

God as Spouse and Mother: Examining Gender Within Teresa of Avila's Writings

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Abstract: In *Meditations on the Song of Songs* and *Interior Castle*, Teresa of Avila describes God as both her Spouse and Mother. This article explores how scholars have interpreted Teresa's works in the past and argues that gender analysis of Teresa's bridal and maternal imagery must be more fully utilized in order to understand Teresa and her works.

In 1622, the Roman Catholic Church recognized the remarkable achievements of Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) by canonizing her. Teresa was born into a family of the upper-class in Avila, a town west of Madrid. During her adolescence, she went to a convent school, where she was drawn to religious life. When she was twenty years old, she became a nun at the Carmelite convent La Encarnación in Avila. Teresa, like many nuns of noble status, lived at La Encarnación in comfort. Around the age of forty, Teresa's spiritual life changed – she often experienced visions and she became disillusioned with the extravagance of convent life. Soon after, she founded the Discalced Carmelite order, which emphasized poverty, simplicity, and enclosure; in 1562 she opened the convent San José in Avila under the new order. She spent the rest of her life setting up fifteen more convents in Spain and writing seven books and a few shorter works, such as poems. In her *Meditations on the Song of Songs* (ca. 1571-1573) and her *Interior Castle* (1577), Teresa writes to her nuns, explaining how they can achieve a closer relationship with God.¹ In these writings, Teresa often uses bridal imagery that describes Christ as her husband or lover. For instance, in *Meditations*, a short work that offers a commentary on the Song of Songs, Christ is described as the bridegroom from the Song of Songs. In the *Interior Castle*, Teresa outlines seven steps to achieve spiritual union with God. In the fifth and sixth step, she compares the soul's growing union to God to betrothal and concludes that this eventually leads to a spiritual marriage to Christ. In addition, Teresa uses maternal imagery, in which she portrays God and Jesus as mother.² This article will discuss

¹ Throughout this article, Teresa's *Meditations on the Song of Songs* will be referred to as *Meditations* to be more concise.

² It is important to note that Teresa's use of bridal imagery or maternal imagery was not new or unique. In the Song of Songs, a book from the Old Testament, there is a dialogue between two lovers that, in the medieval period, was often interpreted as a love story between God and his people. For a more in-depth discussion of medieval usage of bridal

how previous scholars have approached Teresa and her writings and will argue that gender analysis can be used to provide a better understanding of Teresa's *Meditations* and *Interior Castle*.

The majority of the early scholarship on Teresa is written in Spanish, but Elizabeth Teresa Howe claims that this changed after the four hundredth anniversary of Teresa's death, which was celebrated in 1982. Howe explains that this anniversary prompted English-speaking scholars from different disciplines to discuss her life and writings. Howe's *Mystical Imagery: Santa Teresa de Jesús and San Juan de la Cruz* (1988) is one of the first works to be written after the anniversary of Teresa's death. The work analyzes the mystical imagery in the writings of Teresa and St. John of the Cross, a mystic and Teresa's friend who helped reform the Carmelite order. Howe contends that many of the images and symbols of flora, fauna, objects, and the body that Teresa and John used in their writings related to everyday human experience.³ However, she ignores the implications of gender within the writings of Teresa and John. By focusing on the similarities between Teresa's and John's writings, Howe fails to acknowledge that Teresa and John may have had different perspectives on spirituality because of their different genders.

Alison Weber's *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity* innovatively argues that Teresa's gender influenced the way she wrote. Weber adopts the term 'rhetoric of femininity' to describe the way Teresa both conformed to and challenged gender assumptions to legitimize her authority as a woman writer.⁴ Since Weber's work, most scholars have had to acknowledge that Teresa's gender affected her writings.⁵

or maternal imagery, see Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York, 1991), and Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley, 1982).

³ Elizabeth Teresa Howe, *Mystical Imagery: Santa Teresa de Jesús and San Juan de la Cruz* (New York, 1988), 15, 18, 20. There are many other studies on Teresa that could not be included because of space constraints. See Jodi Bilinkoff, *The Avila of Saint Teresa: Religious Reform in a Sixteenth-Century City* (Ithaca, New York, 1989) which provides an in-depth background to the town of Avila and explains how Teresa established the Discalced Carmelite order; Gillian Ahlgren, *Teresa of Avila and the Politics of Sanctity* (Ithaca, New York, 1996) which examines Teresa's sainthood and female sanctity during her period; and Alison Weber, "Saint Teresa's Problematic Patrons," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 29, no. 2 (1999), 357-379, which explains how Teresa received patronage for reforming convents.

