The Castle & The Keep

A Gender Study of the Lives and Written Works of Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross

Ryan Jurison
The Castle & The Keep

A Gender Study of the Lives and Written Works of Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross

Ryan Jurison

Abstract

An examination of Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, applying modern theories of gender and sexuality to the textual analysis of a selection of primary written works and biographical works, in order to determine the roles that they play, not only in the case of these two saints of the Catholic Church, but also within the mystical tradition as a whole.

Keywords:
St. Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, Gender Studies, Catholic Church, Counter Reformation, Discalced Carmelites, Spanish Mysticism, Doctors of the Church, Spanish Inquisition, mysticism, Alfred C. Kinsey, Judith Butler, Corporeal Realm, Ethereal Realm
Contents

Introduction ..................................................................................................................... 4
Purpose .............................................................................................................................. 5
Research Objectives ........................................................................................................ 6
Method ............................................................................................................................... 6
Hypothesis ........................................................................................................................ 7
Theory ............................................................................................................................... 7
Analysis ............................................................................................................................ 9
Synthesis ......................................................................................................................... 28
Results ............................................................................................................................. 32
Discussion ......................................................................................................................... 32
Conclusion ......................................................................................................................... 34
List of References ............................................................................................................ 36
List of Internet References .............................................................................................. 38
Introduction

“We are not angels, and we have bodies.”¹

Teresa of Avila wrote these words in her autobiography, completed in 1565.² She along with her contemporary and confessor, John of the Cross (otherwise known as Juan de Yepes, and John of St. Matthias),³ are two of the luminaries of the Catholic Church during a period which is often referred to, though not unproblematically, as the Counter Reformation. They are credited with reforming the Carmelite Order, founding the Discalced (that is to say “barefoot”) Carmelites. Together they form what can be described as the bedrock of Spanish or Castilian mysticism.⁴ Their works have been widely read in the succeeding centuries, and both have been appointed as Doctors of the Church.⁵ John of the Cross, the Doctor of Mystical Theology (Doctor Mysticus) was appointed in 1926,⁶ and Teresa of Avila, the “Virgin Doctor”⁷ or “Virgin and Doctor of Prayer,”⁸ the first woman to be so promoted, was appointed in 1970.⁹ This is a remarkable achievement for two people of converso background, who transcended the historical context of the Spanish Inquisition, and its obsession with “blood purity.”¹⁰

Mysticism, if it shall here be defined for further use in this study, can be viewed as an individualistic, concerted effort to reach or enter a state of relationship with God or Christ. This is achieved through a directed, inward approach, accomplished initially with the help of spiritual practices such as fasting and prayer, and towards the final goal of unification. This approach, according to Gillian T.W. Ahlgren, was developed from the concept of recogimiento, or the soul seeking God within its own heart.¹¹ The desired union that is achieved is analogous to the chemical process of combining solute to a solvent to form either a chemical solution (characterized by the dissolving of the soul into God), or an immiscible liquid (in which the soul and God are combined, and there is distinctio sed non separatio—"distinction but not separation” ).¹²

¹ Life, Ch. 22.11, trans./ed. Peers, 2010.
² Teresa of Avila 2010: p. xxix.
⁴ Green 1938: p. 93.
¹² MacCulloch 2009: p. 635. The Latin terms are borrowed as used here.
To put it another—perhaps more “Teresian” way—the relation of the individual human to God is like that of a single bubble in an unending ocean. We can think of this particular bubble being itself filled with water not unlike that which surrounds it, and as Teresa of Avila herself describes, the soul is made in the likeness of God. The walls of this bubble, representing the body, can be pierced and/or transcended, thereafter the “waters” are free to commingle. The ocean (God) cannot be added to nor subtracted from, and the waters either mix so that the soul can no longer be identified and are thusly dissolved into the “body” of the ocean, and are indistinguishable, or that there yet remains some ability to discern the “water” of the individual soul from the water that comprises the ocean, despite the absence of the bubble wall.

Indeed, this is a difficult phenomenon to explain. Defining mysticism is, in a sense, like trying to gather smoke with only your hands. This is a simile that I suspect would be met with the approval of both John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila, who agree that language fails miserably to represent this concept to any adequate degree. John of the Cross, at any rate, seems to favor the idea of the soul’s being dissolved into God or Christ.

Whether the journey is represented, as with John of the Cross, as an outward journey by night, aided by a “Church militant” and a “Church triumphant,” or Teresa of Avila’s inward one, discovering the rooms of a castle inside, we find in the descriptions of this mystical path that it is one that requires courage, and fortitude. We find in this study that John of the Cross, the Master of the Keep, attempts to arm the would-be traveler of this path for a venture outward, towards and into spiritual battle, while Teresa of Avila provides a guided tour of the fortifications of their Castle home, and a different road to the same end.

It is not, however, the aim of this study to examine mysticism itself in the fullness of its expression. Here we shall concentrate upon the ever-connected issues of gender and sexuality, using Alfred C. Kinsey’s theory of human sexuality, and Judith Butler’s gender theory as found in her work, Gender Trouble. Greater weight, time and focus of this study is placed upon John of the Cross as compared to Teresa of Avila, as no prior gender study of John of the Cross is known. A limited selection of Teresa of Avila’s written works is chosen, due to the time constraints of the study. It is a known weakness and limitation that only a relatively small percentage of Teresa of Avila’s works are considered when compared to almost the entire written output of John of the Cross. Regardless, we will endeavor to see how these twin perspectives relate to the lives and written works of these two doctors of the Church, Pope Francis’ objection to gender studies notwithstanding.

Purpose

The purpose of this essay is to apply modern theories of gender and sexuality to the lives of two prominent Spanish mystics and their cadre of written works in order to gain new understanding. The two mystics differ in style, approach, and physical gender, and they shall be used as so much contrast dye against one another. Another study of this kind is not known.

---

13 The Interior Castle or the Mansions, Mansion 7, Ch. 1.1, trans. Benedictines of Stanbrook, 2011.
14 The Interior Castle or the Mansions, Mansion 5, Ch. 2.4, trans. Benedictines of Stanbrook, 2011.
15 The Living Flame of Love, Stanza 1.29, trans. Lewis, 1919.
17 http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/news/2016/10/03/pope-criticises-indoctrination-of-gender-theory/
to have been undertaken, and as such, new ground will be broken, opening up an avenue for academic debate.

**Research Objectives**

The objective of this study is to consider the role of gender and sexuality in the lives and written of John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila, to determine their importance in this context. Gender can be defined in multiple ways, including biologically or anatomically, as well as through self-identification. Sexuality can also be defined through multiple ways, again through self-identification, but in this study, it will be evaluated by the state of sexual attraction and through biological arousal. The primary point of concern to dissect is what is the role of gender and sexuality in the lives and written works of John of the Cross, and Teresa of Avila? By studying these two mystics, what, if anything, can be learned about the roles of gender and sexuality in the mystical idiom as a whole?

**Method**

The method used in this study is text analysis. Both primary and secondary texts will be examined in order to extract meaning from them, which will then be analyzed. Meanings, arguments, narrative devices, and other elements found within the texts will aid in their analysis. All of the texts studied have been either written in English or translated from their original language (most commonly Spanish) into English by translators. Some Latin is to be found, both translated and untranslated, as well.

Historiography, the writing about history, is also used in this study. The individuals and texts studied are analyzed within their historical context. It is not the ambition of the study to prove or disprove the veracity or occurrence of certain historical events. As an example, it is not the aim of the study to determine whether Teresa of Avila or John of the Cross did in fact levitate or perform other miracles, but rather to examine the meaning of these passages, and how they can be interpreted, or how they might have been interpreted in Counter Reformation Spain. The texts themselves are historical documents and are considered within their context.

Philology, or the study of the language used in the texts, will also play a key role. To this end there will be considered parts of speech, most importantly gendered pronouns, and wording that denotes relationships will be analyzed for the gender they represent. As an example, *he* is a pronoun that signifies a male subject, the term *sister* denotes a female sibling relationship, *mother* is indicative of a female parental relationship, and so forth.
Hypothesis

It is expected that studying John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila from the perspectives of gender and sexuality will reveal that these two elements play a significant role, in both their lives and their written works. Furthermore, it is expected that there will be some information gleaned from this study that will provide insight into the roles of gender and sexuality in mysticism as a whole.

Theory

Sexuality

Alfred C. Kinsey, in the post-World War II era, produced twin studies entitled *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*, which together form what is called *The Kinsey Report*. This theory was chosen because it anchors sexuality in an empirically observable way. In Kinsey’s work, sexuality is measured as a reaction demonstrating attraction to stimuli. The data analyzed in Kinsey’s study was obtained through interviews in which the interview subject was asked questions and answered describing their sexual experience and attraction. The individual’s anatomical gender was then used as the basis for classification as to how the reactions are defined. If the sexual response of the person was activated by another person that is anatomically of the same gender, then it was classified as *homosexual*. If the reaction was to a person of another anatomical gender, then it was considered a *heterosexual* response. The theory is useful as it uses a biological approach to sexuality that can be measured and recorded. This can be contrasted with the theories propounding *self-identification* or *self-determination* of one’s own sexuality and gender. This is significant, as nowhere in the source material studied relating to John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila are there statements of self-identification of sexuality.

In *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, Kinsey argues that sexuality is “not an all-or-nothing proposition”\(^\text{18}\) between heterosexuality and homosexuality, but rather that human sexuality exists on a continuum.\(^\text{19}\) While some individuals can be classified as exclusively homosexual or heterosexual, nearly half (46%) of the human population could be classified as bisexual, a term which Kinsey describes as problematic.\(^\text{20}\) He also notes that the capacity to respond to any stimulus is “basic to the species.”\(^\text{21}\)

Kinsey produces in this study what is called the “Kinsey scale,”\(^\text{22}\) which establishes a numerical assignment for different gradations of human sexuality. A deep discussion of the scale is not necessary here, except for to say that an individual’s sexuality can be assigned numbers from zero (0), representing no homosexual response, to six (6) in which the individual exhibits no heterosexual response. There is an assigned (X) which falls outside of

---

this scale, indicating no sexual response, in which an individual is considered asexual. Kinsey writes that “reality is a continuum, with individuals in the population occupying not only the seven categories which are recognized here, but every gradation between each of the categories, as well.” He also states that, at the time of the study, sexuality as a learned behavior needed to be explored further.

In *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, we find in Chapter 13 that Kinsey breaks down sexual response regarding an individual’s religious affiliation. Kinsey writes “restraints on sexual activities are well recognized among devout Catholics, and often have major effects on the personalities of these individuals. Devout Catholics are restrained in regard to the frequencies of their total outlet, and in regard to their total acceptance of any variety of sexual outlets.”

