CHAPTER FOUR

LACRIME CORDIALI:
CATHERINE OF SIENA ON THE VALUE OF TEARS

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All tears come from the heart, God explains to the ecstatic soul in Catherine of Siena’s 1378 *Il Dialogo*. But the various states of an individual’s soul may cause the heart to send forth a great variety of tears. As it is by means of tears that a soul may pass from one state of grace to another, the *Dialogo* devotes considerable space to correlating each state of the soul with a distinct category of tears. This chapter examines Catherine’s typology systematically, with a focus on the following questions: How do tears figure in Catherine’s claims of authorship and authority? How can they figure union with God, prophetic capacity, and revelation? I will reference parallels in Catherine’s thought with Dante’s theology of tears as depicted in the *Commedia*. Finally, how can the role of tears inform the increasing body of work on, to use Catherine Mooney’s term, “gendered voices” or, in this case, how does Raymond of Capua’s account of Catherine’s spiritual practice differ from that of Catherine herself?

E.M. Cioran tells us that the Middle Ages were saturated with tears: “their rivers of tears haven’t quite dried up even today, and whoever has an ear for pain can still hear their lamentations.” But how can we understand today exactly what those tears meant? They are not just about pain, for one thing. Along with tears of pain, medieval writers describe tears of penitence, of joy, of union with the divine. But the meaning or precise stimulus for tears is often difficult to trace.

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James Elkins’s recent *Pictures and Tears* speaks of tearful reactions to paintings, revealing the tremendous diversity in the ways in which those who cry describe or explain this reaction. For Catherine, it is of utmost importance to do precisely this difficult work; her very sophisticated typology of tears in the *Dialogo* is dedicated to separating out variously motivated tears.

It is my intention to discuss Catherine as author and to acknowledge, at the same time, that Catherine as author defines her mechanics of authorship in the terms of speech far more often than she describes herself as a writer. In both cases, tearful speech and tearful writing, weeping serves to authenticate words. In her essay “Stabat Mater,” Julia Kristeva suggests that milk and tears have this in common: “they are the metaphors of nonspeech, of a ‘semiotics’ that linguistic communication does not account for.” Milk and tears are the “privileged signs of” the *Mater Dolorosa*. Silently maternal, she listens, offering ear, tears, and breast. But this is not the only iconic example of weeping present to medieval people. Another key figure is the female sinner who washed Jesus’ feet with her tears and dried them with her hair, described in Luke 7:38. She “stood at his feet behind him weeping, and began to wash his feet with tears.” Jesus confirms the significance of her action in Luke 7:44: “Thou gavest me no water for my feet: but she hath washed my feet with tears.” While they are not “linguistic,” the woman’s tears speak her penitence and bring her into contact with Christ. In return for her love and humble service, she obtains forgiveness. These tears communicate for her. This female sinner is one component of Mary Magdalene, the “composite saint” (to use Katherine Jansen’s term) compiled by Pope Gregory the Great. It seems safe to assume that this example would have informed Catherine’s ideas about the importance of tears; Raymond of Capua explains that, in one of Catherine’s visions, Christ gave Mary Magdalene to Catherine

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without specific focus on religion, is Tom Lutz, *Crying: A Natural and Cultural History of Tears* (New York, 2001).


6 For an excellent examination of Catherine as writer and author and the debate surrounding such designations, see Jane Tylus, *Reclaiming Catherine of Siena: Literacy, Literature, and the Signs of Others* (Chicago, 2009).
