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Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola (1469–1533): Faith, Antiquity, and the Witch Hunt

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Article abstract

Gianfrancesco Pico's interest in Caterina da Racconigi, a mystic and prophet revered in Piedmont in the first decades of the sixteenth century, was born out of a scientific curiosity prior to becoming devout admiration. The *Compendio delle cose mirabili*, Gianfrancesco's last work, written after the completion of his *Life of Savonarola*, is a continuation of his treatises on prophecy and premonition and on the discernment of spirits and witchcraft; it aims to observe and describe the mystical phenomena attributed to a woman whose conduct is inspired by a specific model of holiness. The *Compendio* is therefore a composite text, part scientific treatise and part hagiography. This article examines the text in terms of hagiography by relating it to the model of Catherine of Siena and to the lives of the living saints that inspired Caterina da Racconigi's own behaviour. It also explores the significance of the work within Gianfrancesco's religious thought.

*A Compendium of the Wondrous Deeds of Caterina da Racconigi: Hagiography or Philosophical Treatise?*¹

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Gianfrancesco Pico's interest in Caterina da Racconigi, a mystic and prophet revered in Piedmont in the first decades of the sixteenth century, was born out of a scientific curiosity prior to becoming devout admiration. The Compendio delle cose mirabili, Gianfrancesco's last work, written after the completion of his Life of Savonarola, is a continuation of his treatises on prophecy and premonition and on the discernment of spirits and witchcraft; it aims to observe and describe the mystical phenomena attributed to a woman whose conduct is inspired by a specific model of holiness. The Compendio is therefore a composite text, part scientific treatise and part hagiography. This article examines the text in terms of hagiography by relating it to the model of Catherine of Siena and to the lives of the living saints that inspired Caterina da Racconigi's own behaviour. It also explores the significance of the work within Gianfrancesco's religious thought.

L'intérêt de Gianfrancesco Pico pour Caterina da Racconigi, mystique et prophète vénérée dans le Piémont au cours des premières décennies du XVI^e siècle, trouve d'abord sa source dans une curiosité scientifique, avant de donner lieu à une admiration dévote. Le Compendio delle cose mirabili, dernier ouvrage de Gianfrancesco, rédigé après l'achèvement de sa vie de Savonarole, s'inscrit dans la même lignée que ses traités sur la prophétie, la prémonition, l'identification des esprits et de la sorcellerie. Il vise à décrire et à observer les phénomènes mystiques attribués à une femme dont la conduite s'inspire d'un modèle spécifique de sainteté. Le Compendio est donc un texte composite, formé en partie d'un traité scientifique et en partie d'une hagiographie. Le présent article s'intéresse à la composante hagiographique du Compendio en le rattachant au modèle de Catherine de Sienne ainsi qu'à la vie de saints contemporains qui ont inspiré le comportement de Caterina da Racconigi. Il explore également la signification de cette œuvre dans la pensée religieuse de Gianfrancesco.

In my first study on the typology of female saints in the early sixteenth century, my research on Caterina da Racconigi (1486–1574) and on the sources related to her hagiographic legend brought to the attention of scholars the phenomenon of the *sante vive* or “living saints,” to which I have given

1. This article expands the themes exposed by a paper—of the same title—presented at the 2016 Renaissance Society of America Annual Conference in Boston, Massachusetts. I wish to thank Tamar Herzig, Walter Stephens, Marco Piana, and Cassandra Marsillo for their help in editing this contribution. Unless otherwise specified, translations are mine.

the sobriquet “court prophetesses.”² Here, I aim to expand my analysis of this fundamental figure. Caterina Mattei da Racconigi, a sister of the Third Order of Saint Dominic often ignored by historians until the last decade of the twentieth century, has become the subject of numerous studies of different kinds and points of view. My article will analyze the hagiographical tradition linked to the figure of Caterina in order to reiterate the argument that prophecy is the distinctive trait of the hagiographic legends of the “living saints,” along with the parallel and wider problem of the discernment of spirits between theology, demonology, and ontology. I will do this through a comparison of hagiographic texts written about Caterina, and, specifically, through a closer analysis of Gianfrancesco Pico’s *Compendio delle cose mirabili di Caterina da Racconigi*.³

The hagiographic legends of the Italian *sante vive* were written at the onset of the Italian wars and the spread of prophetic preaching, allegedly ending with the death of Girolamo Savonarola (1452–98).⁴ The Dominican hagiographers who first wrote of the deeds of their “blessed ones” openly displayed their link—indirect though it was—to Savonarola. Tamar Herzog fully grasped the historical meaning of the feminine variant of Savonarolism in *Savonarola’s Women*, which enriched and deepened the research on the female Tertiary Dominicans by devoting a chapter to Caterina da Racconigi.⁵ A few additional documents, mostly pertaining to early modern Piedmont, can be found in Elisabetta Lurgo’s monograph, which challenges the influence of Savonarola on Caterina, proposing an interpretation of her figure as a “micro-history” and urging us “to explore the mental categories by which local communities defined the clergy [...] and to study, in the last analysis, the concept of saintliness that

2. Gabriella Zarri, *Le sante vive. Cultura e religiosità femminile nella prima età moderna* (Turin: Rosenberg & Sellier, 1990).

3. Giovanni Francesco Pico della Mirandola, *Compendio delle cose mirabili di Caterina da Racconigi*, ed. Linda Pagnotta (Florence: L.S. Olschki, 2010).

4. Ottavia Niccoli, *Prophecy and People in Renaissance Italy*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); Marjorie Reeves, ed., *Prophetic Rome in the High Renaissance Period* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); Donald Weinstein, *Savonarola and Florence: Prophecy and Patriotism in the Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970).

5. Tamar Herzog, *Savonarola’s Women: Visions and Reform in Renaissance Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Tamar Herzog, “The ‘Santa Viva’ and the Dragon: Witchcraft and Religion in the Writings of Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola,” in *Scritture carismi istituzioni: percorsi di vita religiosa in età moderna: studi per Gabriella Zarri*, ed. Concetta Bianca and Anna Scattigno (Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 2018), 139–50.

took shape from local conditions.”⁶ Finally, also important to the scholarly literature is Linda Pagnotta’s critical edition of Gianfrancesco’s *Compendio*⁷ as presented in the manuscript that the Dominican Arcangelo Marchesello di Viadana⁸ transcribed in 1544. The following brief analysis of the *Compendio* will thus expand the vast historiographical research that—since 1990—has decisively deepened our knowledge of individual *sante vive*⁹ and completed the critical editions of several hagiographic legends.¹⁰

6. Elisabetta Lurgo, *La beata Caterina da Racconigi fra santità e stregoneria: carisma profetico e autorità istituzionale nella prima età moderna* (Florence: Nerbini, 2013), 298.

