

Reconsidering Saint Teresa and golden age religious history

Author: Elizabeth Rhodes

Persistent link: <http://hdl.handle.net/2345/2446>

This work is posted on [eScholarship@BC](#),
Boston College University Libraries.

Published in *Journal of Hispanic Philology*, vol. 14, no. 3, pp. 277-285, Spring 1990

These materials are made available for use in research, teaching and private study, pursuant to U.S. Copyright Law. The user must assume full responsibility for any use of the materials, including but not limited to, infringement of copyright and publication rights of reproduced materials. Any materials used for academic research or otherwise should be fully credited with the source. The publisher or original authors may retain copyright to the materials.

Review Article

RECONSIDERING SAINT TERESA AND GOLDEN AGE RELIGIOUS HISTORY*

Elizabeth Rhodes

TO anyone who takes the time to think about it, the solid and enduring presence of Teresa of Ávila in the Golden Age literary canon is very suspicious. How did a woman get in there? Further contemplation of the matter provokes a smirk from the feminists: she is, after all, safely surrounded therein by men, whose formal education is at odds with Teresa's lack of the same, and whose writings are likewise completely different from hers. She is unique. Said differently, she appears to have posed no threat to her male companions among the classics. Obliging, she denigrates herself and her sex sufficiently to placate the dominant ego—so well that no one until Weber really got a handle on her tactics—yet at the same time, there she is, right next to Luis de León and Miguel de Cervantes, disproving the seemingly humble foundations of her own arguments. How can we reconcile the Saint's fundamental insistence that she was merely "mujer y ruin" with the undeniable proof that she was anything but (in her single-handed dominion over the Spanish literary religious canon, for one thing)? This is the problem Alison Weber approaches in her book, proposing in essence that Saint Teresa employed, consciously or not, certain rhetorical strategies particularly characteristic of women's discourse that served to disarm her dominant readers (men) and still communicate a subversive and supportive message to her dominated ones (mostly women).

The Introduction provides an important recapitulation of literary critics' approaches to Teresa's works which aptly justifies the chapters that follow. Rather than slough off the Saint's success as "feminine charm" or another of the sexist short-cuts heretofore employed, Weber cuts to the words themselves, and projects them onto Teresa's historical context. That pro-

* Alison Weber. *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990. xi + 183 pp. ISBN: 0-691-06812-7. [Bibliography; Index.]

jection is illuminated by contemporary concepts of psychology and linguistics, introduced here and employed in subsequent chapters. Weber states outright her decision to focus on gender as a stylistic determinant, in spite of the fact that the studies she quotes indicate that gender in itself is merely a correlative of other variables in social behavior such as speech. To the extent that this is actually accomplished, then, Weber's argument is admittedly slanted.

Chapter I presents Weber's account of the perilous spiritual environment in which Teresa was immersed. Chief among the factors in that account are traditional Christian misogyny followed by what Weber calls consolidation of Counter-reformation misogyny, the illuminist movement, and the "discouragement" of holy women as the sixteenth century progressed. This situation made it extremely difficult to write about religious experience after the mid-sixteenth century, and more so for a woman. The essential point that the religious turmoil surrounding Teresa deeply conditioned the nature of her self-expression is well taken. There are, however, parts of the historical context involved whose inclusion would have made the account more representative of Teresa's own religious environment. As things stand, the sources and cases Weber cites are those of the same elitist and marginal texts consistently employed by the literary scholars whose arguments about Teresa's rhetoric she so effectively undermines. Since this first chapter serves as a foundation for her following arguments, however, I reserve my misgivings until later on for the sake of presenting her thesis in its entirety.

Chapter II approaches Teresa's *Vida*, a text Weber approaches as a confession written at the behest of superiors, purportedly for their examination of Teresa herself, lacking the modern autobiographical drive of individuality. Weber here employs the psychological concept of the double-bind, meaning the illusion of choice within a relationship. Obligated by her religious convictions and her sex to be humble, Teresa also realized that the humble did not write (and certainly did not write on and on) about themselves. Assuming she was obliged to compose her life's story, however, this left her with a baffling set of contradictions which Weber addresses nicely. For example, she considers how Teresa concedes authority to her supposed readers by confessing to innumerable and often generic sins, yet at the same time undermines that authority to her own advantage. Teresa carefully selects which sins to present as generic, and lets disclaimers drop throughout their exposition which leave her imitable qualities intact, thereby allowing her to proceed with the narration. Continuing to address the narrative's subtext, Weber also explores Teresa's relationship with her father, other nuns, and individuals in whose lives she obviously effected a moral change, yet a change for which she could not claim credit and still maintain that crucial humility. Weber summarizes eloquently, saying, "In *The Book of Her Life* Teresa executes speech acts whose *force* is confessional: she repeatedly asserts that she performed certain actions and ex-

