

# The Saint Behind the Sculpture: (Re)Interpreting Saint Teresa's Ecstasy through a Feminist Analysis of Bernini's *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*

**Alana Louise Bowden**

In Rome? So far away? To look? At a statue? Of a saint? Sculpted by a man? What pleasure are we talking about? Whose pleasure? For where the pleasure of the Theresa (sic) is concerned, her own writings are perhaps more telling.<sup>1</sup>

## **Which Teresa? An Introduction**

Teresa Sánchez de Cepeda y Ahumada, otherwise known as Saint Teresa of Ávila, was born in Ávila, Spain, in 1515. During her lifetime the Carmelite nun became known not only as “a mystic of phenomenal lucidity and intensity,” but also as a woman “whose energy, humour, and common sense were legendary even while she lived.”<sup>2</sup> Although Teresa made significant contributions to the Catholic church through her work in the Counter Reformation, along with her philosophical and theological writings (being the first of only four women to be appointed the title of Doctor of the Church), she is better known as the subject of Gian Lorenzo Bernini's Baroque sculpture, *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* (see figure 1). Once described by art historian Simon Schama as “the most astounding peep show in art,” Bernini's sculpture is as much divisive as it is arresting, and depending on the viewer's interpretation, depicts the saint either in the throes of spiritual ecstasy or sexual orgasm, or both.<sup>3</sup> It is this interpretation of Teresa's experience, ecstasy *as* orgasm, that is overwhelmingly

---

The late Alana Louise Bowden gained a First Class Honours with University Medal in Studies in Religion and Theatre and Performance Studies at the University of Sydney.

<sup>1</sup> Luce Irigaray, ‘Così Fan Tutti’, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (Ithaca NY; London: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 91.

<sup>2</sup> Robert T. Pertersson, *The Art of Ecstasy: Teresa, Bernini, and Crashaw* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Simon Schama, *The Power of Art* (London: BBC Books, 2006), p. 78.

foregrounded in Bernini's sculptural interpretation: mouth agape, body spent, the saint is not only in orgasm, she is overwhelmingly and classically beautiful. Although Bernini's sculpture is a secondary masculine representation of a firsthand female subjective experience, it is this depiction of Teresa, as the ecstatic, orgasmic saint, that is fixed most prominently in the cultural imagination; the real Teresa, as communicated through her own written accounts of her ecstasy, becoming lost in the aura and controversy of the artwork. This erasure of female subjectivity through masculine representation is symptomatic of not only the religious tradition to which it belongs, but broader socio-cultural structures of patriarchal hegemony.

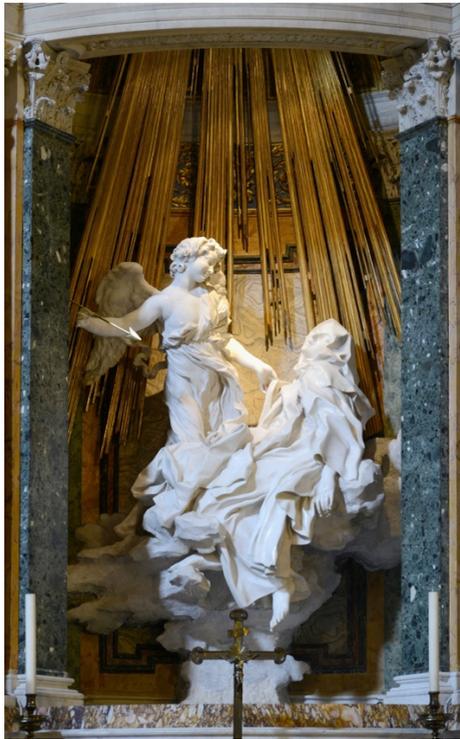


Figure 1. Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* (1647-1652), Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome. Marble, stucco and gilt bronze (3.5m).

In order to reassert the presence of Teresa in her own narrative, this article will use an overtly feminist methodological approach to analyse the religious dimensions of Bernini's *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*. In doing so it will

consider the sculpture through conceptual frameworks and perspectives which are traditionally outside of dominant Religious Studies discourse, asking questions of the artwork and its location in socio-religious discourse that consider concepts such as trans-empirical knowledges, subjectivity, and female agency. In doing so, the analysis will emphasise the often-observed relationship between gender and power, offering a feminist critique of the elided role of women in religious and sociological discourse, and academia in general. We will consider the significant impact of masculine interpretations, articulations, and sexualisations of the female subject in socio-religious discourse, both in Teresa's narrative and Christianity more broadly, highlighting the consistent erasure of female subjectivity and women as speaking subjects in Christianity, patriarchal hegemony, and the androcentric Western academy.

