

BRIDES OF CHRIST: VISION, ECSTASY, AND DEATH IN THE HOLY WOMEN OF
GIANLORENZO BERNINI

By

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To my mother, who makes all things possible: *Nisi coelum creassem ob te solam crearem*

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Throughout history, scholarship on Gianlorenzo Bernini's *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* in the Cornaro Chapel has wrangled with issues of sexuality and the religious image, and has never fully elucidated the mystical narrative of the altarpiece. Through a cultural contextualization and review of the literature on both the Baroque and Bernini, it is possible to begin a proper reading of the subject of eroticism in his work. By establishing the foundations of mysticism and moving forward from a medieval precedent, rather than backward from the contemporary period, any notions of profanity within Bernini's work become appropriately aligned with the sacred.

In addition to the Cornaro Chapel, there are two other works that have a mystical subject: the *Memorial to Maria Raggi* and the Altieri Chapel and its *Blessed Ludovica Albertoni*. Examining these three compositions in relation to one another and in relationship to a medieval framework delineates Bernini's translation of the sexualized language of mysticism into artistic representations consonant with the theology of the Counter-Reformation Church. Bernini's Brides of Christ serve the goals of the Catholic Church both as a means of provoking spirituality through an emotional connection with viewers and as didactic tools to model the importance of the sacrament of the Eucharist.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

“Note well that the Son of God married us in the circumcision, cutting off the tip of his own flesh in the form of a ring and giving it to us as a sign that he wished to marry the whole human generation.”¹ Saint Catherine of Siena speaks of her mystical marriage to Christ in highly sexualized terms, using nuptial imagery that had been established in the very origins of the Christian faith. This is the erotic language of mystics, and though it may seem startling or even profane to contemporary audiences, it has an important theological role in expressing the spirituality of the Counter-Reformation period and for achieving the goals of the Catholic Church.

What is mysticism? Put simply, it is the union between God and his followers through Christ. There is a perceived state of separation between humans and God that mystics endeavor to recapture in order to achieve the fundamental state of “oneness” with Him.² In the reality of the mystic, this “seeming twoness” is evidenced by a disquieting of the spirit that illustrates an individual’s kinship with the divine. Mystics believe that despite the ineffability of the celestial and mankind’s apparent separation from it, one can achieve an “intuitive knowledge” and “moral harmony” with it through the reciprocity of self-knowledge.³ In practice, there is an initial stage of activeness, but the final stage is marked by passivity, defined in Christian mysticism as union, wherein the exercises of the first stage are accomplished without effort and no longer needed.

¹ E. Ann Matter, “Mystical Marriage.” Trans. by Keith Botsford, in *Women and Faith: Catholic religious life in Italy from late antiquity to the present*, edited by Lucetta Scaraffia and Gabriella Zarri (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 37.

² Margaret Lewis Furse, *Mysticism: window on a world view* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1977), 15.

³ *Ibid.*, 17.

Knowledge is intuitively based and ethics are undistinguished, with emphasis placed on the present time and experience.⁴

The Baroque is a period of art preoccupied with the concepts of illusionism and the representation of the supernatural. Depicting the ephemeral, transcendent state in art presented the same problematic issues that troubled the original, verbal expression of mystical concepts. How exactly did an artist illustrate the mystical ascension from the physical to the spiritual and the final culminating union of the terrestrial and the celestial? Just as mystics utilized an erotic vocabulary and physical metaphors, so did artists. In particular, Gianlorenzo Bernini drew on both the history of mysticism and contemporary literature in order to create visual representations of mystical union in his sculptures using corporeal terms, just as mystics had used physical language to express the ineffable.

One of the most salient visualizations of mystical union is Bernini's Cornaro Chapel, located in Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome (Figure 1). The altarpiece and crown jewel of this chapel is the *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*, a sculptural group which has been recognized both by the artist and by the majority of historians as his most accomplished work, not simply for its formal virtuosity, but also because it summarizes the revolutionary innovations that delineate the culmination of his artistic career, the *bel composto*: a combination of painting, sculpture, and architecture in a singular work, creating a beautiful whole or "synthesis" (Figure 2). Though other artists worked in all three media, Bernini was the first in the history of art to combine all three in one work.⁵ In this chapel, the subject of eroticism and sexuality is carefully negotiated in the writings of most contemporary scholars who specialize in the Baroque (such as Rudolf

⁴ Furse, 17-18.

⁵ Bruce Boucher, *Italian Baroque Sculpture* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 134.

Wittkower, Howard Hibbard, Kenneth Clark, Charles Avery, and Tod Marder); they either do not address the issue or curtly note it, gingerly eluding the topic by focusing on formal aspects and a generalized stylistic analysis. Neoclassical and Victorian commentators (such as Francesco Milizia, John Flaxman, John Ruskin, Jacob Burckhardt, De Stendhal, and Hippolyte Taine), and theorists outside art history (such as Jacques Lacan, Luce Irigaray, and Tom Hayes), by contrast, have found the work to be thoroughly erotic, interpreting Saint Teresa in sexualized terms independent from any seventeenth century religious and socio-cultural context. There are, of course, varying degrees of assessment in between, including a few historians (such as John Pope-Hennessy, Robert Petersson, Irving Lavin, Charles Scribner, and Bruce Boucher) who have briefly suggested that any perceived eroticism is firmly placed within the established religious tradition of mysticism. A full review of these evaluations will be covered in Chapter Two.