presses sorrow for them, and does so within an institutional hierarchy that gives ritual significance to the conjunction of such verbal acts. But the rhetorical *effect* is defensive" (p. 64). The chapter concludes extracting the elements of Teresa's mixed linguistic strategy, applying Penelope Brown's descriptions of positive politeness (tactics promoting identification between speaker and listener) and negative politeness (promoting the listener's autonomy, at the speaker's expense). By reconstructing Teresa's phantom addressees, Weber uncovers a text replete with tensions and complexities, dexterously managed so as to weave a subtle web around the Saint's readers. That text leads them to identify with her and thereby cracks the foundations of their authority.

Chapter III deals with *Camino de perfección*, a text originally conceived as a treatise on prayer for the twelve nuns at the convent of San José. Although written for women, it nonetheless had to successfully pass through the hands of Teresa's male superiors; here we have, then, an exacerbated version of the rhetorical dilemmas present in the *Vida*. Weber provides a concise yet thorough exposition of the manuscript's transformation. Using its three codices, Weber convincingly identifies the myriad of difficulties the text poses, particularly as regards its multi-layered spectrum of readers. Carefully tracing what we might term Teresa's dance through the minefield, she illustrates how the *Camino* changed from a relatively intimate text, dominated by an irony made possible by the nuns' familiarity with Teresa herself, into a more authoritative, stylized treatise for a broader audience that negotiates more carefully the potential afforded by irony and manipulation of the diminutive. Given the fact that we have no uncensored expository text by Teresa, and certainly none in which she declares her intentions, Weber's concluding assertion, that "Teresa consciously adopted, as a rhetorical strategy, linguistic features that were associated with women, in the sense that women's discourse coincided with the realm of low-prestige, nonpublic discourse" (p. 97) is strong indeed. Although it also convincingly reveals the difficulties that discrepant readerships imposed on the work, this is a heavily ironic reading. It pushes Weber's association between Teresa and Aristotle's *eiron* (the one who, if deceptive, is so in order "to avoid parade"; p. 15) to the thin line it shares with the Machiavellianism Weber disclaims in her introduction.

Chapter IV treats the *Castillo interior*, proposing that Teresa purposefully shifted metaphors across her text to meet the contradictory demands of orthodoxy and mystical reality. Weber shows how Teresa is bold in her delicate but persistent use of erotic images. Among the strategies considered are Teresa's claim of incompetence, her imprecise use of scripture, and the text's irregularity of structure and imagery. Weber assumes, then, that Teresa believed herself to be competent, and that she knew the scriptures well enough to quote them exactly but did not do so to avoid bringing censure upon herself. She also assumes that Teresa believed that mystical experience can be (and under normal circumstances, is rightly) ex-

pressed in an orderly, consistent discourse.

Chapter V deals with the *Libro de las fundaciones*. Weber presents an excellent study of Teresa the authority on convent foundations and Teresa the founder, working at odds with authority itself. She reveals how humorous the text is, a quality that offsets its many tales of Teresa's serious conflicts with (i.e., hoodwinking of, disregard of) her superiors. Weber suggests that Teresa's quest for religious foundations is an extension of her search for an ideal home, and compares her restless marginality to that of the rogue.

The crux of the *Fundaciones* is exemplarity. Therein, Teresa must create a narrator distinct from herself, because whereas she was disobedient, she must inspire obedience in her readers while telling her own story. The text is thus particularly cautious in matters of doctrine and morality, and Teresa takes an almost clinical interest in female hysteria, which she deals with as melancholy. All were able tactics to meet the demands of her status, and as Weber rightly points out, all were at least partially untrue to her own experience. By singling out three stories in the *Fundaciones* in which Teresa recounts how women escaped from their secular lives to enter the convent, Weber draws attention to Teresa's willingness to elaborate on events that reflect her own experience of rejecting the paternal home and integration into a higher, ideal authority. This is the strongest and most interesting chapter, particularly for its revelation of how Teresa coped with the attainment of the authority that she herself had challenged for such a long time.

