

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Speaking with Authority: Reading Catherine of Siena in the Times of Vittoria Colonna

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Volume 44, Number 4, Fall 2021

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1089346ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i4.38595>

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Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Stella, C. (2021). Speaking with Authority: Reading Catherine of Siena in the Times of Vittoria Colonna. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 44(4), 9–50. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i4.38595>

Article abstract

This article proposes a way of reading Vittoria Colonna's lyric persona in the light of Catherine of Siena's religious writings and philosophy of the self. In part 1, I begin by tracing the mystic profile that the participants of Colonna's reformed circles ascribed to the saint. Those descriptions are then incorporated into a comparison of the schisms that shaped Christianity in Catherine's times, namely the Avignon Papacy, and those of the Lutheran Reformation. In part 2, Colonna's sacred charisma(s) is related to Catherine's penitential and political model, thus identifying her Vita and epistles as a very possible literary source that Colonna could have used in her religious output and self-identification. In part 3, I analyze Colonna's exegesis of the penitent Magdalene in the light of Catherine's political reading of the same character. To conclude, I discuss the ways in which we can integrate the Trecento tradition into Colonna's conception of grace and prophetic message of renovatio.

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Cet article propose une nouvelle manière de lire la persona lyrique de Vittoria Colonna, à la lumière des écrits religieux de Catherine de Sienne et de sa conception philosophique du soi. La première partie porte sur le portrait mystique que les cercles réformés de Colonna ont attribué à la sainte. Ces descriptions sont ensuite intégrées à une comparaison entre deux schismes : celui qui a façonné la chrétienté à l'époque de Catherine, à savoir la papauté d'Avignon, et celui qui est lié à la Réforme luthérienne. Dans la deuxième partie, les qualités sacrées de Colonna sont mises en relation avec le modèle pénitentiel et politique de Catherine, démontrant que Colonna s'est probablement appuyée sur la Vita et les épîtres de Catherine dans sa production religieuse et sa caractérisation de soi. Dans la troisième partie, j'analyse l'exégèse que Colonna fait de la Madeleine pénitente à la lumière de la lecture politique que Catherine fait de cette même figure. L'article se termine par une réflexion sur la façon dont nous pouvons intégrer la tradition du Trecento dans la conception de la grâce de Colonna et le message prophétique de la renovatio que propose l'autrice.

Introduction

This article proposes reading Vittoria Colonna's lyric persona and public ministry in the light of the figure of Catherine of Siena, the greatest Italian woman reformer of the fourteenth century, who joined the call of many other Catholics, including Birgitta of Sweden, for the papacy to return to Rome after nearly seventy years of popes living at Avignon.¹ Even though Colonna's

1. This article thus builds on those recent studies, in fields that are mainly political, devotional, and exegetical, of the impact of the legacy of saintly women on later women writers. Birgitta of Sweden's

library has not come down to us, there still exists the list of books that her aunt Costanza kept in her castle in Ischia where Colonna was educated and spent at least thirty years of her life.² The inventory was put together by an anonymous author at the request of Alfonso d'Avalos of Aquino, Costanza's heir, in 1541. Although the list of 131 books is evidently incomplete (it does not include the works of some of the D'Avalos family's most-read authors, such as their beloved Dante, Petrarch, and Sannazaro) it still reflects the humanistic emphasis that characterized the background of the whole family. The family's interest in the moral epistle genre in Latin and Greek as well as in the vernacular stands out in an examination of the list. Along with Cicero's and Seneca's *Epistole* and those of Saint Jerome and the humanist Francesco Barbaro, there are also those of Catherine of Siena. The "Epistole di S. Caterina" is described as a printed volume bound in red leather, quite likely either the Manuzio edition or the first incunable of thirty-two letters printed in Bologna in 1492 by Fontanesi.³ Although Vittoria Colonna's spirituality was essentially Franciscan and evangelical due to the impact that the Capuchin friar Bernardino Ochino had on her spiritual development, Catherine of Siena's legacy very likely came to her through her early education in her aunt's circle and also gained renewed importance during the time she spent in reformed Dominican convents.

By viewing Catherine of Siena as both author and reformer and highlighting her influence on the Marchesa Vittoria Colonna—the most important Italian woman writer of the sixteenth century, who also took a leading role in the spread of Italian evangelism—this article seeks to contribute to the bigger question of how women writers in the early modern period could have been influenced by the legacy of female mystics and reformers from the past. The violent reality of early sixteenth-century Italy formed, albeit in a different

influence on later women writers is the topic of the international research project led by Unn Falkeid, *The Legacy of Birgitta of Sweden: Women, Politics and Reform in Renaissance Italy* (funded by The Research Council of Norway, 2018–21), whose database provides qualitative and quantitative information exploring the impact and spread of Birgitta's thought in the Italian peninsula from the fifteenth until the late sixteenth century. On Catherine of Siena, see, for example, the revisionist works by Jane Tylus, *Reclaiming Catherine of Siena* and "Mystical Literacy." In Falkeid's study of the political discourses that accompanied the Avignon Papacy, Birgitta and Catherine are studied alongside Dante, Petrarch, Marsilius of Padova, and William of Ockham: Falkeid, *The Avignon Papacy Contested*. On the increasing number of women writers in the sixteenth century, see Cox, *Women's Writing in Italy*, xiii.

2. De Vivo, 297–302.

3. "L'Epistole di S. Caterina in bambace stampato coperto di cuoio rosso," in De Vivo, 300.

way, a backdrop as unstable as the Avignon period with its monetization of God's grace and centralization of wealth that the ministers of the church were accused of from 1309 to 1377. In both cases, those accusations of corruption and immorality had the potential to crack open the divisions in the church, leading to the rise of a reforming tendency in both centuries. Those historical moments revolved around powerful women reformers who, although they moved in different circles, pursued their "own" call for reform and contested the secularization of ecclesiastical power and its negligence of its pastoral role.⁴

The first decades of the Cinquecento, including the episode of the Sack of Rome in 1527, paved the way for a revival of the prophetic tradition in Italy and, in particular, the highly political model of prophecy incarnated by the two medieval saints Birgitta of Sweden and Catherine of Siena.⁵ The destruction of Rome, and the violence perpetrated against its Christian past, was felt to be the latest in a series of disastrous episodes that fostered the revival of apocalyptic sentiments from the elite to the lower classes.⁶ On the one hand, those readings reflected political conflicts between supporters of the imperial and the papal sides in the debate over the nature of the pope's sacred authority and the danger of his increased temporal power, which was thought to be the cause of God's anger.⁷ On the other, as Ottavia Niccoli points out, the prophetic climate of the beginning of the sixteenth century filled the mouths of preachers and the pages of popular leaflets with expectations of an angelic pope and a radical purification of the Bride of Christ. A new wave of reformers like the Dominican prophetess Domenica Narducci in Florence and the angelic sister and visionary Paola Antonia Negri in Milan structured their voices according to the prophetic model of Birgitta of Sweden and Catherine of Siena. In addition, like their predecessors, they acted as leaders of a new spiritualized

4. On the failure of papal leadership and the intellectual connection between the Great Western Schism and the Protestant Reformation, see Stinger, 323; the recent essay by Bellito, "The Reform Context of the Great Western Schism"; and Falkeid, *The Avignon Papacy Contested*, 175–76.

5. Zarri, "'Vera' santità, 'simulate' santità," 12; see also Zarri, *Virgo digna coelo*, ch. 1.

6. Niccoli, *Prophecy and People*, 175. See also Gouwens, 168–74.

7. The most famous quarrel was that which occurred between the humanist Alfonso de Valdés and the pope's legate in Spain—and Colonna's friend—Baldassarre Castiglione: whereas the first justified the Sack as a divine and necessary punishment desired by God, the second could not accept this and regarded it as an outrage; see Cook, 282–83. For the significance of prophetic signs in the popular preaching of early sixteenth-century Rome, see especially Niccoli, "High and Low Prophetic Culture in Rome."

elite of secular women, many of them widowed during the preceding wars, who turned to their teaching for guidance and trustworthy knowledge.⁸

As the recent literature has highlighted, far from being weak “vessels of God,” the two most important women reformers of the Trecento, Birgitta and Catherine, had a clear concept of authorship and, in Thomas Luongo’s words, an “engagement in writing” to a degree that was “unprecedented” among female religious figures in Europe at that time.⁹ Birgitta’s *Revelations* in particular, and Catherine’s letters and *Dialogue*, relied on an intense relationship with their readership and dissemination of their thought among their respective textual communities composed of scribes, readers, clerics, nuns, and secular leaders. Birgitta and Catherine were among the most prolific authors of the Trecento, still read and published in the centuries that followed. Their extensive body of written work was widely disseminated both in their original languages and in translations. Those processes have been considered a central moment in the development of their respective national languages from historical and literary points of view.¹⁰

As Luongo demonstrated, Catherine was already perceived as a reformer and an authoritative writer, featuring in Quattrocento miscellanies, but Aldo Manuzio’s edition of her letters further casts her as the mother of the vernacular language, and her epistolary was shortly followed by the printed editions, free of commentary, of Petrarch’s *Cose volgari* in 1501 and Dante’s *Le terze rime* in 1502.¹¹ Notably, Catherine’s reputation reached a peak right at the start

8. Zarri, “Living Saints”; Valerio, “Domenica da Paradiso e la mistica femminile dopo Savonarola”; Herzig, 40.

9. The latest book on Catherine’s and Birgitta’s legacies as authors and political thinkers at the time of the Avignon papacy is Oen and Falkeid, *Sanctity and Female Authorship*. On Catherine’s awareness of authorship, see Tylus, *Reclaiming Catherine of Siena*, 43–44; and Luongo, “Sainthood Authorship in the Italian Renaissance,” along with Luongo’s chapter “Birgitta and Catherine and Their Textual Communities,” in Oen and Falkeid, *Sanctity and Female Authorship*, 29. Studies devoted to the two saints are too numerous to be listed here, and the reader is directed to the bibliographies of their respective Brill Companions: Oen, *A Companion to Birgitta of Sweden*, and Muessig, Ferzoco, and Kienzle, *A Companion to Catherine of Siena*. All quotations from the letters of Catherine of Siena in Italian are from Misciattelli’s edition. For the English translation I used the annotated and translated edition by Noffke.

