest bidder. Catherine thus makes herself familiar to Hawkwood through her language; that is, she
shows herself to be as wily and as “worldly” as he is. I could invoke “it takes one to know one” here, or, perhaps more accurately Paul’s claim to be all things to all men—his operating principle as it also is Catherine’s. It is a way for Catherine to tell Hawkwood that she understands him, that she shares certain characteristics with him, and that she and he come at problems from a similar mental perspective. Her criticism notwithstanding, she assures him that they stand shoulder to shoulder; “I may be a woman religious, but don’t underestimate me for all that,” she implies. She gains his trust and his ear and so can speak as bluntly as she wants. If anything, rather than seeming outrageous, her language would have sounded circumspect to so hardened a field commander.

Nevertheless, Catherine is furious that Hawkwood, after apparently committing himself to the crusade, instead goes to war in Italy (against fine Italian Christians, of all things). She tells him that he is “in the devil’s service and pay” (Letters, vol. one, 80) by so fighting against believers and that it’s time to change his battle plans to engage unbelievers.11 Because she knows that he lives for war—“you find so much satisfaction in fighting and waging war” (80; note that she does not criticize him for this, but rather the reverse): She offers him, in fact, a far grander or greater war than the minor, even petty, skirmishes in Italy. Hawkwood can’t be a “true and courageous knight,” she says, unless he helps Gregory out. Eternal Glory and his soul’s fate hang on what he decides. By these statements Catherine not only appeals to Hawkwood’s possible concern for eternity but also to his longing for temporal greatness. To be a great knight, she hints, requires a great cause—and in what greater cause could a mercenary enlist than to help liberate the Holy Land? Catherine, ever pragmatic as well as visionary, a combination that made her unbeatable as a negotiator, in print or in person, can think of none. She also knows when she’s made her case, when to stop talking. She ends many letters with the words she writes to Hawkwood: “I’ll say no more” (81).

When we turn to the second of three extant letters that Catherine wrote to the Queen of Naples, we find a similar strength of language, language that at times is blunt to the point of obvious, at others subtle and sly. Catherine again is advocating support of the crusade (she writes during the summer of 1375), but she has a double agenda—also trying to convert the queen, Giovanna d’Angiò; thus the letter is as much evangelism as politics. Catherine understood that although someone might have been born in the Church, that person wasn’t necessarily a Christian, should behavior demonstrate otherwise. Thus it was with the Queen, who, from Catherine’s perspective needed conversion; as Noffke puts it, Giovanna “was licentious, violent, and fickle, an opportunist of the first degree,” not so different in character, then, from Hawkwood (98). Catherine thus undertakes to educate Giovanna on the true role of a monarch and the right behavior...
of a Christian, the two indivisible from Catherine’s perspective. Yet not only was Giovanna a queen, she was also much older than Catherine; thus Catherine is violating two cultural norms, respect for someone older and due humility and modesty before a monarch. Nevertheless, the first extant letter to the Queen opens correctly: “Dearest most revered mother and sister in Christ Jesus, milady the Queen” (99), though in the second letter Catherine tones down her greeting: “My dearest and most revered mother in Christ” (122).

After this ritual greeting, Catherine wastes no time telling the Queen that she wants to see her “a true and perfect daughter of God” (122); in the first letter, she had written that she wanted to see the Queen “filled and made one with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit’s grace, like fertile earth that produces not thorns and briars and brambles but good sweet fruit” (only Christians would be filled with the grace of the Holy Spirit), certainly a much stronger condemnation than we find initially in the second letter (99). In the second letter, she uses softer, more carefully couched language, saying, in effect, that Giovanna’s subjects are too afraid to tell her the truth—and thus they serve the Queen badly. Even so, Catherine, having nothing to fear from the Queen, need not, whether soft or hard. Good servants, Catherine explains, do what needs to be done out of respect and love, not out of fear of punishment, implying something about the Queen’s relationship with her own subjects (and with Catherine herself); she is teaching the Queen what integrity means. Catherine next compares earthly subjects to followers of God, urging that the Queen not only see herself as one of God’s subjects but also to “behave like a servant too, for you know well that we are always in our Master’s presence, that God’s eye is always on us and sees what is hidden” (122). Thus does Catherine construct her argument at the outset; you, Queen, are a subject of (and so subject to) an omniscient ruler. “And neither power nor wealth nor nobility can exempt anyone from service to this gentle Master Jesus,” she insists (123).