7. Gianfrancesco Pico, *Compendio delle cose mirabili di Caterina da Racconigi*, ed. Linda Pagnotta (Florence: Olschki, 2010).

8. Also known by the name Arcangelo Marchesello da Vitelliana, with reference to the Roman Vitellius clan and their long ownership of the place from which the toponym Viadana derives—a village located in the territory of Mantua, subject to the Gonzaga lordship. He was a member of the Observant Congregation of Lombardy, then the Reformed Province of Lombardy. He was assigned to various convents, and while in 1542 he held the office of confessor to the nuns of Santa Maria Nuova di Revello, in the Marquisate of Saluzzo, he transcribed the life of Caterina da Racconigi compiled by the confreres Friar Gabriele da Savigliano and Friar Domenico da Braida. Shortly thereafter, in Ferrara, he wrote two short biographies of Sister Lucia da Narni then living in the monastery of Santa Caterina da Siena, of that same city, and in 1544 he transcribed from the original the diary or autobiography of Sister Lucia. See also Gianfrancesco Pico, *Compendio*, ed. Pagnotta, 82–83.

9. Maiju Lehmijoki-Gardner, ed. and trans., *Dominican Penitent Women* (New York: Paulist Press, 2005); Gabriella Zarri and Rosanna Golinelli Berto eds., *Osanna Andreasi da Mantova 1449–1505. Tertii Praedicatorum Ordinis Diva* (Mantova: Casandrea, 2006); Gianni Festa and Angelita Roncelli, eds., *Osanna Andreasi da Mantova, 1449–1505: La santa dei Gonzaga; Lettere e colloqui spirituali*, with a preface by Gabriella Zarri (Mantua, Italy: Casandrea, 2007); E. Ann Matter, “Prophetic Patronage as Repression: Lucia Brocadelli da Narni and Ercole d’Este,” in *Christendom and Its Discontents: Exclusion, Persecution and Rebellion, 1000–1500*, ed. Scott L. Waugh and Peter D. Diehl (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 168–76; Giovanna Casagrande and Enrico Menestò, eds., *Una santa, una città: Atti del Convegno storico nel V centenario della venuta a Perugia di Colomba da Rieti, Perugia 10–11–12 novembre 1989* (Spoleto: Centro Italiano di Studi sull’Alto Medioevo, 1991); Isabella Gagliardi, *Sola con Dio: La missione di Domenica da Paradiso nella Firenze del primo Cinquecento* (Florence: SISMEL Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2007); Tamar Herzig, “Christ Transformed into a Virgin Woman”: Lucia Brocadelli, Heinrich Institoris, and the Defense of the Faith (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2013).

10. Lucia Brocadelli, *Una mistica contestata: La Vita di Lucia da Narni (1476–1544) tra agiografia e autobiografia*, ed. E. Ann Matter and Gabriella Zarri (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2011); Reinhold C. Mueller and Gabriella Zarri, eds., *La Vita e i Sermoni di Chiara Bugni Clarissa Veneziana, 1471–1514* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2011); Sebastiano Angeli, *Legenda volgare di*

Caterina was born in 1486, the daughter of Giorgio Mattei and Billia Ferrari, in a manor house belonging to the House of Savoy Racconigi. Her father was a blacksmith; their family had many children and inadequate economic means.¹¹ From an early age, Caterina practised the silk weaving trade, for which the town of Racconigi was famous.¹² The hagiographic sources state that the first manifestations of her sanctity occurred during her childhood, and that she went for confession to the monastery of the Servite Order. In 1506, Prince Claudio of Savoy (1445–1521), lord of the town, founded a Dominican parsonage—a monastery with a small number of monks. Three years later, the monastery was ready, and three Dominican friars and a lay brother settled there. Fra Domenico Onesto da Bra, a pious friar and popular preacher, became prior. He would later become confessor to Claudio di Racconigi as well as to Caterina.¹³

The favour the prince showed to the Dominicans may not have been shared by the population or by other religious orders who were, as a result, excluded from the proceeds of alms collections.¹⁴ This could be part of the context that aroused suspicions against Caterina, a penitent of the friars who had recently settled in the village and who was known for her extraordinary mystical phenomena. Her hagiographers unanimously recount that, in 1512, she was summoned by the Inquisition and had to go to Turin, where she would be interrogated by the bishop's court. She was found to be free of any heterodox views and was able to return to her town with a clean reputation. Having been received at the Court of Savoy, she met with the duke, the bishop of Turin (Claudio de Seyssel, 1458–1520), Bianca di Savoia, and the marquise Anna di Monferrato, with whom she formed lasting ties.¹⁵

Colomba da Rieti, ed. Giovanna Casagrande with the assistance of Maria Luisa Cianini Pierotti, Andrea Maiarelli, and Francesco Santucci (Spoleto: Centro Italiano di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo, 2002).

11. Gabriella Zarri, "Caterina da Racconigi," in *Il grande libro dei Santi. Dizionario enciclopedico*, ed. Elio Guerriero and Dorino Tuniz (Cinisello Balsamo: Edizioni San Paolo, 1998), 1:390–94; Paolo Fontana, "Mattei, Caterina," in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani* 72 (2008), accessed 5 August 2018, [treccani.it/enciclopedia/caterina-mattei_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)/](http://treccani.it/enciclopedia/caterina-mattei_(Dizionario-Biografico)/); Giuseppe Capello, *La Beata Caterina Mattei: 1480–1547* (Turin: Soc. editr. internaz., 1946).