It will be shown that a feminist interpretation of the sculpture not only challenges established approaches to the sculpture itself and the religious context in which it is situated, but also the role of women in the broader landscape of academic practice. The article will begin by locating its analysis within the field of Feminism itself, offering an outline of its socio-political origins and its relation to the specific objectives and praxis of Feminist Studies in Religion. It will then turn to the work itself, using a Feminist methodology to analyse Bernini's sculpture both as a work of art and as a discursive object. First, the sculpture will be considered in relation to the written accounts of Teresa herself, showing how the formal qualities of Bernini's sculpture can be understood as not only a masculine interpretation and articulation of a woman's experience, but also as a fetishised and abstracted imaginary. It will then locate the work in the socio-religious context of Western Christian mysticism and highlight the ways in which its discourse policed and domesticated female experiences that threatened the authority of the church. Finally, the analysis will turn to the sculpture as a discursive object, exploring how androcentric academic interpretations of the work continue to perpetuate this erasure of not only Teresa's subjectivity, but female agency.

### **Feminist Approaches to the Study of Religion**

A feminist approach to the study of religion is concerned with the position and experience of women, not only within religious discourse and praxis, but also the field of the academy itself. Broadly speaking, its objective is to reassert the presence of women in religious, sociological and academic discourse by investigating, exposing and critiquing hegemonic socio-

religious structures which either subjugate and elide the experiences of women, or exclude or dismiss them entirely. Although Feminism began as a socio-political movement concerned with challenging patriarchal hegemony and gender roles, contemporary iterations are instead focused on redressing the multiple issues that intersect and permeate patriarchal societies.

As contemporary scholars such as Kimberlé Crenshaw have rightly asserted, the initial concerns of the early feminists were distinctively focused on the issues of middle class, cis gendered, able bodied, heteronormative, white women, and although problematic exclusionary debates continue within Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminist (TERF) discourse concerning biology and gender, the majority of feminist thought does not restrict the concerns and objectives of feminism to white, cis-gendered women, but instead recognises the ways in which all Othered subjectivities are oppressed differently and simultaneously through a matrix of simultaneous and multidirectional oppression. This analytic concept of intersectionality, was first coined by Crenshaw, who critiqued academic and social justice conceptions of a 'single axis' of oppression, and instead sought to redress such problematic attitudes by identifying the consequences of "the tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis."<sup>4</sup> Its methodology thus takes up concepts such as subjectivity, lived experience and agency, as well as broader intersectional issues of sexism, racism, class, gender, and sexuality. Therefore, Feminist scholars of religion, such as Grace M. Jantzen, Mary Daly, and Carol P. Christ, are fundamentally concerned with the often-observed relationship between gender and power with Jantzen observing that "it is commonplace of feminist thinking that any investigation of power relations soon reveals issues of gender."<sup>5</sup>

This critical analysis is deployed on both a micro and macro level. Firstly, it offers critical analysis and renegotiation of the marginalised role of women within religious texts, practices and discourses. For example, despite its teachings of benevolence, love, and kindness towards others, a feminist analysis of Christian doctrine and theology reveals it to be overtly misogynist; God is conceived as a masculine patriarch, as the Father and Lord, with feminine subjectivity policed and subjugated through the concept

---

<sup>4</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics', *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, vol. 1 (1989).

<sup>5</sup> Grace M. Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 2.

of ‘original sin’ and the either/or binary of the Virgin/Whore. As Mary Daly argues, this dichotomy simultaneously effects a ‘glorification’ of the abstracted and idealised woman at the expense of real female subjective experience, “The symbolic glorification of ‘woman’ arose as a substitute for recognition of full personhood and equal rights.”<sup>6</sup> The position of women in the Old and New Testament is therefore a product of its time, manifesting the “unfortunate—often miserable—condition of women in ancient times.”<sup>7</sup> Therefore, as Christ suggests, a feminist approach to the study of religion originates from “the dual recognition that women have not played an equal role with men in shaping the so-called major religious traditions and that women’s experiences and contributions within religions have not been adequately studied.”<sup>8</sup>