The shortcomings of scholarship have been two-fold. First, this sculptural group should not be considered as a separate entity from the chapel itself. Bernini's original concept seamlessly blends architecture, painting and sculpture, and any dissection of the sum of these parts thoroughly breaks down the larger narrative of the iconographic program and negates the proper interpretation of this work. Second, in order to properly understand the iconographic narrative, it is necessary to contextualize the mystical tradition it employs. By approaching the interpretation of this chapel program by moving forward from the medieval precedent, rather than moving backward from the contemporary period, the established vocabulary of mysticism comes into focus. Reading the Cornaro Chapel and its *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* through this lens aligns our comprehension more closely with how it would have been understood in the seventeenth century and how it should be viewed today. In addition to reviewing the literature and framing the Cornaro Chapel within an established mystical tradition, it is pertinent to

consider the contemporary seventeenth century socio-cultural and religious environment, particularly the case of public commissions within the Counter-Reformation period.

There are two additional Roman works within Gianlorenzo Bernini's oeuvre that illustrate the mystical states of holy women: the *Memorial to Maria Raggi* in Santa Maria sopra Minerva and the Altieri Chapel and its *Blessed Ludovica Albertoni* in San Francesco a Ripa (Figures 3-5). The *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* has dominated the literature to date and as a result, the importance of these other works in their relation to the *Ecstasy* and in the interpretation of the ephemeral within Bernini's art has been remiss. The *Memorial to Maria Raggi* precedes the Cornaro Chapel and represents Bernini's initial treatment of the divinely supernatural union between Christ and his bride, the Venerable Sister Maria Raggi. The Altieri Chapel and its *Blessed Ludovica Albertoni* follow the Cornaro Chapel and its *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*. In this chapel, Bernini once again combines architecture, painting and sculpture in a larger iconographic program to produce a narrative delineating the mystical union between Christ and Beata Ludovica Albertoni. The aesthetic similarities between these additional works have actively been noted by scholars, but few have given any consideration to conceptual commonalities beneath the surface. These two works, in addition to the Cornaro Chapel, do not merely satisfy the requests and propagandistic function of their individual patrons. Such a singular interpretation ignores the multivalent qualities within their compositions. When placed alongside the Cornaro Chapel, they not only contextualize and further illustrate the role of mysticism within the Counter-Reformation Church, but they also serve larger goals of reinforcing the rite of Holy Communion and demonstrating the power of the saint—two aspects of Catholicism that had been the most viciously contested points of Protestant Reformers.

Examining these three works in relation to one another and in relationship to a medieval framework puts into perspective Bernini's engagement with the language of mysticism and his utilization of these works within the environment of the Counter-Reformation, both as a means of provoking spirituality through an emotional connection with viewers and as didactic tools to model the importance of the sacrament of the Eucharist. Any perceived eroticism within Bernini's work should be understood within the recognized mystical tradition and its use of nuptial imagery to conceive of an intangible union between the earth-bound and the heavenly. Bernini's sculptural Brides of Christ represent this role of mysticism within the Counter-Reformation Church, and are used to delineate and reinforce the key principles of early modern Catholicism in the connection with the divine.

CHAPTER 2 PIETY OR PERVERSION: SEXUALITY IN THE RELIGIOUS IMAGE

Critical debate over the profanation of the sacred by no means began with Gianlorenzo Bernini. In order to adequately and justly discuss the issues of sexuality in religious art, it is necessary to consider a variety of factors. Framing works of art in their contemporary socio-cultural environment is imperative in their interpretation, particularly in the case of public commissions. From this initial exploration of environment arise four secondary and vital issues: literary sources and influences for the art work, the role of the artists, the will of the patrons, and the interpretations made by the public. With these many considerations in mind, we may begin to examine how these internal and external factors shaped the controversial sculpture of St. Teresa, in order to put her eroticism in historical perspective.

From the conclusion of the Council of Trent through the persistence of the Counter Reformation in Italy, there was a redoubled effort to maintain the purity of sacred works. These regulations encompassed not only art and literature, but nearly any interpretive device used for the promotion and understanding of Catholicism. Jill Burke asserts:

The fact that religious painting also had the potential to arouse viewers sexually became a mounting anxiety for Catholic reformers, who in the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries increasingly sought separate spheres of operation for the sacred and profane.¹

Yet this comment by Burke should not be interpreted as a permissive gesture by ecclesiastic officials in favor of a realm of profane, secularized art, but the acknowledgement that its existence, while not publicly tolerated, was implicitly evident. Irreverent themes and representations, particularly in public works with religious subjects, would not be acceptable. Despite post-Baroque perceptions, public works of religious art that were deemed inappropriate

¹ Jill Burke, "Sex and Spirituality in 1500s Rome: Sebastiano del Piombo's Martyrdom of Saint Agatha." *Art Bulletin* 88 (2006): 482.

faced censorship, up to and including removal. Those that were not subject to this censorship should be viewed as *relatively* acceptable, insofar as they were not condemned by Church officials. This point should be kept in mind particularly while considering Bernini's mystical works. In these examples, there is not a dichotomy of the sacred and "profane," but a visualization of the sacred using a very physical vocabulary in order to describe a wholly spiritual experience.

The Catholic Church's commitment, at least publicly, was to uphold the reforms set up by the Council of Trent. Session XXV of the Council in 1563 states:

And the bishops shall carefully teach this,-that, by means of the histories of the mysteries of our Redemption, portrayed by paintings or other representations, the people is instructed, and confirmed in (the habit of) remembering, and continually revolving in mind the articles of faith; as also that great profit is derived from all sacred images, not only because the people are thereby admonished of the benefits and gifts bestowed upon them by Christ, but also because the miracles which God has performed by means of the saints, and their salutary examples, are set before the eyes of the faithful; that so they may give God thanks for those things; may order their own lives and manners in imitation of the saints; and may be excited to adore and love God, and to cultivate piety. But if any one shall teach, or entertain sentiments, contrary to these decrees; let him be anathema.

