

Parole Lievite: St. Catherine of Bologna's Spirituality through Breadmaking

Katherine A. McKee, Class of 2022

In medieval Bologna, Caterina Vigri did it all. Vigri, born in 1413, was a Franciscan nun, teacher, artist, writer, musician, and mystic of fifteenth-century Italy who was mummified upon her death in 1463. Postmortem, Vigri grew immensely popular, and she was eventually elevated to the status of patron saint of both artists and the city of Bologna as St. Catherine of Bologna. My research focuses on Vigri's bread making while living at the Corpus Christi convent in Ferrara. Bread, the keystone of medieval meals, held significance not only nutritionally but also symbolically. I frame Vigri's bread making as a way to explore themes of self-representation, motherhood and maternity, and penitence within her most well-known text, *Le Sette Armi Spirituali*, as well as her artwork and minor poetic and prose works. This research presents an interdisciplinary approach to Vigri's life, incorporating research on the history of bread making, medieval theories of conception, and literary criticism.

Situated at the center of Vigri's bread baking legacy is a bread miracle. As told by her biographers, Vigri left a loaf of bread in the oven for about four hours during a sermon by a visiting priest, telling her fellow nuns that she left it in the care of Christ. When she returned to the oven following the sermon, she pulled it from the oven and, instead of being scorched, it was perfectly cooked. While the biographers structure this narrative as *exempla* of her humility, obedience, and devotion, I posit that bread making as a daily practice was a devotional exercise for Vigri that allowed her to emulate the Virgin Mary and the immaculate conception. The selection of the themes of self-representation, motherhood and maternity, and penitence was borne out of the necessity to contextualize breadmaking within the larger cultural system of values in Italy during the late Middle Ages.

The project itself was certainly not without intellectual challenges. While Vigri did write in the Italian vernacular instead of Latin (though many words and phrases are in Latin), many of the words were closer to the local dialect of Emilia-Romagna instead of the unified Italian language. The shifts between dialect, Italian, and Latin necessitated the close examination of many words and parsing of sentences. However, given the generosity of time granted by the Fellowship and the patience of my supervisors, I was able to slowly and accurately work through even the most difficult passages.

The rigorous, interdisciplinary analysis of the Italian writings of Caterina Vigri and scholarship on her literary life and afterlife in Italian, English, and French has built the foundation for an Honors project that expands our knowledge on the influence of bread making in the life of Vigri. Beyond just Vigri's life, too, the research has the potential to shift scholars' existing interpretations of bread making within convents during the late Middle Ages in Italy. The research is far from over; my intensive study of Vigri's work and the scholarship thereof over the course of the summer has indeed left room for on-site archival research in Bologna during the winter of 2022. My most sincere thanks go to the benefactors of the Surdna Foundation Undergraduate Research Fellowship Program and to my advisors Professor of Italian Arielle Saiber of the Department of Romance Languages, Italian section, and Professor of Art History Kate Gerry of the Department of Art for their support through this productive summer research project.

Faculty Mentors: Dr. Arielle Saiber and Dr. Kate Gerry

Funded by the Surdna Foundation Undergraduate Research Fellowship Program