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Teaching Medieval Italian Women Writers

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Teaching Medieval Italian Women Writers

By Steven Grossvogel

Anyone who has taught or taken a course on secular Italian literature of the Middle Ages would be hard pressed to find women writers. Other than the sonnets of the *Compiuta Donzella* and the semi-literate letters of Margherita Datini to her merchant-husband, Francesco di Marco Datini, there are hardly any secular works written in Italian that are attributed to Italian women. Since the Datinis did not write in the "illustre volgar" (the "illustrious vernacular" of Dante and other Trecento lyric poets, including *Compiuta Donzella*), their written Italian is too difficult to read, even for a native speaker of Italian; and their letters are not available in translation. This leaves students with only the three extant love sonnets of *Compiuta Donzella*, not nearly enough to constitute a body of women's secular writing from the Italian Middle Ages. The story is quite different, however, when we look at religious literature: almost all the extant literature by medieval Italian women writers was written by women religious, as was the case for quite a bit of non-Italian medieval writings by women. It is their writings that must be the basis of any course on medieval Italian women writers.

Even though students today may recognize universal experiences in the lives and works of medieval Italian women writers--experiences that cut across all time periods and nationalities, they should not limit their appreciation of these women and their works solely on what they can empathize and identify with. Students should also be aware that even though modern critical approaches to studying medieval women writers can give us insights into many aspects of these writers' behavior and works--insights which the writers themselves may not have had, modern critical approaches can also limit the students' understanding and appreciation of these women if the approaches are not accompanied by an understanding and awareness of the women's intellectual, historical, theological and cultural background, and by a study of the medieval literary genres, forms, and conventions that make up their works. When teaching medieval Italian women writers, I try to adopt an approach that combines traditional medieval studies with aspects of gender studies that best lend themselves to a close reading of the texts.

Despite a renewed interest in medieval Italian women mystics during the last two decades, only the works of St. Clare of Assisi, Angela of Foligno, and St. Catherine of Siena are readily available in English translation.^[1] Although one could easily create a course just on these three writers, I prefer to integrate their works in a survey course of medieval Italian literature which is equally divided between religious writers and secular writers. In this essay I will discuss only the first part of this course, the one

dedicated to religious writers, since that is where all the medieval Italian women writers are grouped, except *Compiuta Donzella*, who is studied with the secular lyric poets in the second part of the course. The course begins by discussing the roles of Saints Francis and Clare of Assisi as founders of the Franciscan movement, and examines the social and historic context of their respective writings.

After examining Francis' two Rules and his two Testaments, students are asked to examine Clare's Rule and Testament and compare them to those of Francis. There are, in fact, significant differences between her Rule and Francis's; and by examining those differences students can gain insight into the role of women in medieval society. For example, the punishments that Clare prescribes for wayward sisters are different from the punishments Francis prescribes for friars guilty of the same offenses. Students are asked to figure out why Clare never expels a sister from her order; and what might have happened to a sister had she been expelled. That an expelled sister would have been more vulnerable than an expelled friar to violence, abuse, and neglect in the secular world allows students to see the limited options available to medieval women without families. It might also suggest that Clare was a bit more compassionate than Francis.

I ask students to consider the degree to which Clare's forty years in a convent would have impacted the writing of her Rule. It soon becomes clear to students that Clare was able to distill in her Rule what her experience as an abbess had taught her

about the creation of a fully-functional religious order. For example, Clare recognized the importance of having a democratic assembly of all the sisters to deliberate and decide certain matters, while, on the other hand, she had the sisters choose representatives ("discreets") who would advise her on other matters. She obviously did this in the name of harmony, one of Clare's most important goals and achievements. In fact, as scholars have shown, Clare's Second Order proved to be more stable and successful than Francis's First Order, which became deeply divided at the time of his death.