Spain in the 1500s and 1600s, not unlike the United States in the Post-War era in which Kinsey worked, was a sexually repressed society. In Spain this was due in part to Catholic Church. Marriage (heterosexual) was considered the only proper outlet for sexuality, though there were efforts to resist this institution and eventual sacrament. Homosexuality, masturbation, and other acts outside of legally defined marriage were considered immoral and sinful. Monks and nuns also took vows of celibacy, making all sexual contact forbidden. Barnes-Karol and Spadaccini write in *Marriage and Sexuality in Medieval and Early Modern Iberia*:

…the repeated attempts at suppressing sexuality or channeling it through the institution of marriage are often undermined or resisted; how the boundaries between licit and illicit unions are often uncertain and in flux; how the legality of concubinage and prostitution is often the object of considerable debate and legislation, both secular and canonical (which were often at odds with each other); and how rigid standards come into play only with the reforms contemplated by the Council of Trent in 1563 with the proscription of all extraconjugal relations and the abolishment of clandestine marriages.

Kinsey’s theory of human sexuality presented here is interpreted as being non-binary, and that an individuals’ religious mores or morals have an impact on their sexuality, experienced as well as expressed. Kinsey states that “strict Catholic interpretations … accept the reproductive philosophy of sex …” and “consider sexual activities which do not offer the possibility of fruition in reproduction as morally wrong.” Nuns and monks, again, were forbidden to have any sexual contact. In Kinsey’s theory, an individual may experience physiological sexual responses to stimuli, but they do not necessarily indicate an iron-clad, non-negotiable sexuality. This harmonizes well with modern gender theory.

**Gender**

Judith Butler in her book *Gender Trouble* presents a conceptualization of gender which is complex, dynamic and non-binary. She writes:

But we are actually in the presence of three contingent dimensions of significant corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance. If the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the

---

27 Barnes-Karol & Spadaccini 2002: p. 244.
gender of the performer, and both of those are distinct from the gender of the performance, then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance.\footnote{Butler 2006: p. 187.}

This is interpreted as signifying that gender is not tied solely to the sexual organs, but also subject to self-identification, and that gender is a performance, and that these three elements need not overlap. In discussing this conceptualization, she adds:

Consider gender, for instance, as a corporeal style, an “act,” as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where “performative” suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning.\footnote{Butler 2006: p. 190.}

This is interpreted as meaning that gender is not assigned specifically, but is created through this performance, as an actor takes on a role in a play. Butler writes that there are no inherent traits that are gender-specific, and that those tools (or “props”) are first chosen, and then employed by the individual actor, and they are self-evocative. That is no structure or combination that is pre-ordained by the inhabiting of a physical body complete with its sexual organs that must be followed, and there are no strictly “female” or “male” traits. This is understood when Butler writes:

If gender attributes, however, are not expressive but performative, then these attributes effectively constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal. The distinction between expression and performativeness is crucial. If gender attributes and acts, the various ways in which a body shows or produces its cultural signification, are performative, then there is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured; there would be no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender, and the postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as a regulatory fiction. That gender reality is created through sustained social performances means that the very notions of an essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity are also constituted as part of the strategy that conceals gender’s performative character and the performative possibilities for proliferating gender configurations outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality.

Genders can be neither true nor false, neither real nor apparent, neither original nor derived.\footnote{Butler 2006: p. 192–193.}

An individual’s gender in this way is what they themselves have decided that it is and is portrayed outwardly in an “act” by which a “role” the individual has taken upon themselves is “performed.”

Analysis

John of the Cross

Life

John of the Cross, unlike Teresa of Avila, did not leave behind an autobiography, or account of his life. Father Paschasius Heriz, O. C. D., himself a Carmelite, wrote the hagiographical St. John of the Cross in 1919, which combines an account of his life as well as a litany of the miracles and graces which accompanied it. Heriz writes near its beginning:
The father of the reformed Carmel was a second Elias, like to the first in name, in spirit, armed with burning zeal, attired in penitential apparel, glowing with the flames of seraphic ardor and winning his way to the highest top of the mystical Mount Carmel. This was our blessed and most devoted father, St. John of the Cross, brightness and glory of the reformed family of Carmel, their master, captain, guide. Though he is the first-born spiritual son of St. Teresa, he is at the same time our cherished and revered father, for from the very beginning he fostered us. In Holy Writ, Ner is called the father of his brother Cis, and Igal the son of his brother Nathan. So, in our holy order, the first-born son of St. Teresa and beloved brother of all the Discalced Carmelites, is nevertheless truly our father as well.\textsuperscript{33}

Here John of the Cross is considered a co-founder of the Order and is packaged together with Teresa of Avila, who was her “son” in a metaphorical sense, and the father and brother of the rest of the order.

John of the Cross was born Juan de Yepes in Hontiveros, Spain either in June or December of 1542. The date of which cannot be pinpointed, as records were lost in a fire.\textsuperscript{34} He was the son of Gonzalo de Yepes and Catalina Alvarez, who was a “friendless orphan.”\textsuperscript{35} His father died shortly after his birth, while he was still an infant.\textsuperscript{36}

He was described as a child as being pious, meek, quiet and humble, and there is a story that he was saved from drowning by the Virgin Mary, and Saint Joseph.\textsuperscript{37} This would be the first of several such miracles in which he was to escape peril by divine intervention. Mary would again save him from being crushed to death in his (monastic) cell,\textsuperscript{38} and visit him in the prison\textsuperscript{39} in which he wrote the poems that would form the foundation of two of his greatest books, \textit{The Ascent of Mount Carmel}, and \textit{Dark Night of the Soul}. This is the same prison cell that a divine light with the power of speech (\textit{locution}) would help him escape.\textsuperscript{40}

John of the Cross was said to have devoted himself zealously to acts of penitence, and for chastising his body “though innocent.”\textsuperscript{41} John of the Cross “girt his loins”\textsuperscript{42} and later in his life:

\begin{quote}
He slept about two hours during the night. The remainder was spent in prayer, either in the church before the most holy sacrament, or in his cell. He resumed the terrible penances of Duruelo, and gave his body no rest. It was the only creature of God for whom he had no mercy.\textsuperscript{43}
\end{quote}

This indicates a strong tendency to physical manipulation and penance. John of the Cross punished his body, and this was used as a spiritual practice meant to favor the works of the soul over the comfort of the body.

Teresa of Avila, for her part, “used to say frequently that Father John of the Cross was one of the most pure and holy souls in the Church; that God had infused in him great treasures of purity and heavenly wisdom, and that, in her opinion, he was a saint during all his life.”\textsuperscript{44} In

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{33} Heriz 1919: p. 6–7.
\item \textsuperscript{34} Heriz 1919: p. 13.
\item \textsuperscript{35} Heriz 1919: p. 9.
\item \textsuperscript{36} Heriz 1919: p. 10.
\item \textsuperscript{37} Heriz 1919: p. 14–15.
\item \textsuperscript{38} Heriz 1919: p. 150.
\item \textsuperscript{39} Heriz 1919: p. 94.
\item \textsuperscript{40} Heriz 1919: p. 100.
\item \textsuperscript{41} Heriz 1919: p. 24.
\item \textsuperscript{42} Heriz 1919: p. 35.
\item \textsuperscript{43} Heriz 1919: p. 109.
\item \textsuperscript{44} Heriz 1919: p. 39.
\end{itemize}
Heriz we find a litany of miracles either witnessed or performed by John of the Cross, including bringing a woman back from the dead in order to administer last rites, and the miraculous appearance of asparagus out of season.

John of the Cross was known to fall into trances, occasionally even together with Teresa of Avila, to levitate, and “hear” locutions credited to Jesus. He is said to have foretold the canonization of Teresa of Avila. John of the Cross also performed numerous exorcisms.

Once, when saying the Mass of the Holy Trinity, he is said to have had his soul transported out of his body by the revelation of God, and was thereafter afraid to give mass for some time. The determined, fixed programs of physical manipulation were a hallmark of John of the Cross’ mysticism, and can be seen as a sort of “boot camp” in which the body is trained, and ultimately tamed or subjected to the will, to the benefit of the soul.

After his death on the 14th of December 1591, his body was found nine months later incorrupt in his tomb, and thereafter some parts of his body were removed for relics. His finger was cut off, and the body was said by witnesses to still have blood in it, and to bleed as though it were still living. There were also several miracles which are attributed to these relics. John after his death was beatified in 1674 and canonized in 1726.

Written Works

The four primary texts used for analysis are John of the Cross’ Ascent of Mount Carmel, Dark Night of the Soul, A Spiritual Canticle of the Soul and the Bridegroom Christ, and The Living Flame of Love, considered “the famous four.” The exact dates of their composition are unknown, and these texts were written in the vernacular. In this case the vernacular was Spanish, with some passages in Latin, for which John of the Cross himself provided translations or otherwise paraphrased. Translations of the texts from Spanish into English are used for this analysis. Translations of Ascent and Dark Night are by E. Allison Peers, and of Spiritual Canticle and Living Flame are by David Lewis. They represent essentially two matched sets, which vary somewhat in style and tone.

---

[^45]: Heriz 1919: p. 69.
[^46]: Heriz 1919: p. 185.
[^47]: Heriz 1919: p. 70.
[^49]: Heriz 1919: p. 171.
[^50]: Heriz 1919: p. 165.
[^52]: Heriz 1919: p. 117–118.
[^54]: Heriz 1919: p. 204.
[^57]: Heriz 1919: p. 214.
John of the Cross considered *Ascent* and *Dark Night* to be one text\(^{60}\), although they have been printed separately, often largely out of tradition.\(^{61}\) The other set, comprised of *Spiritual Canticle* and *Living Flame*, departs slightly from the theological and explanatory nature of the first pair, and can be considered somewhat more poetic, however the general format remains constant throughout the four works. All four texts consist of the presentation of a poem, which is then elucidated, or “fleshed out,” through discussion and analysis of the lines and stanzas in greater detail.

John of the Cross was a reluctant scribe, committing his thoughts to the page largely at the request of others. In the prologue to *Ascent* John of the Cross writes that he addresses his treatise to the friars and nuns of the Order of Mount Carmel, with the text having been written “since they have desired me to do so.”\(^{62}\) *Spiritual Canticle* was written at the request of Ann of Jesus.\(^{63}\) *Living Flame* was written “not without some unwillingness … at the requests of others,”\(^{64}\) which is said to have been especially after the request of an individual penitent under John’s care and tutelage, namely Doña Ana de Mercado y Peñalosa, in 1584.\(^{65}\)

John of the Cross’ reluctance to write, however, does nothing to detract from the power and beauty of his prose. The use of beautiful poetic imagery is found throughout his works, but demonstrated most commendably in passages such as the following, taken from *Spiritual Canticle*, in which John writes that Christ is to the soul as “silent music”:

> In this silence and tranquility of the night, and in this knowledge of the divine light, the soul discerns a marvelous arrangement and disposition of God’s wisdom in the diversities of His creatures and operations. All these, and each one of them, have a certain correspondence with God, whereby each, by a voice peculiar to itself, proclaims what there is in itself of God, so as to form a concert of sublimest melody, transcending all the harmonies of the world. This is the silent music, because it is knowledge tranquil and calm, without audible voice; and thus the sweetness of music and the repose of silence are enjoyed in it. The soul says that the Beloved is silent music, because this harmony of spiritual music is in Him understood and felt.