In addition to its critique of religious traditions, feminist scholarship of religion interrogates the praxis of the academic discipline itself, questioning the ways that knowledge is produced and reified, simultaneously critiquing epistemological frameworks which gender ways of ‘knowing’ as either masculine or feminine while also championing supposedly ‘feminine’ trans-empirical epistemologies. As Pamela Sue Anderson and Beverley Clack argue, positioned within, and as a product of the Western academy, the discipline of Religious Studies has been shaped by and continues to be overwhelmingly dominated by European Christian males: “not only was the practice of philosophy of religion shaped largely by white, male European Protestant analytical philosophers, but the virtually exclusive focus of their practice was the justification of their belief in the patriarchal God of traditional Christian theism.”<sup>9</sup> Therefore its ontologies, epistemologies and methodological frameworks are inherently bound to Christian discourse, and are geared towards supposedly masculine, positivist, and empirical approaches to not only religiosity but scholarship itself. In addition to reifying arbitrary constructs of gender, this epistemic framework is problematic as it not only omits alternative forms of knowing such as personal or lived experience as inferior, but also attributes it with a ‘feminine’ and negative value, and thus positions the subjective lived experience as

---

<sup>6</sup> Mary Daly, ‘The Church and The Second Sex’, *Women’s Studies in Religion*, eds K. McIntosh and K. Bagley (New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 106.

<sup>7</sup> Daly, ‘The Church and The Second Sex’, p. 106.

<sup>8</sup> Carol P. Christ, ‘Do We Still Need the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*?’ *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, vol. 30, no. 2 (2014), p. 139.

<sup>9</sup> Pamela Sue Anderson and Beverly Clack, ‘Introduction’, *Feminist Philosophy of Religion: Critical Readings* (London; New York: Routledge, 2004), p. xiv.

suspect and inferior. Feminist methodologies therefore critique the overtly 'masculine' and therefore 'positive' approaches to knowledge prevalent in the academy which privilege positivist, empirical objectivity. Luce Irigaray notes that this overtly masculine approach to epistemology inherently problematic, as it not only erases the body a site of knowledge but also reinforces the power structures of patriarchal Christian hegemony:

This model, a *phallic* one, shares the values promulgated by patriarchal society and culture, values inscribed in the philosophical corpus: property, production, order, form unity, visibility... and erection ... Here, anatomy is no longer able to serve ... as proof-alibi for the real difference between the sexes. The sexes are now defined only as they are determined in and through language.<sup>10</sup>

Although Irigaray's position is limited as it argues for and thus perpetuates gendered constructions of masculine and feminine modalities of epistemology, it nevertheless highlights the extent to which knowledge and female subjectivity is regulated through discourse and thus the relationship between gender and power.

In order to redress this gendered disparity, a feminist methodology asks different questions of its subject and its field, primarily interrogating the relationship between gender and power, privileging the obscured and elided experience of the female relational Other. This ontological relation of the transcendent masculine subject and the immanent feminine object was first asserted by Simone de Beauvoir in her foundational feminist text, *The Second Sex*: "Humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself but in relation to himself; she is not considered an autonomous being ... He is the Subject; He is the Absolute. She is the Other."<sup>11</sup> That is to say, subjectivities that fall outside of the masculine neutral category are classified through a process of alterity and are thought of as deficient, lacking and are thus disempowered. Following on from de Beauvoir's claim, it can be argued that a feminist methodology seeks to re-assert the subjective and lived experience of the marginalised and relational Other within religious and academic discourse, championing the less powerful or elided perspective, asking different questions in their analysis or scrutinising established methodologic approaches for their omissions, oversights and biases. Multiple approaches and theoretical frameworks such as phenomenology psychoanalysis, post-structuralism, post-metaphysics, ethics, theology, and

---

<sup>10</sup> Irigaray, 'Cosi Fan Tutti', p. 87.

<sup>11</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (London: Vintage Books, 2009), pp. 5-6.

epistemology all are deployed through a feminist lens; in doing so, a feminist methodology not only challenges the discourses of religion and subjectivity, but also the efficacy of broader methodological frameworks themselves. As Anderson and Clack suggest, the praxis of feminist scholarship is thus characterised by continual self-reflexivity, self-criticality and self-consciousness, and an awareness and acknowledgment of the power inherent in speaking for others, consistently asking who is speaking and for whom: “What is the difference when, with an awareness of our gender(ing), we ask, ‘whose knowledge?’”<sup>12</sup> Having foregrounded the objectives, frameworks and praxis of feminist scholarship in the study of religion, the paper will now turn to its analysis of the religious dimensions of Bernini’s sculpture, demonstrating how a feminist methodological approach can expose and redress issues of gender and power by asking different questions and thus offering different perspectives.