Unlike other Christian women who had founded similar monastic orders (e.g. St. Scolastica, the founder of the Benedictine order for women), St. Clare did not adopt, lock, stock and barrel, the Rule of her male counterpart and apply it to her Rule. As scholars have shown, Clare was the first Christian woman to have her own Rule approved by the Church, despite initial resistance from the Papacy, no small accomplishment in a male-dominated institution. Clare's persistence in having her Rule approved suggests that she was convinced she had found, after almost forty years of life experiences, a way of life which, among other things, was designed to meet the needs of women religious who wanted to be self-sufficient and independent from the world outside the convent. Discussing these and other historic accomplishments of Clare can also serve as a springboard for a broader discussion on women's voices within the Church and within medieval society in general.^[2]

Clare's admonitions to the sisters and her praises of their ability to endure hardships could be viewed as a response to medieval stereotypes of "the weaker sex," as well as an attempt to assuage the concerns of the Papacy that the vow of absolute poverty would be too harsh on women.^[3] Clare states in her Rule that the sisters should serve as a role model for other woman, both lay and religious, to imitate.^[4] It would be a mistake, however, for students to view Clare simply as someone asserting her women's ideals within an institution and a society dominated by men. Along with the "modern" qualities that make up Clare's ideal sister, there are several qualities which feminists have associated with the position of women in a patriarchal society: total self-abnegation (Simone de Beauvoir's "losing oneself in the other" [681-2]) and unquestioning obedience to male authority (e.g. the Pope). For Clare, however, as for any Christian religious of that period, these values are consonant with the theology of the time. It is important for students to realize that in the minds of medieval religious women obedience to "the holy Mother the Roman Church" was not intended as a concession that the female religious made to institutionalized patriarchy, though it might have been that too, but an attempt to curb pride, the deadliest of the seven vices, in order to attain the supreme theological virtue of *caritas*.

In an age when women had to accommodate and compromise with patriarchy, some might argue that Clare was seeking empowerment through self-reliance and independence. From a medieval perspective, however, Clare's ideals were intended to

attain God's love and salvation in a way that fully took into account, for the first time, the needs of women who chose this vocation. However distant some of Clare's ideals may be from those of women today, students need to understand that, from a medieval perspective, institutional oppression and suffering in general could also be overcome through humility and self-effacement. In short, it is important for students to be aware of the religious mindset that influenced the way medieval religious women thought and lived, if the students are to understand the rationale behind these women's beliefs, ideals, and lifestyles.

After discussing the founders of the Franciscan orders, I have students read selections from the *Lauds* of Jacopone da Todi and the *Memorial* of Angela of Foligno. Students are asked to compare these two Franciscans (a man and a woman) to each other, and find what they have in common: both Jacopone and Angela express their love for the divine in courtly and even erotic terms; and both were quite outspoken in criticizing the limitations of the secular clergy. I also ask students to compare these two followers to the founders of the Franciscan Orders. In the case of Angela, there is quite a contrast between her excessive emotions and St. Clare's serenity and level-headedness. This allows students to compare feminists' perspectives on hysteria to the way in which the Middle Ages viewed and understood people who suffered from it.^[5] Angela's irrational behavior inside the Church of Saint Francis at Assisi elicits totally different reactions from her entourage, on the one hand, and her

Franciscan relative /scribe, on the other. Asking students to suggest reasons for such different reactions makes them aware of the extent to which medieval and modern perspectives of abnormal behavior differed. It is important to point out to students that even though hysteria has historically been associated with women, it also manifested itself in men, including St. Francis (e.g. his stigmata). The fact that the Franciscan Orders were open to excessive emotions, and regarded them as a religious response to the presence of the divine in the religious, can be viewed as another example of how the Franciscan movement was able to free itself from some of the gendered prejudices of the Middle Ages. After discussing this, I have students watch a short video in which the renowned brain researcher, Dr. V. S. Ramachandran, discusses the effects of frontal temporal lobe seizures on one of his patients. After witnessing this patient's behavior, it soon becomes apparent to students that Angela too may have suffered from the same mental illness. I then ask the students if such an illness detracts in any way from Angela's religious experience, and why or why not.