And if any abuses have crept in amongst these holy and salutary observances, the holy Synod ardently desires that they be utterly abolished; in such wise that no images, (suggestive) of false doctrine, and furnishing occasion of dangerous error to the uneducated, be set up.²

More than one artist found themselves answering to the Church concerning their artistic license.

Not ten years after the institution of this decree, Paolo Veronese had to appear before the Inquisition in 1573 for the addition of non-historical figures in his Last Supper.³ Caravaggio dealt with the rejection of his art from several public church commissions, one for perceived

² James Waterworth, ed. and trans., *The canons and decrees of the sacred and oecumenical Council of Trent, celebrated under the sovereign pontiffs, Paul III, Julius III and Pius IV* (London: Dolman, 1848), 235, <http://history.hanover.edu/texts/trent/ct25.html> (accessed March 7, 2008).

³ David Chambers, Brian Pullan, and Jennifer Fletcher, eds., *Venice: a documentary history, 1450-1630* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press in association with the Renaissance Society of America, 2001), 232-236.

historical and doctrinal inaccuracies in his painting of *St. Matthew*, and twice for showing the Virgin in a common and debased way.⁴ Bernini himself faced censorship by Pope Innocent XI in his *Tomb of Alexander VII*. Filippo Baldinucci recounted the event in his seventeenth-century biography of Bernini:

At the bottom of the tomb on either side are two large marble figures, one representing Charity, the other Truth. This latter figure was completely nude, though the nudity was concealed somewhat by the play of the pall about her and also the sun which covered some of the bosom. But a nude woman, even though of stone and by Bernini's hand, was unsuitable to the purity of the mind of the present Pope, Innocent XI. He let it be known in a gracious way that it would be to his liking if Bernini would cover her somewhat in whatever manner seemed best to him. Bernini quickly made her a garment of bronze which he tinted white to look like marble. For him it was a work of immense thought and labor, as he had to unite one thing to another that had been made with a different aim in mind. He held, however, that it was effort well spent, since by these measures, and by that beautiful example, the holiness of mind of that great Pope would shine forth for all the centuries to come.⁵

The decree established by the Council of Trent would be echoed by church officials and artists alike. In 1582 Cardinal Gabriele Paleotti, archbishop of Bologna, authored his *Discorso intorno alle imagini sacre e profane*, in the hopes of “correcting abuses in the visual arts” by addressing indiscretions in both artists and patrons that could potentially pollute the meaning of the subject being viewed. Paleotti addressed patrons as “curates and noblemen and honored persons,” and found them to be the “principal agents whose will the artist executed.”⁶ On

⁴ R. Po-Chia Hsia, *The World of Catholic Renewal, 1540-1770* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 159.

⁵ Filippo Baldinucci, *The Life of Bernini*, trans. Catherine Enggass (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1966), 65-66. Additionally interesting to note is that in the preparatory drawings and models for the tomb, the figure of Charity was originally bare breasted as well, nursing a child she held in her arms, presumably to represent the allegorical nature of her figure. For more on this, cf. Charles Avery, *Bernini: Genius of the Baroque* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1997), 134-138, and Tod A. Marder, *Bernini and the Art of Architecture* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1998), 314-317.

⁶ James Clifton, “‘Being Lustful, He Would Delight in Her Beauty’: Looking at Saint Agatha in Seventeenth-Century Italy.” In *From Rome to Eternity: Catholicism and the Arts in Italy, ca. 1550-1650*, edited by Pamela M. Jones and Thomas Worcester (Boston: Brill, 2002), 159.

viewing art, he cautioned not to place a sacred work in the realm of the profane (thus alluding to the two different categories into which he divided art):

. . . because it could be that an image in its nature and according to its form should justly be placed among sacred [images], and nonetheless one who is looking at it will place it in another category. This happens because the viewer will have a very different idea in his mind from that which the maker had . . . ⁷

Perhaps the most adumbrative comment by Paleotti provided the best summation: “Whereby we see that from the sap of country flowers bees make sweet honey and spiders extract deadly poison.”⁸

Seventy years later in 1652, theologian Giovanni Domenico Ottonelli and painter Pietro da Cortona wrote the *Trattato della pittura e scultura uso et abuso loro*, aimed first and foremost to the viewers, and secondarily to artists. Ottonelli and Cortona dealt with issues of nudity, obscenity, and general lack of decorum. They particularly asserted, on the issue of nude women, that such images could “serve sometimes as an impulse for the dangerous fall of weak viewers”⁹ and were to be painted with great care to avoid thoughts of impurity. What was labeled as the “first abuse” of painting religious subjects was that, “some paint angels or saints with lascivious appearances, from which are caused impure thoughts in the viewers.”¹⁰ Such statements from Ottonelli and Cortona illustrate a responsibility in both artist and viewer, and what is pertinent to note about both essays is that they forthrightly address the perception and responsibility of the viewer in the interpretation of art.

⁷ Ibid., 160. Nevertheless, Paleotti does not excuse the role of the artist in such inappropriate interpretations.

⁸ Idem.

⁹ Ibid., 161.

¹⁰ Ibid., 162.