Catherine pursues her argument further. The Queen knows what it means to be a master; she understands from the ruling side what a servant is or should be. But, says Catherine, she doesn’t understand what it means to be a servant or subject from the servant’s perspective. Yet a servant or subject is just what the Queen is, whether or not she chooses to admit it. Not only does Catherine paraphrase Jesus’s statement that no one can serve two masters, but underlying her argument is that the Master, Christ, himself became a servant, thus showing the Queen the true meaning of rule: The greatest rulers are those who serve their subjects. Then when Catherine says that we should love and serve God, though not because it will get us anything, there is another underlying message: A monarch knows that people serve her because it pays. Catherine wants to cut through that. She wants to humble the Queen (or she wants the Queen to adopt humility).
Although with Hawkwood Catherine appeals to his mercenary nature, with the Queen she does the opposite.

Not to be (dis)missed is the way Catherine includes herself in her own discourse to the Queen. The initial paragraph uses the first and second personal pronouns, I and you. But Catherine opens the second paragraph with the pronoun our and by the fourth paragraph she is intermingling you and our, a grammatical way to put the two women at par, to say that they share the same problem or challenge. As with Hawkwood, Catherine is saying, “We stand together.”

One of the characteristics of Catherine’s rhetoric noted by all who study it is that of her mixed and often extreme metaphors. This letter provides good examples of both. (Seldom discussed, however, is Catherine’s obvious familiarity with such ancient rhetorical devices of all great orators, like chiasmus, prosopopeia, antisagoge, antistas.) In a few sentences Catherine moves from the soul to a domestic servant washing dirty dishes and then to the behavior of a child toward her father. She recommends that the Queen behave like a domestic whose responsibility is to wash those dirty dishes, a household chore with which the Queen would have had no experience, a great example of Catherine choosing an unlikely metaphor to startle her reader (imagine the Queen scrubbing blackened pots, up to her elbows in greasy suds!). Here is further implicit criticism of the Queen, who may think she deserves to be loved, but . . . hang on a sec’, writes Catherine. No one deserves love other than God, babe (the slang here is deliberate, a way to emphasize the radical nature of Catherine’s rhetoric). She says that the Queen must clean out “the soul’s jug,” removing every trace of sediment: “all the pompous show of vainglory, all worldly impatience and injustice and vanity and wickedness” (125). Catherine writes all this to a woman accused of murdering her husband, whose reputation for vanity and injustice is well known, legendary. Nor should the Queen hold a grudge, for which she was also notorious, insists Catherine. She is putting this Queen in her place—but at the sink? In a dirty kitchen?

But as we read, we cannot forget that Catherine not only wants the Queen to convert, she also wants her to support Gregory’s crusade. Today diplomats know that to get something they have to give something (put this letter in the context of any current conflict: Palestine and Israel; Sri Lanka and the Tamil Tiger rebels; Ireland and the United Kingdom; the United States, the United Nations, and Iraq). But that isn’t Catherine’s way, at least not entirely. As we saw with Hawkwood’s letter, she is not above appealing to someone’s “earthly” instincts (self-preservation?), while insisting that acting on the right earthly instincts can result in the right eternal rewards. We can also note another similarity between the two letters, and that is the emphasis on relationships: Hawkwood and Catherine, Hawkwood and his men, Hawkwood and the Pope, Hawkwood and
God; the Queen and Catherine, the Queen and her subjects, the Queen and the Pope, the Queen and God, two fine examples of *gradatio*. This relational emphasis is also central to Catherine’s emphasis on domesticity, to keeping the home fires burning.