The Conclusion describes briefly how Teresa's works were received during the first ten years after her death, and how the royal family saved them from conservative theologians. Weber's ending remarks are particularly fine, returning us to her introduction and reminding us how a female prodigy could only be integrated into the general scheme of things as a virile woman, as Teresa was often described. Weber's conclusion also ably points to one of the most paradoxical elements of Teresa's story: through her works, which stress humility and subordination, she perpetuated values whose validity her own history disproved.

I applaud Weber's debunking of the "feminine mystique" explanation of Teresa's style. At the same time, I am uneasy with her implicit denigration of affective, low-register discourse, for in it, I hear echoes of the misogynist criticism that invented the "feminine mystique" concept in the first place. For example, Weber's idea that Teresa purposefully marked her *Camino* texts as feminine so as to make them non-threatening (p. 93), or her thesis that Teresa's recourse to the colloquial in the *Castillo interior* was intended to place her text "within the protective confines of women's conversation" (p. 103), reduce that discourse to mere rhetorical strategy, and minimize or exclude any inherent value it may have had for the author and her readers. Since Weber finds this intentionally humble discourse, to

one degree or another, in all the works she studies, can we share her assumption that Teresa could have written any other way? Do the Saint's letters, which are abundant and important, and perhaps as close to her spontaneous discourse as we can get, also reflect this strategy? Some consideration of them might have clarified this point.

This study is a finely cut gem that does rare justice to its raw material. The theses about Teresa herself, and the careful attention devoted to her language, are convincing and methodologically inspiring. However, the historical setting and critical apparatus in which they are soldered are at odds with those theses themselves, and often imprecise. It is disconcerting, and surprising from Weber, whose guest editorial in *JHP*, 13, No. 3 is an unmatched piece of scholarship, that she uses the masculine default linguistic code (e.g., "the expertise that conferred on him," p. 49; "God's love for man," p. 119). Although she was willing to alter Peers' translations when she found them excessively archaic (Chapter 5), she was not willing to alter them generically, even for the *Castillo interior*, which was originally written for women (thus, p. 104: "a person to be very much in his senses and see his soul"). The critical context in which this language is couched reflects the same default tradition. Weber unfortunately continues in the school of literary critics who neglect the profound influence of strictly religious culture on the Golden Age as a whole. Some in-depth consideration of Teresa's precursors and contemporaries in religious literature might have avoided some of the misleading background information with which we are sometimes supplied. Although they are details, together they create an overall impression.

The contention in Chapter I that *beatas* were persecuted with special zeal in the post-Cisneros period is based strongly on the case of the would-be holy woman Magdalena de la Cruz. The history of these women is being written only now, and slowly at that. It may be too early to contend that women's spirituality was more in peril than it ever was because Sor Magdalena was determined to be a fraud whereas María de Santo Domingo was not. Close examination of their stories belies facile conclusions. For example, the case of María de la Visitación (1584) calls into question Weber's contention that after the 1524 outbreak of illuminism the "willingness to concede interpretive and even vatic powers to an unlettered woman would be inconceivable" (p. 27). This María's visions and wounds were sanctioned by Cardinal Albert, Archduke of Austria and Viceroy of Portugal, the Archbishop of Lisbon, the Inquisition itself, and even Pope Gregory XIII. She was silenced and determined to be a hoax only when she began to preach against Felipe II's presence in Portugal. Clearly, gender in religion is more complex than it may seem.¹

¹ Bynum's essay is extremely helpful: "... 'And Woman His Humanity': Female Imagery in the Religious Writing of the Later Middle Ages," in *Gender and Religion*:

Weber maintains that misogyny developed beyond its already respectable boundaries after what she presents as something of a golden age for women religious during the first quarter of the sixteenth century. Still, in 1554 Luis de Granada, among the many ardent supporters of María de la Visitación at the end of the century, repeatedly compared monks of cold meditational habits unfavorably with the pious and zealous married woman, or with "la viejecita hilando en su casa."² Gender is not the crucial factor here—Granada was no feminist. The issue is rather the level of one's humility, and one's disposition to submit to divine will.