10. Wallace, 1:xxvii–xlii, xxxiv.

11. Manuzio’s edition is also the first collection of Italian literature in the vernacular to include the first words ever printed in italics on the front page. See specifically Tylus, “Caterina da Siena and the Legacy of Humanism,” 134–35.

of the sixteenth century with Manuzio's famous edition of her epistolary in September 1500, which enjoyed a "greater prestige" than her spiritual treatise, *The Dialogue of Divine Providence*, despite the *Dialogue's* "greater publishing success."¹² Manuzio's edition of Catherine's letters, whose manuscript was based on the research of the Dominican friar Bartolomeo d'Alzano, a follower of Savonarola, was the common thread, or "filo rosso" in Alessio Assonitis's words, that linked different circles associated with the memory of the Dominican friar and apocalyptic prophet Giacomo Savonarola, who modelled his own prophetic voice on that of Catherine.¹³ Those were the so-called "circolo di Murano," which included Manuzio, Pietro Bembo, and Gasparo Contarini—also a key figure in another important circle of Italian evangelism, the Spirituals of Viterbo—and the circles of San Marco in Florence and San Silvestro on the Quirinal hill in Rome.¹⁴ As Manuzio made clear in the dedicatory letter to Cardinal Francesco Todeschini Piccolomini, his initiative voiced the necessity of a moral and literary reform, bearing in mind the severe contemporary crisis in the church.¹⁵ In this preface, the Venetian printer invokes Catherine's help and authorial voice "in order to reform morals." As Luongo notes, he sought in Catherine "an antidote to the current taste for profane writing,"¹⁶ and the printer's wish was that her letters "should spread throughout the world like solemn preachers' for they do not merely exhort to good works but they actually force one to do good works through miraculous means, the mystical force that emerges from them because of their divine origin."¹⁷ Rephrasing Manuzio's introductory words, the letters of Catherine not only exhort the reader to do good works ("eshortano al ben fare"), but also force ("constringono") them to do so through their "modo meraviglioso," which constitutes the mystical and highly contemplative dimension of Catherine's dialogue with God. The divine force of her letters is necessary also, according to Manuzio, for the reformation

12. Librandi, "Style and Translation of the Biblical Citations," 268; see also Zaggia, 147.

13. Assonitis, "Eredità cateriniana." For the history of the church, see Iezzi.

14. Assonitis, "Eredità cateriniana," 515.

15. On the ethical and political value attributed by Manuzio to the edition of Catherine's letters, see Dionisotti, *Gli umanisti e il volgare*, 3–14; Zaggia, 135–53; Tylus, *Reclaiming Catherine of Siena*, 273.

16. Luongo, *Saintly Politics*, 29. On Manuzio's hidden allusion in his preface to Savonarola as the last of the true prophets, see Frasso, 432.

17. Translation by Tylus, "Caterina da Siena and the Legacy of Humanism," 117. See also Zarri, "Living Saints," 282n95.

of the church, because they address, in very direct terms, the corruption of its ministers and remind them of their duty and of the necessity of a new crusade.¹⁸ Those are the aspects that Manuzio continued to highlight from the manuscript tradition, printing her letters to Pope Gregory XI and Urban VI, followed by those directed to various ecclesiastics, right at the beginning of her epistolary and so emphasizing the prestige and standing of Catherine's correspondents. The figure of Catherine of Siena—a saint but primarily a reformer and a crusader—and the diffusion of her thought in the sixteenth century open up many questions as to the ways in which she might have been received and read during the spread of evangelical movements in Europe. Her cult was in fact brought back through the mediation of the Florentine reformer Giacomo Savonarola;¹⁹ later on, it was reactivated in Rome by the vicar Mariano Fetti and the Dominican friar Lancelotto de' Politti,²⁰ known as Friar Ambrogio Catarino Politi, whose adopted name pays homage to Catherine and to the Blessed Ambrose Sansedoni.²¹ Politi, an anti-Lutheran and controversialist²² and one of Colonna's spiritual teachers in Rome, was key to the dissemination of Catherine's biography, having translated Raymond of Capua's *Legenda maior* into Italian, and of her reputation as a prophetess of the necessity of a moral reformation in the Christian world.

Catherine emerges in the sixteenth century therefore as a woman writer and reformer who speaks to the pope and secular leaders but who also invites her readers, among whom are ordinary people from her family, religious community, and beyond, to purify and renew themselves in Christ's sacred blood and to go out to manifest their love for God fearlessly ("senza timore"), following the example of the martyrs and, in particular, of Mary Magdalene, her spiritual mother and guide.²³ Catherine's thought could resonate with the type of religiosity promoted by Italian evangelists, undogmatic and based on a privileged interior experience of God, of Neoplatonic and Augustinian

18. For Catherine's political program, see Luongo, *Saintly Politics*, 81; Falkeid, *The Avignon Papacy Contested*, 154.

19. On Savonarola's devotion to Catherine, see Herzig, 25, 40, 173.

20. See specifically Assonitis, "Eredità cateriniana."

21. On Politi's Catherinian devotion see Muessig, Ferzoco, and Kienzle, 11.

22. See specifically Preston.

23. On Catherine's civic humanism and the necessity of manifest charity in contrast to the ordinary position of Dominicans, see Tylus, "Caterina da Siena and the Legacy of Humanism," 123–24.

origin, and with the renewed force of the penitential dimension.²⁴ In particular, Catherine's focus on inner solitude and her effort to promote a new Christian model of life based on the renewal of the individual were key aspects common to the interior piety and ecclesiastical reforms promoted at the time of Avignon, and at the time of Luther. Unlike the reform movements in central and northern European countries, Italian evangelism, and within it specifically the Viterbo circle, was never schismatic, believing that it was possible to carry out a reform of the Catholic church from within, without a break with Rome, up until the first moves by the Inquisition in 1542.²⁵

From this introduction we see that reviving the figure and thought of Catherine of Siena and comparing it to that of Colonna can be a fruitful way to further explore the latter's profile within a different tradition and dialogue, rooted in Italian medieval thought, when women occupied an unprecedented position in voicing calls for the reformation of Christianity, and linked their mystic and prophetic voice to the example of the Magdalene.²⁶ On the one hand, Catherine of Siena should be reconsidered as a fundamental text in Colonna's aristocratic education, given the special place that Catherine held in humanistic culture. On the other, even though there are no specific studies on how Catherine was viewed in evangelical circles of the sixteenth century, Catherine's thought was likely to have been read in a new light during the years before Trent, as happened with the writings of church fathers like Augustine.²⁷ As a religious guide, Catherine of Siena was nonetheless central in the formation of the identities of contemporary female prophets of Colonna's time, like the blessed Lucia Longo, Domenica Narducci da Paradiso, and Paola Antonia Negri. Those fascinating figures were close to Colonna or at least belonged to her circle of acquaintances, and each of them looked to legitimize their position in their communities relying on the legacy of Catherine and Birgitta. It is therefore the aim of this article to take into account the legacy of Catherine in Colonna's effort to craft her own voice as a guide within Italian evangelism, particularly during the last years of her life, in Rome.

24. The point is also suggested in Brundin, "Vittoria Colonna and the Virgin Mary," 77.

25. On the anti-schismatic positions of the Viterbo's group see Jung, 523; Firpo, 94–95; and Caponetto, 311–12.

26. On the role of the Magdalene in the prophetic tradition, see Valerio, "L'altra rivelazione," 161; and Valerio, "Il ruolo pubblico delle mistiche italiane."