In light of the reforms instituted by the Council of Trent in the mid 1500s, a period of restoration and renewal began and continued throughout the seventeenth century. While the reactionary clarifications of the Church concerning art did not amount to wholesale iconoclasm, they seemed to favor a more conservative and thoughtful approach as a means for the justification of images. However, this anti-aesthetic stance found in art criticism shifted to a profound appreciation for aesthetic quality, catalyzed by the aspirations of a High Baroque papacy to compete with absolute monarchies. In this post-Counter Reformation era, the arts remained an important tool of the Church; critics and theologians like Paleotti, et al., were still addressing artistic strategies that could be understood as too profane as late as 1652. However, the arts now served not only to educate the spiritual, but to provide enjoyment as well. In addition to the rise of aestheticism, the spheres of secular and sacred art became more individualized (as noted by Burke), marked by a heightened interest in secular art by ecclesiastic as well as political circles.¹¹ Such interests are evident in examples such as Caravaggio's *Musicians*, made for Cardinal Francesco Maria Del Monte, and his *Amor Vincit Omnia*, done for Marchese Vincenzo Giustiniani. Interestingly, the late Seicento also produced a surge in mysticism, not only in literature, but art as well. This development occurred despite the "practical psychology" and "psycho-therapeutic directness" of the powerful Jesuits, and a general softening in devotional fervor.¹²

As a result of the Counter-Reformation and in response to staunch Protestant critics, the martyrdom of saints became more of a central theme in art.¹³ What manifested in the Baroque was a shift to depictions of graphic violence and deathly contemplation in an appeal to the

¹¹ Rudolf Wittkower, *Art and Architecture in Italy, 1600–1750* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1958), 90-91.

¹² Idem.

¹³ Hsia, 163.

emotional state of the viewer. Female martyrs were a particularly complex issue for representation, because of the increased depiction of female virgin martyrs nude or semi-nude, which heightened the violent offense to their bodies as well as virtue.¹⁴ The illustration and viewing of sacred subjects, particularly saints, was a delicate matter. The problematic issue of viewership and the potential for inappropriateness of gaze has been suggested by the reforms of the Council of Trent and the censoring measures taken against artists in connection with the reform and restoration of the Counter-Reformation. Often the eroticism of a work is assigned solely to the artist and the work, without proper consideration of the role of the viewer. An example that elucidates this point can be found in Bernini's own oeuvre. Chantelou relates in his *Diary of the Cavaliere Bernini's Visit to France* a story Bernini used to illustrate the issues surrounding the interpretive mind:

When he was working on the Daphne, Pope Urban VIII (then still a cardinal), came in to see it with Cardinal de Sourdis and Cardinal Borghese who had commissioned it. Cardinal de Sourdis remarked to the latter that he would have some scruples about having it in his house; the figure of a lovely naked girl might disturb those who saw it.¹⁵

Whether the good Cardinal de Sourdis was speaking of his own personal desire or cautioning others is unclear. Another primary source, Baldinucci's biography, *Life of Bernini*, notes the action taken by the future Pope Urban VIII to clarify the interpretation of the sculpture:

In order that the figure of Daphne—so true and alive—would be less offensive to the eyes of a chaste spectator, Cardinal Maffeo Barberini had carved there the following distich, the noble fruit of his most erudite mind: The lover who will fleeting beauty follow / Plucks bitter berries; leaves fill his hand's hollow.¹⁶

¹⁴ A. Hyatt Mayor, "The Art of the Counter Reformation." *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 4 (1945): 102.

¹⁵ Paul Fréart de Chantelou, *Diary of the Cavaliere Bernini's Visit to France*, ed. Anthony Blunt, trans. Margery Corbett (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 30.

¹⁶ Baldinucci, 14.

The necessity of applying a Christian moral to a well-known mythological subject perhaps best demonstrates the case in point.

Another key component in the depiction of both sacred and secular art is the source from which subjects were drawn. Images were not always idealized by the license of the artist (which would have been considered carefully), but were often represented as they were expressly described in their corresponding literary sources. The reforms instituted by the Council of Trent focused on the purification of literature, not only because it was an individual form of artistic expression, but also because it was a source for painting and sculpture, whose subject matter was delineated both by the patrons request and the literary narrative. Traditional doctrine has not been the sole source for artistic interpretation. Many artists looked to plays, poems, biographical accounts, and church records to glean examples for reproduction. Seventeenth century assessments of Bernini valued his power of invention, translation, and his ability to create a work that conveyed a “meaningful literary theme” above all other issues of aesthetic appeal and execution.¹⁷

Despite contemporary praises such as these, Bernini worked within an environment that was highly sensitive to the moral clarity of art and the dangers of the profane commingling with the sacred. His successful position is pertinent to consider when examining the early critical reception to his work, and what scant criticism there was may result from jealousy of his position rather than legitimate artistic offenses. When Cardinal Maffeo Barberini became Pope Urban VIII in 1623, anyone aspiring to a papal commission for the next thirty-one years would be sorely disappointed. Gianlorenzo Bernini would be the uncontested artist of choice for the duration of Urban VIII’s papacy, enjoying what Howard Hibbard has asserted as, “a relationship

¹⁷ George C. Bauer, *Bernini in Perspective* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1976), 6.

unmatched in the history of artistic patronage.”¹⁸ The newly elevated Pope had begun cultivating the artist and their relationship when Bernini was a young child prodigy working for a former papal family, and had been the first to commission an independent work from Bernini in 1616.¹⁹ With Bernini’s virtual monopoly of papal patronage came the continual ebb of criticism. His position under Urban VIII was the most coveted in all of Rome and put him quite out of reach for any encroaching usurpers. With only brief interruptions, Bernini commanded the Roman art world and was overwhelming successful for more than fifty years. Rudolf Wittkower remarks of his career: “Only Michelangelo before him was held in similar esteem by the popes, the great, and the artists of his time.”²⁰ Even Giovanni Battista Passeri, painter and biographer, who said Bernini was, “the dragon in the garden of the Hesperides who, jealously guarding the apples of papal favor, everywhere vomited poison and always sowed the way which led to the possession of high favors with the most stinging nettles,” begrudged that despite his acrid metaphor, Bernini held his elevated position on genuine talent and achievement.²¹ However, the recognition of merit did not stop the deluge of negativity or the efforts of artists and their supporters to discredit Bernini and secure a position for themselves.²²

¹⁸ Howard Hibbard, *Bernini* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1965), 68.