12. Pierpaolo Merlin, *Il Piemonte sabauda. Stato e territori in età moderna* (Turin: UTET, 1994).

13. Zarri, "Caterina da Racconigi," 390–91.

14. Zarri, "Caterina da Racconigi," 391.

15. Zarri, "Caterina da Racconigi," 391; and Elisabetta Lurgo, "La 'Vitta e legenda admirabile' di Caterina da Racconigi di Gabriele da Savigliano OP e Domenico da Bra OP (1525ca)," in *Archivum Fratrum*

In January 1514, at twenty-eight years old, Caterina took the habit of a Dominican Tertiary along with two companions, and later went to live with them in the nearby village of Caramagna, where she died in 1547.¹⁶ As was the custom in monastic or mendicant communities, women and men who demonstrated, or presumed, supernatural gifts were mentored by special confessors who listened to their confessions, visions, or revelations.¹⁷ It was not unusual for this confessor to take note of what he saw and heard in order to compose a hagiographic text that would be useful for canonization. In the case of Caterina, her life and miraculous events were narrated at different times and in different ways by three different hagiographers: Gabriele Dolce da Savigliano, Pietro Martire Morelli (ca. 1504–90), and Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola.

Between 1506 and 1525, the Dominican Gabriele Dolce da Savigliano, who had replaced Domenico da Bra as Caterina's confessor, wrote the first biographical annotation about the "living saint," entitled *Legenda Aurea*. This text has come down to us in two damaged manuscripts dated from about 1525: one preserved in the Parochial Archive of Garessio-Borgo (Cuneo) and the other in a copy created by Arcangelo Marchesello da Viadana in 1543.¹⁸ These served as the basis for the more structured *Compendio delle cose mirabili di Caterina da Racconigi*, written by Gianfrancesco between 1526, the year of his first meeting with Caterina, and 1532, a few months before his violent death. Lastly, in 1533 Caterina's deeds and revelations were collected anew by a confessor, the Dominican Pietro Martire Morelli, who enriched Gianfrancesco's text with the events, prophecies, and miracles that took place up to her death.¹⁹

Praedicatorum 78 (2008): 275–76.

16. Zarri, "Caterina da Racconigi," 391 and Lurgo, "La 'Vitta e legenda admirabile,'" 265–70.

17. For Osanna Andreasi's case, see Zarri, *Le sante*, 51–85.

18. The Marchesello copy, preserved in Rome in the General OP Archive (Santa Sabina Convent, Ms. X.661: *Vita della b. Catharina de Racconisio*), was edited by Lurgo, "La 'Vitta e legenda admirabile,'" 149–307. Reference is made to this edition in the notes that follow. The authors of the text were local churchmen especially noted for their relations with the "blessed one." For more on them, see the information gathered by Lurgo, "La 'Vitta e legenda admirabile,'" 164–65.

19. Gianfrancesco Pico's *Compendio*, with Morelli's additions, was first published in about 1681: *Compendio delle cose mirabili della venerabil serua di Dio Catterina da Raconisio Vergine integerrima del Sacro Ordine della Penitenza di S. Domenico, distinto in dieci libri, e composto dall'illustrissimo sig. Giouanni Francesco Pico signore della Mirandola, e conte della Concordia, et vltimato dall'vmitale seruo di Giesu Christo fr. Pietro Martire Morelli da Garressio dell'ordine de' predicatori* [place and date unknown]; a second edition with addendums and notes was printed in the nineteenth century as follows: *Compendio*

Thanks to these three works, it is possible to compare different versions of the same facts and phenomena of Caterina's life. Even though some form the basis of others, they result in varied projections of the different cultural values and interests of those who portray her. The *Legenda*, written by Dolce, who in those years was engaged in expanding the observant convents in the Piedmontese area, foregrounds Caterina's relationships with princes, above all in regard to local interests and to her religious order. Dolce not only highlights the fact that Caterina prophesied a forthcoming settlement of the Dominican beliefs in the territory of Racconigi, but also devotes two whole chapters to narrating the negotiations between Prince Claudio and the vicar general of the Congregation of Lombardy with the bishop of Turin to gain consent for founding a convent.²⁰ Dolce also refers to the persecutions that the Dominicans underwent in the early days of their mission in that locality.²¹ By contrast, Gianfrancesco's *Compendio* focuses on the observation of mystical phenomena, which he contextualizes in the theories discussed in his day and in his personal scholarly reflections. Lastly, Morelli's continuation emphasizes her prophecies and her relations with the princes regarding the resumption of war in Piedmont between 1535 and 1546.

Dolce's *Legenda Aurea* shares some features with Pico's later *Compendio*. However, while the former is structured as a biographical narrative, the latter has a more argumentative structure. When Dolce began collecting material for his hagiography, he had access to two perfectly fashioned models of female Dominican saintliness published in print: the *Legenda Maior* about Caterina da Siena, written by Raimondo da Capua,²² and *Life* about the Blessed Osanna da Mantova (1449–1505), written in Latin by Francesco Silvestri and which he

delle cose mirabili della beata Caterina da Racconigi... distinto in dieci libri / e composta da Giovanni Francesco Pico... con aggiunte e note (Chieri and Turin: Ti Fory e Dalmazzo, 1858). About Morelli, see Elisabetta Lurgo, "Un ignoto maestro dell'osservanza domenicana nella Lombardia Superiore: Pietro Martire Morelli da Garessio," in *Memorie Domenicane* (2009): 267–84.

20. Lurgo, "La 'Vitta e legenda admirabile,'" 271.

21. Lurgo, "La 'Vitta e legenda admirabile,'" 272–75.

22. Printed in Florence in 1477 and in Milan in 1489. See Raimondo da Capua, *Legenda maior, sive Legenda admirabilis virginis Caterina de Senis*; ed. Silvia Nocentini (Florence: SISMEL Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2013).

later translated into the vernacular in 1507.²³ In the year Dolce commenced his work on Caterina, the Dominican Sebastiano Angeli had already written *Legenda* about the miraculous events of Colomba da Rieti's (1467–1501)—a sister of the Third Order of Saint Dominic, for whom he was a confessor—though his text was supposedly unknown. It was shortened and published only in 1521 by the Dominican friar Leandro Alberti (1479–1552), who was then in contact with Pico concerning the latter's run-ins with the Inquisition and the witchcraft trials that took place in the County of Mirandola in 1522.²⁴