\textit{(A Spiritual Canticle of the Soul and the Bridegroom Christ, Stanza 15.14, trans. Lewis, 2012)}.

In this passage, we see the power of John of the Cross’ expression. Elsewhere he describes fleeting moments of visual contact with Christ, who, like a hart (deer) stops and looks momentarily, only to then sprint away out of sight. These passages demonstrate the poetic nature of their author.

Remarkably, we find in John of the Cross’ work that poetic genius is coupled with a coolly logical mind, trained in theology at the University of Salamanca.\(^{66}\) Cardinal Wiseman, in the introduction to *Living Flame* writes of both qualities, saying of John of the Cross that “his mind is eminently poetical, imaginative, tender, and gentle. Whatever mystical theology may appear to the mind of the uninitiated, to St. John it was clearly a bright and well-loved pursuit; it was a work of the heart more than of the head”\(^{67}\) and again:

> But when we read his writings, another high quality, for which we are not prepared, must strike us forcibly as entering into the composition of his character. He must have given much time to reading and

\(^{60}\) John of the Cross 2012: p. 35.


\(^{64}\) The Living Flame of Love, Prologue 1.1, trans. Lewis, 1919.

\(^{65}\) John of the Cross 1919: p. xlv.

\(^{66}\) John of the Cross 2012: p. 15.

\(^{67}\) John of the Cross 1919: xv.
study. He is learned in all those pursuits which we desire and expect to find in an ecclesiastical scholar of his age.\textsuperscript{68}

John of the Cross’ theological training forms the canvas on which his poetry is painted.

Of all the influences found in John of the Cross’ work, it is clear that it is his deep familiarity with Scripture that which makes itself most apparent, and one gets the impression that John was himself a living encyclopedia in regard to it. Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas, and Dionysius the Areopagite are named in John of the Cross’ texts, and according to E. Allison Peers, he bears the marks of their influence, along with “St. Gregory, St. Bernard, and Hugh and Richard of St. Victor … Ruysbroeck … Suso, Denis the Carthusian, Herp, Kempis and various other writers.”\textsuperscript{69}

\textit{Ascent of Mount Carmel} and \textit{Dark Night of the Soul} have been described as a “full dissertation on mystical science”\textsuperscript{70}. Together they represent two thirds of a guidebook of sorts for the mystical path of the soul to God. John of the Cross explains the journey as three stages of night, \textit{Ascent} is an examination of what he calls the active and passive nights of the senses, followed thereafter in \textit{Dark Night} by the active and passive nights of the soul, leading then to the unwritten third section. This third part, which should explain the final leg of the journey, was never composed. According to E. Allison Peers, it was likely to have been similar to the ground covered in \textit{Spiritual Canticle} and \textit{Living Flame}, though those works “are not so completely knit into one whole as is this great double treatise.”\textsuperscript{71} This section was to consider the mystical union of the soul with God.

In \textit{Ascent}, Book I, chapter II, John of the Cross instructs that this is a path through a night which has three parts:

> These three parts of the night are all one night; but, after the manner of the night, it has three parts. For the first part, which is that of sense, is comparable to the beginning of night, the point at which things begin to fade from sight. And the second part, which is faith, is comparable to midnight, which is total darkness. And the third part is like the close of night, which is God, the which part is now near to the light of day.  
> \textit{(Ascent of Mt. Carmel, Book 1, Ch. 2.5, trans. Peers, 2012.)}

The journey begins with \textit{Ascent}, and the active and passive purification and purgation of the senses, along with the higher and lower parts of man.\textsuperscript{72} The hallmark of this leg of the journey is ascetic self-denial, such as John of the Cross practiced, and the use of meditation and spiritual exercises. This is followed by the second stage, the overwhelmingly frightening and difficult active and passive purgation of the higher and lower parts of the soul that is the \textit{Dark Night}, which is described by Peers as ending in the soul’s climb of the “ten steps or degrees,” which is to say rungs, “of love which comprise St. Bernard’s mystical ladder.”\textsuperscript{73} This corresponds to chapters XIX and XX of \textit{Dark Night}.\textsuperscript{74}

The conceptual difference between the active and passive purgation or the senses and body or soul are clearly laid out. “Active” in John of the Cross’ usage describes that the individual’s senses/body or soul is acting, or is the primary actor, which is to say that it is “doing the work.” John of the Cross’ usage of “passive” refers to the senses/body or soul being “acted upon,” or is in the position of receiving or being worked upon by God. John of

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{68} John of the Cross 1919: p. xiii.
  \item \textsuperscript{69} John of the Cross 2012: p. 27.
  \item \textsuperscript{70} John of the Cross 1919: p. xl.
  \item \textsuperscript{71} John of the Cross 2012: p. 299.
  \item \textsuperscript{72} Ascent of Mt. Carmel, Book 1, Ch. 1.1, trans. Peers, 2012.
  \item \textsuperscript{73} Ascent of Mt. Carmel, Book 1, Ch. 2.6, trans. Peers, 2012.
  \item \textsuperscript{74} Dark Night of the Soul, Book 2, Ch. 19–20.
\end{itemize}
the Cross uses the simile of the soul as a painting that is being lovingly filled in by God, and rails against the condemnation of what he means may outwardly appear to others as “idleness,” but is really God in the process of painting a masterpiece. In John of the Cross’ meaning, it is a rare few, and particularly beautiful souls touched by the grace of God that receive this and they must be afforded this “idleness” so that God may work upon them. To John of the Cross, it is the height of folly to hinder these souls’ progress:

These goods, then, these great riches, these sublime and delicate unctions, this knowledge of the Holy Ghost, which, on account of their exquisite and subtile [sic] pureness, neither the soul itself, nor he who directs it, can comprehend, but only He Who infuses them in order to render it more pleasing to Himself are most easily, even by the slightest application of sense or desire to any particular knowledge or sweetness, disturbed and hindered. This is a serious evil, grievous and lamentable. O how sad and how wonderful! The evil done is not perceived, and the barrier raised between God and the soul is almost nothing, and yet it is more grievous, an object of deeper sorrow, and inflicts a greater stain, than any other, though seemingly more important, in common souls which have not attained to such a high state of pureness.


Here he indicates that the inward approach of mysticism may outwardly seem like idleness to the uninitiated.

The third part of this guidebook was, as mentioned, never written, but thematically John moves on into what should be similar territory, describing the betrothal and spiritual marriage of the soul with Christ, as seen throughout the Spiritual Canticle. The third book is based upon the Song of Solomon, and this stage culminates in what John of the Cross describes as the soul “leaning upon her Beloved,” which is Christ, in preparation for mystical union with God. The final work, Living Flame of Love, written in perhaps only fifteen days, describes this mystical union of the soul with God in greater detail and, having first been experienced in Spiritual Canticle, endeavors to comment on whether this union can last. Benedict Zimmerman writes:

In his first treatises the author accompanied the soul on the long and arduous journey, typically described as the Ascent of Mount Carmel and the Dark Night, which may last many years. Emerging from the terrifying darkness it finds itself in that blissful state, technically called Espousals of the soul, of which the Spiritual Canticle gives a glowing picture. Now the question arises: Can this state be permanent? or is it just a last glorious ray before the sun sets and the eyes close in death, and the soul stands before the great white throne? or is it a climax in the spiritual life, to be followed by a return into insignificance? or can there be many such climaxes in the course of a single life, just as there are many snow-capped peaks in a mountain range?

John of the Cross ultimately gives the impression that the mystical union of the soul with God or Christ can last. Teresa of Avila, on the other hand, appears to waver on this point somewhat.

In examining these four works with an eye for the roles that gender and sexuality play, there is much to consider. Quantitative analysis of John of the Cross’ work will here be subservient to qualitative study, though it can be useful in helping track trends over the course of the four texts. It is interesting to note that of the forty-one (41) persons referenced by name.

75 The Living Flame of Love, Stanza 3.52, trans. Lewis, 1919.
76 John of the Cross 2012: p. 408.
throughout the four texts (excluding God, Christ, and the Devil), thirty-one (31) are male, and ten (10) are female. The focus here will be upon what information can be gleaned directly from the texts. Concepts lifted from Caroline Bynum Walker’s *Jesus as Mother* will be used and discussed alongside John of the Cross’ writings in this study.

The overall character of John of the Cross’ writing has been described in different ways. E. Allison Peers described John’s work and arguments as “clear, definite and virile like the man who proposes them,” and “orthodox, yet bold and fearless.” Elsewhere Peers described the use of language as “energetic,” “precise,” and “individualistic.” There is significant and extensive use of feminine language through these works, but the poetry especially relies heavily on a female point of view. Diarmaid MacCulloch, before quoting the poetry that is analyzed throughout *Ascent*, wrote that through this use of feminine imagery, John of the Cross was “expressing himself in ways which now sound startlingly homoerotic.”

**The Division of the Universe into Two Realms**

In John of the Cross’ work, entities that are gendered exist in two primary categories or realms, the corporeal and the ethereal. The first category is corporeal, or entities that find their form primarily in a (gendered) physical body. To this realm belongs persons both historical and contemporaneous to the author, as well as to the author, himself. Rarely does John of the Cross write reflexively, except for to excuse any inexactness in the explanations he provides, and that the fault is on his part. A distinctly binary and rigid understanding of gender characterizes this realm. This is signified by the fact that the entities referenced are either strictly male or female (binary), and this distinction is unambiguous (rigid).

The second category is ethereal, comprised of entities that exist primarily in a spiritual realm, without a physical body, such as God. Other examples of entities ordered into this realm include Christ, the soul, the Devil, and the Holy Spirit. In this category, we find a non-binary and fluid understanding of gender. This is signified by the fact that these entities cannot be considered strictly male or female (and are therefore non-binary), and that the distinction and usage is ambiguous (fluid). This realm can include beings that are not assigned gender and are thus textually non-gendered, such as angels, which are described simply as angels, without further indication of gender.

Another important aspect of this category is affiliative variability, which can be used to describe the relational dynamism and border uncertainty between spiritual entities, such as those that exist between God, Christ, and the Holy Ghost (John of the Cross uses this term synonymously with Holy Spirit), or between the soul and these entities. Affiliative variability indicates that the affiliation between the entities is changing, and non-static. The words describing the relationships vary in usage. One entity can in relation to another, for example be described both as its “mother,” and its “son.”

Relational dynamism indicates the result of the non-static nature of the relationships, in which the relationships are dynamic, and necessarily changeable. Border uncertainty describes the way in which it becomes difficult to know when one entity ends and another.

---


81 Females referenced: Mary Magdalene, Delila, Teresa of Jesus, Rachel, Virgin Mary, Eve, Martha, Sara, Esther, and “woman of Samaria,” referring to the woman at the well that spoke with Christ.