Although some may disagree with Luce Irigaray's statement that mysticism is "the only place in Western history where woman speaks and acts in *such* a public way" (191, my emphasis), her statement can serve as a point of departure for a discussion on the private and public roles of both Clare and Angela, and their respective accomplishments in both spheres. As Paul Lachance points out, women were excluded from the ministry of the Word, but mystics like Angela still spread God's message to

the Christian community (42). When students look carefully at the *Memorial*, they will notice that Angela is not simply repeating God's message, she is also expounding the Word of God (the prerogative of priests), no small accomplishment for a semi-literate lay woman who became a tertiary only later in her life.^[6] Equally significant is fact that Angela and her female companion completely by-pass priests in order to receive a sacrament directly from Christ. In both cases she is appropriating priestly (i.e. male) prerogatives for herself, something Clare would have not done. Notwithstanding her appropriation, some of the most important men within the Franciscan order attest to Angela's credibility and *auctoritas*, as indicated by the Approbation at the beginning of the *Memorial*. It is important for students to understand how Angela acquired such credibility at a time when Franciscans of both sexes and mystics of all stripes were often subject to various kinds of punishments for their views and remarks.^[7] The privileged relationship Franciscan women had with their male counterparts in the First Order, and the way in which Angela's personal mystical experiences corroborated and conformed to important theology concepts of the time enhanced her credibility and authority.^[8]

The close bond between Franciscan men and women lends itself to a discussion of the extent to which a woman's voice is altered by that of her male scribes. From a feminist perspective, it would seem that the *Memorial* is not a work that is representative of Angela's own voice because her scribe, *frater A[rnaldo]*, is able to transcribe only some of the many things she narrates to him. But as Angela, her scribe,

and even Christ point out in the *Memorial*, the ecstasies she experiences, after the initial one on the road to Assisi, become harder to recount as they become more ineffable. Therefore, the question of whether Angela's voice can be heard through the voices of her male scribe becomes less of an issue when every voice, including that of Christ, fades into silence as Angela reaches ever higher levels of ecstasy.^[10] This can serve as a point of departure for a broader discussion on language and its limitations, and the way Angela uses language to confront the ineffable.

Whether she is praying for the death of her mother, her husband, and her children, or engaging in masochism by burning all the erogenous parts of her body with a torch, Angela's unconventional behavior surprises even the most jaded student. Both feminist and psychoanalytic theory can provide insight into Angela's behavior, especially with regard to hysteria, sublimated eroticism, and body language.^[11] Here too, however, students should be made aware of the theological underpinnings of even her most extreme behavior: without this theological subtext, the *Memorial* would have never been approved by the Franciscan Order; and, as Arcangeli points out, without their approval Angela's text would not be extant today (64-66). For example, a feminist and/or psychoanalytic interpretation of Angela's language of the body should not be divorced from a theological understanding of the mystical body of Christ: together they can give students a better understanding of why Angela behaves and thinks the way she does.

St. Catherine of Siena is the last Italian mystic we examine in class. As a member of the other great mendicant order, the Dominicans, she complements the two Franciscan women quite well since she shares traits of both St. Clare and Angela. Given Catherine's extensive writings (three hundred eighty-two letters, twenty-six prayers, and her doctrinal book, *The Dialogue*) and her literary and historic importance in 14th century Italy, it is hard to do her justice in a survey course. Students, however, can get a good idea of her personality, the diversity of her experiences, and her contributions to Trecento literature and history by reading selected letters.^[12] Catherine's letters to Popes Gregory XI and Urban VI, to Three Italian Bishops, and to Giovanna of Anjou, Queen of Naples reveal her political activism and fiery outspokenness;^[13] whereas her letters to her mother, Monna Lapa, to Raymond of Capua, her confessor and future biographer, and to others who knew her well, reveal a more sensitive but equally impressive side of Catherine.^[14]

As Joseph Berrigan points out, the "political" letters are important documents of the social and political turmoil in Italy and France in the 14th Century: students can learn about the Hundred Year War, the Babylonian Captivity, the Schism, and life in the Italian *comuni*, or city-states (252-3). The non-political letters, on the other hand, shed light on her mysticism, and some, like letter 272, can serve as an introduction to understanding the *Dialogue*, her most important doctrinal work.^[15] (It is largely due to this doctrinal work that Catherine would eventually become the first woman Doctor of

the Church.) Most of her letters, however, are a combination of both her private and public selves: the two are closely intertwined by her very personal tone and outspoken stance. Any discussion of Catherine's letters should include a brief discussion of the *ars dictaminis*, the medieval art of writing letters. In addition to learning the coherent and distinct parts that made up a medieval letter, students learn that most letters in the Middle Ages were intended for a public, not a private audience, and reflected the feelings of its sender. (A modern example of this kind of letter would be Martin Luther King Junior's "Letter from Birmingham Jail.")