Dolce wrote his work on the life of Caterina with an eye on both Raimondo da Capua's (ca. 1330–99) and Francesco Silvestri's (ca. 1474–1528) texts. His reference to Caterina da Siena is not limited to citing her as Caterina da Racconigi's guide and protectress but aligns the two in relation to their specific miraculous acts: mystical marriage, fasting to the point of anorexia, miraculous communion, stigmata, the material exchange of hearts with Jesus, and the struggles with the devil.²⁵ His reference to Silvestri's text and to the story of Osanna da Mantova appears evident in his mention of political prophecies, such as the prediction of the return of the French to Italy after the Peace of Madrid,²⁶ and in defining Caterina as “blessed one of the Court,” protected by

23. *Beatae Osannae Mantuanae de tertio habitu ordinis fratrum predicatorum uita per fratrem Franciscum Siluestrum Ferrariensem eiusdem ordinis & uitae regularis professorem edita*, Impressum Mediolani: per Petrum Martirem de Mantegatiis dictum Cassanum, 1506 die 20. Augusti, Idem, *La vita e stupendi Miraculi dela gloriosa virgine Osanna Mantuana del Terzo ordine de Frati Predicatori*, Impressa in Milano: apresso di Alexandro Minutiano, a sexdeci di Ianuario. 1507. A second legend of Osanna Andreasi, written by a monk from Monteoliveto, was printed in 1524: *Libretto della vita & transito della beata Osanna da Mantua nouamente corretto, & con una noua aggiunta: composto dal venerando padre frate Hieronymo Monte Oliuetano, et stampato de l'anno del 1524*, Stampato nella cita de Bologna: per li heredi de Benedetto di Hettorre di Phaelli, 1524.

24. *Vita della beata Colomba da Rieto dil Terzo ordine di S. Domenego: sepolta a Perugia* [Per il venerando padre F. Leandro delli Alberti bolognese de lordine de Predicatori in volgare composta], Stampata in Bologna: per maestro Girolamo delli Benedetti cittadino Bolognese, 1521. alli xv. de Aprile: With regards to the life and works of Leandro Alberti, see *L'Italia dell'inquisitore: storia e geografia dell'Italia del Cinquecento nella Descrittione di Leandro Alberti: atti del Convegno internazionale di studi*, Bologna, 27–29 maggio 2004, ed. Massimo Donattini (Bologna: Bononia University Press, 2007).

25. Raimondo da Capua, *Legenda maior*, 198–200, 237–48, 370–74. Thomas Antonii de Senis Caffarini, *Libellus de supplemento: legende proluxe virginis beate Catherine de Senis*; primum ediderunt Cavallini, Iuliana and Foralosso, Imelda (Rome: Edizioni Cateriniane, 1974), 121–211.

26. *Compendio*, l.3, ch. 8, 79.

the Savoy-Racconigis, with rival contenders in the Marchesi di Monferrato and Saluzzo.²⁷ Colomba da Rieti's model of sanctity, known by Dolce, must have been mediated by preachers before being disseminated through Alberti's printed booklet. There is no doubt about Caterina's knowledge of the life and virtues of Osanna and Colomba—since Dolce describes one of Caterina's visions in which the two Third Order Dominicans appear between the holy blessed women of the order of preachers.²⁸

The presence of the prophetic element in blessed Dominican women of the early sixteenth century does not represent change from the model of Caterina da Siena. What does appear new is the explicit recognition that the role of prophecy in the model of sanctity that was being formed around the *sante vive* was culturally motivated. Silvestri was the first, in his preface to the fifth book of his *Life* about Osanna da Mantova, to contrast prophecy to astrology and claim that only those to whom God has shown the future can know it:

Those who [deal with] celestial matters have always been held in the highest esteem among nations, for nothing is more delightful to men than news and certitude of future event. [...] For this reason, many avid Princes surround themselves with physiognomists, astronomers, geomancers, who predict things they cannot know by virtue of their talents and industry. [...] There is no generation of men that can speak with greater certainty of future things than those who seek them in clear and certain divine truth. [...] He cannot err who, enlightened by divine light, discloses future events.²⁹

The cultural context in which Silvestri emphasizes the character of the “heavenly oracle” and “true prophethess” attributed to the Blessed One of the Gonzaga Court is the same that had been shaken by Savonarola's treatise against astrologers, first printed in 1497 and republished several times after.³⁰ This Savonarolan text owed much to the similar work done by Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, whose treatise was later composed and completed by his

27. *Compendio*, l.3, ch. 10, 83.

28. Lurgo, “La ‘Vitta e legenda admirabile,’” 260.

29. Francesco Silvestri, *La vita e stupendi Miraculi*, book 5, preface.

30. Girolamo Savonarola, *Tractato contra li astrologi* [No later than 1497].

nephew Gianfrancesco, who published the *Disputationes adversus astrologiam divinatricem* in 1496, in the second volume of Giovanni's *Opera omnia*.³¹

Despite Savonarola's clear influence on Silvestri's work, in his *Legenda Aurea* Dolce never refers directly to Savonarola, although there is a marked reference to the call for church reform and to Caterina's missionary and salvific role.³² In contrast, Gianfrancesco names Savonarola in his *Compendio*, recognizing in Caterina an authoritative witness to Savonarola's saintliness. As just one example, in the following passage Gianfrancesco reports Caterina's visions of Savonarola wearing the three crowns of Virgin, Martyr, and Doctor:

I won't deny having said many times that I saw with my own eyes our Girolamo from Ferrara embellished with three crowns. And he spoke to me in the presence of many, describing the attributes of the crowns: one white atop his head, one red above that, and the other golden above them all.³³

Belief in an ideal relationship between Caterina and Savonarola was very much alive among Savonarolans at the time Gianfrancesco wrote his text. The written lives of Caterina and Savonarola were, in fact, the subjects of some of Gianfrancesco's most influential literary works. Both were left unpublished until the second half of the seventeenth century, when they would be published within a few years of one another: *Vita Savonarolae* in 1674, and *Compendio* with Pietro Martire Morelli's additions in 1681.³⁴

In comparison with the biographical and narrative slant of Dolce's *Legenda Aurea*, Gianfrancesco's *Compendio* presents itself as a highly structured text. Its biographical narrative is divided into ten books, each with a preface that

31. Elisabetta Scapparone, *Pico, Giovan Francesco*, in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani* 83 (2015), treccani.it/enciclopedia/giovan-francesco-pico_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/; Charles B. Schmitt, *Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola (1469–1533) and His Critique of Aristotle* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1967).