83 *John of the Cross 2012*: p. 28.

begins, such as in the relationships between God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. This can be used to described what is known in the Catholic Church as the “mystery” of the Holy Trinity. The opposite of this would then be border integrity, as found in the corporeal realm, in which it is crystal clear where the boundaries between individuals exist.

It should be made clear that within the ethereal realm, there is absolutely no indication of sexual interaction between the entities. No literal form of sexual intercourse is ever represented or inferred. The descriptions of relationships between the various forms are metaphorical, as a simile, or otherwise simply illustrative.

John of the Cross’ conceptualization of Jesus, formed by the Catholic Church, is one in which Jesus is both fully human and fully divine. Jesus represents something of a categorical anomaly here. There are strong arguments for placement in both the corporeal and ethereal categories, however for the purposes of this study Jesus will be placed within the ethereal category. The justification of this classification is that Jesus, although considered in the texts to at one time have existed in a corporeal form, through what John of the Cross calls the “mysteries of the Incarnation,” with a male gender. As such Jesus is conceptualized as, contemporaneously to John of the Cross, inhabiting the spiritual universe or ethereal realm, in which entities are neither strictly female nor strictly male (non-binary), and thus ambiguous (gender fluid). The sexual characteristics that lead to this assessment, as we shall describe further, are arguably assigned only in a metaphorical sense, or to further the author’s use of narrative devices, but this does not discount the existence of their assignment.

Ethereal

To further elaborate on the ethereal categorization, we can expound the example used above. God in John of the Cross’ writing is amorphous. “God falls within no genus and no species, whereas the creatures do,” and as such without gender in any true sense, but God is consistently attributed the male gender. John of the Cross writes “Wherefore those that imagine God beneath any of these figures, or as a great fire or brightness, or in any other such form, and think that anything like this will be like to Him, are very far from approaching Him.” Note the use of the derivative form of the masculine pronoun “he.” John of the Cross describes God:

He is omnipotent, wise, good, merciful, just, strong, loving; He is all the other attributes and perfections of which we have no knowledge here below. He is all this. When the soul is in union with Him, and He is pleased to admit it to a special knowledge of Himself, the soul sees in Him all these perfections and majesty together in the one and simple essence clearly and distinctly, so far as it is consistent with the faith, and as each one of these attributes is the very being of God, Who is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost as each attribute is God Himself and as God is infinite light, and infinite divine fire, it follows that each attribute gives light and burns as God Himself.

(The Living Flame of Love, Stanza 3.3, trans. Lewis, 1919.)

This is in keeping with Thomistic theology, and the concept of God as the “First Cause,” or “Unmovable Mover.” Thomas Aquinas writes that “God is not, like creatures, made up of parts. God is spirit, without bodily dimensions.”

God could in theory have been considered female or gender-neutral in descriptions without the need to alter the fundamental aspects of the John of the Cross’ writing about God.

---

According to Bynum Walker, “In the Old Testament, God frequently speaks of himself as mother.” The Son of God would have affiliative certainty with the usage of either the male or female gender descriptors, as “a son” is a son to both female and male parental figures. More affiliative uncertainty would exist in using gender-neutral descriptors only if one were to use a binary definition of gender roles in parental relations. This would be like saying that it is only acceptable to think of Christ as being the son of a definitely male God (using the traditional “His Son”) or definitely female (a feminist “Her Son”) God. Christ in John of the Cross’ work is discussed with some female characteristics, making it possible to conceive of Jesus as the Daughter of God (as indeed Bynum Walker proposes the conception of Jesus as Mother). This is precisely the affiliative variability, gender fluidity, relational dynamism and border uncertainty that is the hallmark of the ethereal or spiritual realm.

In the texts, the human soul is overwhelmingly discussed as belonging to the female gender, through countless references. Quoting God in Ezekiel, John of the Cross writes of the soul that “I have made you; and you were multiplied and made great, and you went in, and came to the ornaments of woman; your breasts swelled and your hair budded.” However, there is some evidence that John of the Cross considers the soul amorphous and genderless. John of the Cross writes that “the soul has no parts, neither is there any difference between its interior and exterior.” He states that there are “imperfections and desires of nature which the soul inherits from its mother Eve,” and that it will “consider all its previous knowledge” and again “when it has ascended.” John of the Cross also writes of the “love it bears the Beloved.” Italics have been added here to the gender neutral pronoun for emphasis. If this is construed as being overly attentive to minute detail, we find in John of the Cross that he himself considers exactness is of great importance, and especially for persons that are “spiritual directors,” when he writes:

But it may be said that these directors err … because their knowledge is scanty. Be it so; but they are not therefore justified in giving the rash counsels they do … And if they do not understand the matter, it is not for them to interfere in what they do not comprehend.

(The Living Flame of Love, Stanza 3.60, trans. Lewis, 1919.)

By this we can infer that the use of the gender-neutral pronoun is by no means an accident. It was the intention of the author to confer the genderless nature of the soul. Caroline Bynum Walker, in discussing similar usage earlier in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, describes “We also find that the soul is usually pictured as female by both male and female writers. This is in part because the gender of anima is feminine in Latin,” but that this “does not explain why twelfth-century writers elaborate the idea of the soul as female,” and “when they comment on the Song of Songs,” as does John of the Cross, “they turn away from the older tradition of identifying the bride with the church to an identification of her with the individual soul.” John of the Cross’ use of feminine language and gender markers in regards to the soul is certainly the rule rather than the exception.
There is a third category that exists on the fringes of the two, representing abstractions, which is to say that these are ideas or other institutions that are assigned a gender. To this category belongs the Church, which is preceded with an address such as “our Holy Mother the Catholic Church,” and consistently referred to as female, the status of which is confirmed and amplified using the feminine possessive adjective “her.” The Church is remarked upon in Bynum Walker as “always a female image,” and is also conceived of in John of the Cross’ work as the mystical body of Christ. “Divine Wisdom,” about which John of the Cross writes “Wisdom is clear and never fades away, and is easily seen of them that love her,” (italics added for emphasis), and then not five lines later says that people seeking her will find “Wisdom, the Son of God, the Bridegroom waiting.” Similar ideas belong to this third category, to which the gender, in this case the female gender, is attributed using gender-specific pronouns.

Corporal

When gender in relation to physical bodies is examined in the texts, there are a few concepts that John of the Cross discusses. The body in the works studied is frequently referred to as either a prison or a house, as in Dark Night. The soul, that which John considers most important, finds itself within the confines of this prison or enclosure. John of the Cross writes in Ascent about “the miserable estate of captivity, a man’s deliverance from which, when none of the gaolers’ [sic] hinder his release, he considers a ‘happy chance.’ For the soul, on account of original sin, is truly as it were a captive in this mortal body.” As God guides the soul out of the body and towards the spiritual realm, “it is like to one that has come forth from a rigorous imprisonment.” In Spiritual Canticle John of the Cross describes the soul as being aware that “it is still in the flesh, often suffers exceedingly” and is “like a prince in prison, subject to all misery, whose authority is disregarded.” A significant component of John of the Cross’ work is the soul’s desire to be freed of the body, as he describes in Living Flame:

To burst the bonds which bind the spirit and the flesh together, that both may resume their proper state, for they are by nature different, the flesh to return to its earth, and the spirit unto God Who gave it. The mortal body, as St. John saith, profisetth nothing, but is rather a hindrance to the good of the spirit. The soul, therefore, prays for the dissolution of the body, for it is sad that a life so mean should be a hindrance in the way of a life so noble.

(The Living Flame of Love, Stanza 1.29, trans. Lewis, 1919.)

John of the Cross considers the body to be a problem or obstacle that must be overcome, to the benefit of the soul.

---

98 Bynum Walker 1982: p. 239.
100 A Spiritual Canticle of the Soul and the Bridegroom Christ, Stanza 3.6, trans. Lewis, 2012.
101 Ascent of Mt. Carmel, Book 1, Ch. 4, trans. Lewis, 2012.
105 A Spiritual Canticle of the Soul and the Bridegroom Christ, Stanza 17, Note 1.1, trans. Lewis, 2012.
Indeed, John of the Cross considers there to be three enemies that hinder the progress of the soul, preventing its mystical union with God. These “three enemies, which are world, devil and flesh.”\textsuperscript{106} It is always John’s opinion that the corporeal should be neglected in favor of the spiritual. In \textit{Dark Night}, we find that on the soul’s march towards union with God:

...the soul is now purged from the affections and desires of sense, it obtains liberty of spirit, whereby it in ever greater degree it gains the twelve fruits of the Holy Spirit. Here, too, it is wondrously delivered from the hands of its three enemies--devil, world and flesh; for, its pleasure and delight of sense being quenched with respect to all things, neither the devil nor the world nor sensuality has any arms or any strength wherewith to make war upon the spirit.

\textit{(Dark Night of the Soul, Book 1, Ch. 13.12, trans. Peers, 2012.)}

There are frequent references to the body being a limiting factor in spiritual progression. The asceticism that John of the Cross practiced and recommended meant that his body was put through trials in order to subdue it. Monks and nuns, of course, were withdrawn from commerce with world to a certain extent, in order to limit its influences, and focus upon spiritual growth and a life of service. The Devil, universally male in all the sources studied, was always on the lookout for an opportunity to deceive and satisfy worldly pleasures so that he might sully the “cleanness” of the souls of devout individuals.

\textbf{Sexuality}

The role of sexuality in the texts is most prominent in the use of erotic and suggestive imagery depicting the surrender of the soul in marriage with Christ. This includes reference to the bridal chamber, and the soul resting in the caress of Christ. This will be elaborated further in the next section on \textit{nuptial imagery}, but what, apart from the many calls to be free of the desires of the flesh, can be found in these works? While John of the Cross was anatomically male, he wrote often from the point of view of a decidedly female soul. There is, despite this, no indication in the texts that John of the Cross self-identified as female, or as a homosexual.

John of the Cross writes in \textit{Ascent} of “the abominable vice of effeminacy, or the incentives thereto.”\textsuperscript{107} If by “effeminacy” John of the Cross is referring to what would now considered homosexual stereotypes, namely the overtly or exaggerated feminine traits and characteristics of a male homosexual, this can be taken as somewhat surprising, in contrast to the overall context of John of the Cross’ writing and extensive use of feminine language and point of view. However, it is not beyond the grasp of a talented writer such as John of the Cross to simply conjure up a believable representation of femininity, as found in the statements and demeanor of the soul.

Richard Rambuss in \textit{Closet Devotions} seizes upon what he sees as advice from John of the Cross regarding erections. Rambuss quotes a passage from \textit{Dark Night}. After the quotation he then explains that “John thus evokes (in terms explicit enough to cause the regular excision of these passages from later editions and translations of \textit{The Dark Night}) the scene of novices and young devotees at prayer with erections—thus stimulated not despite, \textit{but because of} the intensity of their devotions.”\textsuperscript{108} This is meant simply as a word of advice from someone who simply understands the predicament of the novice.