### ***The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa***

A feminist analysis of the formal sculptural qualities of *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* reveals the extent to which a masculine interpretation of Teresa’s written account has rendered her a passive and fetishised object in her own narrative. As previously discussed, a feminist methodology in the study of religion considers the relationship between gender and power within religious discourse and practice, and thus seeks to interrogate and redress hegemonic socio-religious structures which simultaneously elide the agency and experience of the Othered subject. Therefore, this analysis will seek to reassert the agency and subjectivity of Teresa by placing Bernini’s sculpture into a dialectic with Teresa’s original text, foregrounding the implications of a masculine sculptural interpretation of a female subjective textual account.

Although there is debate amongst theologians and scholars of religion as to the exact time of its writing, it is widely accepted that the memoir *The Life of Saint Teresa of Jesus* is genuinely written by Teresa herself, finished around 1565 as a means of confession, with the ‘original’ document written “in the handwriting of the Saint” housed in the *El Escorial*, the historical royal residence of the Spanish monarchy.<sup>13</sup> These writings offer detailed and

---

<sup>12</sup> Anderson and Clack, ‘Introduction’, p. xiv; For example, in researching and writing this paper, I have attempted to practice this self-reflexivity by deliberately consulting female academics.

<sup>13</sup> Benedict Zimmerman, ‘Introduction’, to Teresa of Ávila, *The Life of Saint Teresa of Jesus: Of the Order of Our Lady of Carmel*, trans. David Lewis (London: Thomas Baker, 1911), p. xxxi.

intimate first-person accounts of what Teresa terms the “absolutely irresistible” experience of rapture and therefore represent some of the most important first person accounts of Christian mystical experience in existence.<sup>14</sup> The descriptions are deeply personal and use evocative and visceral language in an attempt to encapsulate the simultaneously “delicious” and “intense agony” of spiritual ecstasy; an experience which is definitively outside of written or spoken discourse.<sup>15</sup> Teresa thus describes her mystical experiences as feeling as if she is on the verge of death, but states that “when I am in them, I then wish to spend therein all the rest of my life, though the pain be so very great, that I can scarcely endure it.”<sup>16</sup> Arguably, the most famous of these accounts details an ecstatic experience in which she was rendered powerless as “a great force” lifted her up, and an angel pierced her heart with a spear of fire:

I saw in his hand a long spear of gold, and at the point there seemed to be a little fire. He appeared to me to be thrusting it at times into my heart, and to pierce my very entrails; when he drew it out, he seemed to draw them out also, and to leave me all on fire with a great love of God. The pain was so great, that it made me moan; and yet so surpassing was the sweetness of this excessive pain, that I could not wish to be rid of it. The soul is satisfied now with nothing less than God. The pain is not bodily but spiritual . . . It is a caressing of love so sweet which now takes place between the soul and God.<sup>17</sup>

Although there is no archival evidence for it, the striking similarities between the sculpture and text suggests that it is this specific passage that was used by Bernini as a reference for his sculpture, *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*. Commissioned in 1647 by the Venetian Cardinal Federico Cornaro, the sculpture is a celebration of the life of Teresa, who had been canonised twenty-five years prior by Pope Gregory XV in 1622, forty years after her death. Taking almost five years to complete and carved entirely from a singular slab of white Carrara marble, the ecstatic saint and her attendant spear-carrying seraphim seem to levitate amidst the ornate splendour of the Cornaro funerary chapel of the Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome. As the architect of the chapel itself, Bernini ensured that each element of the space operated in a dialectic with the sculpture: from the fresco and stained glass of the vaulted ceiling above, to the dancing skeletons on the marble pavement

---

<sup>14</sup> Teresa of Ávila, *The Life of Saint Teresa of Jesus*, p. 161.

<sup>15</sup> Teresa of Ávila, *The Life of Saint Teresa of Jesus*, pp. 161, 166.

<sup>16</sup> Teresa of Ávila, *The Life of Saint Teresa of Jesus*, p. 167.

<sup>17</sup> Teresa of Ávila, *The Life of Saint Teresa of Jesus*, pp. 266-7.

below. Completed at the height of the Baroque, the work is an exemplar of the period and clearly illustrates the ways in which artists appealed to the grandiose and visceral experience to inspire faith in God, overwhelming the viewer with awe-inspiring displays of heightened drama, opulence, and a sense of the miraculous. It is little wonder then, that the artist chose one of the most dramatic and sensual passages of Teresa's texts, depicting the Saint, not in quiet reflection or prayer of which she advocated, but limp in a state of ecstatic rapture.