27. For a reading of Augustine during the Renaissance, see Saak Leland, 475–77; and Visser, 95–110.

The sacred charisma(s) of Vittoria

In 1540, papal agent Pier Paolo Vergerio of Capo d'Istria, a leading figure of the Spirituals, recounted in a letter to Vittoria Colonna his first meeting with Marguerite d'Angoulême and their four-hour conversation on spiritual matters, including the present situation of the church and the nature of God's grace.²⁸ After promising Colonna a summary of their encounter, he lauds Christ for having gifted humankind such elect souls on whom the reform of the church is going to depend. Those elect women (among whom are Colonna, Marguerite d'Angoulême, and Leonora Gonzaga) are going to show—he writes—the way the Son will come again to both “purge” and “enlighten the holy vineyard” of the church.²⁹ God will awaken those fervent spirits, “in one sex and the other, in this and that city and province” and He will send forth His word (“*Emittet Verbym suum*,” from Ps. 147:7) to speak of God and to soften the hearts and the minds that are silenced and currently “shut up.” As illustrated by Stephen Bowd and Constance Furey, in those “communities in Christ,” the mere presence of these intellectually inspired women is a sign of the “breadth and depth” of God and the cleansing power of the Holy Spirit which entrusted to them the preservation and revelation of God's “holy vineyard.”³⁰ As Furey notes, the “feminized spirituality” that animated the circle is viewed by its members as a sign of God's presence, and the presence of learned ladies was perceived and praised as the sign of a culture of great potential, ready for renewal.³¹

Colonna therefore came to be seen not only as a muse in the traditional sense, but also as a spiritual guide who replaces silence with an inspired voice, moved by the “divine fire” of an inflamed intellect working for the glory of God and for the benefit of her readers. The nature of artistic inspiration and the relationship between true poetry and religion was a particularly cherished topic in various humanistic forums in which Colonna received her lyric and spiritual education: first in the *cenacolo* on the island of Ischia, where Colonna received her first insights into the art of lyric poetry, and thereafter in the

28. Ferrero and Müller's edition (hereafter referred to as *Carteggio*), 194–97. On Vergerio's letter to Vittoria Colonna, see Jacobson Schutte, 126–29.

29. “Io per me sono son seculo che questa habbia essere la via, con la quale si verrà tosto a purgare et illustrare la santa vigna et Chiesa del Signore, che era piena di spine e di oscurità”. *Carteggio*, 196.

30. Furey, *Erasmus, Contarini and the Religious Republic of Letters*, 160.

31. Furey, “Intellects Inflamed in Christ,” 21. See also Cox, *Women's Writing in Italy*, 49.

Viterbo circle. The topic was also at the centre of Colonna and Michelangelo's friendship. In the circle of the Spirituals the discussion of the nature of divine inspiration and sacred art (poetry included) was understood as a means of purification of the intellect that could lead, subsequently, to the subjugation of the will in order to mystically reunite with God.³² According to Michelangelo and others among her contemporaries, Colonna's poems were used as a means of contemplation and achieving a living encounter with God. This was made explicit to every reader in the 1546 Valgrisi edition of her poetic corpus.³³ In the preface that opens the first collection in print of Colonna's only spiritual corpus, Colonna's lines stand against, on the one hand, the "dangerous profane poets" ("poeti nocivi, et profani") and, on the other, those who attack poetry from irrational religious zeal ("mossi da zelo di religione"). In contrast to their misleading judgment, the anonymous writer lauds the providence of God, who has shown through Colonna "the foolishness" of those views. She is "a woman [*una femina*] in our day, who treats spiritual things with a poetry so graceful, noble, and divine," being "superior to the others in the quality of the object and subjects as much as the heavenly things are higher than those on earth."³⁴ Her writing is a gift of God granted to humans ("dono di Dio conceduto ai mortali") so that the Lord can finally be lauded in a sublime style, more magnificent than every treatise or philosophical discussion. Here in the preface, the editor—who is presenting for the first time in print an extended corpus of Colonna's solely religious poetry—revives the notion of the poet as a *poeta theologus* and places the "leggiadria" of Colonna's poetry side by side with the harmony of the religious works of the Psalmists ("I Santi poeti Hebrei"). Colonna's divine lines ("versi divini"), like those of the Psalmists, allow the reader to enter upon the spiritual way through identification with the writer. Her poems are so exemplary that every reader ("tutti i Pellegrini ingegni") should consecrate their tongue and pen to God if they want to achieve true immortality ("che ad

32. Rolfe Prodan, 147.

33. Brundin, *Vittoria Colonna and The Spiritual Poetics*, 34; Crivelli, 121–24.

34. "Ma sia benedetta la provvidenzia di Dio, il quale per far palese a tutto il mondo la stoltizia di costoro [i poeti moderni] ha fatto nascere a' nostri giorni una femina, la quale tratta le cose spirituali con una poesia tanto leggiadra, nobile e divina, che non essendo ella inferiore a gli altri poeti né d'ingegno, né di eloquenza, et essendo tanto superiore nella qualità della materia e del soggetto, quanto sono più alte le cose celesti delle terrene, si può dir senza iperbole che la sua poesia fra queste altre non altrimenti risplende che si faccia la luna fra le minori stelle." Colonna, *Le rime spirituali*, c. A2.

imitation di questa nobilissima Signora consacrino la loro lingua, et stile à Dio, se vogliono scrivendo conseguire la vera immortalità”).

Colonna's charisma was also seen in, and defined by, the ascetic mode of self-renunciation she tried to embrace, her patronage toward minor poets, and her charitable actions toward the lowest people, in particular prostitutes.³⁵ According to Pietro Bembo, the marchesa, after the death of her husband Ferrante, is described as a pious woman whose “lovely limbs” are “enclosed in black robes / holy thoughts and divine musings.”³⁶ Bembo's and Ariosto's ideal portrayals of Colonna as an exemplary and beatific widow, however, should be read alongside other contemporary descriptions that rather emphasize the severe asceticism that Colonna embraced after the death of her husband, and that recall, at least to some extent, the exercises of penance of mystics. In 1543 Bembo was seriously concerned about her health, and in a private correspondence with Carlo Gualteruzzi, he encouraged him to look after her and to prevent her dying from her frequent fasting (“digiuni et astinentia”).³⁷ According to Paolo Giovio, in his ten-page encomium of Colonna that forms part of the *Dialogus de viris ac foeminis* written during the period of the Sack of Rome, she had already started to replace her linen underwear corset with a garment of “coarse wool” and to eat just a single poor meal per day. Her knees and back also showed signs of her intense devotion, as they were worn out, as Giovio writes, by her continuous prayers and prostration before the statues of saints. Giovio adds that the marchesa “even beats the private parts of her body with stinging whips” to avoid carnal temptation.³⁸ Pietro Carnesecchi, a member of the Viterbo circle, also testified that, at the end of her life, she was “skin and bones” even after she had been rebuked by Cardinal Pole for what he termed “superstition” and invited to show respect for herself and her body and, in doing so, to demonstrate humility and moderation.³⁹ Carnesecchi gave the ultimate testimony regarding the physical condition of Colonna, reporting that

35. Alicarnaseo, 511–13. Camaioni, “Per ‘sfiammeggiar di un vivo e ardente amore,” 153–55.

36. “Leggiadra membra, avvolte in nero panno, e pensier santi e ragionar celeste.” Bembo, 612; translation by Brundin, *Vittoria Colonna and the Spiritual Poetics*, 27.

37. Simoncelli, “Pietro Bembo e l’evangelismo italiano,” 56.

38. Giovio, 34r. English translation by Robin, 6.

39. See letter 142 to Giulia Gonzaga in *Carteggio*, 239. See also the anti- and pro-fasting polemics that characterized Lenten preaching and that “mirrored a wider, ongoing struggle between opposing strands of reform” (Camaioni, “Reforming Quadragesimales,” 310).

“the Marchesa [...] had tormented herself so much with lashing and hair shirts and other mortifications of the flesh, that she was little more than skin [...] but then, admonished by the Cardinal, she withdrew gradually from her rigid life to a reasonable and honourable moderation.”⁴⁰

Colonna’s own words suggest the male members of her circle were uneasy with her fasting practices: a tradition that characterized Christian asceticism and that was also associated, for women, with spiritual leadership. Admiration for a life of penance attracted Colonna from the beginning of her spiritual life to the end. After the death of Ferrante, she tried to follow the “syllabus” required for the perfect path to sainthood, like a true pilgrim. She desired to become a nun, form a religious community inside her own home, and arrange a pilgrimage to the sacred places where the body of the Magdalene was believed to have lain, and ultimately to the Holy Land.⁴¹ None of Colonna’s desires came to fruition, being denied by the pope, although she was given the right of keeping a portable altar, with the Eucharist, inside her home. Being denied a formal religious status, like mystics she practised her piety by combining inspired writing with a chastised body. Ascetic fasting and feeding formed part of the identity of medieval female mystics, who found in Mary Magdalene, according to the *Golden Legend*, the very first teacher of those extreme forms of privation.⁴² This gendered form of worship which combines purgation, penance, and restriction of food was, in the Italian setting, best exemplified by Catherine of Siena’s life. Not by chance, the Dominican order produced the highest number of holy anorexic saints who followed Catherine of Siena in this way, both up to the time of Colonna—Catherine of Genoa, Catherine of Racconigi, and Domenica Narducci for example—and after her in the person of Mary Magdalene de’ Pazzi. From her reading of episodes from the life of Catherine, one of the most-read devotional books among Catholic women, particularly after her canonization in 1461, Colonna knew about her self-expiatory practices, which included wearing rough wool clothing and an iron chain bound around her hips, flagellating herself three times a day, and refusing to eat, all for the sake of the whole church.

40. From Appendix A in *Carteggio*, 337.

41. Targoff, 125–27.

42. Bynum, 166.

Surely, the mystic traits that were associated with Colonna's public figure—her search for solitude and Christological piety—were well captured by Niccolò Zoppino on the title page of the 1540 edition of her *Rime spirituali*, reprinted in 1542. In what today we would call a perfect marketing strategy, the title page portrays the author like an ascetic nun and foreshadows the religious content of the collection in her attitude.⁴³ With her eyes fixed on the cross, one of the richest women in Italy is dressed like a tertiary nun, skinny and wrinkled, with one hand toward her heart and the other toward the scriptures, in what seems to be the space of a simple and bare monastic cell where the only light comes from the cross. The triangular form of her gesture stresses the core themes of the collection: an inspiration to write that comes from God and inflames her heart, and that is fortified by the private, direct, and intimate reading of the Gospels. Her fame as a powerful proponent of religious reforms, together with her status as a widow, became paradigmatic of the new spirituality of the evangelical movement she wished to represent. The woodcut is particularly interesting for the allusions to different icons and traditions that the xylographer is able to assemble. It combines elements that would appeal to different audiences: Colonna's profile and posture can be seen to resemble the woodcuts of Bernardino Ochino and Catherine of Siena, both coming from the bottega of Zoppino.