Catherine pursues her domestic analogies (and agenda?) by calling the Queen “dear respected mother” (125), juxtaposed with further discourse about the need for humility, which are the best “clothes” to wear. From what we know of this Queen, a woman less like a mother to her subjects cannot be imagined. Nevertheless, Catherine repeats the term *my venerable mother* in the peroration of her letter where she pleads with the Queen to answer her positively about future support should the crusade come off. And finally, just in case her language has offended, Catherine writes “and do pardon my boldness.” This phrase acts like a kind of *occupatio*, for were she truly worried about her boldness, she would have written another way. We know from the third surviving letter that the Queen of Naples did indeed respond and indicate that she would support the Pope.12

With Catherine’s letter to a leather-worker, Giovanni Perotti, and his wife, Monna Lippa, we near the end of 1375. The Pope had asked Catherine to intervene on his behalf in Lucca, where the citizens had threatened to join the Florentine rebellion against him. Catherine was, then, on a diplomatic mission. It is clear from her letter that Catherine had met Perotti and his wife during her visit, and we can infer that Perotti was one of the town leaders. The couple had expressed their appreciation for Catherine through a gift—a bambino, the baby Jesus, a traditional Advent present. And to this gift Catherine responds—a thank-you letter, one that demonstrates the way Catherine uses every opportunity to reinforce each mission she undertakes.

Thus far we have noted how Catherine uses metaphors and imagery to appeal to or to discomfort—even repel?—her audience: masculine imagery to Hawkwood, to the Queen of Naples inappropriate feminine imagery (if we assume that domestic imagery is synonymous with feminine imagery). Another metaphor that Catherine uses repeatedly here, and did, as we saw, with the Queen, is that of clothing. Because of the richness of the gift of the bambino—the couple had dressed the doll in silk, which indicates their class and financial status—Catherine unifies her letter through the metaphor of clothes. And of course, as the daughter of a wool merchant, she would know well the fabric and clothing trades. Here again Catherine puts herself on, if not an equal, at least a similarly knowledgeable footing with her correspondent, as if to say that the couple couldn’t have sent a gift more appropriate to someone well placed to appreciate it as it deserves. At the same time, she applies the clothing metaphor to numerous, unconventional contexts and describes the metaphor us-
ing other, radically different, metaphorical language (that is, she goes outside the normal semantic field). Thus she imbues her simple domestic metaphor with a kind of violence. Such an approach also demonstrates how Catherine takes a standard religious trope—a commonplace in medieval thought and in the Bible—and revitalizes it, renewing its power to startle and impress.

There is nothing new in quoting Paul’s admonition to believers that they should clothe themselves with the new garments of Christ or to be clothed in the whole armor of God. What is unusual, however, is Catherine’s description of these new garments as “fire.” Christ’s clothes warm us, she explains, because they are like fire. And like fire—yet another subtle reference to the Bible (“for he is like a refiner’s fire”), they consume; they burn away the detritus in our lives, leaving the gold behind. And this fire, these clothes, are those of grace—the juxtaposition disturbing, for grace is usually seen as soothing—“there is a balm in Gilead”—not an aspect of God’s violent (as in wild) love. Writing in today’s vernacular, Catherine might call it “tough love.” She adds a final dimension to the metaphor by calling these fiery clothes wedding garments, the appropriate dress for those who want to remain at the wedding feast (yet another biblical reference, this time to one of Jesus’s parables).

Catherine, however, never stays long at a theological or abstract level, but always anchors her discourse in the real world—in what her readers (and listeners) could see, taste, touch, smell: what they know of the physical world (or, as in the case of the Queen might know but don’t). In this she imitates Jesus, whose sermons and parables were always rooted in the physical world of his followers. Here Catherine uses the fabric—the silk—that the couple chose for their gift as the comparison, as the anchor. In a kind of gradatio, or climax, she ends her letter with it: “And just as you in your love and charity dressed the bambino in silk, so may he clothe you with himself [. . .]. Thank you very much” (218). In other words, she writes, the richness you gave me, God will give you.