32. Lurgo, "La 'Vita e legenda admirabile,'" 246–47.

33. *Compendio* cit., l.2, ch. 3, 44: "Non commetterò però ch'io non dica avermi narrato spesse volte veduto da sé el nostro Ieronymo da Ferrara, de tre corone ornato. E questo mi disse in presentia di molti, e le qualità delle corone explicava: una bianca sopra el capo, una rossa sopra quella, et l'altra d'oro sopra tutte [...]."

34. About the composition, diffusion, and printing of the life of Savonarola, see Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola, *Vita Hieronymi Savonarolae*, ed. Elisabetta Schisto (Florence: L. Olschki, 1999).

introduces the reader to the meaning of the supernatural phenomena and events therein described, and each concluding with a lengthier treatise addressed to possible skeptics or opponents. In the preface to the first book, Gianfrancesco briefly presents the plan of his work. The first two books deal more strictly with the divine properties of Caterina's body. They discuss the signs of the Holy Spirit's presence in her corporeal form, such as the donated ring, the grief of the passion, the familiarity with the saints, the body transported to distant places. The next two books concern the signs of the Holy Spirit's presence in her soul, such as mindreading, the foreknowledge of things to come, and the vision of the blessed, the damned, and the Otherworld. The fifth and sixth books concern the virtues of the will and the intellect; the seventh and eighth concern battles with the devil and the ensuing victories. The last two books discuss the supernatural signs that prove the sanctity of Caterina, such as her revelations and miracles.

The conclusion to the first book is of particular interest. Here, Gianfrancesco clearly expresses the defensive nature of the conclusions attached to each chapter. He addresses those who do not believe in mystical marriage, or the ring entrusted by Christ, and to prove the reality of these things he adduces a similar phenomenon that occurred in the lives of Caterina of Alexandria and Caterina da Siena, canonized saints, and Osanna da Mantova, proclaimed a saint in 1515 by a papal brief but not yet officially beatified.³⁵ With regards to the topos of the exchange of hearts and the possibility of living for days without a heart, Gianfrancesco cites the authority of Aristotle but in the end claims that there are no limits to divine love.³⁶ Of equal interest is the preface to the second book, devoted to the familiarity of Caterina with the angels and the holy souls of heaven, which at once takes on a defensive and polemical tone, addressing the detractors who do not believe in the presence of supernatural entities or in spiritual migration. On that subject, Gianfrancesco warns the unbelievers that even the Pythagoreans and the Platonists they praise so much used to acclaim Socrates, who was familiar with a devil, and that even Aristotle believed in the sibylline oracles. Concerning the examples of spiritual migration, even the ancients through their fallacious philosophy—he states—admitted that bodies could be transported by spirits.³⁷ This is a very important element in order to

35. Gianfrancesco Pico, *Compendio*, 1.1, chapter 16, 33–34.

36. Gianfrancesco Pico, *Compendio*, 1.1, chapter 16, 35.

37. Gianfrancesco Pico, *Compendio*, 1.2, preface, 37–39.

understand the thin line between popular sanctity and the witch hunt. It is in his *Compendio*, in fact, that Gianfrancesco makes a comparison between sanctity and witchcraft, based on the possibility of bodies being elevated and transported through the air as much by angelic as by demonic power, and he coins the effective expression *la Masca di Dio*, that is, the “witch of God,” in reference to Caterina:

It is certain that Caterina was given powers to do wondrous things. She was able to be carried by a flock of angels over great distances to free her friends from grave and imminent perils. This miracle was so frequent, and the fame of it so widespread over the nearby regions, that some named her “Masca de Dio.” “Masche” is the term that those who abide in that region close to the Alps use to call witches. [However] they used that name to signify that Caterina was carried by nothing but good angels just like the witches are transported by evil demons.³⁸

Gianfrancesco had already dealt extensively with witchcraft, sharing—or rather, authoritatively confirming—the belief in the flight of witches that had taken hold in the fifteenth century after a long period of denial by church authorities. In his *Compendio*, he had explicitly cited his treatise, *Strix*, affirming that, just as in antiquity philosophers like Iamblichus, Pythagoras, and Empedocles had “their bodies carried through the air” by demons, so in his own time, “witches were transported to the games of Diana or Herodias.”³⁹

38. Gianfrancesco Pico, *Compendio*, l.2, chapter 11, 63: “Tanta certamente facultà de far cose mirabili fu concessa a Caterina che per liberare soi amici da gravissimi casi imminenti etiam era portata, per ministerio d’angeli, per longinqui tratti della terra. Tanto le fu frequente cotal dono, tanta fu chiara la fama di questa cosa per le regioni vicine, che d’alcuno era nominata la ‘masca de Dio’ (dimandano masche le strige quelli che abitano quella regione vicina a l’Alpi). Volevano eglino per quel nome significare non altramente esser portata per li boni angeli Caterina che per e’ mali demoni le strige.”

39. Gianfrancesco Pico, *Compendio*, l.2, preface, 38. The game of Diana here mentioned is a recurring topos of witchcraft theory already found in the well-known *Canon episcopi* (tenth century CE). For a modern edition of the canon, see Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1972), appendix, 291–93. The games are a Christian rendering of the medieval folkloristic tradition of the Mesnie Hellequin. See Michel Lauwers, “Ghosts,” in *Encyclopedia of the Middle Ages* (James Clarke & Co., 2002), oxfordreference.com.proxy3.library.mcgill.ca/view/10.1093/acref/9780227679319.001.0001/acref-9780227679319-e-1164: “In the late Middle Ages, churchmen often diabolized the collective apparitions of the dead, the troops of ghosts, known since the 12th c. as

If this was the case, states Gianfrancesco, there was no reason to deny that Caterina and other mystics were carried to different places by a flock of angelic beings. The book goes on to recall how Caterina had, on various occasions, communicated with angels; how she had been able to converse with saints and with Christ himself; and how she had been able to travel “with her own body over a distance of a hundred and sixty miles” to dissuade a powerful lord or *condottiero* from fomenting the wars that were then raging in Italy.⁴⁰

The third book, devoted to Caterina’s ability to know the secrets of someone’s heart and to foresee and predict the future, has a rather short preface that refers to the *De Rerum Praenotione*—a work written by Gianfrancesco in the early sixteenth century and printed in Strasburg in 1506⁴¹—and to problems regarding the distinction between true and false revelations. In this treatise,⁴² Gianfrancesco explores the topic of *discretio spiritum*, a matter often analyzed in relation to mystical theology, starting from the debate on prophecy strictly connected to Savonarola’s preaching. In this text, his express purpose is to rigorously distinguish true Christian biblical prophecy, or *praenotio divina*, and, above all, to condemn *praenotio superstitiosa*, a form of excessive trust in the power of human reason, which is the earthly action of the Devil. This form of foreknowledge is usually at the origin of all the superstitious heresies, such as astrology, magic, and the occult arts.

