
Renaissance and Reformation
Renaissance et Réforme



Brown, Jennifer N. Fruit of the Orchard: Reading Catherine of Siena in Late Medieval and Early Modern England

F. Thomas Luongo

Volume 43, Number 3, Summer 2020

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1075305ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v43i3.35323>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Luongo, F. (2020). Review of [Brown, Jennifer N. Fruit of the Orchard: Reading Catherine of Siena in Late Medieval and Early Modern England]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 43(3), 285–287.
<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v43i3.35323>

Brown, Jennifer N.

Fruit of the Orchard: Reading Catherine of Siena in Late Medieval and Early Modern England.

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019. Pp. xi, 312 + 4 ill. ISBN 978-1-4875-0407-6 (hardcover) \$75.

Jennifer Brown's apt title refers to the *Orcherd of Syon*, the English translation of Catherine of Siena's *Libro di divina dottrina* or *Dialogo*, and to the ways in which different readers in England plucked fruit from this or that aspect of Catherine's texts and hagiography. Among Continental saints whose cults were exported to England, Catherine is usually upstaged by the much more prominent Birgitta of Sweden, but Brown's study of the reception of Catherine's writings and texts about Catherine in England seeks to show that there was indeed an "English Catherine of Siena," (205) and that Catherine and her texts served as a spiritual model for several different strands of English devotional culture in late medieval and early modern England. In order to trace the transmission of Catherine's texts and reputation, Brown focuses on the particularities of manuscripts and early printed books for what they reveal about the tensions and complications of English devotional culture during a time of great ferment and change.

Each chapter focuses on one particular text or textual situation, beginning in chapters 1 and 2 with the roles played in introducing Catherine to England and shaping her reception there by two important members of her circle, both with connections in England. Brown traces the key role of Catherine's close follower Stefano (here "Stephen") Maconi, master general of the Carthusian Order, in the diffusion of Catheriniana from the Charterhouse of Sheen and the creation of a model for devotion to Catherine in terms that pre-empted concerns about her orthodoxy—important given the English church's suspicion of female visionaries and vernacular texts. And she demonstrates how the *Documento spirituale* of the English Augustinian William Flete, a member of the Augustinian community at Lecceto near Siena and one of Catherine's strongest supporters, circulated in England as *The Cleannesse of Sowle* and was attributed incorrectly to Catherine herself. Catherine's writings fit into a genre of contemplative literature in which Flete was already well-known, and so her connection to Flete in effect prepared a space for her in English devotional culture.

The variety of ways in which such shorter texts shaped Catherine's reception in England is even more dramatically evident in chapter 3, in which Brown traces the complex web of interconnections and associations—as well as interesting misattributions—among texts by and about Catherine as they circulated in fifteenth-century miscellanies. Brown shows how Catherine's persona and the meaning of her texts changed depending on the interests of the miscellanies' compilers and/or readers and the forms in which her texts circulated. Catherine and her texts could be made “to accommodate different strands of late medieval English spirituality—as in turn pedantic, methodological, visionary, or mystical,” so that “who Catherine is and the purpose she serves is not inherent in the text itself, but rather in the pen of the compiler” (110). In chapter 4, Brown explores the role of the Bridgettine convent of Syon Abbey—the most important female religious community in fifteenth-century England and a key centre for the production of devotional books—in shaping Catherine's identity, especially through the translation of her *Dialogo* into Middle English (from a version in Latin) in the form of the *Orcherd of Syon*, the title of which placed Catherine securely within a Bridgettine context. Brown points to the translator's preface, chapter divisions, and rubrics as not only guiding the reader through Catherine's difficult text, but also encouraging a method of reading the work in smaller pieces, as if fruits picked from its trees—consistent with the guiding metaphor of the text as an orchard.

The last two chapters take Catherine into the Reformation period. Chapter 5 traces the dissemination of Raymond of Capua's authoritative *Legenda*, translated into English as the *Lyf of Katherin of Senis*, through the 1492 edition by Wynken de Worde and inclusion of extracts of the *Lyf* in a collection of mystical texts printed by Henry Pepwell in 1521. Brown links the readership for these texts to a growing trend of private lay devotional reading in England and points out that it was thus primarily through the hagiography, and not through her own writings, that Catherine was known in England during the Reformation period. Her Conclusion traces the contradictory figures of Catherine as she was used in different ways by Protestants and recusant Catholics.

Each of Brown's chapters leads the reader through the complex details of textual transmission and provenance of specific manuscripts and printed editions that shaped the way Catherine was read in England. Brown convincingly ties these details to larger themes in English religion in this period, including issues of gender, tensions over authority and reform, and a growing culture of

lay reading and devotion. Moments of weakness occur where Brown departs from her methodological commitment to specificity. In chapter 2, even if one grants the (debatable) premise that Catherine's approach to penance depends on Flete's, it is not clear that the ideas that Catherine is supposed to have inherited from Flete are particularly "English." In chapters 3 and 4, Brown sometimes slides confusingly between translations in a way that risks losing the distinctiveness and autonomy of the work of the different translators. In chapter 4, for instance, she blurs differences between Catherine's original and its English translation to make Catherine seem unproblematically the author of both texts. Brown also notes that the *Orcherd of Syon* introduced chapter divisions in order to help the reader, but Italian manuscripts of the *Dialogo* in both Italian and Latin also have divisions into chapters. Does the Latin version on which the *Orcherd* was based not have such chapters, or are the chapter divisions in the *Orcherd* different from the ones in the Latin original?

These issues aside, *Fruit of the Orchard* is a fascinating example of book history and establishes convincingly the importance of the reception of Catherine of Siena in later medieval and early modern England.

F. THOMAS LUONGO

Tulane University

<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v43i3.35323>

Butterfield, Andrew, ed.

Verrocchio: Sculptor and Painter of Renaissance Florence.

Washington: National Gallery of Art / Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019. Pp. x, 372 + 279 colour ill. ISBN 978-0-6911-8336-7 (hardcover) US\$60.

This beautifully produced and meticulously researched book finally brings the Florentine Renaissance goldsmith, painter, and sculptor Andrea Verrocchio the attention he so richly deserves. It respects the importance of his work by separating him from the legacy of Leonardo, inviting a reconsideration of his own considerable talents. Truly monumental in format and size, and filled with hundreds of crisp, detailed photographs that permit close looking in a way sometimes not possible in situ or even in a gallery, the sheer visual force of the book is matched by the excellent research essays.