Despite the overwhelming extravagance of the chapel, the moment captured by *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* dominates the space. Beams of gold radiate from behind the sculpture, framing the scene in a warm glow. The viewer is immediately drawn to the tension between the poised spear of the smiling seraphim and the gasping Teresa, the angel ready to strike as the Saint simultaneously recoils from and draws towards the spear tip. Her smooth and beautiful face is framed by the rippling fabric of her habit: mouth agape and eyes rolling back into her head, the marble eyelids seem to almost flutter. The undulating creases of her enveloping robes mirror the waves of electricity that flow through her body, pulsating out into the chapel through the contorting flesh of her dangling yet flexed fingers and toes. Undoubtedly as controversial today as when it was created, the sculpture and its interpretation have been the subject of debate and contention for over four centuries, simultaneously lauded as a masterpiece and derided as filth, with one contemporary petition against the work complaining that the sculpture "dragged that most pure Virgin not only into the Third Heaven but into the dirt, to make a Venus not only prostrate, but prostituted."<sup>18</sup>

Bernini's sculpture obviously depicts a moment of ecstasy, but is this *the* ecstasy of Saint Teresa? As evidenced in the passage from Teresa's original text, her description of the ecstasy is suffused with evocative energy, vividly portraying the embodied experience of her direct communion with God. For Teresa, the experience is simultaneously painful and pleasurable with one sensation indistinguishable from the other, describing the sensation as being a "sharp martyrdom, full of sweetness."<sup>19</sup> This sense of sensual tension is furthered through her use of overtly visceral language to describe her desire for the thrusting of the spear, her pleasure at the piercing of her entrails and her uncontrollable 'moans'. Although this is a spiritual

---

<sup>18</sup> Dany Nobus, 'The Sculptural Iconography of Feminine Jouissance: Lacan's Reading of Bernini's Saint Teresa in Ecstasy', *The Comparatist*, vol. 39 (2015), p. 23.

<sup>19</sup> Teresa of Ávila, *The Life of Saint Teresa of Jesus*, p. 166.

experience, and Teresa's language is highly sensual, it is not, necessarily, sexual. Dany Nobus suggests that while the text can be read erotically, the description itself positions the reader as confessor rather than observer, leaving "more to the reader's imagination."<sup>20</sup> This can clearly be contrasted with Bernini's sculpture, which makes a private moment into a very public spectacle. In doing so the act of viewing *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* transforms every viewer into a voyeur with Bernini offering Teresa's rapture up for, what Nobus terms, "eroticized observation: in staging the spectacle of ecstasy it turns every spectator into a voyeur, someone who is by definition too entrenched in his or her own *jouissance* to fully understand what there is to be seen."<sup>21</sup>

In addition to its erasure of her subjectivity, Bernini's sculpture can also be understood to be a fetishised objectification of the real Teresa. In its adherence to the aesthetics of the Baroque, Bernini's Teresa is strikingly beautiful but is in no way an accurate representation of the living Teresa. It is only after trawling through a plethora of sultry, pouting portraits such as *Sainte Thérèse* by François Gerard that an actual verifiable likeness is found, painted in 1567 by Fray Juan de la Misera when Teresa was sixty-one years of age.<sup>22</sup> Teresa is captured in quiet contemplation, her hands in prayer and eyes drawn above to the Dove of the Holy Spirit. She is clearly aged: fleshy and full faced, with deep lines around her eyes and cheeks. This likeness is in stark contrast to the ecstatic protagonist of Bernini's sculptural drama. The skin of the face is flawless and the hands and feet startlingly smooth. This is an obviously young and therefore 'attractive' woman. Given that Teresa's mystical experiences took place during her mid-forties in 1559-1561, it is clear that Bernini's ecstatic Teresa is a masculine fantasy; a homogenised, fetishised version of not only Teresa, but of the female experience itself. The extent to which *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* can be understood as an idealised and universalised depiction of female subjectivity is further evidenced through a comparison with another work by Bernini, *Blessed Ludovica Albertoni*.<sup>23</sup> Completed in 1674 as a funerary monument for another holy woman, Ludovica Albertoni (1473-1533), the work supposedly depicts the Italian mystic on her deathbed. Like Teresa, the sixty-year-old Ludovica has

---

<sup>20</sup> Nobus, 'The Sculptural Iconography of Feminine Jouissance', p. 27.

<sup>21</sup> Nobus, 'The Sculptural Iconography of Feminine Jouissance', p. 27.

<sup>22</sup> Françoise Gérard, *St. Teresa* (1827), oil on canvas; Fray Juan de la Misera, *Teresa de Jesús* (1576). Oil on canvas.