As Gaundez Freuler rightly suggests, the unknown artist made a link to available representations of saintly figures, and in particular to Saint Catherine kneeling at the cross, with her arms opened while receiving her invisible and inner stigmata, like in Matteo di Giovanni's predella and many other examples.⁴⁴ It is very likely, however, that Zoppino commissioned the woodcut, taking inspiration from his own repertoire; one of the most prolific printers in Venice, he was particularly famous for his historiated volumes on sacred subjects. Among these is the 1511 reprint of Giovanni Pollio Lappoli's 1505 edition of Catherine of Siena's life in three books.⁴⁵ The title pages of both editions show the saint in a room, kneeling, with open arms and her eyes fixed on the cross.⁴⁶

43. Freuler, 267.

44. Freuler, 268.

45. Also known as Pollio, Pollastrino, or Pollastra. He was the grammar teacher of Pietro Aretino and Giorgio Vasari: Clubb and Black, 33, 34, 86, 87, 114, 116, 117. The edition printed by Zoppino is Aretino (1511).

46. The image was used again thirty years later in Melchiorre Sessa's edition of Catherine's *Dialogo*, printed in 1540. See De Gregorio and Pellegrini, 88–89.

In 1540, Zoppino also printed Bernardino Ochino's *Dialogi quattro* and *Dialogi sette*. Both are preceded by a woodcut of Ochino's profile, characterized by his Capuchin habit, a long beard, hands clasped in prayer, and his eyes screwed up in concentration while looking at the cross. Considering both images, we can see that the xylographer, under commission, places Colonna in dialogue with both models and finely encapsulates what the reader will find once the book is opened: the words of an inspired woman and a reformer.

Reviving Catherine of Siena's voice and thought in the first half of the Cinquecento

The timeliness and relevance of Catherine's thought to the scenario of the Italian wars, the corruption of church ministries, and the rise of the Ottoman empire were clearly understood by the Venetian printer Aldo Manuzio and, with him, many other printers who, for various reasons, decided to reprint Catherine's life and works many times in the first half of the Cinquecento.⁴⁷ It is, however, with Manuzio's 1500 edition of Catherine's letters, to which he added a short *vita* and some prayers, that the sixteenth century opened its doors amid the ominous warnings of the previous decades.⁴⁸ Only two years after the execution of Girolamo Savonarola in 1498, a man who had regarded his prophetic mission as a continuation of Catherine of Siena's legacy, the Venetian printer dared to revive Catherine's cult and ethical message for a reformed church. As anticipated in the previous paragraphs, Manuzio's edition of Catherine's letters had the general effect of enhancing Catherine's status as a writer and reformer. Even though Catherine is not explicitly mentioned by Aretino among those "sounding bells" ("squille della religione") that contributed to Colonna's religious development, her epistles were in her aunt's library and her works were something to which she could have returned during her stays at the monasteries and convents she visited during her life.⁴⁹

Catherine of Siena's letters and *Dialogue* were among the few books written by a woman that were actually recommended by humanists, who listed them among the works that every well-stocked library should contain for

47. See Dionisotti, *Aldo Manuzio*, xxxviii–xxxix; Saffrey, 241–312.

48. Zaggia, 130–55.

49. See the interesting letter by Pietro Aretino to Colonna on 4 November 1537, in *Carteggio*, 150.

spiritual edification.⁵⁰ In the successful *De institutione feminae christianae* of Juan Luis Vives, published in 1524 then again in 1538 in a revised edition, he refers to Catherine's works as "monuments of her genius in which the purity of her saintly intellect is resplendent," recommended for the instruction of female rulers.⁵¹ Also, her *Dialogue*, first published in Bologna in 1472 and then in Naples in 1478, had, historically, an extensive readership among aristocratic women, and should be regarded as a must-have in women's libraries as well as in those of monasteries.⁵² The 1494 edition of the *Dialogue*, preceded by a short biography by an anonymous Dominican friar of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan, was in fact specifically addressed to women in power, portraying the saint like a true *magistra* of the two dedicatees, kneeling at her sides. In the woodcut, Catherine sits on a throne and gives copies of the book to two of the most refined female humanists and leaders of their time: Isabella d'Aragona, wife of the Duke of Milan, Gian Galeazzo Sforza, and Beatrice d'Este, wife of the Duke of Bari, Ludovico Sforza, both ornately dressed and kneeling on the grass. The shelves behind Catherine are covered with books, thus giving the idea of a studio which is also an enclosed garden or, as Tylus notes, a *hortus conclusus*.⁵³ In this picture, the xylographer made a powerful symbolic interpretation of the figure of Catherine; he stressed her authorial position as a teacher and author, and her privileged relationship with book culture.⁵⁴ The iconographic choice is even more significant given the focus on Catherine's illiteracy on the part of her biographer Raymond of Capua, whereas here Catherine on the throne is presented as a "saintly *doctrix*," and the iconography connects her to Birgitta's legacy.⁵⁵

It seems that the market for the several editions of Catherine during the first half of the sixteenth century shows the various shadings or "caratteri"

50. See in particular Cherewatuk and Wiethau, 1; Zancan, "L'intellettualità femminile nel primo Cinquecento," 161; Bianca.

51. See Vives, ch. 4.25.

52. The *Dialogue* had also been copied by female hands from the time of Catherine's canonization in 1461 under Pope Pius II; on this see Richardson, 102–04.

53. Bianchi and Giunta, 308; Richardson, 52–53; Tylus, *Reclaiming Catherine of Siena*, 278.

54. "Di notevole significato simbolico la presenza dei numerosi volumi ritratti sulla balaustra, oltre alle due copie del *Dialogo* che vengono offerte alle nobili signore quasi a sottolineare il rapporto privilegiato di Caterina con la cultura attraverso la scrittura e i libri." Cited in De Gregorio and Pellegrini, 83.

55. Oen, "Ambivalent Images of Authorship," 123.

that her image could have assumed, according to the eye of the editor and his particular audience of readers. Among Catherine's present followers, there was certainly the father of Italian evangelism, the Spanish theologian Juan de Valdés, who was much attracted to the history and the works of the early church's protagonists. In the *Dialogue on Christian Doctrine* of 1529, the letters of Catherine of Siena are recommended as a fundamental text to read and study alongside church fathers like Saint Augustine and Saint Jerome, and important medieval theologians such as Jean Gerson.⁵⁶ In the heart of Milan, Antonio Maria Zaccaria, the founder of the Congregation of the Barnabites in 1530, included "le Epistole e il Dialogo di Santa Caterina Senese" in the *Costitutions* of the congregation.⁵⁷ The letters are on the reading list of books that instruct on "good habits, perfection of life, and the true imitation of Christ" and that everyone who wants to remain within the congregation will have to know thoroughly.⁵⁸

In the early years of the spread of Italian evangelism, it is worth noting that Catherine's *Dialogue* was printed by the reform-minded publisher Cesare Arrivabene in 1517, and then by Melchiorre Sessa in 1540. Arrivabene had been the main publisher of Savonarola's works and the supplier to a circle of Protestant sympathizers in the area between Mantua and Parma.⁵⁹ Sessa had been the publisher of Jacopo Sadoletto, but also of the works of Erasmus and Luther's friend and colleague Philipp Melanchton; his 1532 vernacular edition of the Bible with commentary, the *Biblia in lingua materna*, and the 1538 Greek translation of the New Testament were operations both intended for an engaged evangelical readership.⁶⁰ Jumping to the years after the beginning of the Council of Trent, the title page of the 1548 edition of Catherine's *Lettere et orationi*, printed by Federico Torresano in Venice, contains a striking reference to the redemptive power of Christ's precious blood, which had never been used before in the title pages of her epistles. According to the title, the reader

56. Pérez Priego, 150–52; Crews, 24. The work by Catherine was probably the Spanish translation of Caterina da Siena, *Las epistolas y oraciones*.

57. Zaccaria, 63–95.

58. Zaccaria, 70.

59. On Arrivabene, his religious interests, and the process of the Inquisition, see particularly Grendler, 105–06.

60. On Sessa, see Curi Nicolardi.

would find in Catherine the manifestation of God's love for humanity and "the great fruit of the precious blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ."⁶¹ In the preface, the editor stresses that Christ, fully embracing his humiliating martyrdom without interfering with His enemies ("ne aprendo pur la bocca contra quelli che lo percotevano"), runs with love toward death, making of himself the staircase and the door ("scala, et porta") to heaven. The nuns of the Giudecca in Venice, to whom the preface is addressed, will learn through Catherine's example the fruit that grows from a faith that was constant and perfect ("ferma et perfetta"). They should teach their sisters that those who drink the milk of faith ("latte della santa fede")—who are nourished with the simplicity of faith as with milk—will be able to contemplate the souls that have been washed "in the precious blood of Christ poured for our salvation" ("nel pretioso sangue del figliuolo di Dio sparso p(er) nostra salute nella sua santa passione"). The lexicon, perfectly orthodox on the surface, and which uses some of the key words of Catherine's theology of the blood, might subtly appeal to readers who, a few years before, would have hoped for salvation by faith in the sacrifice of God's Son.