¹⁹ The former papal family here is the Borghese: Pope Paul V Borghese and specifically his nephew, Cardinal Scipione Borghese. Young Gianlorenzo was introduced to the world of papal patronage through his father, Pietro, who regularly worked for the Borghese family. *Ibid.*, 25, 29. He was encouraged in his studies by Paul V, who Baldinucci says, “entrusted Bernini to Cardinal Maffeo Barberini, a great devotee and patron of the noblest arts . . .” Baldinucci, 9.

²⁰ Wittkower, *Art and Architecture in Italy*, 96.

²¹ Bauer, 5-6. Cf. Hibbard, 115, and Francis Haskell, *Patrons and Painters: A Study in the Relations Between Italian Art and Society in the Age of the Baroque* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 16, 36-37, for concurrent accounts.

²² Hibbard, 157. Pope Innocent X said of him in 1647, “They say bad things about Bernini, but he is a great and rare man.” *Ibid.*, 107. For more on criticisms and enemies of Bernini, specifically those dealing with the destruction of the bell towers of St. Peter’s and cracks in the dome, cf. Baldinucci, 89-109.

Commentary on the Cornaro Chapel and *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* from Bernini's lifetime is scant. The sole example comes from an anonymous source who stated that the sculptor had "pulled Teresa to the ground and made this pure virgin into a Venus, not only prostrate, but prostituted."²³ However this critique is most likely evidence of the negative commentary he faced from jealous rivals throughout his career. Walther Weibel feels the criticism from his contemporaries only served to justify Bernini's legitimacy as a true master.²⁴ He also maintains that the *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* was met with contemporary approval from both ecclesiastic and lay circles alike, pointing out that one of Bernini's sons later lauded his father's work, a move which would not have been possible if the sculpture had been perceived as offensive.²⁵ Additional praise comes from the dedicatory epistle given to Federico Cornaro when the chapel was completed. Since this letter bears the signature of the prior and members of the convent (from Santa Maria della Vittoria), it is possible to read the bountiful praise of Federico Cornaro's devotion to Saint Teresa, expressed in "metal and marble."²⁶

The Cornaro Chapel has a dynamic and multi-faceted, yet wholly purposeful program. First, it functions as the funerary chapel of Cardinal Federico Cornaro. Second, it venerates and honors the founder of the Discalced Carmelite order, Saint Teresa of Ávila. The Discalced Carmelites generously bestowed a chapel space in the left transept of their church, Santa Maria della Vittoria, to Federico Cornaro, who requested the space after being inspired from a lifetime

²³ Published anonymously sometime in the 1670s, as quoted in Irving Lavin, *Bernini and the Unity of the Visual Arts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 121.

²⁴ Walther Weibel, "The Representation of Ecstasy." In *Bernini in Perspective*, edited by George C. Bauer (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1976), 79.

²⁵ Weibel, 84-85.

²⁶ Boucher, 137.

of interaction with the order and committees.²⁷ Third, through the depiction of high-ranking officials from the Cornaro family in high relief on the chapel sidewalls, a dual purpose is served. The chapel acts both as Federico's commemoration of the Cornaro family's accomplishments and as his propagandistic message for the only position yet to be achieved by the distinguished members of the Cornaro family—the papacy.²⁸ By commissioning Bernini for the Cornaro Chapel, Federico ultimately succeeded in attaching his name to the ranks of popes²⁹ through both the notoriety of the artist and in chronological relation with two extraordinary public monuments commissioned by the papacy. At the time of its completion, the Cornaro Chapel was firmly wedged between two of Bernini's major commissions—just after Pope Urban VIII's tomb and just before the Pope Innocent X's *Fountain of the Four Rivers*.³⁰ Through the thematic program of the Cornaro Chapel, Federico successfully depicted noble members of his family not only in a fashion befitting them, but also in a manner that was reminiscent of a Church senate, portraying his family's lineage of devotion to the Church and his suitability to reign on the papal throne.³¹ Even if the entirety of the socio-cultural context is forgotten, with the perspective of a propagandistic bid for the papacy underlying a cardinal's funerary chapel that honors a popular

²⁷ William L. Barcham, *Grand in Design: The Life and Career of Federico Cornaro, Prince of the Church, Patriarch of Venice and Patron of Arts* (Venezia: Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti, 2001), 306.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 376-385.

²⁹ A commission from Bernini meant glory conferred to the patron by the very virtue of his calling card of clients. Pope Urban VIII had been exceedingly strict on who he would allow Bernini to sculpt. His blessing was given rarely and only for exceptional privileges in return. Though Bernini was a free agent at this time, his demand and restrictions from fulfilling that demand would not have been overlooked, particularly by high ranking clerics. Cf. Haskell, 37.

³⁰ Barcham, 386.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 385.

saint,³² it is hard to assert that Bernini would have taken any risks in decorum in the depiction of Saint Teresa.