Each of these characteristics—for example, the extreme metaphors, the blunt language, the physical analogies, the emphasis on relationships—becomes particularly salient when we turn to Catherine’s letter of early 1376 to Pope Gregory XI or to Charles V (though I will not look at this one). If we would expect subservience—humility?—when addressing nobility, how much more so would we expect circumspection when writing the Pope? Yet Catherine uses such impassioned language in her letter to Gregory, written from Siena, that it is almost incomprehensible that the Pope nevertheless begs for her intervention in numerous hotspots. It appears that when she writes to her equals or even her subservients, her language is far less extreme, more diplomatic, as if she has more care for their possible negative reaction than she does for those above her. Or perhaps it is simply that the issues addressed in
letters to ordinary people are less politically or theologically urgent, and the urgency (as with the Pope’s return to Rome and his reformation of the Church) compels her to use urgent language. And the Pope understands and accepts this, for even more than when writing to the Queen of Naples, Catherine here chooses a language of extremes.

It is hardly novel or extreme to invoke the biblical metaphor of the tree, with its numerous connotations, from the trees of knowledge and of good and evil in the Garden of Eden to the tree of the Cross: “I long to see you a productive tree planted in fertile soil and laden with sweet mellow fruit” (244). But Catherine, urging humility on the Pope (ironic in light of her apparent lack of humility), wrenches the metaphor into a much larger, more exacting, and more radical context. She talks about “bearing the knife of hatred” to perform radical surgery on the “worm of self-centeredness”; she insists that “those who love themselves—whether they be rulers or the ruled—harbor within themselves the evil pride that is the head and origin of all evil” (245). She tells the Pope that a ruler who lacks justice is “evil,” and if surrounded by those who sin, and if he knows and does nothing to remove the sinners, then that ruler has failed—is, in fact, himself guilty of their sin.

Catherine moves from the metaphor of the tree and the knife and the worm and fruit—agricultural, masculine metaphors, though in her native Tuscany, women worked the fields and helped with the harvest—to the feminine metaphor of a woman whose children are stillborn and then back to a “medical” metaphor that could be either one: “plaster” (as in bandage), “ointment,” “cauterized,” “excised,” healing/infection. We find shepherds, we find physicians, we find patients; we find food and water and hunger and fire and the furnace. We find Catherine using feminine metaphors with the Pope as frequently as masculine metaphors. Catherine pulls out all the stops in this letter to urge the Pope to head a reformed and purified church, the central desire of her life (an essential part of the reform, of course, was the papacy returning to Rome). The language is intense, incendiary—for instance, “Those who are in authority, I say, do evil when [ . . . ]” (245)—the juxtaposition and weaving of metaphors like “shepherd-physicians” arresting. Let me emphasize again that no one else was writing quite like this; nor did the semiliterate Catherine have any exact models to follow (with the possible exception of St. Augustine, though his style and hers are not identical; the Bible, obviously, was a model). 14 Consider the following passage:

Do we want that glorious hunger the saints and true shepherds of the past had? Do we want to extinguish in ourselves this fire of self-love? Then let’s act as they did, and extinguish fire with fire. Such was the fire of measureless blazing charity that burned in their
hearts and souls that they were all famished and began to eat and savor souls. Oh sweet glorious fire, so powerful that it extinguishes the fire of every disordered pleasure, enjoyment, and love of self—like the drop of water quickly consumed in the furnace! If anyone should ask me how we reached this fire, this hunger, I can’t imagine, since of ourselves we are mere fruitless trees. But I see what path they followed, for once they had seen the fruitful tree of the most holy sweet cross, they never left it. (247)

I cite this at length because it epitomizes the most salient and powerful characteristics of Catherine’s style (she ends the paragraph with a theological comment about the atonement, linking Christ’s agony on the cross to a fire and linking that fire to his thirst).

First, we should note that (again) Catherine shifts her pronoun from the second-person singular to the first-person plural. Thus, though she is exhorting the Pope to renew himself, she softens her exhortation by including herself in her charge. It is significant that this paragraph follows the one in which she calls the Pope “babbo,” the intimate Italian diminutive for father, thereby implicitly establishing her right to say what follows, another example of her emphasis on relationships and the domus. Next, and most obviously, are the radically combined metaphors and the swift movement of her argument, a style that anticipates the metaphysical poets (for instance, John Donne in “Batter My Heart, Three-Person’d God”)—hunger and fire and cannibalism (“to eat and savor souls”) to fruitless trees and so to a very Augustinian metaphor, the journey to the cross (the cross is both road and destination). Then follow her paradoxes and oxymorons, such as “extinguish fire with fire,” so close to our own fight fire with fire. We find resonances here not only with some of Paul’s letters and Jesus’s parables but also with the Old Testament, for instance the story of Daniel in the lion’s den. Catherine would have expected the Pope to recollect these stories as he read, her frequent illusions allowing her to write concisely and copiously at once. Catherine’s fire is “sweet,” is “glorious,” is greater than “the fire of every disordered pleasure,” which is another way of expressing the fevers of lust (247). But how to reach this fire? She claims not to know (in the classical rhetorical sense), and yet she does know, for she argues that only by taking the path to the cross can anyone reach this righteous fire—the Tree in flames, the Tree enflaming.