⁴ Alison Weber, *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity* (Princeton, 1990), 15-16.

⁵ See Carole Slade, *St. Teresa of Avila: Author of a Heroic Life* (Berkeley, 1995) and Elena Carrera, *Teresa of Avila's Autobiography: Authority, Power and the Self in Mid-Sixteenth-Century Spain* (London, 2005).

Scholars recognize that gender analysis is integral to studying Teresa's activities in the Church. While Teresa was living at La Encarnación, the nuns had much contact with the 'outside' world. For example, the nuns often left the convent to stay with their family while they were ill or were experiencing financial hardship.⁶ After the Council of Trent (1545-1563), however, the Roman Catholic Church in Spain took measures to prevent nuns from venturing into the outside world. Religious authorities wanted to help preserve the chastity of the nuns and protect them from worldly influences.⁷ Teresa agreed with the Church's stance and actively advocated for enclosure in her convents. At the same time, she participated in activities that women were generally barred from, such as reforming convent life, interpreting Scripture, and writing about spiritual issues.⁸ This concerned male religious leaders, which is evidenced by the controversy surrounding Teresa's *Meditations*. Jerónimo Gracián de la Madre de Dios, an avid supporter of Teresa, recorded that:

She was ordered to burn [her *Meditations*], since it seemed to a certain confessor of hers very unorthodox and dangerous for a woman to write about the *Song of Songs*. He was moved by his pious concern that, as St. Paul says, women should be silent in God's church, which is to say: they should not preach from the pulpit, or teach at universities, or print books.⁹

Scholars correctly recognize that Teresa's *Meditations* presented problems for religious men because in her work she was interpreting a biblical book, which only men were allowed to do.¹⁰

Although scholars have made important contributions to the study of Teresa, they often neglect to look at gendered images in her works. Take for example, the second chapter of the seventh section of the *Interior Castle* in which Teresa exclaims: "For from those Divine breasts, where it seems that God is ever sustaining the soul, flow streams of milk, which

⁶ Bilinkoff, *The Avila of Saint Teresa*, 115.

⁷ Elizabeth A. Leffeldt, *Religious Women in Golden Age Spain: The Permeable Cloister* (Hampshire, 2005), esp. chapter 6. Scholars have examined the architecture of convents during the early modern period and argue that religious authorities built higher walls and more gates to protect nuns from the outside world as well as from other nuns. See Roberta Gilchrist, *Gender and Material Culture: The Archaeology of Religious Women* (New York, 1993).

⁸ Weber, *Rhetoric*, 18-20.

⁹ Quoted from Jerónimo Gracián de la Madre de Dios in Weber, *Rhetoric*, 117. Teresa did burn the copies of her *Meditations*, but there were copies in other convent libraries that went unnoticed.

¹⁰ Weber, *Rhetoric*, 18-19.

solace all who dwell in the Castle.”¹¹ Previous scholars have not seen any significance in this description of God as a breastfeeding mother.¹² Weber points out that Teresa wrote *Interior Castle* in 1577 when she was imprisoned in her Toledo convent after the Carmelite superior general ended his support of her convent reform and a nun denounced Teresa to the Spanish Inquisition.¹³ Weber claims that Teresa switched from bridal to maternal imagery in the *Interior Castle* because “obfuscation was safer than clarity.”¹⁴ Weber demonstrates that it was not wise for Teresa to use language explicitly from the Song of Songs because she suddenly faced opposition from religious authorities.¹⁵ However, Weber does not explain why Teresa went to such great lengths to use the language from the Song of Songs.

Religious scholars J. Mary Luti and Rowan Williams generally ignore Teresa’s bridal and maternal imagery. For instance, Luti argues that Teresa sees God “as decidedly masculine, even if not every metaphor she used to talk about God was male.”¹⁶ Later in her book, Luti acknowledges briefly that sometimes in *Meditations* and *Interior Castle* Teresa uses maternal imagery and describes God as a feminine being.¹⁷ Williams does not mention once that Teresa makes reference to a feminine God.¹⁸ Although Teresa generally writes about God as masculine, an expanded discussion of maternal imagery is needed. Howe has attempted to understand the metaphor of God as a breastfeeding mother. She argues that this image provides two descriptions of God: He is loving and compassionate, just as a mother who takes care of her child, and He is a spiritual provider, who gives spiritual food to his children so that they can grow in their knowledge of Him.¹⁹ Although Howe goes into more depth than other scholars, her conclusions remain unsatisfactory because her observations fail to do justice to the image and, more importantly, they fail to consider the impact gender has on this image.