John of the Cross treats the subject of lust in the works as well, even outside a portion centered on the seven deadly sins. We are instructed that one is to “mortify the concupiscence


\textsuperscript{108} Rambuss 1998, p. 97.
of the flesh and the concupiscence of the eye,” and that “everything carnal is insipid. That is: No profit or enjoyment is afforded by all the ways of the flesh.”

In Ascent, we find the following passage concerning sexual lust:

Returning now to speak of that second evil … is the extent of the misery that arises from the setting of our rejoicing on natural beauty and graces. For every day we hear of its causing numerous deaths, the loss by many of their honour [sic], the commission of many insults, the dissipation of much wealth, numerous cases of emulation and strife, of adultery, rape and fornication, and of the fall of many holy men, comparable in number to that third part of the stars of Heaven which was swept down by the tail of the serpent on earth. … How far does the poison of this evil not penetrate?

And who drinks not, either little or much, from this golden chalice of the Babylonian woman of the Apocalypse? … And she seizes upon all estates of men, even upon the highest and noblest estate – the service of the sanctuary and the Divine priesthood … for very few will be found, however holy they may have been, that have not been to some extent stupefied and bewildered by this draught of the joy and pleasure of natural graces and beauty.

(Ascent of Mt. Carmel, Book 3, Ch. 22.4–5, trans. Peers, 2012.)

This passage contrasts with, or perhaps simply confirms, John of the Cross’ writing on the beauty of Christ and God. The soul properly aligned can see “the infinite beauty of God,” and be “transformed in beauty, which is God,” and that “all the grace and beauty of the creatures, compared with the grace of God, is the height of misery and of uncomeliness.” In Spiritual Canticle, the bride (soul) in seeing Christ is transformed “in the beauty of the union of the Word with flesh, wherein she shall behold His face as well as His back.”

Imagery

Several types of imagery that can be attributed gender assignments also characterize John of the Cross’ writing. The overwhelmingly most common concept found in the four books is nuptial imagery, relating to marriage or the characteristics of a spousal relationship. There is also significant use of feminine and maternal imagery. These are relating to characteristics typical of a woman, and a woman in a motherly position relative to another entity, respectively. To this category belongs nursing imagery, or frequent use of references to breastfeeding. Paternal and masculine imagery, often referring simply to God’s relation as father (male) to His Son (male), is used throughout. There is limited use, but highly significant use of fraternal or sororal imagery, denoting a male (fraternal) or female (sororal) sibling relationship. There are notable examples of combined usage of several of these terms, and of quite generalized references to “children,” with no given indication of gender or quantity, apart from the obvious use of the plural.

Nuptial imagery is the most common in the four texts. There are roughly fifty-eight major passages in which it is discussed in more than a simply fleeting way. Nineteen of these passages are in Ascent, seven in Dark Night, Spiritual Canticle, which is in essence one long treatment of the concept, has twenty-three, and Living Flame has nine. The focus is on the soul’s relationship with Christ, going from betrothed or engaged to married. Christ in the ethereal realm takes the soul for His/Her spouse, and in doing so the soul is presented for mystical union with God. John of the Cross contends that language fails to adequately explain
the intricacies of this arrangement and the union, stating that these are “matters so interior and spiritual as to baffle the powers of language. The spiritual transcends the sensual.”

John writes that:

The soul, then, says that ‘kindled in love with yearnings,’ it passed through this dark night of sense and came out thence to the union of the Beloved. For, in order to conquer all the desires and to deny itself the pleasures which it has in everything, and for which its love and affection are wont to enkindle the will that it may enjoy them, it would need to experience another and a greater enkindling by an other [sic] and a better love, which is that of its Spouse; to the end that, having its pleasure set upon Him and deriving from Him it strength, it should have courage and constancy to deny itself all other things with ease. And, in order to conquer the strength of the desires of sense, it would need, not only to have love for its Spouse, but also to be enkindled by love and to have yearnings.


The soul here is represented as the marital partner of Christ.

There are so many passages that it is impossible to consider them all in this study, but it can be summarized in terms of the soul’s journey through John of the Cross’ work. Through the purgation of sense, and soul it is prepared for mystical union, which throughout is likened to marriage. The soul is ultimately “released from the burden of the flesh, led into the deep caverns of Your (Christ’s) bridal chamber and gloriously transformed in You.” He also writes “Hence the soul, because of its perfect love, is called the bride of the Son of God, which signifies equality with Him.”

Bynum considers the growth of “nuptial mysticism” a particularly female influence, with a devotion to the heart and wounds of Jesus. It is important to note that Bynum’s study is of nuns from an earlier era. She notes that the “individual is not dissolved into God but rather becomes God’s partner and friend,” and that the consideration of Christ as Bridegroom is allegorical. Men were not afforded the opportunity to write of God as male and hope for sexual union without referring to themselves as female. She makes mention of some male writers, such as Ruysbroek (one of John of the Cross’ influences as previously noted), and Julian of Norwich that used nuptial imagery, noting that “males who popularized maternal and feminine imagery were those who had renounced the family and the company of women.”

Maternal imagery is featured in twenty-two major passages in the four works. The closely-linked nursing imagery is used in the form of pregnancy and breastfeeding. In Ascent we find five such passages, in Dark Night and Spiritual Canticle seven each, and three in Living Flame. The usage is mostly a general reference or casual simile. We find John of the Cross writing “Woe to them that in those days are with child and to them that give suck,” and in paraphrasing St. Paul in “I have given you milk to drink, as to infants in Christ.” “For it,” meaning the soul, “is like a child, which, while receiving the milk that has been collected and

---

113 The Living Flame of Love, Prologue 1.1, trans. Lewis, 1919.
brought together for it in the breast, is taken from the breast.”124 These are more referential in nature or offer a casual similitude. In Dark Night we find that “God is now taking this soul from its swaddling clothes, setting it down from His arms, making it to walk upon its feet, and likewise taking from it the milk of the breast.”125

In Spiritual Canticle, we find an interesting mixture of roles. John of the Cross writes:

Hence the bride in the Canticle, longing for this state, says to the Bridegroom: “Who shall give to me You my brother, sucking the breast of my mother, that I may find You without, and kiss You, and now no man may despise me.” By addressing Him as her Brother she shows the equality between them in the betrothal of love, before she entered the state of spiritual marriage. “Sucking the breast of my mother” signifies the drying up of the passions and desires, which are the breasts and milk of our mother Eve in our flesh, which are a bar to this state. The “finding Him without” is to find Him in detachment from all things. (A Spiritual Canticle of the Soul and the Bridegroom Christ, Stanza 22.15, trans. Lewis, 2012.)

Here the soul is described as both the sister and spouse of Christ. Christ encourages the soul to nurse from the breast of the soul’s mother, Eve. Christ and the soul are described as having both a sibling and spousal relationship, which would of course be forbidden in the corporeal realm.

Bynum Walker discusses nursing or breastfeeding imagery as being found in other writers pondering the Song of Songs. She quotes Guerriç in stating that “The Bridegroom [Christ]…has breasts” and is “a mother too” producing milk, and that the blood of Christ is turned to milk.126 Breastfeeding imagery, Bynum Walker contends, can be seen as a correlation to drinking the blood from, or kissing, the wounds of Christ.127 In her estimation, discussing Bernard of Clairveaux’s writing, we discover that “in Bernard’s commentary on the Song of Songs … the breasts of the bridegroom repeatedly call forth not erotic, but maternal metaphors.”128 In later writing, “nursing tends to become nursing with blood, not milk,”129 and this becomes more of a eucharistic devotion.130

Fraternal and sororal imagery comes into play in John of the Cross’ work in an unusual blend. John of the Cross writes that Christ “invites the soul, now His bride, to enter this state, saying: ‘I am come into my garden, O My sister, My bride...’”131 John of the Cross writes that Christ addresses his sister soul, “that his Bride should be … ‘My sister is a garden enclosed and a fountain sealed up.’”132 “The Holy Spirit, the author of this spiritual union, desirous that the soul should attain thus far in order to merit it, addresses Himself to the Father and the Son, saying: ‘Our sister is little, and has no breasts. What shall we do to our sister in the day when she is to be spoken to?’”133 Here we find a male Holy Spirit speaking about the female soul to a male God and a male Christ. The reference of the Holy Spirit and Christ as brothers to the father, God, along with innumerable uses of male pronouns for God, is incorporation of the built-in conception in John of the Cross’ writing of paternal imagery.

In the closing pages of Living Flame, John of the Cross writes of the fraternal/sororal and concomitant partner relationship between a male Christ and a simultaneously female and genderless soul as noted through the use of gender neutral pronoun “it” and then female regal title of “queen.” Italics are added here for emphasis and clarity:

He shows Himself as its Bridegroom and Brother, all fear vanishes away. Because in showing unto it, in gentleness and not in anger, the strength of His power and the love of His goodness, He communicates to it the strength and love of His breast, leaping from His throne to caress it, as the bridegroom from his secret chamber, touching it with the sceptre (sic) of His majesty, and as a brother embracing it. … and there the face of the Word full of grace, strike the queenly soul, so that, transformed in the virtues of the King of heaven, it beholds itself a queen … ‘The queen stood on Thy right hand in gilded clothing, surrounded with variety’

(The Living Flame of Love, Stanza 4.13, trans. Lewis, 1919.)

This is a further example of the uncertainty surrounding the gender, exact relationships and relational dynamics between spiritual entities. The soul is both gender neutral and female in this passage. Christ here is its/her king, brother, and spouse.

Throughout the four major mystical works of John of the Cross, we find that gender does indeed play a role. His is a theology in which entities fit in to two primary categories, the corporeal and the ethereal or spiritual. In it, a binary conceptualization of gender belongs truly only to the physical (corporeal) realm, and the physical realm is to be neglected and abandoned at all costs in favor of the spiritual realm. The spiritual realm, as discussed, is characterized by a non-binary conceptualization of gender. In this ethereal plane, the area that John of the Cross finds most important, there can be seen to exist a theological emancipation of the gender concept from the shackles and captivity of a physical body.

Teresa of Avila

Teresa of Avila was born in Avila, Spain on March 28th, 1515, as Teresa de (Cepeda y) Ahumada.134 Her father was Don Alonso Sanchez de Cepeda, and her mother Doña Beatriz Davila y Ahumada.135 She had eight brothers and sisters, and three half-siblings, and her mother passed away when Teresa of Avila was young, in 1528.136 She spent most of her life as a religious, dying at Alba de Tormes, Spain, on October 4th, 1582, and she was beatified in 1614, and canonized in 1622.137 She left behind an autobiography, so instances of her life shall be interwoven into the analysis of her texts. In the words of Pope John Paul II, Teresa of Avila “was at once the spiritual mother and daughter of St. John of the Cross.”138 If this is speaking of two souls departed from the physical world, and the Pope is indeed to be taken as infallible,139 no further evidence of the affiliative variability and relational dynamism of the spiritual realm need be presented.