Catherine’s letter continues in this immoderate, exhortational vein, with a shift for the last time back to the second person and with it a shift to explicit, rather than implicit, language. “If till now you haven’t been very firm in truth,” she writes, “I want you [. . .] to be so” (248) and even stronger, “Up, father! No
more irresponsibility!" (249). And as she does in writing so forcefully to the Queen of Naples, she ends with an apology and a request for forgiveness—or, we might better say, for forbearance. Catherine knows that she has been rude or blunt—intemperate—or at least a Pope might so construe her language. She wants to maintain her relationship with Gregory without relinquishing or withdrawing one word of her polemical discourse. Given her work on behalf of the Pope—acting as his emissary with the King of France, for instance—and his subsequent request that she come to Rome after he had returned there, it is clear that she succeeded.

In trying to answer how Catherine succeeded, survived, and flourished when other women religious obviously did not, it might be well to recall her lay vocation, which allowed her freedom of movement. She had the foresight not to become a nun and so could gather disciples around her. It also would be well to recall her work among the sick, the plague-ridden; no doubt when you have seen so many people die before you while you yourself have escaped such a horrendous death, you are less likely to tolerate half-measures, the status quo, or fools. She argues against the status quo in her letter to Hawkwood, against half-measures in her letters to the Queen of Naples, and most vehemently against all three in her letter to the Pope, drawing on her own, well-known experiences in choosing her metaphors:

They [those in authority] see those under them sinning but it seems they pretend not to see and do not correct them. And if they do correct, they do it so feebly and halfheartedly that it is worthless [. . .]. Sometimes it’s just that they would like to keep peace, and this, I tell you, is the worst cruelty one can inflict. If a sore is not cauterized or excised when necessary, but only ointment is applied, not only will it not heal, but it will infect the whole [body], often fatally. (245–46)

Catherine refuses to placate: not for her nineteen UN resolutions. Time is short, as Catherine witnessed repeatedly, first in her own family and then in her ministry. She simply could not, theologically or personally speaking, countenance time wasted, feeble efforts, peace at any price—far more preferable, holy chaos. In this, too, she reflects Paul’s admonition to work diligently for the days are short, but let me repeat: More important is that experience tells, which, in Catherine’s case, had no white noise to distort the message.

The last letter that I want to consider is one written in early 1376 to a prostitute from Perugia, famous then and now for its university, the leading city of Umbria. When I read the letter, I think of two quite different texts. The first is the Gospel story of the woman taken in adultery, and the second is Jonathan Edwards’s best-known sermon. Unlike Christ and like Edwards, Catherine preaches
hellfire and damnation. She tells the prostitute that she is “like a pig rolling in the mud”; she tells her that she has “become like a severed limb that dries up once it is cut off from the body”; she tells her that she is “like dried-up, shriveled, sterile wood”; she tells her that “even in this life you have hell in the company of horrible devils” (291). Catherine’s images here, as in the three previous letters considered, are visual, tactile, and sensual. They are earthly, not heavenly; they are concrete, not abstract. Catherine quotes Scripture, reminds the woman of the Virgin Mary, and urges her to become a modern-day Mary Magdalene—and promises that Christ’s sweet perfume awaits her. Implicit here is that such perfume is worth far more than any money the woman might earn as a “mercenary” of the body—that term reflecting the letter to Hawkwood, a different sort of mercenary, and the letter to the Queen of Naples, who was, to shift to the adjective, mercenary. Beyond these, says Catherine—again using the familiar carrot—is the promise of eternal life (or eternal damnation), and so Catherine ends her letter reminding the prostitute that because she does not know the day of her death, she should repent without delay. Here is another version of “time is short,” another example of Catherine herself practicing what she preaches by cauterizing the sore rather than simply applying ointment and then a Band-Aid sure to come off the first time the wound is immersed in water. To put it another way, Catherine creates a rhetoric for herself to meet the exigencies of her calling. What she cycles and recycles is herself: no warmed over rhetoric from last night’s dinner.