Victimization during the period was not merely a matter of religious practice or gender either. Bartolomé Carranza, whom Weber cites as a representative victim of the Inquisition because of his liberal spirituality, was relentlessly pursued as much because of Fernando de Valdés's personal jealousy and enmity as because of the nature of his piety. The *Comentarios* on Carranza's *Catechismo* by Melchor Cano, Valdés's theological bouncer, are a rhetorical masterpiece that define heresy as they go along. Likewise, I wonder whether Teresa's imagery of the suckling soul in the *Fundaciones* is really "audacious" (p. 111, n. 71); it appears regularly in Catholic reformist treatises throughout the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. (Granada used it repeatedly in the *Libro de la oración*.)

The ironic reading of Teresa's repeated references to over-scrupulousness (pp. 90-91) does not take into account that such scruples were the mainstay of confession. They are enumerated in a multitude of sincere religious works, such as Luisa de Carvajal y Mendoza's *Escritos autobiográficos*, Juan de Ávila's sermons and *Audi, filia*, and Luis de Granada's *Libro de la oración*. The frequency of the topic and its special significance to women, however trivial it seems to readers today, might suggest that Teresa's treatment of it is not ironic, or at least not always so. Some comparative texts would substantiate this argument considerably. Most importantly, Weber's repeated references to "censored mental prayer" (pp. 61, 79, 83) over-simplify an essential issue: mental prayer was not prohibited, in practice or in literature. Granada's *Libro de la oración*, the most-printed book of the sixteenth century, is a manual for mental prayer. There were conditions under which it could be practiced and treated, however, and these should be spelled out, since Teresa evidently understood them perfectly.

These observations ultimately derive from the reservations about Chapter I mentioned above. To emphasize the Erasmists, illuminists, and *beatas*

On the Complexities of Symbols, ed. Carolyn Walter Bynum (Boston: Beacon, 1986), pp. 257-88.

² Álvaro Huerga, "Fray Luis en Escalaceli. Nuevos datos para el conocimiento histórico y espiritual de su vida," *Hispania* [Madrid] 9, 10 (1949; 1950): 434-80; 297-335.

in any account of sixteenth-century Spanish spirituality distorts the period's religious history and literature, by representing the marginal as the majority. The majority, working through Spanish reformist Catholicism, flourished, albeit cautiously, throughout the century. As recent studies in printing and literacy patterns indicate,³ it was they who wrote the books that stocked the book-sellers' stores, not the Christian humanists. These writers both forced Valdés's censorship and managed (most of them) to survive it, because they bent to the powerful Church's will rather than break. They inspired Teresa herself, who was not the child of Erasmus, Vives, or the illuminists as much as a daughter of the *recogidos* and other reformist Catholics.

Weber is in good company in this tendency to favor the Christian humanists and the heretics in literary studies of the period; almost all Golden Age scholars do it. But whereas in a book about Cervantes such favoritism can pass unperceived, in one about Saint Teresa, the incongruity is more striking. The problem is largely one of sources. To describe Spain's religious climate using primarily Bataillon's magisterial but purposefully limited *Erasmus y España* is to repeat an error that Bataillon himself recognized in his prologue to the Spanish translation of 1950. In it, he acknowledged that his book did not sufficiently represent the power of Spain's non-Erasmist reformism, precisely what might have influenced Teresa's rhetoric the most: Spanish medieval piety and its continuations into the sixteenth century, especially the pervasive influence of Juan de Ávila. To state that *Erasmus y España* has not been seriously challenged since 1937 (p. 23) is to ignore not only the vital polemic the book inspired by scholars as illustrious as Asensio, Castro, and Whinnom (to cite a few), but also the previously unavailable religious literature and documents that the same polemic brought to light.⁴ An intimate familiarity with these complexities is essen-

³ Keith Whinnom, "The Problem of the Best-Seller in Spanish Golden-Age Literature," *BHS* 57 (1980): 198-98; Sara T. Nalle, "Literacy and Culture in Early Modern Castile," *Past and Present* 125 (1989): 65-96.