Among Colonna's acquaintances, Ambrogio Catarino Politi, initially a follower of Savonarola, translated the life of Catherine into the vernacular in a very successful publication of 1524 printed by Giovanni Landi in Venice.⁶² Politi had participated from the beginning in the revival of the cult of Catherine, writing a sonnet for the 1505 edition of her life rendered into verses by the humanist Giovanni Lappoli, then reprinted by the above-mentioned Nicolò Zoppino in 1511. Zoppino then went on to be the publisher of Ochino's *Dialogi quattro and sette* and Colonna's *sonetti spirituali* in 1540.⁶³ Politi's reading of the life of Catherine is rooted in his admiration for Savonarola,

61. On Federico Torresani, see Cataldi Palau, 269–92. The complete title reads *Epistole et orationi della seraphica vergine santa Catharina da Siena, nella quali manifestamente si dichiara l'ardentissimo amore dell'eterno padre verso l'humana generatione et il grandissimo frutto del pretioso sangue del Signor nostro Iesu Christo*.

62. Politi became a Dominican in 1517 at the Florentine house of San Marco, deeply influenced by Savonarola. Probably in the 1530s, Politi entered the debate on the cult of the saints with his treatise *De disputatio*, which was printed in 1542 in Lyon. He was profoundly devoted to the Virgin and in open opposition to Luther. He dedicated to Colonna the first edition of his *Speculum Haereticorum* of 1540, and, as reported by Francis of Holland, he read and commented on the Epistles of Saint Paul for Colonna and Michelangelo: for this, see Brundin, Crivelli, and Sapegno, 279. On Politi, see Caravale, *Beyond the Inquisition*. See also De Gregorio and Pellegrini, 33.

63. De Gregorio and Pellegrini, 10.

and her figure is used to support a defence of true prophecy, with the aim of clearing the name of his Florentine teacher.⁶⁴ In the preface addressed to the dedicatees, the Dominican tertiaries, Catherine is depicted as the “clearest mirror” (“chiarissimo specchio”) in which the reader can find an example of the true and holy way of living (“vero et religioso et sancto vivere”) associated with an ever-living and life-giving doctrine (“sana et viva efficace dottrina”). Catherine is, in fact, an exemplum of true faith (“viva fede”), which is alive and fruitful, and the mind behind the doctrine of knowing oneself in God and His providence (“del salutare cognoscimento di se stesso et di Dio et della dolce providentia sua”). Also, and here he follows Savonarola’s argument, she is the living and historical proof that grace can shine even in the female sex, which is generally considered to be fragile and stupid (“fragile et imbecille”).⁶⁵ In the third part of the book, where Politi reports on Catherine’s prophecy concerning the renewal of the church, the conversion of the infidels, and the advent of a new pope, Politi inserts a personal digression on the nature and characteristics of true prophecy, primarily presented as the ability to truly and honestly read the scriptures.

For Politi, who actively spread the cult of Catherine in Rome, she is therefore not only a model of active faith but also God’s intermediary who can read, interpret, and teach His word.⁶⁶ Politi’s high opinion of Catherine as a *magistra* is even more prominent if we consider his attacks against those “stupid women, idiots, and ignorant” (“muliercule, idioti e prophani”) who pretend to have their opinion on important theological questions and are instead the root cause of the spread of heretical ideas and social disorder.⁶⁷ Talking of Politi leads us to open a parenthesis on the importance of Catherine’s cult in Rome and its link to the legacy of Savonarola in the city.

Catherine’s role as a prophetess was amplified after her canonization in 1461, largely by the Florentine reformer who exploited the legacy of the saint to authorize his own actions in Florence. Catherine became the spiritual and figurative centre around which devotion to Savonarola moved from Venice to Florence, and then to Rome. As emerges in the research of Tamar Herzig and Alessio Assonitis, Savonarola’s campaign for Christian renewal had, therefore,

64. Caravale, *Sulle tracce dell’eresia*, 19–21.

65. Da Capua, c. A1v; see also Herzig, 29.

66. Zucchi, 204–05.

67. Politi, 17.

an important effect in enhancing Catherine's cult in Venice, his houses in Tuscany, and Rome.⁶⁸ More interesting from our perspective is that several of those houses had been Colonna's choices of residence for her spiritual retreats. Among these are the Roman convent of San Silvestro in Monte Cavallo, associated with Savonarola's cult and his followers (the so-called *piagnoni*), the convent of Santa Caterina in Ferrara where she lived for ten months in 1536, and the convent of San Paolo in Orvieto where she lived during the spring of 1541. The reformed Dominican Church of San Silvestro di Monte Cavallo, in particular, with its beautiful gardens, was the setting for Politi's set of lectures on the epistles of Saint Paul in 1538 and 1539, which were key years in the development of Italian evangelism.

The Church of San Silvestro di Monte Cavallo is also the setting for the first of the four dialogues composed by the Portuguese artist Francisco Hollanda, which reports on the important meetings that occurred between Politi, Michelangelo, and Colonna in 1539.⁶⁹ Politi used to read and comment on the epistles of Saint Paul to Michelangelo and the marchesa, and the group then usually ended their discussion in the garden of the convent, as "interlocutori" on religion and art.⁷⁰ One of the fascinating aspects of the backdrop to their encounters was the series of frescoes commissioned years before by the vicar Mariano Fetti who, like Politi, had been a supporter of Savonarola and was committed to spreading the cult of the spiritual mother of the Dominican order in Rome. During Fetti's time at San Silvestro, he hired the most important artists to fresco the church, and Colonna might have particularly admired the decoration of the intimate Fetti chapel. The chapel is decorated with parallel episodes from the lives of Mary Magdalene and Catherine of Siena, which the painter Polidoro da Caravaggio set into complex landscapes, praised by Vasari for their beauty, which enhance the importance of inner solitude in the performance of their public role as reformers. The representation of Catherine mediating between Urban VI and the Roman people has also been interpreted as a subtle allusion to the divisions in the church.⁷¹ Lastly, the altar—decorated with two large images of the Magdalene, holding an unguent jar, and Catherine—was an inspiration for Michelangelo in the composition of the sculptures of the

68. Herzog, 39–46; Assonitis, "Art and Savonarolan Reform."

69. Bessone Aurelj, 35, 52–53.

70. Zucchi, 204.

71. Cavallini, 37.

same saints that decorate the lower level of Pope Julius's funerary monument.⁷² These statues are a sample of the wider debate and reflection on many religious figures—among whom we should include Catherine of Siena—that involved Michelangelo and Colonna.⁷³ The traditional representation of Catherine of Siena in conjunction with the Magdalene appears in fact to assume a new paradigmatic stance in reformed circles, one that catalyzed the attention of the group of the Spirituals in complementary directions.

Authorial legacy: Catherine and Colonna as spiritual advisors and teachers

In a letter to the French queen Marguerite d'Angoulême, sent in 1540, Colonna argued for the appropriateness of female role models for women and the desire to find her teacher ("maestra") among the great women of Italy: to learn from them and imitate their example. The perfect model is, for Colonna, a soul in which the perfections of the will ("perfettioni della volontà") are at one with those of the intellect, hence a soul that lives a life in purified knowledge of one's self in God, putting the fruits of his/her philosophical knowledge at His service.⁷⁴ Those are precisely the characteristics that Colonna, four years later, will emphasize in her descriptions of the saintly lives of Mary Magdalene and Saint Catherine of Alexandria, whose fervent love and intelligence she discussed in one of the three mystical letters that she sent to her cousin Costanza d'Avalos Piccolomini, Duchess of Amalfi, printed in 1544, three years before her death.⁷⁵ Having traced the spread of the cult of Catherine of Siena and the revival of her voice as a teacher and advocate for the reformation of the church in those cultural and religious circles in which Colonna moved, we now look at how the model of Catherine appears in a selection of Colonna's writings where Colonna's voice emerges primarily as that of a teacher and religious guide.

72. Forcellino, "Nessuno se n'è mai quasi accorto," 13–22.

73. See respectively the Magdalene (S1: 121, S1: 155), the Samaritan woman (S2: 13, 29), Saint Catherine of Alexandria (S1: 122), and Saint Ursula (S2: 30). On Michelangelo's private drawings for Colonna in the years 1539–43, see Rolfe Prodan, 142–53, with its bibliography.

74. *Carteggio*, 186. See also Virginia Cox and her translation of the passage, in Cox, "The Exemplary Vittoria Colonna," 463.

75. I refer to Colonna, 1544 and Colonna, 1545, cc. 33r–40. The facsimile edition is edited by Giacomo Moro, in Colonna, *Novo libro di lettere scritte*; on the complicated editorial journey of Moro's edition, see xvii–xix, lxxxiv–lxxxv. See also Liguori, 39–54.