<sup>23</sup> Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Blessed Ludovica Albertoni* (1671-1674). Marble. Chisea di San Francesco a Ripa Grande.

been transformed into a youthful beauty, her flawless face consumed in a moment of rapture: head thrown back, eyes closed, her hand clutching her breast. Although the Teresa and Ludovica are entirely different in age and ethnicity, the expressions and faces are so similar that they are almost interchangeable.

This sense of sculptural fetishisation in *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* is furthered by the presentation of Teresa's private experience as public spectacle. The sculpture is flanked on the left and right by two frames which contain sculptures of eight men from the prestigious Cornaro family; dressed in finery, reading scripture, and talking animatedly. Although their individual attentions are not directed towards the ecstatic scene in the centre of the chapel, their collective presence affects a sense of spectacle; the men seated in theatre boxes ready to witness the performance. In this way, the ecstasy takes on a theatrical quality, a private movement transformed into a spectacle under the watchful eyes of the men in the boxes above: it is little wonder then, that the work has been described as a "peep show."<sup>24</sup> In this sense, Teresa's experience of ecstasy is interpreted not only by one man (Bernini) but also the collective gaze of the men witnessing it. Robert T. Petersson goes so far to suggest that their audience functions as a further interpretive of Teresa's narrative: "By placing the Cornaros above the viewer's level and almost on a level with the saint, Bernini makes us aware of them as human intermediaries between us and her."<sup>25</sup> Although he was writing at the height of the second wave of feminism, his interpretation of the scene is enduringly patriarchal. This problematic erasure of Teresa's subjectivity is apparent throughout his comparison of the text and sculpture. He goes on to argue that Bernini's sculpture is not a mere "skilful imitation" but is rather a recreation of the essence of Teresa's ecstasy, "It is as though (Bernini) became the experience he expressed."<sup>26</sup> Petersson's analysis thus presents Teresa's personal experience as secondary, relegating the woman and her text to the background, even going so far as to dismiss her autobiography as "the transformation of a wilful, rather hysterical girl into a likeable, sympathetic, and saintly woman."<sup>27</sup>

With these issues of diminished subjectivity and fetishisation in mind, is it possible to ascertain whether the ecstasy that Teresa described was not

---

<sup>24</sup> Schama, *The Power of Art*, p. 78.

<sup>25</sup> Petersson, *The Art of Ecstasy*, p. 62.

<sup>26</sup> Petersson, *The Art of Ecstasy*, p. ix.

<sup>27</sup> Petersson, *The Art of Ecstasy*, p. 14.

just sensual but sexual, or are such assumptions always to be couched in patriarchal assumptions about alleged women's inability to experience the spiritual beyond the physical? According to Nobus, this is dependent upon the viewer: "whether Teresa's experience is considered via her own text or via Bernini's sculpture, it is the position of the interpreter as confessor or observer, as much as the contents of the work that is responsible for the effect."<sup>28</sup> Although Nobus is correct to an extent, his position fails to acknowledge the underlying issues of power and gender at play. As Samuel Weber argues, far from being able to ascertain a singular definitive truth or meaning, interpretation is "a struggle to overwhelm and to dislodge an already existing, dominant interpretation and thus to establish its own authority."<sup>29</sup> Therefore, the process of interpretation is an ongoing, evolving and diachronic phenomenon, bound to the institutions of hegemony with the interests of reifying and perpetuating its power.

It is therefore crucial to consider the location of the sculpture, a Christian church, as a further form of interpretation and domestication of Teresa's narrative and thus her subjectivity. In the case of the Catholic church in the middle ages, categories such as the Mystic/Hysteric or Virgin/Whore were often designated through ecclesiastical judgements and councils, with Teresa's male counterparts originally judging her as being "deluded by an evil spirit" and under the power of Satan.<sup>30</sup> However, during the time of Bernini, this ecclesiastical pedagogy was most clearly perpetuated publicly through the visual arts: a realm dominated by the interpretations, representations, and gazes of men. It can thus be argued that Bernini's sculpture represents an attempt to domesticate and 'close' the interpretation of Teresa's text; a document that posed a serious threat to the ecclesiastical establishment and patriarchal authority. In order to fully illustrate this, this article will now turn its analysis of Bernini's sculpture to the socio-religious discourse of Christian Mysticism from which it emerged, and the ways in which it sought to police and regulate the female subjective experience.

---

<sup>28</sup> Nobus, 'The Sculptural Iconography of Feminine Jouissance', p. 27.

<sup>29</sup> Samuel Weber, *Institution and Interpretation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 5.