Besides blurring the line separating Catherine's public and private persona, the letters and subsequent saint's legends also blur the line separating Catherine's hagiographic persona from her historical one, as Claudia Rattazzi Papka has suggested (131-2). Since most of the letters were dictated by Catherine and, probably, revised by her followers after her death, students need to distinguish between the Saint and the historical Caterina Benincasa when trying to determine "Who really was Catherine of Siena?" To aid them in this task, I have my students consider both the work of Dominican scholars such as Giuliana Cavalini and Suzanne Noffke, and the gender studies of Caroline Walker Bynum, Elizabeth Petroff, Claudia Rattazzi Papka, Karen Scott, and especially Jane Tylus.^[16]

As the most important woman writer of the Italian Middle Ages, Catherine's work can be examined in stylistic terms, as Giovanni Getto did, and in terms of imagery

and oral culture, as Noffke and Scott have done. As the most important Italian mystic and, possibly, the most important medieval mystic, Catherine's mysticism can be viewed from several different perspectives. Noffke, for example, has examined the physical in Catherine's mysticism and has shown how the saint created "a view of God and of human spirituality which both incorporates and transcends the physical. [. . .] It is the *mistero* of flesh and spirit redeemed in the flesh and the Spirit, redeemed into the ultimate truth and love that is God" (128). Rattazzi Papka, on the other hand, has examined how Catherine's use of the symbol of Body, and in particular her image of being mystically wed with the ring of Christ's circumcised foreskin (Noffke letter 37), endows her with the phallic power she takes on as a reader and a public figure (Rattazzi Papka 138): "For Caterina, it is the body, in its mystical and essentially androgynous assimilation with that of Christ, that precisely empowers public action and public expression" (147).

Finally, teachers may also wish to discuss with their students Catherine's genius and the way it was represented in the Middle Ages. The stumbling block for medieval hagiographers and for some modern critics is that Catherine, an illiterate woman of the working class, was able to become a major literary, social, and political figure without any formal education. (By most accounts, Catherine was illiterate until late in her life, long after she had acquired an international reputation.) Medieval hagiographers' attempts at explaining Catherine's genius in term of God's divine grace rather than by

Catherine's own "wit or will" (Rattazzi Papka 133) have been viewed by feminist critics as inherently sexist. Students, however, should be made aware that in the Middle Ages knowledge claimed to have been acquired through revelation was considered superior to knowledge that was acquired through human reason. Therefore, even though many modern critics appreciate Catherine's achievements in post-Renaissance terms (e.g. her self-affirmation, personal achievements, and individual merits), Catherine's medieval biographers and hagiographers appreciated her according to medieval standards: her earthly glory is a reflection of God's heavenly glory, and her powerful will a reflection of the will of God. To glorify her in terms of the Self would, in the eyes of medieval hagiographers, detract from her image as a saint, not enhance it. In short, it is essential that students be able to distinguish between their culture of appreciation and that by which female mystics were appreciated in the Middle Ages.

To conclude, students should be encouraged to read the writings of Italian medieval women mystics in terms of what both gender studies and theologically-based medieval scholarship have to offer. By combining both approaches to an interpretation of these works, students can gain a better understanding of and appreciation for these women and their writings while, at the same time, avoiding the pitfalls and limitations of adopting a single critical approach.

Endnotes

[1] Although there are some English translations of saints' legends about lesser-known medieval Italian women mystics (see Elizabeth Petroff's translation of the lives of St. Umiltà of Florence, Margarita of Faenza, Gherardesca of Pisa, and Aldobrandesca of Siena [Petroff, *Consolation* 83-178]), there are very few English translations of their actual works (see Richard Pioli's translation of selected *Sermons* of St. Umiltà of Faenza [Petroff, *Medieval Women* 247-253]). Students who read Italian, however, will find an ample selection of writings by Italian women mystics in Giovanni Pozzi and Claudio Leonardi's anthology.