Three days before Christmas 1542, in the Dominican convent of Santa Caterina in Viterbo, Colonna reported to Morone that, after the “chaos of ignorance [...] and the labyrinth of errors” in which she had found herself, she had finally perceived, thanks to the grace of God, her nothingness and, at the same time, the possibility of existing only in Christ.⁷⁶ In the solitude of Sant’Anna dei Falegnani, as Colonna later writes to Morone, she could finally rest from the “affairs of the world” in the company of the nuns of the convent, “pure and sweet spouses of our Lord.” While the simplicity of their faith and the modesty of their habits attracted Colonna, she was sufficiently concerned about their learning and spiritual edification that she wrote to Ignatius of Loyola to have a preacher sent to the convent.⁷⁷

While Colonna’s health was getting worse and worse, her assertiveness escalated: she told Morone to be secure, or better, “sicurissima,” in her faith as she had never been before, and her assertiveness, grounded in a “public” abandonment to God, is marked by the didactic tone of her letters.⁷⁸ In a letter of 1544, she rebukes, for example, the bishop of Caserta, Antonio Bernardi, who was a renowned Aristotelian philosopher, and exhorts him to abandon the “old Adam” and the sense of pride that derives from his learned intelligence, because only in that moment can worldly knowledge be truly meaningful, as “the divine philosopher” is at one with the “celestial man.”⁷⁹ Most importantly, she becomes a pillar of support for Morone, and an example of advancement in spiritual discernment for her cousin Costanza, for Marguerite of d’Angoulême, and for a community of experienced writers, like Bernardo Tasso and Pietro Aretino. As a *vera magistra*, she asserts, she suggests, but most importantly she “dares to say the contrary” and “wants” her reader to conform his or her life to a strict spiritual routine. Interestingly, Colonna’s secureness was one of the points made by her inquisitors as a proof of her certainty over her salvation, but her tone is nonetheless grounded in the certainty of her calling, making use of Catherine’s rhetorical structure to put forward her arguments.⁸⁰

76. *Carteggio*, 273.

77. Targoff, 256.

78. *Carteggio*, 305.

79. “Put away Aristotle for a while, because then when this supernatural intelligence will be the principal lord of your every act, putting philosophy in its place will serve you very well.” *Carteggio*, 305.

80. On accusations against Colonna, see Pagano, 60–61.

The 1544 edition of her letters to Costanza d'Avalos, which has been the object of increasing interest from scholars since Maria Luisa Doglio's analysis, is the first example of an epistolary collection signed with the "vero nome e cognome" of a lay woman author, and situates Colonna at the very start of the development of the spiritual epistolary genre in the vernacular in the sixteenth century.⁸¹ In those letters, each considered a meditation based on the spiritual observation of Colonna's inner eye, Colonna specifically invites her cousin to share a mental journey that would lead their souls to rebirth in themselves, to eating at the table of Christ, and to having visions of the intellectual superiority of the Virgin and of the brave spirits of the two saints Mary Magdalene and Catherine of Alexandria. Colonna's letters to her widowed cousin imply an instructress who guides the addressee as a spiritual teacher in an intimate dimension, entrusted to the epistolary form. In the second letter, where Colonna reports her audacious vision of the Virgin, she states that her letters have been simply written ("semplicemente scritte") on purpose, avoiding any ornament and superfluous elements of elegance ("ornamento" and "eleganza"), to let Costanza have a true and direct taste of the vision.

Despite Colonna's claim of simplicity, she takes as her subtext nothing less than the textual authority of Catherine of Siena's mystical teaching.⁸² As Doglio has highlighted, Catherine's rhetorical and didactic technique is present in the internal formal divisions that Colonna adopts (the initial address, the spiritual cores, and the final subscription), in the balance between moments of description and theological discernment, and in the constant exhortation to her reader to be attentive, and keeping the inner eye, "l'occhio interno," fully focused during contemplative practice.⁸³ If we consider more closely the similarities with Catherine's writing, we can see that those elements are a

81. Doglio, "L'occhio interiore," 19; Ranieri, "Vittoria Colonna e Costanza d'Avalos Piccolomini," 477–90; Chemello, "Il più bel lume di questo mondo," 73, 83; Camaioni, "Per 'sfiammeggiar di un vivo e ardente amore," 105–60. Unn Falkeid's recent article on Colonna's Mariology uses the filter of Birgitta of Sweden to explain the core role of the Virgin in Colonna's reflections, and she considers, in particular, the second spiritual letter that the marchesa sent to Costanza, in Falkeid, "*Magistra Apostolorum*."

82. Doglio, "L'occhio interiore"; the revival of the mystical tradition is noted also in Brundin, "Vittoria Colonna and the Virgin Mary," 77–78. In this latest work, she recalls Doglio and, briefly, the fact that Catherine's letters had a strong influence on Colonna—in particular, the emphasis on "il vedere interno" and the need to free oneself from earthly bonds in order to be assimilated into God.

83. Doglio, "Letter Writing, 1350–1650," 20.

selection of the features that constitute Catherine's epistolary practice, used by the saint to create a space for intimacy where the models of faith she presents to her reader are vivified and approachable.⁸⁴

If we consider the structure of the *exordium*, Colonna greets her cousin and tells her exactly the goal of each letter and what she would like to see from her, replicating Catherine's famous opening formulas. The bluntness of the invitation is mitigated by the intimacy that Colonna creates between the two: Costanza is addressed as "most elevated spirit" ("elevatissimo spirito," letter 1) and "the sweetest sister" ("sorella dolcissima," letter 2), and "most beloved sister" ("sorella amatissima," letter 3), thus making use of the form of the superlative, which is used by Catherine with the aim of establishing an intimate connection with her reader (e.g., "carissima e dolcissima suora mia") and to highlight their closeness in faith. Colonna also creatively adapts Catherine's strategy, for example, when inviting her cousin to stay with "her most reverend father" Paul, her "great light" Augustine, and "the most fervent" Magdalene ("il mio osservandissimo padre Paolo, o col mio gran lume Agostino, overo con la ferventissima serva mia Maddalena"). The use of the superlative preceded by the possessive adjective ("mio"/"mia") puts Colonna in a different position relative to her dedicatee, as Costanza is exhorted to stay with what Colonna portrays as her spiritual teachers, and be taught how to prepare the thirsty soul to receive the grace that is distributed from the holy table of Christ.

If we now consider the content of the third letter to Costanza, the epistle looks very much, as Michele Camaioni notes, like "the beginning of a sermon" delivered by Colonna in epistolary form, with the aim of distinguishing the faith grades and spiritual gifts ("I gradi et le gratie") of the Magdalene and Saint Catherine of Alexandria.⁸⁵ Colonna, who took Catherine as a reference point for the rhetorical structure of the *libretto* for Costanza, could have seen, while browsing through the pages of Catherine's epistles, that episodes from the life of the saint were also sophisticatedly adapted precisely to inspire and instruct her spiritual community, or to improve their practices in meditation.⁸⁶ For example, Catherine wrote a letter to a Florentine noblewoman and her spiritual

84. Catherine's selection of strategies can be found in Librandi, "Le strategie," and Fresu.

85. Camaioni, "Per 'sfiammeggiar di un vivo e ardente amore," 136.

86. Catherine's letters and her use of female saintly models are put in dialogue with Colonna's in Adler, 319. Here, Catherine of Siena's letter to Agnesa is quoted but is not placed in relation to the Catholic roots of Colonna's education and the revival of Catherine's cult at the time. The author, whose work has

daughters, living at the monastery of Sant'Agnese of Montepulciano, in which the Magdalene is presented in the company of Saint Agnes, of whom Catherine was a fervent devotee.⁸⁷ Interestingly, the recipient is “Monna Agnesa,” a penitent and a widow like Colonna and her cousin Costanza. Agnesa, the widow of Orso Malavolti, lived in the monastery of Sant'Agnese of Montepulciano and knew Catherine personally, as Catherine herself took residence there before leaving for Florence in 1374.⁸⁸ She was also part of that element of the nobility with which Catherine had interactions, being among other important women who were noble by origin but lived as penitents.⁸⁹ The prestige of her family name, the Malavolti, and her first-hand interaction with Catherine surely granted to those letters considerable value after the death of Catherine, especially given the fact that Francesco di Vanni Malavolti was involved in the *Processo Castellano*, the collection of testimonies about Catherine's sanctity ordered by Bishop Caffarini in 1414. Two other important correspondents of the saint also lived there, the Blessed Giovanna and Daniella.⁹⁰ For this reason, the religious community of San Paolo in Orvieto grew in esteem and was involved in the tasks of founding and renewing other women's communities, among which was the convent of Santa Caterina in Viterbo in 1529, where Colonna also lived. It is possible, then, that Colonna might have had access to a copy of Catherine's epistolary in Orvieto and strengthened her knowledge of the thought of the saint during this important year of her life.⁹¹

Turning back to Catherine's letter, Agnes and the “apostola innamorata” Magdalene are offered as models of perseverance and commitment for her fellow sisters, whom Catherine desires to see “united with and blazing, consumed with love, as was that loving apostle Magdalene.”⁹² To do so, they need to “learn too from the holy virgin Agnesa” the “true holy humility.” Of Agnes, Catherine stresses that she “showed her love for her Creator” giving herself over to prayer,

a different focus from the current article, quotes Catherine as a predecessor but does not establish an intellectual connection between the first and the second or the existence of a legacy.

87. Noffke, 1:3–5. Agnes is the Dominican nun and mystic founder of the convent of Montepulciano. On Catherine's devotion to Agnes, see Bynum, 166.