Savonarola had devoted a book to the analysis of prophetic revelation, and frequently returned to the topic in his preaching.⁴³ He agreed with Thomas Aquinas that prophecy was a skill of supra-rational knowledge, revealed to the prophets gratuitously and manifested to other men by verification of the facts

‘mesnie Hellequin’; they also established complex procedures for questioning the dead who appeared individually, involving at once exorcism, disputation and inquisition, and aiming to win them over, and domesticate them. Several accounts (Gervase of Tilbury in the 13th c., John Gobi in the 14th) recount long dialogues between the ghost and the churchmen present at its appearance. It was a matter of ‘making the dead talk’ the better to control them. The information provided by the ghosts thus interrogated sometimes formed veritable treatises, in which doctrinal questions were touched on.”

40. Gianfrancesco Pico, *Compendio*, I.2, chapter 11, 64.

41. Gianfrancesco Pico, *Compendio*, I.3, preface, 69.

42. Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola, *Ioannis Francisci Pici Mirandulae ... De rerum praenotione libri nouem. Pro veritate religionis, contra superstitiosas vanitates editi* (Argentorati: Ioannes Knoblochus imprimebat, 1507).

43. Girolamo Savonarola, *Compendio di revelationi* (Florence: Francesco Buonaccorsi, 1495).

by empirical confirmation.⁴⁴ There were some differences. Facts, for Aquinas, were represented by miracles; for Savonarola, by good works and behaviour. Further, for Aquinas, the prophets—as creatural men—were an imperfect instrument; as such, they could not fully understand the divine message, and therefore could not transmit it correctly.⁴⁵ Savonarola agreed with Aquinas in denouncing the error of crediting the prophetic spirit to human reason, or to occult or secret revelations to be sought in knowledge separate from the holy text; yet they differed on the problem of certifying prophecy. For Savonarola, the “*lumen propheticum*” made those who possessed it more certain than those who based their beliefs on rational principles that operated on matter for which science needed an empirical verification.⁴⁶ Reason, enlightened by the divine supernatural light, had in itself the certainty of its truthfulness: God, who is *lux*—a luminous source, from which comes the *lumen*, or prophetic ray—guarantees, beyond any doubt, the *certificatio* of prophecy. This was why belief in prophecy depended not on external certification or miracles but on conversion to God, which could only be granted through an internal, spiritual process. Gianfrancesco diverged from Savonarola on this last point. While agreeing that prophetic inspiration involved the complete devaluation of any rational effort to get at the truth, Gianfrancesco believed that the *certificatio* of the prophetic mission must be confirmed by manifest miracles—a belief we can trace through the role he progressively ascribes to miracles in the phases of drafting the *Vita Savonarolae*.⁴⁷

Even in the *Compendio delle cose mirabili di Caterina da Racconigi*, the ontological reality of miracles played an important role. Gianfrancesco devoted an entire chapter to the phenomenon, but the topic of the *lumen propheticum* acquired a new physiognomy and a completely original development compared to what we find in his previous treatises; in Caterina’s direct observation and in her accompanying dialogue, the philosopher’s theoretical analysis is verified through practice.⁴⁸ Through the experience and declarations of mysticism,

44. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIa–IIa, q. 171, a. 1 res.

45. Aquinas, IIa–IIa, q. 173, a. 4 res.

46. See Gian Carlo Garfagnini, *Il messaggio profetico di Savonarola e la sua recezione: Domenico Benivieni e Gianfrancesco Pico*, in *Studi savonaroliani: verso il 5. Centenario*, ed. Gian Carlo Garfagnini (Tavarnuzze, Impruneta: SISMEL Galluzzo editions, 1996), 197–211, 203–04.

47. Garfagnini, 207–08.

48. Gianfrancesco Pico, *Compendio*, general preface, 4.

several chapters of the third book explore the nature of divine light, which makes possible the discernment of spirits. It is in the first chapter of this book that Gianfrancesco shows his “empirical” interest in Caterina. Having been acquainted with her reputation as a prophetess from their eight-year correspondence, in 1526 he arranged to meet with her in the castle of Roddi in Piedmont, a small estate purchased by his wife Giovanna Carafa (d. 1537). During their talk, he asked her several questions about her supernatural powers, especially with regards to her prophetic abilities:

But above all I was eager to know the nature of the light by which she was famed to know the secrets of human desires and the future events that she foretold. Therefore, I sought to learn about the discernment by which she distinguished truth from falsehood, what we are wont to call discretion of spirits, and I asked her if she had ever had occasion to be deceived by them.⁴⁹

Gianfrancesco, then, questioned Caterina on the divine light, how it manifested itself, and how it might be verified. She simply asserted that she was never deceived when she was infused with the light. Gianfrancesco deemed her response very prudent. He recalled the different ways in which prophets and visionaries could be deceived and concluded that “the light is needed for achieving a real understanding of the truth.”⁵⁰ Thus, the light of which Savonarola also spoke was self-verified. Gianfrancesco investigated, more subtly, the conditions necessary for achieving the certainty of not being deceived. Caterina’s answer added precious details to Savonarola’s statements:

I investigated in greater detail concerning this light, and she told me in response: one appeared to my eyes like a certain brightness similar to that of a flame (which she refused to confirm if it was her guardian seraphim,

49. Gianfrancesco Pico, *Compendio*, l.3, chapter 1, 71: “[...] ma soprattutto ero desideroso di sapere la conditione del lume col quale era fama che conosceva li secreti delli cori umani e le cose future, e prediceuale. Imperò cercai d’avere notitia del discernicolo per el quale iudicasse tra el vero et el falso, quale sòle dimandarsi apresso a’ nostri la discretione de spiriti; e curai sapere da lei se mai vi era intervenuto di essere ingannata.”