<sup>30</sup> Zimmerman, 'Introduction', to Teresa of Ávila, *The Life of Saint Teresa of Jesus*, p. xvi.

### Mystic or Heretic? Christian Mysticism as a Tool of Patriarchy

As a mystic, Teresa of Ávila's experience of the divine was intensely personal, embodied, and subjective and though shared through textual description, existed outside of the hegemonic power structures which regulated knowledge of God through androcentric discourse. Broadly speaking, Christian mysticism is fundamentally concerned with the attainment of spiritual wisdom or insight through direct and experiential communication with the divine. Because of its reliance on trans-empirical and embodied knowledge, the majority of mystics who experienced spiritual ecstasy were female. Grace M. Jantzen argues that "It was the rootedness in experience which made women mystics different from many theological writers and even many male mystics of the time."<sup>31</sup> Removed from the 'rationality' of theology, the 'irrational' and uncontrollable state of ecstasy has often been linked to the negative alternative state produced by the 'wandering womb': hysteria.<sup>32</sup> This dichotomy is profoundly gendered and was therefore a significant site of struggle, with the categories wielded by patriarchal Christian hegemony as a means of regulating and domesticating female subjectivity.

In addition to issues of women's subjugation, the mystical experience in the time of Teresa was indelibly tied to the wresting of power from clerical authority during the Reformation. As Jantzen observes, the risks to the ecclesiastical establishment during the middle ages is obvious: "a person who was acknowledged to have direct access to God would be in a position to challenge any form of authority, whether doctrinal or political, which she saw as incompatible with the divine will."<sup>33</sup> Although the female mystic operated within the confines of the church, the means through which her knowledge of God was produced was distinctively outside of normative religious praxis. While men were able to access scripture directly through reading and writing, the majority of women were not afforded the "usual routes of education and ecclesiastical preferment" and thus relied on the intermediary of a priest or teacher for their knowledge of the Word of God.<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*, p. 159.

<sup>32</sup> This overt gendering of knowledge and its ontological separation of the mind and body has its antecedents in the Cartesian cogito: *je pense, donc je suis*. In asserting the thinking mind as the first proof of existence, Descartes cleaves bodily experience from foundational forms of knowledge and thus relegates the body and phenomenological epistemologies as secondary, uncertain and doubtful.

<sup>33</sup> Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*, p. 1.

<sup>34</sup> Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*, p. 159.

But the mystic claimed direct access to God, and for the female mystic this was often by way of their women's bodies and intimate experiences. This alternate means not only sidestepped but threatened the stability of patriarchal Christian hegemony.

Because of the significant risks posed, it was—is—therefore crucial for masculine Christianity to retain control over the depiction and thus the interpretation of the feminine mystical experience through its regulatory dichotomy of the Mystic Saint/Hysterical Whore.<sup>35</sup> The ambiguity of sexual metaphors in descriptions of rapturous experience enable the boundary between these binaries to be constructed by those in charge of the broader discourse. This power, wielded by men over women through religious discourse, has long acted as a regulatory force, policing female subjectivity and agency through its authoritative designation of sanctified or heretical experience; if the conversation was not with God, then it was with the Devil; if it was not just sensual but sexual it was the result of hysteria. Mystical experiences thus carried feminine markers, as Christine Mazzoni observes, while the majority of mystics were female “if they are men, they must place themselves on the side of the not-all, on the side of the barred W/oman.”<sup>36</sup> That is to say, in the case of a male mystic, his position as the neutral masculine subject is necessarily sacrificed. Therefore, as Jantzen argues, the category itself is not a fixed and enduring concept but is rather an ongoing process of negotiation contingent with other emerging and evolving sociocultural discourses of religiosity and the role of women in society.<sup>37</sup>

### **Whose Pleasure? Academic Interpretation**

In the case of Teresa, the attempt to ‘close’ or finalise the interpretation of her ecstasy as orgasmic or otherwise is overwhelmingly framed by discourses of patriarchal Christian hegemony and is thus bound up with its regulation of gender and power. Simply put, masculine subjectivity is not subjected to the same sexualisation as its female counterpart, and this is no less the case for Christian mystics. It is Bernini's sculpture, a masculine interpretation and articulation of female subjectivity, that has become the simulacrum of the ‘real’ Teresa in the cultural imagination. As Irigaray

---

<sup>35</sup> Although it is beyond the scope of this article, a powerful example of the extremes of this dichotomy can be made here with life of Joan of Arc. Canonised almost five-hundred years after her death, the saint was burnt at the stake as a suspected heretic.