Critical sieges would continue throughout Bernini's career and beyond, though these attacks were not entirely based on Bernini as an artist, but the style of the Baroque. Beginning in his lifetime, the notion of classical purity rose to the surface of artistic ideals. Though not expressly stated in the academic lectures and writings of Giovanni Pietro Bellori or in the treatise of Orfeo Boselli, the condemnation of artists who "freely invent" and "slavishly copy nature," in addition to the complaint that art does not flourish when it is only created by one artist, clearly had a particular person and style in mind. Such commentary would pave the way in the years after Bernini's death for the most detrimental of criticisms, propagated by Johann Joachim Winckelmann and his followers. Winckelmann's comments about Bernini himself are few, though his sentiments about the Baroque are widely known, and were directly influential on the study and theory of art. In the classicist view, the Baroque period came to be considered the end of the artistic cycle.³³ Under the tutelage of Winckelmann, classical idealism, intellectualism, and clarity replaced Baroque realism, emotionalism, and amalgamated dynamism. Neoclassical follower Francesco Milizia stated: "Borromini in architecture, Bernini in sculpture, Pietro da Cortona in painting, the Cavalier Marino in poetry are a plague on taste, a plague which has infected a great number of artists."³⁴ Such a disparaging and generalizing statement made about Baroque art certainly taints Milizia's assertion about the *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* specifically:

"but the *St. Teresa* in the Vittoria swoons in an ecstasy, not of Divine Love, but of very worldly

³² Cf. Weibel, 79: "Teresa was so esteemed that, when they were to be canonized together, she was almost given priority over Ignatius of Loyola. Only with effort did the Jesuits succeed in having the name of the founder of the Society mentioned before that of a Spanish nun."

³³ Bauer, 9-11.

³⁴ Francesco Milizia, as quoted in Bauer, 12.

voluptuousness.”³⁵ Victorians such as John Flaxman and John Ruskin would follow suit in their commentary. Flaxman, English sculptor and draughtsman (d. 1826) stated that Bernini’s work was “a baneful influence, which corrupted public taste for upwards of one hundred years afterwards.”³⁶ Ruskin, appalled by the statue’s continuing popularity, stated that it was “impossible for false taste and base feeling to sink lower,”³⁷ and found Bernini’s work on the whole to be “morally corrupt.”³⁸ The culmination of such criticisms was that both the Baroque and Bernini were virtually ignored from the middle of the eighteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth, and when they were mentioned, it was no more than a regurgitation of everything disparaging that had come before.³⁹ There would not be a sympathetic English translation of the period’s central figure until Rudolf Wittkower’s 1955 monograph on Bernini.⁴⁰

Twentieth-century commentary initially followed the same pattern as the preceding century, with the exception of historian Walther Weibel. Writing in 1909, Weibel attributed the notion of obscenity in the *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* to modern historians who have failed to take the contemporary perspective into account. He described modern research as having “expressed its opinion against it with especial vehemence, even with contempt.”⁴¹ He cited Jacob Burckhardt as a primary example of this, who stated: “Here one certainly forgets all questions of

³⁵ Francesco Milizia, “Dictionary of the Fine Arts: Bernini.” In *Bernini in Perspective*, edited by George C. Bauer (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1976), 55.

³⁶ As quoted in Avery, 277.

³⁷ Rudolf Wittkower, *Bernini: the sculptor of the Roman Baroque*. 4th ed. (London: Phaidon Press, 1997), 11.

³⁸ Boucher, 9.

³⁹ Bauer, 10-21, especially 15. Bauer also notes that Winckelmann and Lessing were the basis for sculptural criticism into the twentieth century.

⁴⁰ Boucher, 9.

⁴¹ Weibel, 79.

style because of the scandalous degradation of the supernatural,”⁴² and also presents a lengthy excerpt from Hippolyte Taine and a more brief one from De Stendhal,⁴³ summarizing that their “reproach of profanation . . . rings out over all the praise.”⁴⁴ It is Weibel’s conclusion that any accusation of “lasciviousness” was initially made by later generations and not those of Bernini’s lifetime. He summarized: “. . . but this invalidates it [the reproach], since we can only judge the intentions of the artist with the eyes of his own time.”⁴⁵

If the words of his predecessors do not ring true, then where does that leave Weibel’s assessment of the *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*? Weibel is the first historian to contextualize what had been previously assigned as prurient, acknowledging that the overwhelming cacophony of criticisms might carry some weight if not for Teresian hagiography and literature, which “reveal why Bernini represented the subject in away which has shocked many for the overt equation of the supernatural occurrence of a vision with a worldly scene of love.”⁴⁶ He went on to state that a consideration of both the physiological as well as the psychic processes are necessary in order to properly delineate Saint Teresa during her vision.⁴⁷ Weibel asserted that Bernini conducted “clinical studies” of Saint Teresa’s physical illness, which was diagnosed in the late nineteenth-century as epilepsy. Teresa had described her condition and stated that it was exacerbated during her visions and ecstasies. Even without this pathological evidence, Weibel stood firmly on the

⁴² Idem.

⁴³ Of the two, De Stendhal’s is the more salient example: “What divine art! What voluptuousness? Our good monk believing that we did not understand it, explained this group to us: “E un gran peccato,” he finished saying, that these statues can easily present the idea of a profane love. We have pardoned the Cavalier Bernini all the evil he has done to the arts.”

⁴⁴ Weibel, 81.

⁴⁵ Weibel, 85.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 81.

⁴⁷ Idem.

fact that Bernini translated the sculpture directly from her literature and therefore took no indecent liberties with the representation.⁴⁸ He briefly noted that Teresa's writings were "animated by a fervent tone of love which is only rarely found in the literature of profane love,"⁴⁹ and that this love was "concentrated in a metaphysical or sublime way upon God, but the expression which she gave to her feelings was scarcely different from that of a worldly passion,"⁵⁰ and specifically cited her commentary on the Song of Songs, proclaiming that she exceeded the already sensual tone of the poetical work. Weibel supported his contextualization by maintaining that Teresa had lived in complete chastity and her sexual naivety was pointedly mentioned in the investigation during her canonization.⁵¹ Though his scholarship is brief, Weibel made an important first step in re-examining the *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*.

