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Reclaiming Catherine of Siena: Literacy, Literature, and the Signs of Others

Jane Tylus

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Catherine of Siena (1347–1380) wrote almost four hundred epistles in her lifetime, effectively insinuating herself into the literary, political, and theological debates of her day. At the same time, as the daughter of a Sienese dyer, Catherine had no formal education, and her accomplishments were considered miracles rather than the work of her own hand. As a result, she has been largely excluded from accounts of the development of European humanism and the language and literature of Italy. *Reclaiming Catherine ofSiena* makes the case for considering Catherine alongside literary giants such as Dante and Petrarch, as it underscores Catherine's commitment to using the vernacular to manifest Christ's message—and her own.
Jane Tylus charts here the contested struggles of scholars over the centuries to situate Catherine in the history of Italian culture in early modernity. But she mainly focuses on Catherine’s works, calling attention to the interplay between orality and textuality in the letters and demonstrating why it was so important for Catherine to envision herself as a writer. Tylus argues for a reevalution of Catherine as not just a medieval saint, but one of the major figures at the birth of the Italian literary canon.

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