⁴ For example, there are those who have supported or mildly modified Bataillon's thesis of the pervasive influence of Erasmus in Spain, such as Pierre Groult: *Literatura espiritual española: Edad Media y Renacimiento*, trans. Rodrigo A. Molina (Madrid: Fundación Universitaria Española, 1980); *Los místicos de los países bajos y la literatura espiritual española del siglo XVI*, trans. Rodrigo A. Molina (Madrid: Fundación Universitaria Española, 1976). Equally important are those who disagree with the focus of the French scholar's work, believing it underplays Spanish piety in favor of northern European currents. Most of these follow in the line of Eugenio Asensio's article "El erasmismo y las corrientes espirituales afines," *RFE*, 36 (1952), 31-99, Américo Castro's "Lo hispánico y el erasmismo," *Revista de Filología Hispánica*, 1 (1942), 1-66, and Keith Whinnom's "The Supposed Source of Inspiration of Spanish Fifteenth-Century Narrative Religious Verse," *Symposium*, 17 (1963), 268-91. Melquíades Andrés Martín's important book, *Los recogidos: Nueva visión de la mística española (1500-1700)* (Madrid: Fundación Universitaria Española, 1976) is a *risposta* to Batai-

tial to study a religious author; the complexities of Teresa's writings reflect them.

Exploring the matrix of Spanish piety during this period might allow us to refocus Teresa's rhetoric into an offensive position to complement the largely defensive posture in which she is portrayed here. For instance, Weber proposes that Teresa's self-deprecating language and use of the traditional humility topic is unusual when compared with other religious writers of the times such as Granada or Osuna (p. 50), and this provides a springboard for one of her most important themes. This may be something of an apples and oranges comparison, at Teresa's expense. So far as I know, Teresa is the only canonical Golden Age author whose primary subject was herself. What is more, that is basically all she wrote about, as most women writers of the period wrote about themselves. In contrast, in the multitude of his works, Luis de Granada never divulged any personal history: a letter to him from Juan de Ávila advises him to keep his mystical experiences to himself, as did all the great mystics *except* Teresa. Even Juan de la Cruz resorted to metaphor to describe his. I know of no important male religious who wrote documentary accounts of their intimate relationship with the divine, and none who wrote their own *Vidas*. Naturally, then, neither Osuna nor Granada dwells on his humility as Teresa did; neither called it into question as audaciously as she did either. This is extremely significant and problematic. Was Teresa's imposed writing of her love relationship with God a violation of her privacy?

Whereas the male writers of the Catholic reform prescribed, Teresa and other women writers lacked this public power. Forging another, more personal power, they enacted what their faith demanded of them: they testified for it individually. For example, Osuna insists that the individual recognize his or her own worthlessness. Teresa does so. He prescribes total humility, she struggles with the means to display it, while expressing it. Whereas the men could tell, the women had to show. Might this not be an important source of Teresa's rhetorical acrobatics? She was, then, operating *within* a familiar context, supporting something, not only struggling against her opposition. She approaches familiar material from a new angle, that of her personal experience; her job was much more difficult than the men's because she had to exemplify—verbally—what they merely described.

Although Weber does a convincing job of uncovering the risks Teresa ran by picking up her pen, the Saint's rhetoric still offers territory for exploration. For me, to read Teresa's works as the product of persecution and danger, or as the constant manipulation of her own ideas to avoid trouble, is to see the glass half empty rather than half filled. It dangerously

Ilon's thesis. The latter displays prejudices toward the Dominicans, just as Bataillon's thesis favors his own "order," the Christian humanists.

underplays the value of feminine discourse itself, turning it into a mere instrument to another end rather than a valid end in itself. Further, Teresa was one of many Catholic reformists struggling to make Christ live in the world. She did not spring fully armed with her rhetoric from the divine head, but was nurtured by a rich tradition, a Spanish religious tradition, with its own rhetoric which deserves recognition. There is no doubt that she had a difficult time triumphing. There is no doubt that the times were turbulent, and women were probably more sensitive to that turbulence than men. But I agree with Weber that Teresa enjoyed a challenge, at the same time I would deny that she is constantly being challenged in her works. Teresa was a woman who loved to talk, write, and laugh, ready to tangle—in one way or another—with anyone who got in her way. And the Inquisition? “God help the Yankees if they get you, Scarlet.” (They did, and evidently God did.)

My congratulations to Professor Weber for uncovering Teresa’s words, for identifying Teresa’s many and varied readers, for setting us a new direction. She does an excellent job articulating some almost ineffable ideas, and her own rhetoric is splendid.

Department of Romance Languages
and Literatures
Boston College
Chestnut Hill, MA 02167 (USA)