In the letter to the prostitute, as in the others, we find such wildly juxtaposed metaphors conveying such urgency that a reader cannot help responding. Had Catherine used such language only with the poor or the dispossessed, we could dismiss it. But as we have seen, she uses such language with those who have the greatest authority over her, even with her own confessor, Raimondo. She refuses to mollycoddle him, just as she refuses to mollycoddle popes or kings and queens. Yet at the same time—and perhaps here is the reason why the recipients accepted her words—her tone avoids being harsh or bitter but sounds the note of passionate concern. And we continue to hear the inescapable echo, “There is so little time, there is so little time.” And of course for her there was so little time.

To provide a more complete investigation of Catherine’s rhetoric, I want to conclude with brief sections from two of Catherine’s prayers, which have the effect of poetry. We find similar themes, metaphors, and rhetorical devices but set within primarily aesthetic and theological frames rather than a predominantly polemical one because her prayers have a dual audience: God first, her listeners second. The first prayer dates from early 1379 in which we find striking examples of antithesis and that favorite metaphor, fire. Here are the opening lines, which set the tone for what follows:
O immeasurable love!
O gentle love!
Eternal fire!
You are that fire ever blazing,
O high eternal Trinity!
You are direct without any twisting,
genuine,
without any duplicity,
open
without any pretense.16

This prayer explains the attributes of God and in that sense can be called theological discourse. It also calls God a blazing fire, reinforced by the word eternal. Then come the antitheses: direct/no twisting; genuine/no duplicity; open/no pretense. And what of us, God’s creatures? Catherine implies through her antitheses that we are the antithesis of God, thus a two-tiered set of antitheses. We twist; we are duplicitous; we pretend. That this is the significance comes in the next stanza where Catherine begs God to show us mercy. To understand the subtleness of the prayers requires that we read on multiple levels simultaneously. And this is a distinguishing characteristic—a difference between her letters and her prayers (and the reason to consider both together). Catherine in her letters is, as we note, straightforward to the point of being blunt, even rude. But Catherine in the prayers composes in an altogether different way—through concision and implication (not that in her letters she doesn’t at times imply a position; rather I am talking of the overall patterns). While she speaks of God, she also speaks of herself and her followers and all humanity. While she speaks of her followers, she speaks of God. Antithesis is at the core of Catherine’s thinking—the way her mind works. To that end she frequently uses chiasmus, as she does midway in the prayer: “Our sin lies in nothing else / but in loving what you hate / and hating what you love” (Noffke 74). And though here she uses the plural pronoun, in subsequent lines she uses the first-person singular: from we to I. With that shift Catherine invites her followers to put themselves, too, in the position of the first-person singular. Given that most of her followers would have been unable to read, her masterly use of highly memorable rhetorical devices like chiasmus, antithesis, and anaphora (examples below)—even more so than her radical metaphors (catachresis)—ensured that her audience would have been able to easily recall and so contemplate her words. Her prayers invite her followers to meditate.

For Passion Sunday, also in 1379 (the year before she died, though as with her letters the dates are not necessarily more than a best textural guess),
Catherine composed one of her more exquisite prayers and one of the more fruitful for study. Once again we find anaphora, antithesis, and chiasmus but also question/answer (using both subjectio, answering her own questions, and sermocinatio, answering the questions of someone else not present in the text). She also combines several important rhetorical devices, for instance chiasmus and gradatio, as in the following:

You have shown us love
in your blood,
and in your blood
you have shown us your mercy
and generosity.

She continues to repeat “in this blood” for several more lines. Also note that here “mercy” and “generosity” are the culmination or climax of love (though we might initially think the opposite). Catherine is arguing cause/effect, as well as using a logical loop (think of an Escher drawing, and you have the idea).