[2] In addition to Regis Armstrong's informative introduction to his translation of the works of St. Clare (9-32), students should also read Elizabeth Petroff's "A Medieval Woman's Utopian Vision: The Rule of St. Clare of Assisi" in *Body and Soul* (66-79).

[3] Students are impressed that Clare said "no" to the Papacy when asked that the vow of poverty be struck from her Rule.

[4] In her Testament, Clare says, "For the Lord Himself has placed us not only as a form for others in being an example and mirror, but even for our sisters whom the Lord has called to our way of life as well, that they in turn might be a mirror and example to those living in the world."

[5] Students may find useful the articles by Gilman, King, Porter, Rousseau, and Showalter in *Hysteria Beyond Freud*.

[6] Angela, in fact, is critical of priests (the only people who could expound and minister the Word of God): "I was filled with such certitude, such light, and such ardent love of God that I went on to affirm, with the utmost certainty, that nothing of these delights of God is being preached. Preachers cannot preach it; they do not understand what they preach. He who was leading me into this vision told me so." (131).

[7] Jacopone da Todi spent many years in a Papal prison; and the French mystic Marguerite Porete, though not a Franciscan, was burned at the stake for having said several of the same things that Angela was saying.

[8] A good example of this is when "Angela has a powerful experience of the unction of God's presence when he imprints in her a permanent sign of his love" (149); that imprint and sign is the theological virtue of *caritas* which is infused with the soul only after it has attained grace. There are other instances in the *Memorial* in which her personal experiences correspond to established theological concepts. It is not surprising

that none of the Franciscan men who examined the *Memorial* “saw any sign of false teachings in this book--on the contrary, they treat it with a humble reverence, and cherish it most dearly, like a holy book” (123): her mystical experiences are theologically sound.

[9] For a feminist interpretation of Angela’s voice versus that of her scribes, see Tiziana Arcangeli, “Re-reading a Mis-known and Mis-read Mystic: Angela da Foligno.”

[10] As Angela experiences more fully her mystical union with God, all attempts at relating her divine experiences are, in her words, blasphemy.

[11] For a useful bibliography of these and related topics, see Cristina Mazzoni, “Italian Women Mystics: A Bibliographical Essay.” For a feminist interpretation of Angela’s body language, I would recommend Petroff’s “Writing the Body: Male and Female in the Writings of Marguerite D’Oingt, Angela of Foligno, and Umiltà of Faenza” in *Body and Soul* (211-215, 217-218), and Mary Ann Sagnella’s “Carnal Metaphors and Mystical Discourse in Angela da Foligno’s *Liber*.”

[12] Most of Catherine’s letters have been admirably translated and annotated by the Dominican scholar, Suzanne Noffke, but there still is not a complete translation of all 382 letters; in fact, there is not even a critical edition of the saint’s letters.

[13] Letters to Pope Gregory XI and Giovanna of Anjou appear in Noffke’s translation, whereas the letters to the three Italian bishops and to Pope Urban VI have been translated by Joseph Berrigan and Robert Coogan.

[14] Catherine’s famous letter to Raymond about the execution of Niccolò di Toldo (letter 31 in the Noffke translation) will make an impression on any student.

[15] This letter is regarded as a synthesis of some of the main themes that would later appear in the *Dialogue*. There is a translation of this letter by Vida Scudder (337-352).

[16] In addition to reading Noffke’s informative introduction to her translation of Catherine’s letters, I recommend that students read Noffke’s “The Physical in the Mystical Writings of Catherine of Siena,” a compelling interpretative essay on the saint’s works. Students who wish to have a more extensive interpretation of Catherine’s life and works should read Cavallini’s *Catherine of Siena*, and Jane Tylus’s *Reclaiming Catherine of Siena: Literacy, Literature, and the Signs of Others*. In addition to the feminist presentation of Catherine by Claudia Rattazzi Papka and Karen Scott, students can also read the sections devoted to her in Petroff’s *Body and Soul* (17-19), and in Bynum’s *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* (165-180).

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