¹¹ Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle* in *The Complete Works of Saint Teresa of Jesus*, Vol. 2., trans. and ed. by E. Allison Peers (London, 1946), 7:2:6. See also, Teresa of Avila, *Meditations on the Song of Songs* in *The Complete Works of Saint Teresa of Jesus*, Vol. 2., trans. and ed. by E. Allison Peers (London, 1946), chapters 4, 5 and 7.

¹² These scholars take a similar approach when exploring Teresa’s description of a breastfeeding Christ.

¹³ Weber, *Rhetoric*, 99-100.

¹⁴ Weber, *Rhetoric*, 114-115.

¹⁵ Weber, *Rhetoric*, 112-117.

¹⁶ J. Mary Luti, *Teresa of Avila’s Way* (Collegeville, Minnesota, 1991), 13.

¹⁷ Luti, *Teresa of Avila’s Way*, 108.

¹⁸ Rowan Williams, *Teresa of Avila*, Outstanding Christian Thinkers Series, ed. Brian Davies (London, 1991).

¹⁹ Howe, *Mystical Imagery*, 156-158.

A more thorough analysis of Teresa's images is needed to understand why she described God as both female and male. Why did bridal and maternal images resonate with her and why did she include these images in her works? In *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (1982), Caroline Walker Bynum argues that scholars can understand images that medieval religious writers used by looking at the images in their religious, social, and cultural contexts.²⁰ Bynum maintains that examining how gender plays a role in some religious images is helpful for understanding what medieval men and women thought about themselves and their relationship to God.²¹ For instance, she explains that twelfth-century Cistercian monks often wrote about God and Jesus in maternal images. She claims that these images were used to instruct the abbots on how to exercise authority within the monastery: lovingly and nurturingly, just as a mother.²²

This approach can help uncover the meaning and purpose of Teresa's maternal imagery. In the seventh section of Teresa's *Interior Castle* - which describes the mystic's ultimate union with God, and in which the maternal image of God is used - God and Christ are generally described as males. However, Teresa reveals a different side to God when she describes His "Divine breasts" and the milk flowing from them.²³ After she writes about God as a mother, Teresa states that God wants "to sustain those who in bodily matters have to serve the Bridegroom and the bride."²⁴ Teresa shows her audience that God is loving and nurturing, but, most importantly, that He provides for those in need. This comment may have been especially important for Teresa's nuns because her convents were founded on the principle of poverty and relied on donations from townspeople.²⁵ In addition, maternal imagery can enlighten us on Teresa's and her nuns' relationship with God. It appears that Teresa wanted to use a description of breastfeeding to demonstrate that her nuns could experience an intimate relationship with Him. There is much concerning maternal imagery that still needs to be examined and

²⁰ Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 6-8.

²¹ Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 167.

²² Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 154-155.

²³ Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, 7:2:6.

²⁴ Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, 7:2:6.

²⁵ See Teresa of Avila, *The Book of Her Foundations* in *The Complete Works of Saint Teresa of Jesus*, Vol. 3., trans. and ed. by E. Allison Peers (London, 1946) in which Teresa describes how she founded fifteen convents. Teresa records the difficulty she faced in finding the funds to buy a property and to renovate a house into a convent suitable for nuns. She also makes frequent reference to her reliance on the generosity of religious authorities and townspeople to fund her convents.

looking at the gendered aspects of the images will provide an important starting point for developing a more in-depth understanding of Teresa's writings.

A similar approach needs to be taken with Teresa's descriptions of Christ as a bridegroom, especially because these images play a considerable role throughout her *Meditations* and at the end of her *Interior Castle*. In addition, this gendered image will provide a different and more complex understanding of Teresa and her nuns, as well as their relationship with God. At times, Teresa writes about an intimate - and almost erotic - relationship with Christ. For instance, in the fourth chapter of her *Meditations*, Teresa exclaims: "Again, my God, I speak to Thee, and beg Thee, by the blood of Thy Son, to grant me this favour: 'Let Him kiss me with a kiss of His mouth.' For what am I, Lord, without Thee? And what am I worth if I am not near Thee?"²⁶ Luti and Carole Slade acknowledge that parts of Teresa's *Mediations* and *Interior Castle* appear to be erotic, but they only mention this in passing and fail to look at the implications of this type of imagery.²⁷ Weber explains that religious authorities were concerned with women's use of erotic language because of the connection between women, sexuality, and the demonic.²⁸ She states that Teresa "felt the idea of spiritual marriage so crucial that she was willing to continue to take [the] risks."²⁹ This increases the need for scholars to question Teresa's use of erotic terms to describe Christ.