In a striking departure from her usual metaphors, she says that she (and others, by implication) “can only see and experience [God] in your [that is, God’s] mirror” (emphasis added), a simple definition of chiasmus. Style is argument. But not only do such reversals or mirror-images operate within the poem—from line to line—but they also structure the whole. Catherine begins the prayer “Oh God eternal, / high eternal Greatness! / You are great but I am small” and then toward the end of the prayer/poem, in a marvelous series of antitheses says “By thus making yourself small / you have made us great” (Noffke 211), thus the whole becoming an antithesis. And in this section she reinforces her antitheses with anaphora: “By being saturated,” “by enduring,” “by stripping,” “by being filled,” “by becoming,” “by being stretched out”—each prepositional phrase completed with a negative (disgrace, hunger, shame) so that she and all humanity might have its opposite, the positive (blessedness, food, honor).

Catherine uses questions to underscore, or summarize, or introduce a new idea. For example, after a long section about how a believer may see God, she asks, “but as you really are? / As I have said, / no” (Noffke 205). She introduces the next section with a question, which also introduces another group of anaphoristic statements: “And when did I become capable / of reaching up to your charity’s affection? [. . .] / When? / When it was time,” followed by “When the fullness [. . .] when my soul [. . .] when the great doctor [. . .] when the bridegroom” (205). As with her chiasmus and her antitheses, these questions help to link and tightly organize what might otherwise seem to be a hodgepodge of ill-considered ideas. We might also note her use of indirect discourse and
indirect questions and so much more. But as Catherine herself would write, I (but then I am no Catherine) will say no more, except . . .

This past summer, the summer of 2003, the hottest on record in Italy, I decided to visit Catherine’s spiritual retreat, the Rocca d’Orcia (the fortress on the River Orcia) in Southern Tuscany, where she wrote numerous letters and a brief, intense, ten-line prayer to the Holy Spirit. The fortress, high in the mountains like an eagle’s eyrie, overlooks the spa town of Bagno Vignoni. Not only did I decide to visit but also (with my husband) to hike from the Rocca to the spa and back, after climbing up and down the steep streets of the town, very little changed from Catherine’s time. We had a hazy day, as days there often are in the summer and so limited views, but on clear days it is not only possible to see the spa but off in the distance the hills of the crator-like Crete region and, if keen-eyed enough, the towns of Montepulciano and Pienza. Without much rain, the trail was dusty, the sun unrelenting, for there also was little shade. And the river, also thanks to the drought, barely wet the soles of our hiking boots as we crossed it.

I had visited Siena often, had seen the church where Catherine and her family worshipped, contemplated her head and her finger. I had hiked the surrounding Sienese countryside often. But not until my visit to the Rocca d’Orcia did I come to understand how influential on Catherine’s style was the land she knew best—those paths she walked, those vistas she saw. It is a land of paradox and oxymoron and antithesis, of soft lines and vehement angles, of extremities high and low. Violence hovers on the edges, as it did for us that day on our return under perilous clouds and deep, reverberating thunder: threat and promise, storm and relief. Catherine’s style, I decided that day (for how could I get her or this article out of mind?), is best understood through metaphor and analogy, which would be her own explanatory choice. Her style is of the land, concrete, immediate, and demanding. It requires work and at the end of the labors offers rest. I hope by this I am not being too quixotic or anachronistic (too much of the nineteenth century), for I do not intend so. In this land we find the short view and the long combined, for just as the haze makes the land abstract, ambiguous, and enigmatic, so the steep, hard streets and the sudden clarity offered never allow a person to forget the practical for too long. The urgency of now, for Catherine (and also for us in these perilous times?) is just too great. She found a style, a rhetoric, to match—the footprints of every great writer.

Notes

1I thank RR reviewers Janice Lauer and Andrea Lunsford for their helpful comments, urging me to push my analysis and argument further.

