

La strega di Dio: Profezia politica, storia e riforma in Caterina da Racconigi.

Eleonora Cappuccilli.

Politikòn Zóon: Collana di Storia del pensiero politico 6. Canterano: Aracne Editrice, 2020. 158 pp. €12.

Eleonora Cappuccilli's *La strega di Dio* is a slim but ambitious volume. Ostensibly, the book is a study of the Piedmontese prophetess Caterina Mattei da Racconigi (1486–1547), who became an adviser at the Savoy court and inspiration to Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola. The author sees Caterina Mattei as the first of many female prophets who stepped into the new space for lay religious expression created by the upheavals of the Italian Wars and the Protestant schism, using her visions “to question simultaneously the sexual, social and ecclesiastical hierarchies, thereby contributing to the revolutionary process” (12). Studying Caterina Mattei allows us, Cappuccilli argues, not only to understand the connections between prophecy, history, theology, and politics in this tumultuous period, but also to see those connections from a specifically feminine perspective. Four “analytical lenses” are utilized in the investigation: the hagiographic lens, through which can be seen the “literary crystallization of the collective unconscious” (14) and how it describes the clash between political and ecclesiastical power to itself; the mystical lens, which focuses upon the negotiation between reason and revelation in this dawning age of modernity; the prophetic lens, which reveals the propagandistic dimension of prophecy as a means of calling the faithful to action; and, finally, the political lens, which Cappuccilli uses to identify “moments of subjectivation” (15) of women and the affirmation of male power, as well as the osmosis between politics and theology.

The book is divided into four chapters. Chapter 1 briefly sketches scenes from the Piedmont that were formative for the *beata*, from the unsettled life of a region beset by war and poverty, to the impact of the rule of the dukes of Savoy, at whose court Caterina Mattei would exert her visionary's influence, to the variable presence of the Dominican Order with whom Caterina would affiliate herself as a tertiary. Chapter 2 considers Caterina and her biographers, especially Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola and, to a lesser extent, the Dominican author(s) of her *legenda*. These men Cappuccilli sees using Caterina's prophetic language to give voice to their own philosophical, apologetic, and pastoral agenda in confronting the Protestant Reformation and calls for renewal. Here, too, the author discusses the nature of prophecy and the fine line that separates the true prophet from heresy or witchcraft, of which Caterina was accused. The concept of the *strega divina* is introduced, and what Cappuccilli calls the dialectic between witchery and mysticism that so exercised Pico, as well as the difficulty of distinguishing between angelic and demonic inspiration. Chapter 3 continues with the theme of prophecy, exploring the dynamics between political prophecies and social and religious reform. Finally, chapter 4 casts a quick glance across the Channel to note parallels between the prophetesses of Cinquecento Italy and the “godly women”

of England's "long revolutionary season" (136) of the seventeenth century. The book concludes by suggesting that this recurring appearance of female prophets, who speak the language of reform and succeed in forcing a theologico-political discourse (even if they are ultimately silenced), situates them at the very center of the process of creating modern political reality.

Those whose interests extend to political theory and gender studies will find food for thought in Cappuccilli's book because, in the end, this is a thoroughly theory-driven study. As historical analysis, however, *La strega di Dio* is less successful. Ample space is given to suggesting metahistorical models and theories of religion and patriarchy, but far too little time is spent delineating the life and writings of Caterina Mattei herself in a manner that would give substance to the claims made for her here. The reader who is not already familiar with Caterina will struggle to get a sense of the content or chronology of her visions or the shape of the works that recount her story, and will grow frustrated at bald statements that are left unsupported—as when we are told that there is a clear lineage (a "red thread") from Savonarola to Caterina, but are given no indication of how the *frate's* influence might have communicated itself, or when we are run at breakneck speed through select episodes from the English prophetesses' lives. This is a monograph more comfortable in the secondary literature and theoretical constructs than it is with the sources themselves. Whether that is seen as a virtue will depend largely upon the reader.

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The Life of Saint Teresa of Avila: A Biography. Carlos Eire.

Lives of Great Religious Books. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019. xvi + 260 pp. \$26.95.

Recent scholarship has examined the life and writings of Saint Teresa of Avila, the sixteenth-century Discalced Carmelite mystic and religious reformer, from a variety of perspectives. In his excellent study of the *El libro de su vida* (Book of her life), Carlos Eire demonstrates the inseparability of the written text from the identity of the flesh and blood woman in a clear and highly engaging fashion. In so doing he provides a fascinating history of the book's composition, publication, reception, and afterlife, as well as their consequences for the changing image of the saint over more than four and a half centuries.

In the first three chapters Eire discusses the difficulty of categorizing this text, finally designating it as both "autohagiography" and mystical treatise on prayer (59). Addressing the problematic nature of the book's original composition at the mandate of confessors and of mystical experiences such as trances and seeming levitations, he illustrates the difficult and even dangerous terrain that the saint negotiated in attempting to re-create them in a manner acceptable to church authorities. Eire