Significantly more has been written about Teresa of Avila from the gender perspective than has John of the Cross. Alison Weber in Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity comes to conclude that much of what has traditionally been presented as her femininity is itself a strategy to deal with what they call a “misogynistic” culture. The argument is that Teresa of

---

137 Teresa of Avila 2010: p. xxxvi.
Avila puts on an “act” if you will, and that in the historical sense “Teresa was a prodigy because of her sex and a saint in spite of it.”

Ahlgren agrees, saying that Teresa of Avila developed complex strategies in a specific “sociohistorical context” and with specific social relationships. For Ahlgren, Teresa of Avila ultimately represents the ideal for a Counter Reformation-era woman, and an instructive model for other women to survive in the Church.

For the purposes of this study, Teresa of Avila’s twin classics of the mystical genre, Life (or autobiography), The Interior Castle or The Mansions are examined, as well as Meditations on the Song of Songs. These three are chosen for suitability, and due to the time constraints of the study. There are simply too many texts to all be considered here.

Her writing is characterized by its closeness to the reader, her extreme (overexaggerated) humility, frequent dismissal of women as inferior to men, and willingness to submit herself to her male and female superiors. She has a peculiar habit of writing about herself as if she were another person, saying, for example, that she knows of someone to whom something happened, and that this woman was greatly distressed, and so forth. These characteristics forms the crux of the strategy that Weber and Ahlgren refer to: a woman constantly ingratiating herself to her many male superiors, confessors, and theologians.

Teresa of Avila wrote in Spanish, and both Ahglren and Weber note that this is itself a gender issue. Teresa of Avila, and other women of her time, were not educated in Latin or in formal theology, nor were women permitted to teach in a formal sense. Ahlgren argues that through her many visions and locutions, she was able to gain a certain amount of authority that would otherwise have been impossible for her to achieve, due to her gender. This did awaken some suspicion on the part of the Inquisition, but her outward deference to male authority was a leading factor in her success.

In the primary sources, we find the same split between the ethereal and the corporeal worlds, but whereas in John of the Cross’ writing we find that Christ is the bridge between the two, here there is greater emphasis on Teresa of Avila, herself, being the conduit between the physical and the spiritual worlds. Teresa of Avila was a very productive writer, authoring twelve books on religious subjects, and perhaps co-authoring one non-religious book with her brother, Rodrigo, on “chivalry” or courtly romance.

Teresa of Avila’s writing, like John of the Cross’, could be astoundingly beautiful. She was a subtle teacher in a time when women were not allowed to teach. Peers calls her a “genius born, not made.”

We can find perhaps no more direct and beautiful passage in Teresa of Avila’s work than that in Life, describing her transverberation, which occurred in approximately 1559 or 1560:

…”I would see beside me, on my left hand, an angel in bodily form—a type of vision which I am not in the habit of seeing except very rarely. … He was not tall, but short, and very beautiful, his face so aflame that he appeared to be one of the highest types of angel who seem to be all afire. … In his hands I saw a long golden spear and at the end of the iron tip I seemed to see a point of fire. With this he seemed to pierce..."
my heart several times so that it penetrated my entrails. When he drew it out, I thought he was drawing them out with it and he left me completely afire with a great love of God. The pain was so sharp that it made me utter several moans; and so excessive was the sweetness caused me by this intense pain, but spiritual, though the body has a share in it—indeed, a great share. …

During the days that this continued, I went about as if in a stupor. I had no wish to see or speak with anyone, but only to hug my pain, which caused me greater bliss than any that can come from the whole of creation. (Life, Ch. 29.14–16, trans./ed. Peers, 2010.)

Here we find that the beautiful writing in which Teresa of Avila describes the piercing of her body with a spear by an angel. The (male) angel penetrates her body with the fiery spear, and Teresa of Avila describes that this both wounds her and awakens her spiritually. While the language used could be viewed as being descriptive of an almost orgasmic experience it does not appear that this is what Teresa of Avila meant, and that any such inference would be attempting to apply a second meaning through innuendo, and thus “reading into” the passage.

Life gives an account of her life up until the time around the foundation of the Convent of St. Joseph in 1562. In it, we find accounts of her many raptures, ecstasies, levitations and spiritual journeys, such as to Heaven. There is also a description of her soul’s journey into Hell to see the place carved out for her there by her sins. There are even visions of cosmic warfare between angels and devils.

In her childhood, she and her siblings played at being hermits or nuns living in a convent. She writes that she “heard” locutions, had visions, and was able to pass messages from God to living persons. We find also descriptions of several miracles, in which Teresa of Avila intercedes with Christ on behalf of a living person, and this results in a most profound example of the spiritual world having an effect on the physical one. In this way, we find that Teresa of Avila acts as the link between the two:

I was once earnestly importuning the Lord to give sight to a person to whom I was under a certain obligation and who was almost entirely blind; I was very sorry for him and feared that the Lord would not hear me because of my sins. He appeared to me as on former occasions, began by showing me the wound in His left hand, and then with the other hand, drew out a large nail which was embedded in it, in such a way that in drawing out the nail He seemed to me to be tearing the flesh. It was clear how very painful this must be and I was sorely grieved at it. Then He said to me that surely, if He had borne that for me, He would even more readily do whatever I asked Him; that He promised me I should never ask Him anything which He would not grant; that He knew that I should not ask anything that did not tend to His glory; and that therefore He would do what I was now asking of him. … I do not think a full week had passed before the Lord restored that person’s sight. (Life, Ch. 39.2, trans./ed. Peers, 2010.)

This miracle performed by Christ on behalf of Teresa of Avila demonstrates her interconnectedness with the spiritual realm.

The Interior Castle is Teresa of Avila’s description of the mystical journey. It covered much of the same ground as John of the Cross’ work. In it the soul is equated to a castle in

---

149 Life, Ch. 36.6, trans./ed. Peers, 2010.
153 See discussion regarding spiritual favors coming in corporeal, imaginary, and intellectual forms in Synthesis.
154 Life, Ch. 34.9, trans./ed. Peers, 2010.
which there are seven main rooms. The individual passes from the outside, where it is most shallow and superficial, through to the center of the castle, wherein resides the King, God.

Every commentator on the works of Teresa of Avila makes mention of the fact that her (male) confessor demanded she burn her manuscripts of *Meditations on the Song of Songs*, because it was considered dangerous for a woman to comment on it, and she obeyed. Several copies had been circulated earlier to female colleagues, and it is in this form that it survived to be included into early compilations of her written works.

*Life* (finished around 1565) was written for a mixed or predominantly male audience, while *Interior Castle* (finished around 1578) and *Meditations on the Song of Songs* were written for a female audience, as can be noted throughout the text. Teresa of Avila expresses in *Life* and *Castle* that she is writing under obedience, or at the request of others, but curiously in *Meditations* she states that it is her pleasure to write it.\(^{155}\)

**Corporeal**

In analyzing these works, we find several points that shed light upon the same categories and concepts first demonstrated in the analysis of John of the Cross’ writings. There is significantly more said about entities that comprise the spiritual world than the physical one. However, a few remarks are necessary.

In *Life*, we find that Teresa of Avila provides a template of what she considers to be ideal traits for both men and women in her descriptions of her (earthly) parents. She describes her father as charitable, compassionate, truthful, and chaste. She describes her mother as virtuous, chaste, beautiful, tranquil and intelligent.\(^{156}\) It should be noted that she considers these her earthly parents, as elsewhere she describes after their deaths, she took the Virgin Mary to be her new mother,\(^{157}\) and St. Joseph as her mediator,\(^{158}\) describing him later as “my true father.”\(^{159}\)

She referred frequently to other nuns as both her daughters and her sisters, often within the same passage. She also naturally refers to male superiors as fathers. These gendered relationship labels are not meant literally and should not be considered an indication of affiliative variability in the corporeal realm. She generally speaks well of most living persons, though she does occasionally offer criticisms veiled behind her own “inability” to understand. She differentiates between finding spiritual directors that are more religious and those that are more intellectual or “learned,” as she says.

Teresa of Avila described many physical afflictions that were a part of her spiritual life. She notes in *Castle* that she is ill and hears “noises in her head.”\(^{160}\) In *Life* she describes that her doctors tell her that her trances have caused her nerves to shrink, resulting in great bodily pain.\(^{161}\) Her raptures leave her body “disjointed” and she notes that:

> Our Lord now usually sends severe bodily infirmity. This is a far heavier cross, especially if acute pain is felt: if this is violent, I think it is the hardest of earthly trials. I speak of exterior trials; but corporeal pains if of the worst kind enter the interior of our being also, affecting both spirit and body, so that the soul in its


\(^{156}\) Life, Ch. 1.2–3, trans./ed. Peers, 2010.

\(^{157}\) Life, Ch. 1.8, trans./ed. Peers, 2010.

\(^{158}\) Life, Ch. 6.7–8, trans./ed. Peers, 2010.

\(^{159}\) Life, Ch. 33.13, trans./ed. Peers, 2010.

\(^{160}\) Teresa of Avila 2010: p. 3.

\(^{161}\) Life, Ch. 32.3, trans./ed. Peers, 2010.
anguish knows not what to do with itself and would far rather meet death at once by some quick martyrdom than suffer thus.

(\textit{The Interior Castle or the Mansions}, Mansion 6, Ch. 1.13, trans. Benedictines of Stanbrook, 2011.)

Here she remarks that the spiritual favors she received affected her physically. Teresa of Avila would rather be freed of the body so that the soul may thrive. In this way, we see a similar abandonment of the physical realm in favor of the spiritual as to that found in the work of John of the Cross.

\textbf{Ethereal}

Ethereal entities draw most of Teresa of Avila’s attention. The soul, remarkably, is often referred to by the gender-neutral pronoun “it.” Peers notes that “to the word ‘soul’ the neuter pronoun is applied unless it seems to be equivalent to ‘person’… ‘she’ is used only if St. Teresa appears to have a woman definitely in mind.”\textsuperscript{162} Jesus, God, the Devil, and the Holy Ghost or Spirit is generally referred to with male pronouns, such as we find in \textit{Castle}.\textsuperscript{163} Angels tend to be referred to as male, such as we saw in the passage on the transverberation quoted above.