Later commentary within the twentieth-century dialogue of Bernini's Cornaro Chapel and its *Ecstasy of St. Teresa* are primarily concentrated on the eroticism of the work, and for the most part, either theoretically driven or outside the field of art history. Theorists such as Jacques Lacan and Luce Irigaray have utilized Saint Teresa (among other mystics) in their psychoanalytic interpretations of mysticism and the sexuality of women.⁵² Lacan first discussed Teresa in connection with psychoanalysis and sexuality in "God and Woman's jouissance."⁵³ He found that women possessed a jouissance that was "supplementary" to the one that the phallic

⁴⁸ Ibid., 82.

⁴⁹ Idem.

⁵⁰ Idem.

⁵¹ Idem.

⁵² For an in-depth examination of psychoanalytic interpretations of Saint Teresa and mysticism, cf. Carole Slade, *St. Teresa of Avila: Author of a Heroic Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 134-145.

⁵³ Jacques Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge. Book XX: Encore, 1972-1973*, trans. Bruce Fink and ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: Norton, 1998), 61-77.

function designates and that women cannot explain their experience. He found Bernini's *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* to be a particularly salient visualization of the "supplementary jouissance" in the mystical experience:

. . . you need but go to Rome and see the statue by Bernini to immediately understand that she's coming. There is no doubt about it. What is she getting off on? It is clear that the essential testimony of the mystics consists in saying that they experience it, but know nothing about it.⁵⁴

Ultimately, Lacan was interested in how this particular jouissance, experiential but unknowable, related to the Other.⁵⁵ Luce Irigaray employed feminist constructs in order to criticize Lacan when she responded to his complaints that women have not vocalized their sexuality. Irigaray also referenced Bernini's sculpture, pointing out that instead of engaging with visual sources, Lacan should be reading the woman herself.⁵⁶

In Rome? So far away? To look? At a statue? Of a saint? Sculpted by a man? What pleasure are we talking about? Whose pleasure? For where the pleasure of the Theresa in question is concerned, her own writings are perhaps more telling.⁵⁷

Tom Hayes, a Renaissance, modern and postmodern poetry specialist, endeavors to engage more directly with the idea of the feminine jouissance through the Cornaro Chapel and the *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*. He speculates on Bernini's state of mind and intentions, stating:

Bernini's statue of *Teresa in Ecstasy* evokes a sense of mysticism that is no longer believable . . . Bernini's desire to create an aura around his statue of Teresa by placing it in a baroque theater is the result of a nostalgia for a sacredness images once had but which he feared was now being lost.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Lacan, 76.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 77.

⁵⁶ Slade, 134.

⁵⁷ As quoted in Slade, 134. Cf. Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 91.

⁵⁸ Hayes, 342.

In Bernini's self-portraits, he reads Bernini as insecure in his self-identity and lacking the confidence "to create works of art that evoked the aura of sacredness."⁵⁹ Hayes feels that the *Ecstasy* is meant to be a solution to these problematic issues,⁶⁰ in which Bernini endeavored "to create the *illusion* that a sacred reality lay behind a profane material reality."⁶¹ However, he has failed because he turned the Cornaro Chapel into a "baroque theater of divine *jouissance*,"⁶² with the *Ecstasy* as a spectacular performance that ultimately appears contrary to Bernini's intentions for a realistic presentation. Hayes states that the mimetic devices of Teresa are as ineffective for the viewer as they are for the Cornaro patriarchal observers because "our subjectivities are no longer formed in conjunction with a discourse of an orthodox religious community that validates the category of the sacred."⁶³ His conclusion is that the mystery is the source of the supplementary *jouissance*.⁶⁴

Modern and contemporary Baroque specialists vary in their assessment of the *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*, and can be divided loosely into two groups: those who do not engage with the subject of eroticism within the altarpiece (such as Rudolf Wittkower, Howard Hibbard, Kenneth Clark, Charles Avery, and Tod Marder) and those who do (such as John Pope-Hennessy, Robert Petersson, Irving Lavin, Charles Scribner, and Bruce Boucher). Of particular importance is the second group. Lavin, Scribner, and Boucher go beyond mere engagement and discuss (albeit briefly) the larger context of eroticism within the mystical tradition. Additionally, it is important

⁵⁹ Ibid., 347-348.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 348.

⁶¹ Ibid., 353.

⁶² Idem.

⁶³ Ibid., 352.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 353.

to note that the decision of scholars to include or ignore issues of sensuality is not restricted chronologically.

In 1955, English-speakers would enjoy the first sympathetic scholarship on Gianlorenzo Bernini with the publication of Rudolf Wittkower's monograph on the artist. In spite of this relatively modern date, he still felt it necessary to implore readers to seriously consider Baroque sculpture.⁶⁵ Wittkower does not address the eroticism of the sculptural group except to say that the arrow with which the seraph pierces Teresa produces "her mystical union with Christ, the heavenly bridegroom."⁶⁶ He goes on to state that in choosing this particular episode of Teresa's life, Bernini was following the highest authority, since it was this transverberation that was particularly recognized in the Bull of her canonization.⁶⁷ Thus Wittkower has responded to earlier criticisms without directly recognizing the sensuousness nature of the group. Howard Hibbard does not address the sensuous tone of the group at all, and focuses instead on formal issues of the chapel. He only comments that the vision depicted is cited in the Bull of her canonization from 1622.⁶⁸ Kenneth Clark discusses formal issues, calling the contrast between the "plain, dauntless, sensible face" of the historical Saint Teresa, and the "swooning sensuous beauty" found above the altar in the Cornaro Chapel, "almost shocking."⁶⁹ Clark does not expound on the implications or possible meanings of this contrast, leaving the reader with a simple observation of idealized formal qualities in the sculpture. Charles Avery curtly notes: "To an unbeliever this [transverberation] may seem far-fetched and to a Protestant, then or today,

⁶⁵ Boucher, 9.