A discussion of how scholars have studied eroticism in medieval mystical texts can provide insight into how to approach Teresa's bridal images. Caroline Bynum explains that modern readers have to be careful about reading eroticism into medieval writings because eroticism and sexuality have changed significantly since the medieval period.³⁰ She argues that erotic images, especially those used to describe Christ, have more to do with religion than sex.³¹ Conversely, Nancy Partner maintains that scholars often do not discuss eroticism in religious writings because they feel obligated to uphold the religiosity of the mystics. She states that "[m]edieval mysticism wants to tell us about the heavy weight of sexual restriction, sexual guilt, and difficult rules of self-constraint carried by monks and nuns," as well as their sexual fears and

²⁶ Teresa of Avila, *Meditations*, 4:8.

²⁷ Luti, *Teresa of Avila's Way*, 102; Slade, *St. Teresa of Avila*, 54-55.

²⁸ Weber, *Rhetoric*, 120.

²⁹ Weber, *Rhetoric*, 121.

³⁰ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York, 1991), 85-86.

³¹ Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, 85-86.

desires.³² Therefore, Partner argues that erotic language tells modern readers something about medieval sex and sexuality.³³ Elizabeth Petroff takes a different approach when analyzing the erotic language in the writings of Beatrijs of Nazareth (1200-1268) and Hadewijch of Antwerp (ca. 1200). Petroff explains that the two female mystics were influenced by erotic language from reading the Song of Songs and reading commentaries on the Song of Songs that were written by men. However, she claims that the mystics used sensual language to describe their own desires and experiences.³⁴ She concludes that their sensual relationship with God empowered them by demonstrating that He spoke to them and told them of His love.³⁵

There is evidence to suggest that Teresa used the eroticism of the Song of Songs in her *Meditations* for her own purposes. Teresa was well aware that many men had interpreted the Song of Songs. She writes that educated men “have written many expositions of [the Song of Songs] and have not yet fully explained them.”³⁶ She then promises to “interpret these [passages] in my own way.”³⁷ Teresa does not record which commentaries she read, but it is clear that she believed that she was interpreting the book differently from other men and could contribute something new to discussions on the topic. A closer analysis of her *Meditations* demonstrates that one of the reasons she wrote differently on the Song of Songs was largely due to the fact that she was a woman writing to other women. In the second chapter of her *Meditations*, she writes:

What are we nuns doing in our convent? What motive had we for leaving the world? For what purpose have we come here? In what can we better employ ourselves than in making a dwelling-place for our Spouse within the soul, and doing so in time to be able to ask Him for the kiss of His mouth? [...] Oh, my daughters, what a high calling is ours, since none save our own selves can forbid us to

³² Nancy F. Partner, “Did Mystics Have Sex?,” in *Desire and Discipline: Sex and Sexuality in the Premodern West*, eds. Jacqueline Murray and Konrad Eisenbichler (Toronto, 1996), 307, 304.

³³ See Nancy F. Partner, “Reading *The Book of Margery Kempe*,” *Exemplaria* 3 (March 1991), 29-66.

³⁴ Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff, *Body and Soul: Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism* (Oxford, 1994), 57.

³⁵ Petroff, *Body and Soul*, 62.

³⁶ Teresa of Avila, *Meditations*, 1:8.

³⁷ Teresa of Avila, *Meditations*, 1:8.

address these words to our Spouse, Whom we took as such when we were professed!³⁸

As mentioned earlier, Teresa agreed with the Church's position on enclosure for nuns. A look at this passage reveals that Teresa thought enclosure was beneficial because, by cutting themselves off from the outside world, nuns could grow closer to Christ. In addition, as Petroff has suggested, a close and intimate relationship with Christ could empower nuns. Teresa emphasized that her nuns have "a high calling," which only reinforced their importance in the Church. The sensual relationship between the nuns and Christ also demonstrates that they were serving God in their own unique way. An examination of the erotic imagery Teresa used to define her relationship to Christ provides insight into the nature of her works.

Since the 1990s, many scholars have looked at Teresa's life and writings through a gendered perspective. However, this article has endeavoured to demonstrate that their approaches neglect to examine the significance of Teresa's description of God as mother and Christ as mother or spouse. An analysis of the bridal and maternal imagery used in Teresa's work will bring fresh perspectives to the scholarship on Teresa, and will provide a better understanding of Teresa and her *Interior Castle* and *Meditations*.

³⁸ Teresa of Avila, *Meditations*, 2:5.