There is some use of nuptial imagery, the bulk of which, of course, is found in \textit{Meditations}. Teresa of Avila seems to consider Christ to be the possible husband of all who wish for Him to be and are committed to living without sin. In \textit{Castle} she writes about, “how Christ treats the souls He takes for His brides” (emphasis added).\textsuperscript{164} The use of the plural indicates that Christ would be involved in multiple marriages. In \textit{Life} she references her own spiritual marriage.\textsuperscript{165} Interestingly, the money that nuns brought with them to the convent are referred to in \textit{Life} as “dowries”.\textsuperscript{166}

In \textit{Meditations} we find the same sort of maternal and nursing imagery used for Jesus as was demonstrated in John of the Cross (and elsewhere). It comes in a great blend of nuptial and maternal imagery, and there seems to be a struggle even within this passage to assign gender to the soul. Teresa of Avila writes:

\begin{quote}
But when this most wealthy Bridegroom desires to enrich and favor the soul more, He changes it into Himself to such a point that, just as a person is caused to swoon from great pleasure and happiness, it seems to the soul it is left suspended in those divine arms, leaning on the sacred side and those divine breasts. It doesn’t know how to do more than rejoice, sustained by the divine milk with which its spouse is nourishing it and making it better so that He might favor it, and it might merit more each day.

When it awakens from that sleep and that heavenly inebriation, it remains as though stupefied and dazed with a holy madness. It seems to me it can say these words: \textit{Your breasts are better than wine}.

(\textit{Meditations on the Song of Songs}, Ch. 4.4–5, trans./ed. Kavanaugh-Rodriguez, 1980.)
\end{quote}

Here the soul is described as being transformed into Christ, accompanied by the nursing imagery. The soul is described as drinking from the breast of its spouse, Christ.

One interesting aspect of Teresa of Avila’s theology is that she often refers to the desired relationship of the person with God as being one of friendship. She occasionally expresses a sort of friendly affinity for God, in a way that is absent in John of the Cross’ writing. In \textit{Life}\textsuperscript{162} Teresa of Avila 2010: p. xxii.

\textsuperscript{162} Teresa of Avila 2010: p. xxii.
\textsuperscript{163} The \textit{Interior Castle or the Mansions}, Mansion 4, Ch. 1.1, trans. Benedictines of Stanbrook, 2011.
\textsuperscript{164} The \textit{Interior Castle or the Mansions}, Mansion 5, Ch. 4.11, trans. Benedictines of Stanbrook, 2011.
\textsuperscript{166} \textit{Life}, Ch. 36.7, trans./ed. Peers, 2010.
she urges others “to approach Him in the intimate friendship which comes from prayer,”\textsuperscript{167} “if the friendship which such a person desires to have with His Majesty is true friendship.”\textsuperscript{168} In Castle she writes:

> The will inclines to love Our Lord and longs to make some return to Him Who is so amiable, and Who has given so many proofs of His love, especially by His constant presence with the soul, which this faithful Lover never quits, ever accompanying it and giving it life and being. The understanding aids by showing that however many years life might last, no one could ever wish for a better friend than God (The Interior Castle or the Mansions, Mansion 2, Ch. 1.9, trans. Benedictines of Stanbrook, 2011.)

The choice of viewing God and Christ as friends is notably different than in John of the Cross’ choice to describe the relationship more in terms of a romantic partner.

**Synthesis**

**Corporeal**

If gender is to be considered an act, as in Butler, what can be learned by studying these two saints from the perspective of gender and sexuality? We have here two people that are seemingly dueling representations of their gender, with an unusual tension in both. John of the Cross represents a man capable of writing in a strikingly feminine way, taking upon himself the view of a female soul. There is never any indication in the source material that John in any way self-identified as a woman.

In Teresa of Avila, we find a woman that expresses herself in an almost hyper-feminine fashion, and yet somehow still came to have her bodily gender dismissed entirely, regarded by male church leaders as a “manly woman.”\textsuperscript{169} Weber, in quoting sources from Teresa of Avila’s canonization process, names several instances in which Teresa of Avila was considered a “virile” or “manly woman,” and one that “ceased to be a woman,” even going so far as to imply that nature had made a mistake in causing her to be born (anatomically) as a woman instead of as a man, and well as a description of a “hieroglyph” of Teresa of Ávila in which towers come from where her breasts should be, and an accompanying text in which “Saints Elijah and Elisha float above her on a cloud, proclaiming, “‘Soror nostra parvula, ubera non habet’ ‘Our little sister does not have breasts’” (italics added).\textsuperscript{170}

These representations are not wholly without precedence. Bynum Walker points to male authority figures in the Church being referred to as “mother,”\textsuperscript{171} monks referring to themselves as “weak women,”\textsuperscript{172} and even Biblical references to Christ as a mother hen.\textsuperscript{173} There is also a concept in the Church of the “male woman,” according to Kate Cooper, writing “The apocryphal Gospel of Thomas captures the idea in an enigmatic saying of Jesus. When he finds the disciples quarreling over whether Mary’s status as a woman should bar her

\textsuperscript{167} Life, Ch. 7.2, trans./ed. Peers, 2010.
\textsuperscript{168} Life, Ch. 7.21, trans./ed. Peers, 2010.
\textsuperscript{169} Ahlgren 1996: p. 155.
\textsuperscript{170} Quoting first Fray Francisco de Jesus, then Diego de San Jose. Weber 1990: p. 17-18.
\textsuperscript{171} Bynum Walker 1982: p. 147.
\textsuperscript{172} Bynum Walker 1982: p. 138.
\textsuperscript{173} Bynum Walker 1982: p. 126.
from holding authority, Jesus himself takes her side: ‘I myself shall lead her in order to make her male.’”  

We find similar, though less successful, tales to Teresa of Avila’s elsewhere during roughly the same time period. In *Marriage and Sexuality in Medieval and Early Modern Iberia*, Ronald Surtz writes about a female visionary named Madona Tecla Servent (b. circa 1455) that also has religious visions, and conversations with God condemning human sexual practice, notably sodomy. Tecla wrote a letter to the Pope about this that “when read in context, Tecla’s letter establishes an implicit connection between ecclesiastical sodomy and the empowerment of women. Her missive places the blame for the ills of Christendom on males, specifically, the clergy, who are guilty of sodomy, a sin seldom associated with women.”

Surtz identifies that Tecla’s vision of God’s wrath over sodomy, or homosexual practice, as striking. This is because she is writing from the perspective of a woman. He notes that “by questioning the heterosexual orientation of a male clerical hierarchy that is so corrupted by sin as to incur the wrath of God, Tecla attacks the weak point in a power structure that has authority over her.” Teresa of Avila, of course, never takes on the Church patriarchy in such a confrontational way, but this does lend credence to the idea that forbidden homosexual sexual contact does exist within the Spanish Church during this time.

Tecla was presented to the Spanish Inquisition for being a woman that attempts to teach on theological matters. Tecla wrote directly to the Pope about God’s anger over sodomy that is quelled only by the help of the Virgin Mary and Christ. Surtz writes “Tecla introduces the concept of the Double Intercession, a literary and visual theme that combined the intercession of Christ and the Virgin: Christ shows his wounds to the Father, while Mary exhorts her son to intercede for sinners, showing him her breast that had nursed him.” Here we have another example nursing imagery. Surtz argues that Tecla’s letter to the highest ecclesiastical authority are in congruence with the pattern of the time. He states, “Tecla’s action is not unique but rather follows a pattern held in common by other medieval holy women whose prophecies involved the reform of the Church.”

Tecla’s strategy was direct confrontation, which resulted in her censure. Teresa of Avila’s strategy was subtle critique and deference to her (male) superiors. Teresa of Avila managed to escape censure for the most part, by playing upon her “weakness” and “stupidity,” and in doing so, she was both strong and clever.

Gendered bodies may inhabit the physical world, but in applying Butler’s theory of gender as a performative act, we see other parallels in the material. Teresa of Avila, in painting herself as stupid, weak, humble, submissive, wicked and so forth, takes on the act of femininity, as it was helpful for her, as Weber and Ahlgren point out. Teresa of Avila was in a sense feigning her weakness; a tragic “victim” of her outward gender.

John of the Cross managed to improvise a performance of a female point of view in his poetry alongside his cerebral, methodical prose. The poetry may have gained the attention of modern day researchers, resulting in appraisals such as those by MacCulloch, who say that it

---

174 Bennett & Karras 2013: p. 530.
175 Surtz 2002: p. 197.
177 Surtz 2002: p. 204.
178 Surtz 2002: p. 204.
indicates homosexuality, but there is conflicting evidence from other sources indicating that John of the Cross was considered heterosexual.

Cardinal Wiseman, in writing his introduction to *Living Flame* may have noticed this tension long before anyone else:

…for while no mystical saint has ever been more idealised [sic] by artists, or represented as living in a continual swoon, than St. Teresa, her true portraits all represent her with strong, firmly set, and almost masculine features, with forms and lines that denoted vigour [sic], resolution, and strong sense. Her handwriting perfectly suggests the same conclusion. Still more does the successful activity of her life, in her many painful struggles, under every possible disadvantage, and her final and complete triumph, strengthen this idea of her. And then, her almost superhuman prudence, by which she guided so many minds, and prosperously conducted so many complicated interests and affairs, and her wonderful influence over men of high education and position, and of great powers, are further evidences of her strong, commanding nature; such as, in the world, might have claimed an almost unexampled pre-eminence.

…Twin-saint, it may be said, to St. Teresa sharer in her labours [sic] and in her sufferings, St. John of the Cross, actively and unflinchingly pursued their joint object, that of reforming and restoring to its primitive purity and observance the religious Order of Carmelites, and founding, throughout Spain, a severer branch, known as discalced, or barefooted Carmelites; or more briefly, as Teresians.\footnote{181}

John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila are very often linked together in this way, but it is Teresa of Avila that is credited as the driving force behind the reform of the Carmelites. Therefore, they were known as “Teresians.” It is interesting to note the foundation of an order in which a female takes the lead, and males such as John of the Cross play an ancillary role.

In the physical world that these two inhabited and acted out their genders, we find that they even have a sort of “costume” that are themselves gender-indicative. The habits, or clothes, of monks and nuns, are different for men and women, allowing easy identification of the anatomical gender of the wearer. The wearing of the habit, Teresa of Avila reminds us, does in no way guarantee perfection.\footnote{182} John of the Cross’ habit was even said to have been sewn by Teresa of Avila, herself.\footnote{183}

**Ethereal**

In the ethereal realm, entities are free to take on or play any gender role at any time and change without effort. God, Christ, or the soul can be male, female or neuter and switch freely between roles as deemed necessary for the “performance” at any given moment. It seems that, in regard to spiritual entities, anything goes, and they are free to be conceptualized as whatever one might desire them to be.

There is no indication of the role of sexuality in the spiritual realm, as it seems spiritual entities move between typically sexual and typically nonsexual gendered relationship forms without hesitation and without evoking the strong reactions these would in the corporeal realm. Souls, for example, can have relationships such as parent, offspring and sexual partner in combinations that in the corporeal realm would be considered incestuous, *exempli gratia* the soul as the sister and spouse of a male Christ, who can also be mother. Teresa of Avila, in *Meditations*, by applying the Song of Songs with all its kissing and romantic allusions, to

\footnote{181 John of the Cross 1919: p. ix–xi.}

\footnote{182 Life, Ch. 38.31, trans./ed. Peers, 2010.}

\footnote{183 Heriz 1919: p. 48.}
Mary, the Mother of Christ,\textsuperscript{184} appears to open an interesting set of questions. Add to this the concept of the “Bearded Virgin Mary”\textsuperscript{185} found in other writers, and we have even more.