88. Tylus, *Reclaiming Catherine of Siena*, 196.

89. Tylus, *Reclaiming Catherine of Siena*, 141.

90. Tordi, 1:30.

91. Piccolomini-Adami, 240; *Carteggio*, 229; see also DiMauro.

92. Noffke, 1:3.

“with lavishly generous charity for everyone,” and her “constant zealous perseverance, which neither the devil nor anyone else could make her abandon.”⁹³ In the letter, Catherine then turns to the Magdalene, praising her directly, and then returns to her readers: “See, dearest daughters, how Magdalen knew herself, and humbled herself. With what great love she sat at our gentle Savior’s feet! And speaking of showing him love, we surely see it at the holy cross.”⁹⁴ The predominant aspect that emerges in the Magdalene is her initially fearful character and the perseverance of her faith. Catherine explains that it was her love that made her fearless of herself or the Jews and willing to run to the cross wracked with love and awash with the blood of God’s Son. Catherine’s focus shifts then to the Magdalene’s preaching in Marseille and, with no narrative order, she refers to her encounter with Christ after the Resurrection:

She wasn’t afraid of the Jews, nor did she fear for herself. No, like a passionate lover she ran bathed in blood. Surely you were drunk with love, Oh Magdalen! As a sign that she was drunk with love for her Master, she showed it in her actions toward his creatures, when after his holy resurrection she preached in the city of Marseilles. And, I tell you, she had the virtue of perseverance. [...] You showed this, dearest Magdalen, when you were seeking your beloved Master after not finding him in the place where you had laid him. [...] You didn’t give up; you didn’t stop grieving. How commendably you acted! For you found out that by persevering you were able to find your Master.⁹⁵

Catherine’s fellow sisters are then invited to “see” how those “mothers” of the church and “nuns” (“*madri e suore*”) complement each other and become inspired to pursue a model of faith that is unconventional and extraordinary. By bringing the voice of the Magdalene onto the stage, and inviting her daughters to follow her nourished with the oil of humility, Catherine proposes a different way for them to show their love for Christ, a way that is highly unconventional,

93. Noffke, 1:4.

94. Noffke, 1:4.

95. Noffke, 1:4.

given the prohibition on women preaching and, more generally, the topical association between “silence” and feminine “perfection”:⁹⁶

My dearest sisters, see how alike are these two mothers and sisters of ours!
So I beg you, I command you: join their most holy company, for there you
will find virtue wherever you turn. Then you will be so bound that you will
not be able to run away to be unbound again.⁹⁷

On another occasion, the Magdalene, with Lucy and Agnes, is proposed as the spiritual path to follow to the sisters of Santa Marta in Siena.⁹⁸ The three exemplify the principles of Catherine’s teaching: the light of faith, represented by Lucy and kept alive with the oil of humility given by Agnes, enables one to eradicate self-love with the knife of self-hatred, which is associated with the Magdalene.⁹⁹ Having killed every sign of complacency, Catherine ensures that the soul will be able to stay with Martha and the Magdalene at the foot of the cross and, “with the ship of our soul so provisioned, we will go to visit the sanctuary of the blessed Martha.” In Catherine’s visionary promise, the saints and the Virgin Mary are joined together “through the overflowing blood of Jesus Christ” and by their own merits and those of “that most gentle mother.” Catherine and the reader too “will enter into the vision and very being of God, where they will see and enjoy Christ face to face.”¹⁰⁰

Turning back to Colonna’s meditation on the Magdalene and Saint Catherine of Alexandria, the meditation, as she explains, takes inspiration from the day on which she was writing, the feast of the Roman martyr Catherine, on November 25. What Colonna visualizes, and ultimately discerns in her reasoning, are the common elements of their lives, their intellectual capacities, and their own conception of mission. There is in Colonna’s letter a specific

96. For the medieval church’s prohibition of women’s public speaking, see Farmer, 519–20. In the Dominican tradition, however, women could teach publicly as prophetesses, and preach to audiences composed of women as spiritual advisors. See Bériou, “The Right of Women.” On the topical association between silence and perfection, see Pozzi, 21–23; on the significance of Catherine’s experience and model, see Zancan, “Le lettere di Caterina da Siena,” 161.

97. Noffke, 1:4.

98. Noffke, 1:49–55.

99. “So Lucy gives us light; the Magdalen, hatred and love; and Agnes the oil of humility.” Noffke, 1:53.

100. Noffke, 1:54.

focus on the power of the spoken word and the significance of their suffering. The saints are elevated in their roles as preachers who can convert “queens and kingdoms” with their “wise and sweet words,” and they have manifested their love for Christ in various ways, one with her death and the other with the “long effort” of her apostolic mission. As Colonna concludes, the true way to worship Christ and receive true wisdom is therefore to stay “at the divine feet at which the one [Magdalene], I believe, rests in eternal peace and joy, and the other [Catherine] stands on his side, to the right of Christ’s heavenly spouse” thanking the Virgin with “infinite lauds” for having made possible the Incarnation of the “true Principle.” Colonna’s vision situates herself and her cousin within a community of women who take inspiration from the “pure minds” and the “beautiful bodies” of those virgins, and gain strength to obtain, through prayer, Christ’s grace without further intermediation.¹⁰¹ On one level, the oratorical pace of the letter and the comparison of the two saints render the two epistles we have considered similar, and Colonna might have found a possible inspiration in Catherine’s spiritual advice to her spiritual daughters and sisters, who were mostly noblewomen, widowed, and living within monastic communities. On another level, the letters we have put into dialogue place Colonna in the position of religious guide to her reader, and like Catherine, she shares the same interest in teaching how to grow in spiritual contemplation, offering models of inspiration that are adapted for a purpose which is communal: instructing the reader “to remain at the foot of the cross,” to be able to serve others, and the cause of the church, in their evangelical mission.

Returning to the *libretto* for Costanza, a pair of letters completes Colonna’s female gallery of examples that run from the vision of Mary, Catherine of Alexandria, and the Magdalene in heaven to the inner thoughts of the woman caught in adultery in John 8:2–11, on the battleground between Jesus and the Pharisees.¹⁰² The letters on the *Evangelio de la adultera*, as Colonna calls it,

101. “So let them beg him [*impetrare*] that without the interposition of darkness through their holy means we can lead to its true luminous end; and like mirrors imitating the works of their beautiful bodies and the thoughts of the holy and clear minds, may we render true worship to our Lord.” My translation.

102. Chemello, “Vittoria Colonna’s Epistolary Works,” 28–29. Camaioni, “Note su due episodi del periodo italiano,” 137–38. Chemello distinguishes the “adulterous woman” about to be stoned from the Magdalene, whose sinful past is generally recalled through the episode of the anointing of Christ’s feet (Luke 7: 36–50), in the house of Simon the Pharisee (Chemello, “Vittoria Colonna’s Epistolary Works,” 28). Ochino does likewise and does not refer to the adulterous woman about to be stoned in John 8:2–11

addressed to an anonymous friar, share, as Adriana Chemello notes, “thematic contiguity” and similarities in both “linguistic register and style” with the letters addressed to Costanza.¹⁰³ Although there is no direct correspondence in content with Catherine’s letters, as she does not specifically give an exegesis of this episode, Colonna is perhaps imitating Catherine’s example in speaking her mind and putting forward her own exegetical reading: Colonna specifically stresses the sensation of feeling authorized “to say the contrary” because she based her interpretation on the power of inner vision. To do so, Colonna makes repeated use of the first person singular throughout the letter to stress her contrary opinion—“I don’t find that”; “I dare to say the contrary”—and referring to the development of her vision—“I see,” “I think,” “I believe”—along with impersonal forms with imperative connotations (e.g., “It is necessary to say instead”; “It must be taken as firm”). This way of proceeding recalls Catherine’s way of using the pronoun “I” that is characteristic only of her epistolary and not to be found in her dialogue and orations. The emergence of the Catherinian “I” and the consistent use of the first person singular pronoun is to be related to the prophetic role she assumes in the epistles, which has been related specifically to the rhetorical strategy of a charismatic orator like Catherine, the first religious woman in the Italian tradition to become a model in the humanistic tradition of letter writing.¹⁰⁴ There are many studies that have stressed the uniqueness of her epistolary in terms of the “insorgenza” and the “diretta esibizione” of the pronoun “I” in contrast to the tendency of women authors to “rinuncia al pronome personale.”¹⁰⁵ Moreover, the same formula “I dare to say” (“ardisco dire”) appears also in a letter of Catherine’s addressed to the Franciscan theologian Lazzarino da Pisa, precisely to introduce her interpretation of a biblical passage: the true meaning of Jesus’s invitation of “making Easter” before his death.¹⁰⁶ Biblical exegesis and exhortations are what define Catherine’s prophetic model and they serve as a constant reminder of God’s will regarding the good conduct of His ministers and souls on earth.¹⁰⁷

as the Magdalene. For a different reading, see Michele Camaioni who does not distinguish the identities of the two women: Camaioni, “Note su due episodi del periodo italiano,” 137.