<sup>36</sup> Christina Mazzoni, *Saint Hysteria: Neurosis, Mysticism, and Gender in European Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 47.

<sup>37</sup> Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*, p. 13.

argues, “Psychoanalytic discourse on female sexuality is the discourse of truth. A discourse that tells the truth about the logic of truth: namely that the *feminine occurs only within models and laws devised by male subjects*.”<sup>38</sup> In this way, the medium itself is a silencing: the saint reduced to a fetishised object forever frozen and voiceless while the written text of Teresa of Ávila, her experience, her subjectivity and thus her agency as a speaking subject has become secondary to the masculine interpretation of her narrative. The real Teresa, her written texts, her achievements in the Carmelite reformation and her appointment as Doctor of the Church are noticeably absent from Bernini’s representation. She is reduced to a single ‘orgasmic’ moment, while a (masculine) smirking cherub stands over her, with one hand lifting her robes, the other holding a spear poised to penetrate her through the rippling fabric. Yet while her experience is central to the portrayal, she does not appear a figure of power or agency. As Irigaray argues: “so long as she is not a subject, so long as she cannot disrupt through her speech, her desire, *her pleasure*.”<sup>39</sup>

Dany Nobus suggests that a return to Teresa’s text would be of little benefit, “as if the text of the vision were intrinsically more ambiguous than Bernini’s statue,” but his dismissal of a return to the words, and thus the subjectivity of Teresa, is obviously problematic and left unchecked can lead to overtly misogynist and universalising claims. In the case of Teresa, this is most clearly evidenced in Jacques Lacan’s famous assertion that “*Elle jouit, ca ne fait pas de doute*.”<sup>40</sup> Lacan’s assurance that he is the authority on what she is ‘getting off on’, that he can ascertain the essence of Teresa’s ecstasy as orgasmic *jouissance* by merely looking at a masculine interpretation of female subjective experience is telling and speaks to the larger issues of gender and power at the heart of scholarship in the study of religion. As Mazzoni argues

By stressing the visual dimension of the mystic’s utterance, that is by affirming the sufficiency of looking at the mystic in order to understand her message, Lacan is clearly making a reductive and patronizing move. Not only does he rely on a man’s graven image of a woman’s verbal account, but he also regresses to the positivistic attitude ... where doctors, wrapped up in their contemplation and

---

<sup>38</sup> Irigaray, ‘Cosi Fan Tutti’, p. 86.

<sup>39</sup> Irigaray, ‘Cosi Fan Tutti’, p. 95.

<sup>40</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre XX: Encore*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: du Seuil, 1975).

compulsive photographing, did not bother to listen to the hysteric's and the mystic's words.<sup>41</sup>

Lacan's interpretation of Teresa's *jouissance* conveniently perpetuates a misogynist Christian doctrine and reification of patriarchal hegemony through academic praxis.

## **Conclusion**

In offering a feminist analysis of *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* by Gian Lorenzo Bernini, this article has highlighted the extent to which the sculpture can be understood to be a product of Christian patriarchal hegemony and the how it simultaneously silences, fetishises, and domesticates Teresa's subjective experience. In an expanded version of this discussion, further analysis of female sexuality would be undertaken, with a focus on how the artwork and the dichotomy of the mystic/hysteric can be understood as a domestication of the female orgasm. In addition to this, a more detailed discussion of the aesthetics of the Baroque sculpture and female beauty would be provided.

The scope of this analysis however, focused on female agency as a speaking subject and the relationship between gender and power and the ways in which women and their experiences have been elided or erased in religious, sociological and academic discourse. It began by locating its analysis within the framework of feminist methodology in the study of religion, discussing the objectives and praxis and then turned to a comparison of the sculpture with Teresa's original text, arguing that Bernini's sculpture can be understood as not only a masculine interpretation and articulation of a woman's experience, but also as a fetishised and abstracted imaginary. The analysis then placed the work in the broader context of Christian mysticism and its regulatory discourse which policed and domesticated female experiences which threatened the authority of the church. The analysis then concluded with a discussion of how androcentric academic interpretations of the work continue to perpetuate this erasure of Teresa's subjectivity. Although a feminist analysis is one of many potential interpretive perspectives, it nevertheless reveals a powerful insight into Bernini's sculpture; that although Teresa is at the centre of the work, her voice is very far from being at the centre of its narrative. In the spirit of its methodological approach, this article has attempted to reassert this voice by exposing the patriarchal Christian structures that have and continue to silence it.

---

<sup>41</sup> Mazzoni, *Saint Hysteria*, p. 46.