It ultimately appears not to be a case of there being merely a short Oedipal leap from Christ’s mother to Christ’s lover, or even from Christ as the soul’s brother to Christ as the soul’s lover, or any such configuration. Incestuous relationships such as these would certainly have been considered sinful and forbidden, but these implied relations do not draw ire or even much notice in the material studied, which implies a lack of any directly sexual interaction. This suggests that spiritual entities are not engaged in sexual activity in any real sense, and these relationships are meant in an illustrative sense, never in a physical sense, and that they are not consummated.

Teresa of Avila in her life notably takes Christ’s earthly parents as her spiritual parents. Extending the analogy, we would see that Christ would then be her spiritual brother as well as spouse, which is in keeping with the female soul as Christ’s sister in John of the Cross’ writing. The soul for Teresa of Avila is a female soul, once housed in a female body, married to a male Christ that is its spiritual brother, being the spiritual daughter of Christ’s mother and father. Weber points out that “the soul’s transformation from male to female, soldier to bride, the movement from struggle to surrender, from active to passive penetration—reflect the theologically precarious position of Teresa’s mysticism,”\textsuperscript{186} but it is only a “precarious position” if we expect the ethereal realm to have a sense of gender rigidity, instead of the gender fluidity that the evidence suggests as presented by two persons considered by the Catholic Church to be in such full control of understanding that they are given universal license to teach.

In both John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila we find that they discuss different types of spiritual favors, and that they are broken down into three categories. These categories are “corporeal, “imaginary,” and “intellectual.” Corporeal, as in our usage, applies to sensations recorded by the bodily senses. “Imaginary” favors are felt as though one would have experienced them through the senses, though they are aware that they had not in reality. In intellectual favors, the experience is one of where “nothing is seen or heard by the eyes and ears, and where no sensation is received by the imagination.”\textsuperscript{187} Zimmerman adds a note in Castle regarding this, writing “The senses of Taste, Touch, and Smell are not so often affected by mystical phenomena, but what we are to say in respect of Sight and Hearing applies mutatis mutandis, to these also,”\textsuperscript{188}

John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila both note in their works that they have only experienced favors in the intellectual category. Intellectual favors are considered safest, as the human body can be tricked and deceived via the bodily senses and the imagination. Both John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila were afraid of such things, and in so doing, they clearly prefer movements and favors that occur on the spiritual level, over the physical level. To put it another way, the ethereal realm is always considered superior to the physical (and mental) realms, in the mystical theology of John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila.

There is something to be said, however, for all the confusion surrounding affiliative variability, relational dynamism, and border uncertainty between the different entities that populate the spiritual realm. It is, for those among the living, difficult to know where one

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{184} Meditations on the Song of Songs, Ch. 6.8, trans./ed. Kavanaugh-Rodriguez, 1980.
  \item \textsuperscript{185} Bynum Walker 1982: p. 139.
  \item \textsuperscript{186} Weber 1990: p. 122.
  \item \textsuperscript{187} Teresa of Avila 2011: p. 118.
  \item \textsuperscript{188} Teresa of Avila 2011: p. 116.
\end{itemize}
begins and another ends, and how exactly they relate to one another. The Devil is said on two occasions to have assumed the physical form of John of the Cross in order to trick nuns,\textsuperscript{189} an unusual crossing over of the ethereal with the corporeal in an \textit{act} of deception.

John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila would likely argue that there is only confusion in this life, and that this constitutes one of the great mysteries of the Christian religion, which can only be understood after death. Heriz writes that John of the Cross’ expounding in the \textit{Canticle} is on mysteries that were “beyond the compass of human speech.”\textsuperscript{190} The fault, they would argue, is in the language, not in the makeup of the spiritual world.

Teresa of Avila remarks in \textit{Castle} that God and Christ are the same,\textsuperscript{191} and she should be in the know, having written years prior in \textit{Life} of her initiation into the mysteries of the Trinity \textit{by God}.\textsuperscript{192} One suspects therefore that Teresa of Avila, and most likely John of the Cross as well, would argue that the theoretical framework so here proposed is only accurate regarding the ethereal realm when viewed from the corporeal.

## Results

The finding of this study, in relation to the questions posed, is that the roles of gender and sexuality are important in the lives and written works of John of the Cross, and Teresa of Avila, thus confirming the hypothesis. The role of gender in Teresa of Avila is something that she overcame through a strategy of exaggeration, and the role of sexuality was less apparent, in that she appears not to have thought much in the terms of her sexuality, nor struggled with it in the way that John of the Cross did. Teresa of Avila was, however, in some sense aware of it, and how others may perceive it.

John of the Cross’ gender did not represent a sort of hurdle over which he would have felt compelled to vault, but his sexuality appears to have been, at least from his point of view. Again, we find the two saints as contrasting with one another; different sides of the same coin.

## Discussion

Interpreting the confirmation of the hypothesis, by use of results that came through the synthesis and analysis of the written material here studied, we find that it was necessary to create a new theoretical framework in order to account for sexuality and gender across two planes of existence which differ significantly.

It is difficult to place John of the Cross’ sexuality on the Kinsey scale. The results here are inconclusive, as there is not much to go on from the source material. Once John of the Cross was said to have been confronted in the street by a woman carrying his illegitimate child,

\textsuperscript{189} Heriz 1919: p. 73, 76.
\textsuperscript{190} Heriz 1919: p. 138.
\textsuperscript{191} The Interior Castle or the Mansions, Mansion 5, Ch. 2.3, trans. Benedictines of Stanbrook, 2011.
though he was able to defend himself against this charge. On another occasion, he was supposedly asked to accompany a woman home, and he replied that he would rather go to Hell than to a woman’s house, though this was likely to have been more of a rejection of the impropriety of the suggestion, and less a commentary on the attractiveness of the woman in question. These incidents would suggest that he was, outwardly at least, considered a potential or viable heterosexual mate for these women. He is known to have destroyed some papers upon escaping from his prison cell and asked for the destruction of letters on his deathbed, but there is no way to know the contents of these papers and letters, what they might imply, or why the saint might feel that they required being destroyed.

The advice John of the Cross gives to others regarding erections that Rambuss points out is not especially compelling, as Kinsey pointed out that sexual response to any stimulus is normal and non-indicative. There is simply too little evidence, though we know that John of the Cross struggled with sexuality in a different way than did Teresa of Avila.

Teresa of Avila could potentially have been classified as an “X” on the Kinsey scale, representing an individual that is asexual. In *Meditations on the Song of Songs*, she considers the kiss between the bride soul and the Bridegroom Christ as friendly, and this is perhaps the most likely place where one might expect to see sexual overtones. Her status as a virgin, and lack of struggle with her sexuality may point to this possibility. Teresa of Avila had a broken engagement in her youth, and there were accusations, ultimately dismissed, of a sexual relationship with Jéronimo Gracían. Otherwise we find only that she is perhaps a person that is desired by others. She writes in *Life* that she “became aware of the natural graces which the Lord had given me, and which were said to be many,” implying that others found her attractive. There is also story of a priest that appears to have fallen in love with her, noting that his affection for her was not entirely pure, but these desires do not appear to be reciprocated.

Otherwise, Teresa of Avila expressed that she was afraid of marriage. This could indicate a social or sexual dysfunction, which may relate to her uncertainty of how to properly react to the “marital impulse” based on lack of experience of response to sexual stimulus. Of the men she met in her professional capacity, she wrote:

> But they, being God-fearing and God-serving men, were afraid that I might in some way become attached to them and drawn towards them—in a spiritual sense, of course—by the bonds of affection; so they would treat me quite unpleasantly. … I used to laugh to myself when I saw how mistaken they were. I was always telling them, in so many words, how little attachment I had to anybody…

(*Life*, Ch. 37.6, trans./ed. Peers, 2010.)

Again, in this passage we find that she seems to not be attracted to these individuals. She maintains a platonic relationship with the many theologians, confessors, priests and monks that she meets. Teresa of Avila had a marked fondness for John of the Cross, but there is no

---

195 Heriz 1919: p. 89.
196 Heriz 1919: p. 194.
evidence that this was any sort of romantic relationship, or that she harbored any such feelings. She also keeps a platonic relationship with the many fellow nuns that she met in her professional capacity.

As for the role of gender and sexuality that can be found in the mystical idiom, we see that through the division between the corporeal and the ethereal realms, there are different rules that apply. Furthermore, it becomes evident that these two saints did not exist in the proverbial vacuum, and they belong to a distinct mystical tradition which they both precedes their lives and works, and that they contributed to. Ahlgren writes:

The decision to canonize Teresa in 1622 indicates the recognition of a distinct, Catholic mystical spirituality codified by both Teresa and her contemporary, John of the Cross, one of the major achievements of the so-called Counter-Reformation. The Inquisition’s censors repressed spiritual literature that they feared might incite its readers to challenge the institutional authority of the Roman Catholic Church. Ironically, however, the indexes of prohibited books inspired Teresa, John of the Cross, and others to produce new authoritative texts that eventually formed one of the pillars of Roman Catholic identity.

As noted in the introduction, both John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila were beatified, canonized, and eventually promoted to Doctor of the Church. Their writing had a definite impact, and Teresa of Avila was made the patron saint of Spain.

E. Allison Peers writes of Teresa of Avila’s Life and Interior Castle, saying that no other work by a Spanish author is more widely read in Spain, except for perhaps Don Quixote. John of the Cross’ work is less well-known, but it has inspired others in a way that made an enormous impact on Catholic Church. Pope John Paul II even wrote his doctoral thesis in theology on the works of John of the Cross and is referenced in this study.

Conclusion

John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila worked out a dynamic and complex mystical theology between them, emanating from a 16th century Spain in the throes of the Counter Reformation, and they have often been considered part-and-parcel with one another. Studying the role of gender in their lives and works has provided new insights into mysticism and has examined the fleeting nature of the relationships between the individual in the body sense, their soul, and the other entities that populate the spiritual realm. Interestingly, there is an interconnectedness to be found, where the world of gendered bodies can have an impact on the spiritual world, and vice versa. The spiritual favors that the saints received in the accounts were so great that they resulted in reports of their physical bodies being incorruptible after death.

Future studies based upon the results of this examination can be build from the theoretical framework of gender and sexuality as found in the spiritual and physical worlds as presented in this essay, applying these principles to the works of other mystics. It would be interesting to see if this framework would hold true in other examples. If these patterns could be found in

---

204 Teresa of Avila 2010: p. xxxviii.
the works of other mystical writers, the extra data would reinforce the findings of this study and assist in refining the framework. Should it not hold true, this would be a significant finding that marks Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross as being exceptional within the mystical idiom.
List of References

Primary Sources:


Secondary Sources:


List of Internet References