103. Chemello, “Vittoria Colonna’s Epistolary Works,” 28.

104. Pozzi, 37. On the Catherinian “I” see Forbes, 126, and Librandi, “Le strategie del chiedere,” 92.

105. See Fresu, 111–12.

106. Noffke, 1:91.

107. Luongo, *Saintly Politics*, 73; Rusconi, 27–34; Leonardi, 155–72.

As if she saw the woman firsthand in her heart, inner sight is what guides Colonna's vision of the woman left alone before Christ, seeing her as like "a Magdalene at the sepulchre." Certainly, the adulterous woman gives her the chance to reflect independently on the meaning and salvific nature of Christ's judgment and, at the same time, to reclaim for this figure the merit and the right of being "perfect."¹⁰⁸ Whereas the Pharisees, representing those proud men of learning, tried to tempt Christ and catch him in error but returned to their homes "confused and overthrown," she remained with Christ "absolute and certain" of her salvation because she is "armed" with the weapon of faith. Colonna stresses her personal stance in the exegesis of the episode, reporting Augustine's reading of the woman's attitude in the *Homilies*: "Some say," Colonna reports, "that she remained there shivering, and recommended herself to God" whereas "I dare to say the contrary."¹⁰⁹ Colonna argues that the woman, when alone before Christ, did not feel any fear; neither was she terrified ("atterrita"), as Augustine imagined her, nor was she expecting to be punished by Christ. The Pharisees and their accusations are, instead, a unique opportunity for the woman to turn her thoughts towards her sinfulness, which she understands to be common to all beings and goes beyond the specificity of the occasion. Like the Magdalene, she has been able to see in her heart the true face of Christ: the mercy-giver and not the judge.¹¹⁰ In the logic of the collection, the two letters, which were added only to the second edition of the *Novo libro* of 1545, were very probably felt by the editor to be the last piece that would complete the spiritual sequence addressed to Costanza because they put into practice Colonna's teaching to her, and Colonna's "I" emerges strongly and directly to the reader. Standing as a real teacher, she has pursued the imitation of her model at a different level, alluding to her in her assertiveness in pursuing

108. "It must be taken as firm," Colonna stresses, "that she led a blessed life on earth, absolute of the past and certain of no longer being condemned, nor being able to sin in the future." *Carteggio*, 242. My translation.

109. Musiol, 149. On the exegetical practice of women, see Valerio, "Per una storia dell'esegesi femminile," 3–22. On Colonna, see especially Valerio, "Ignazio di Loyola, Vittoria Colonna e la Bibbia," 649–56; Forni, 93–111.

110. "And she did not dare to pray to him for anything, indeed as truly converted, enlightened and perfect, she abandoned herself entirely to Christ, and she did not look at herself; she conformed her will with that of the Lord [...] and by the will of God not only did she want to absolve her and redeem her, but he made her impeccable." *Carteggio*, 242. My translation.

something personal, new, and in line with Colonna's own revolutionary way of reading and interpreting the scriptures independently, through one's inner eye and meditative practice.¹¹¹

Finally, I would like to draw attention to another letter by Colonna, this time to Cardinal Morone. From the Benedictine convent of Sant'Anna dei funari, on 22 June 1544, Vittoria sent him a letter of spiritual support. In this letter, she reminds the leading figure of the Catholic renewal of the religious meaning of his suffering and the obstacles he has encountered during his mission as a papal legate in Bologna. He was in fact working there towards the opening of the Council of Trent and, at the same time, mediating between the factions inside the Spirituels themselves.¹¹² In this delicate period for Morone, Colonna opens the letter with an *excusatio* for the "arrogance" of her words, so to excuse herself for taking the presumption of mentoring him in religious matters, like most of the incipits of Catherine's letters sent to ecclesiastics.¹¹³ Morone—Colonna says—similarly to the Magdalene, would have preferred to continue a life of contemplation but has been called to respond to "another," more "penetrative call" that will lead the cardinal to know Christ truly, and reach a level of much more intimate wisdom ("più interior cognitione") than before. The cardinal should take the Magdalene as an example because she understood that the only way to "touch," "see," and "serve" her master is "through the service of her brothers and sisters." Colonna reminds Morone of his duty and encourages him to be strong in his faith and mission because it is the will of God that has sent him to serve the community in a way "he did not wish." Colonna then adds that he should act independently from prejudices and criticism, still taking the Magdalene as an example: she preached the risen Christ with "her words and her example," and her behaviour was taken as insane by the apostles ("deliramento"), among whom were Peter and John who then ran to the tomb and saw the winding sheet ("linteamina") lying in the sepulchre.

It is tempting to think that Colonna had at hand, or at least in mind, Catherine's epistles when writing this important piece to Morone, embedding in it a refined exegetical reading and creating parallels between the reader and the biblical character, taking the Magdalene and the doctrine of love as its

111. Lee, 22. See also Greene, 82–146; McLaughlin, 31.

112. Ranieri, "Storia e analisi dei testi," 75–76.

113. Librandi, "Le strategie del chiedere."

central core. The primary concern of Catherine in every epistle was to remind her readers of their duty, being ordinary or institutional, to serve Christ in humility, facing with fervent desire the challenges they may encounter on the way to Him. As Catherine explained to a friar, serving others is the only way to follow Christ's teaching and God's will. In this letter, she invites him to "go into the tomb of self-knowledge" with the Magdalene, and with her to acknowledge his sinful nature and persevere until he can understand the true teaching of Christ, which is to "touch him" by serving others:¹¹⁴

Persevere in staying there until you find Christ risen in your soul by grace. Once you have found Him [Christ] go and proclaim him to your brothers—and your brothers are the true, solid, lovely virtues with whom you want to and do take up your residence. Then, Christ lets you touch him in continual humble prayer by appearing to your soul in a way you can feel. This is the way, there is no other.¹¹⁵

In Catherine and Colonna, the Magdalene is therefore "the way" to follow on earth and is to be taken as an example of perseverance and intelligence, because she understood that to be with Christ and "touch Him" meant to serve Him in one's neighbours. The way Colonna crafted the letter to Morone, and the way she embedded and reactivated the model of the Magdalene in Morone's life, might well have found in Catherine, again, a model of rhetoric, style, and ideological proximity.

Conclusion

Although we have only been able to consider the possible influence of Catherine of Siena's philosophy on a few aspects of Colonna's works, Catherine's epistles and *Dialogue* may well have been an important and often overlooked influence in Colonna's creation of her lyric persona, as well as of her authorial voice. As Emidio Campi rightly pointed out, "there is no escaping the fact that, in terms of theological history, it still remains somewhat difficult to identify and describe Colonna's religious convictions 'with any kind of certainty' and likewise for her

114. The passage is discussed in Falkeid, "Constructing Female Authority," 65.

115. Noffke, 2:512.

sources.”¹¹⁶ If Colonna’s relationship with Petrarchism and integration of new views on religion from Italian Valdesianism have already been detected and studied, reading Colonna via Catherine might reveal an underlying conceptual adherence to Catherine’s message of the need to pursue renewal within the Catholic Church—consciously following not only Catherine’s rhetoric but also her intellectual tradition, which saw renewed interest in the first decades of the Cinquecento. This message of purification in unity characterizes the chain of female mystics that stretched from Birgitta and Catherine to Colonna’s days: women who always argued against a schismatic option as the way to accomplish a reform of the church. With her philosophy of the inner cell of self-knowledge, Catherine of Siena made her ever-increasing closeness to God the foundation of her reforming stance as well as of her public and authorial voice.

As Abigail Brundin rightly points out, in her mature years Colonna developed an interest “both in exploring literary forms other than Petrarchan lyric and, more significantly, in articulating a new and far more assertive role for female religious figures.”¹¹⁷ The *libretto* for Costanza highlights Colonna’s profound belief in the transforming power of meditation on the scriptures, and in the acts of transmission and sharing as a way to grow in faith and awareness. Colonna seems to go back to the Catholic roots of her upbringing, reviving the lessons of Catherine: she selected from Catherine’s letters the terminology, lexicon, and features that felt most appropriate to her own aims, implying a relationship with her model that is profoundly actualized and adapted to her sensibility. While the mystical and rarefied atmosphere is the main feature that characterizes Colonna’s spiritual advice, she surely also recovers the importance of having “concrete inspirational models” as a way to advance in ascetic practice, historically a peculiarity of the religious culture of the Dominicans.¹¹⁸

Considering the role of Catherine’s legacy in Colonna’s writing suggests additional ways to think about how Colonna crafted for herself a role as a mediator of God’s will. Certainly, Colonna did not employ the harshest tones used by Catherine, or the fixed structure of her letters. However, she did make use of a selection of Catherine’s rhetorical strategies when reminding people of high rank of their duties or assisting fellow widows on their spiritual journeys. On certain occasions her use of the Magdalene—which has been extensively

116. Campi, 372.

117. Brundin, “Introduction,” in *Sonnets for Michelangelo*, 26.

118. Lehmijoki-Gardner, 15.

studied in the contexts of the *Spirituali* and of her dialogues with Michelangelo and Ochino—seems to continue the authorial voice of Catherine. More broadly, Catherine’s authorial model emerges in Colonna’s use of female models of faith as exemplars, both for herself and for her correspondents.

Does thinking of Vittoria Colonna as writing in a Catherinian mode make a difference to how we understand Colonna? By bringing Catherine into the spotlight and considering the context of the revival of her cult in those delicate years for the Italian reformist movements, we can put Colonna in dialogue with the humanistic Catholic tradition. This analysis suggests not an alternative way but, rather, an additional way to place Colonna within a chain of women from her past and present who took pen in hand to testify about their own experience despite the negative pressures exerted by society and their detractors. The imitative dialogue that Colonna establishes enables her to infuse her texts with a prophetic voice of “advising” rather than “foreseeing” that is historically gendered and, profoundly, Catherinian. In doing so, she based her homage upon that similarity of mind that goes to the roots of the Renaissance notion of authorship and that links her to the great era of women mystics and reformers in their role as the first examples of women writers in Italian literature.

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