50. Gianfrancesco Pico, *Compendio*, 71: “Èvi adonche bisogno il lume, per el quale exquisitamente se comprende la verità.”

as I interpreted it); she said the other was whiter and brighter, and was able to uplift her soul so that she felt her body to be a mere husk. Then she spoke of a powerful third light, by whose aid it was impossible to be deceived, and at times these last two lights vied with each other, and especially vied in an apparition like the one she narrated; and she said that this last was a gift of the Holy Spirit, recognizable by its tongues of fire, about which we spoke in the first book.⁵¹

Six years after this first interview, Gianfrancesco invited Caterina to his home in Roddi and questioned her once again on the “clarity of that light,” and on her certainty that she had not been deceived. She responded by beating her fist on the table four times and stating she could not doubt that there were four beats. She gave other examples, still. She spoke of the colours of their garments, adding, though, that at other times her visions did not afford such a clear light, and therefore she could not fully understand its meaning. Nevertheless, she confirmed that she saw “truly occult things, when it is granted to me by God, and no falsehood can be imputed to this light.”⁵² Gianfrancesco, satisfied with her answer, concludes his paragraph by stating that—according to a classical definition of the treatises on the discretion of the spirit—no proof can be better than the truth of things and the good and virtuous life of the visionary herself.⁵³

These would not be the only conversations from Gianfrancesco’s treatises in which Caterina reflected on the nature of the light. In another instance, he informed her that a theologian, speaking of the nature of the light, had told him he was uncertain as to whether that “were the light of augmented faith, or a different, new light entirely.”⁵⁴ Caterina then replied that it was not the

51. Gianfrancesco Pico, *Compendio*, 71: “Imperò alor di questo lume più sotilmente investigai. Dissesemi più modi: l’uno d’un certo fulgore in similitudine d’una fiamma che avanti li occhi vi appareva (interpretando io che fusse el seraphino custode, non volse confirmarlo); l’altro dissesemi esser più chiaro e più illustre, per meglio del quale fusseli talmente elevata l’anima che reputava el corpo come una spoglia. Doppoi dissesemi un tertio lume prestantissimo, con l’agiuto del quale era impossibile ingannarsi, e concorrere qualche volta questi dui ultimamente ditti lumi, e particolarmente esser concorsi in una appartitione quale mi avea narrata; e questo ultimo dissesemi esser il dono del Spirito santo datoli per le lingue di foco, del quale avemo parlato nel primo libro.”

52. Gianfrancesco Pico, *Compendio*, 72: “così veddo io sinceramente cose occulte con la mente, quando mi è da Dio concesso, et a questo lume non pò essere admista falsità.”

53. Gianfrancesco Pico, *Compendio*, 73.

54. Gianfrancesco Pico, *Compendio*, 73: “il lume della fede augmentato, oppure un altro lume novo.”

light of faith: “but new light, that went arm in arm with the light of faith, each aiding the other, as the new one was of great intensity and vigor, and the other of greater breadth, and that both together achieved a magnificent splendor in the intellect.”⁵⁵ Gianfrancesco ends his discourse, stating: “This illiterate virgin explained all these things with such subtlety that even a theologian expert in literature would have remained impressed.”⁵⁶

In addition to granting Gianfrancesco a deeper knowledge of the nature and manifestations of this alleged prophetic light, the periods of time spent by Caterina at Roddi and Mirandola enabled the philosopher to learn of the attributes of her visions and revelations from the very voice of the “blessed one.” Book 4 of his *Compendio* is devoted to examining the “raptures and excesses of mind, namely ecstasies, [which granted] the knowledge of the afterlife, namely the glory of the blessed, the torments of the damned and punishments of purgatory.”⁵⁷ In the overall economy of his treatise, this book proposes, like the previous one, to make known the “things” relevant to Caterina’s soul and, in particular, aims to show the difference between the precognitions deduced by predictions, oracles, and “worshippers of false gods” inspired by the devil, and the revelations of this woman inspired by God. The former deal only with earthly events, while the latter strive upwards to know of the afterlife and the destiny of men. As for the attributes of her raptures, whether in spirit or in body, Gianfrancesco does not deviate from the common classification of the treatises on *discretio spirituum*.⁵⁸ The main purpose of this book seems to be that of showing and reiterating a clear distinction between the makeshift precognitions of astrologers, magicians, or sibyls and the universal, verifiable knowledge inspired by the divine light.

55. Gianfrancesco Pico, *Compendio*, 73: “[...] ma un lume novo, al quale concorrevano il lume della fede, et se agiutavano l’un l’altro, sì che il novo era di maggiore intensione e vigore, l’altro di extensione maggiore, e che di tutti doi se faceva un grandissimo splendore nell’intelletto.”

56. Gianfrancesco Pico, *Compendio*, 73: “Cosa certo con tanta sotilità explicata da una vergine illitterata che non è teologo exercitato in lettere che l’avesse udita senza gran meraviglia.”

57. Gianfrancesco Pico, *Compendio*, I.4, preface, 91: “La summa del quarto libro son rapti et excessi di mente, overo extase, a cognoscere le cose de l’altra vita, cioe gloria de’ beati, tormenti de’ damnati e pene del purgatorio.”

58. See Wendy Love Anderson, *The Discernment of Spirits: Assessing Visions and Visionaries in the Late Middle Ages* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011).