2Italian scholars and the Italian academy, it appears, are less squeamish about studying a woman religious than are American scholars and the American academy—but Catherine and other
women writers of religious texts deserve our serious attention, ours and our students'. Although it is outside the scope of this article to encourage scholars to teach these writers, and though it is worth noting the much fine and widespread scholarly work now appearing on such women as Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe, Sor Juana de la Cruz, Teresa of Avila, and others, such work has yet to move generally into the classroom. The recent work on these women gives hope that they will begin appearing regularly on syllabi across the country.

3 As Elizabeth Bowen notes in her book A Time in Rome, another "option" for women, that of martyrdom: "Rome," she writes, "seems to have raised no 'new woman' till the emergence of the feminine Christian martyrs, whose independence of character, equanimity, poise, firmness, and power to discountenance should be noted, not as distinct from their saintliness but as part of it" (122). So we could say, not entirely facetiously, that Catherine rejected this option as well, but though not a martyr, Bowen's description certainly fits Catherine. Unfortunately for American readers, Bowen's book is out of print.

4 For some reason paintings of Catherine always picture her with eyes half-closed and mouth turned down, looking decidedly sad, hardly the image her letters or prayers convey, not to mention what was her obvious energetic physical presence.

5 Two other articles are also of some interest: Karen Scott, "Candied Oranges, Vinegar, and Dawn: The Imagery of Conversion in the Letters of Caterina of Siena" (91–108) and Suzanne Noffke, O.P., "The Physical in the Mystical Writings of Caterina of Siena" (109–29).

6 Given the enigmatic and ambiguous nature of the Italian language itself, I find it beautifully fitting that Catherine should be Italy's patron saint.

7 Today we would write "la Caterina" to so indicate. In a recent article in Corriere della Sera (September 1, 2003, 26), Franco Zeffirelli speculates about what makes a legend, citing a BBC program of experts trying to decide why one woman versus another has attained such status (Josephine Baker compared with la Garbo or la Callas, for example). The panel's conclusion: the personality and the biography. His conclusion: those who lived a life of extraordinary curiosity, those who appealed and still appeal to both "experts" and ordinary citizens. This also well applies to Catherine.

8 The evidence is overwhelmingly on the other side, here just to give two examples: "your un worthy, poor, and wretched daughter Caterina" (Letters 244) or her frequent references to clothing, cooking, and serving.

9 Numerous others could be cited. I should point out that many of these male scholars dismiss her as no stylist, a dismissal with which I obviously disagree.

10 Recall that the papacy was in Avignon, not Rome, during part of this time and that the Great Schism began in 1378. Catherine spent the final years of her life trying to prevent this.

11 Catherine uses the term infidel, infidels, which Noffke has chosen to translate as "unbelievers," a mistake, for it softens too much Catherine's rhetoric; infidel, for us, is a much more strident term and thus helps us better realize Catherine's passion.

12 There is a certain amount of irony here because Catherine spent the latter part of her life trying to convince the Pope to leave Avignon and return to Rome, but it was the Queen of Naples as Countess of Provence who in 1347, the year of Catherine's birth, sold Avignon to the then Pope Clement V for a pittance. Ian Pears makes preventing the sale and thus working toward the return of the papacy to Rome part of the plot of his new historical novel, The Dream of Scipio. Unfortunately, he does not mention Catherine.

13 I accept the dates Noffke gives for the letters. Numerous Italian scholars have also attempted to date them. My purpose here is not textual analysis, as is hers in part while translating and editing Catherine's letters, but to focus on the language itself, albeit in translation.

14 Zancan lists several women mystic "writers" from various orders (Franciscan and Dominican, for example), but says that their work was disseminated orally and that it was only rarely written, thus private and secret. She does not suggest that Catherine knew of or used their work as
models. And, of course, Catherine’s work, even her letters, was public (see Zancan 26 ff.) and so published.

15Noffke notes that she retains the Italian because English terms like daddy “do not quite catch the tone” (246).

16Mary O’Driscoll, O.P. has edited a small helpful introduction to Catherine’s work: Catherine of Siena: Passion for the Truth, Compassion for Humanity. This and the letter to follow are two she anthologizes. She uses the translations of Suzanne Noffke for the prayers, the complete text of the letters in The Prayers of Catherine of Siena, page 61 in the former, 72 in the latter.

Works Cited


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