The fifth and sixth books of the *Compendio*, whose aim is to illustrate the virtues of Caterina's will and intellect, are in large part an appendix to the previous chapter. They serve to refute the malevolent objections to her supernatural knowledge, proving that they proceed from God and not from the devil. These interviews with Caterina also enabled Gianfrancesco to witness, first-hand, the nature of her struggles with the devil. These were no mere spiritual battles, but actual physical combats which he was able to verify from the clamour that emanated from Caterina's chamber and the bruises the devil left on her body.⁵⁹ The seventh and eighth books of the *Compendio* are substantially devoted to illustrating Caterina's continual disputes, contentions, and wars with the evil demons and her victories over them.⁶⁰

The last two books of the treatise gather all the most accredited testimonies to confirm the sanctity of Caterina: the proofs of priests, men, and women who have met her, or the visions and revelations of churchmen famed for their holiness.⁶¹ Lastly, Gianfrancesco enumerates the miracles performed through her by God, and other signs that show her power over men and the natural elements of earth, water, air, and fire.⁶² By extending the miraculous intervention fulfilled by Caterina to the entire cosmos, Gianfrancesco goes beyond the role of miracles as proof of her holiness, as in *Vita Savonarolae*, and instead exalts the power of God that manifests itself not only in learned men, but also in the humblest and least learned.

The *Compendio delle cose mirabili di Caterina da Racconigi* thus reveals itself as a skilfully-constructed, apologetic treatise, whose purpose is not only to prove the sanctity of one woman but also, and most importantly, to prove the truth of Christianity through a Savonarolan paradigm. Both the general introduction and the conclusion explicitly state that, at the origin of the world, people were immersed in superstition until "the cult of a true God was discovered and shone."⁶³ However, neither the Greek philosophers nor the Jews penetrated the secrets of God's goodness until they encountered the

59. Gianfrancesco Pico, *Compendio*, l.6, chapter 2, 136, and chapter 10, 152.

60. Gianfrancesco Pico, *Compendio*, l.8, chapter 2, 155.

61. Gianfrancesco Pico, *Compendio*, l.9, 173–84.

62. Gianfrancesco Pico, *Compendio*, 10, 185–204.

63. Gianfrancesco Pico, *Compendio*, general introduction, 3: "[...] si scoperse et risplendette il culto d'uno vero Dio."

Christian religion. Through it, God delighted in “manifesting to the world a more marvelous and more secret order,”⁶⁴ and, with the incarnation and death of his Son, he prepared the lives of believers, drawing the hearts of men unto himself.⁶⁵ After this event, a reversal of perspective actually took place. The wisdom of God was manifested to the illiterate and humble: “Since philosophers and emperors yielded to ignorant and naked fishermen, it was clear that the wisdom of God was excellently manifested.”⁶⁶ Caterina championed the theory of the humble prophet to whom God had manifested himself and elected as witnesses of his power and goodness. Yet, the figure of Caterina adds another layer to the topos of apostolic humility: her gender. In the conclusion of the *Compendio*, Gianfrancesco reiterates: “Suffice it to be shown that God in our day not only governs the world with his providence but even manifests it most generously for the weak and ignorant sex.”⁶⁷

This article sought to examine the hagiographical tradition connected to the figure of Caterina da Racconigi in order to show how prophecy, spiritual connections with the afterlife, and miracles persist in the hagiographic legends of the “living saints,” along with the parallel and wider problem of the discernment of spirits. On this subject, it is necessary to underline the importance of Gianfrancesco Pico’s *Compendio*, not only in hagiographic terms—otherwise exemplified by Dolce’s biography of Caterina—but also as the product of a fundamental moment in the debate on holiness and prophecy in Savonarola’s circles: an effort to demonstrate the presence of the divine in practical, quasi-empirical terms. It is also important to underline the theoretical significance of the *Compendio* in relation to Gianfrancesco’s interest in the problem of *discretio spirituum* and witchcraft, which he had already debated in his book *Strix*, and more generally to his defense and affirmation of miracles and other divine powers as a manifestation of the Christian God.

64. Gianfrancesco Pico, *Compendio*, 3: “Ma è piaciuto a l’omnipotente Dio manifestare al mondo un più mirabile ordine e più secreto.”

65. Gianfrancesco Pico, *Compendio*, 4.

66. Gianfrancesco Pico, *Compendio*, 4: “Così, poi che e philosophi e imperatori cessaro a pescatori ignoranti e nudi, avvenne che la sapientia de Dio eccellentemente si manifestò.”

67. Gianfrancesco Pico, *Compendio*, l.10, chapter 23, 203: “Basti essere manifestato che Dio a questi nostri tempi non solamente governa il mondo con la sua providentia, ma etiam quella manifesta copiosissimamente per il sexo fragile et imbecille.”

Gianfrancesco's *Compendio* widely circulated in its original Latin form, as evidenced by the large number of surviving manuscripts plausibly known and disseminated within Dominican circles or among literati who knew Latin. The first vernacular translation, meant for the uneducated and the devout, was completed in 1544, testifying to the success that the Latin manuscript maintained in certain fringes of readership even after the death of the author in 1533. There is no doubt, however, that the hagiographic aspect of the text soon took precedence over the "empirical" one. Caterina's deeds were transmitted to a wider public in 1577 by Serafino Razzi (1531–1613), who included a large excerpt from Gianfrancesco's work in his treatise on Dominican saints and *beati*.⁶⁸ Despite his radical pruning of the mystical phenomena, visions, and prophecies that were so important to Gianfrancesco's idea of a tangible, measurable, Christian truth, Razzi did not omit the image of Savonarola in heaven among the blessed, adorned with three crowns, just as Caterina recounts. Razzi thus openly revealed the *Compendio*'s Savonarolan inspiration and remained quite faithful to the original text in certain aspects. However, he made sure to crop all of Gianfrancesco's efforts to provide material proof of Caterina's holiness—an act that shows both appreciation for the Savonarolan ideal and an utter rejection of Gianfrancesco's search for earthly traces of the divine will.

Despite Razzi's purging, the fascination for Gianfrancesco Pico's idea of Caterina as a "masca de Dio" (God's witch) survived. The seventeenth-century edition of the *Compendio*, in fact, includes an engraving of Caterina being transported to Bethlehem by a flock of angels to worship the child Jesus. Subsequent images portray the episode of the exchange between Christ and Caterina, where her heart is miraculously removed from her chest and renewed by Christ. This is the "wondrous thing" that early modern Italian painters and engravers have most frequently represented under the instruction of her devotees: a series of visions that owes its persistence to Gianfrancesco's obsession for the ontological reality of Christian saintliness.

68. Serafino Razzi, *Vite de i santi e beati, così huomini, come donne del sacro ordine de' Frati Predicatori* (Florence: Bartolomeo Sermartelli, 1577).