⁶⁶ Wittkower, *Bernini*, 158.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 266.

⁶⁸ Hibbard, 136.

⁶⁹ Kenneth Clark, *Civilisation: a personal view* (Harper and Row: New York, 1969), 191.

distasteful, while its sexual overtones invite a psychological representation”⁷⁰ Like Wittkower, he has provided an indirect explanation for a subject he himself eludes. After a brief description of the group, Tod Marder simply states: “In these features Bernini sought to represent what the saint herself described as the union *mistica* between God and herself, an ecstatic state attained by prayer.”⁷¹

The group of scholars that directly address the erotic nature of the *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* can be further subdivided into two groups. The first is comprised of John Pope-Hennessy and Robert Petersson, who recognize the altarpiece’s sensuality and endeavor to contextualize it using the writings of Teresa. The second sub-group (Lavin, Scribner, and Boucher) goes beyond the Teresian literature and places both the formal qualities of the sculptural group and Teresa herself within the greater scope of mysticism.

John Pope-Hennessy discusses Bernini’s theatrical and illusionary techniques, pointing out that the artist endeavored to create an unreal world, and further emphasizes that this theatrical effect on Bernini’s sculptures was not “meretricious,” but was intended to propagate the ephemeral qualities of his work. For him, the “supreme instance” of the use of these devices is in the *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*. Though he references Stendhal’s complaints that the sculptural group uses a vocabulary of profane love, and concedes that the interaction between the Saint and the Angel is “indeed almost embarrassingly physical,” Pope-Hennessy qualifies this physicality: “But the analogy with profane love is implicit in the Saint’s own narrative . . . Bernini’s figures take on a visionary quality that is perfectly consistent with the Saint’s account of her own mystical experience.”⁷² However, his acceptance of this analogy is based on its description in

⁷⁰ Avery, 146.

⁷¹ Marder, 112.

⁷² John Pope-Hennessy, *Italian High Renaissance and Baroque Sculpture* (Phaidon: New York, 1963), 110.

the hagiography of Saint Teresa, rather than on the understanding of an established mystical tradition. Robert Petersson moves further away from Victorian commentators and seeks to establish the eroticism of Saint Teresa firmly within her mystical writings. Though Petersson's contextualization does not extend beyond the mystical qualities of Teresa's literature, it comes closer than any historian since Walther Weibel in 1909. In his 1970 book, *The Art of Ecstasy: Teresa, Bernini, and Crashaw*, Petersson addresses the erotic quality of Teresa's writing by stating:

. . . many have taken her character to be completely erotic and her spiritual passion to be sexual sublimation. Indeed she is erotic. The error is to limit that quality to the physical instead of realizing that God is the object of her love and her love is total and indivisible, including the body. In fact we should not wonder that this is an intellectual vision.⁷³

He brings in this reflection in his assertion of the altarpiece proper, once again finding Teresa's figure "unquestionably" erotic, but in spiritual rather than exclusively physical terms.⁷⁴

Petersson would echo this sentiment in 2002, when he once again emphasized that seeing her *only* as an erotic figure limited the work, and that one must take into account that her corporeality serves a specific purpose: "Her entire being is consumed by a divine passion which possesses body, mind and soul at the same moment."⁷⁵

The most in-depth scholarship on the Cornaro Chapel and its *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* has been written by Irving Lavin. As the foremost historian on the subject, his research is prolific. Though the summary here is brief, it permeates nearly the entire length of his groundbreaking book, *Bernini and the Unity of the Visual Arts*. Of the sensuality delineated in the altarpiece, he very simply states: ". . . the group evinces a physical eroticism that well-meaning apologists do

⁷³ Robert T. Petersson, *The Art of Ecstasy: Teresa, Bernini and Crashaw* (Atheneum: New York, 1970), 39.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁷⁵ Robert T. Petersson, *Bernini and the excesses of art* (Florence: M & M, Maschietto & Ditore, 2002), 41.

wrong to deny.”⁷⁶ He goes on to contextualize the physical vocabulary of love and the nuptial metaphors, employed by Teresa and delineated by Bernini, within the mystical tradition,⁷⁷ noting that Bernini has emphasized the physicality of Teresa’s transverberation and death in order to delineate her mystical marriage to Christ.⁷⁸ Charles Scribner treats the subject more briefly, and his observations are assuredly indebted to Lavin. He first cites the source of Bernini’s narrative as the saint herself, and like other scholars, references the reading of her account at canonization hearings. Scribner then points out that there was a long standing tradition of the allegorical use of earthly love as a means of describing religious ecstasy. He ends his contextualization by summarizing Lavin’s conclusions.⁷⁹ Finally, Bruce Boucher follows the same pattern, referring to Saint Teresa’s account of the transverberation and noting that Teresa is a metaphor “for the ‘lovesick soul’ of the Bible’s Song of Solomon.”⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Lavin, 121.

⁷⁷ Idem.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 122.

⁷⁹ Charles Scribner, *Bernini* (New York: H.N. Abrams, Publishers, 1991), 92.

⁸⁰ Boucher, 143.

CHAPTER 3 GOD IS LOVE: MEDIEVAL PRECEDENTS

“‘God is love,’ according to 1 John 4:8, and the first and greatest commandment is to love the Lord God with one’s whole heart and mind and soul.”¹ The manners and modes in which monastics have loved God have been thoroughly researched and debated within theology, in particular, mysticism. The origins of mysticism in ancient Hebrew and early Christianity have had a profound impact on the evolution and legacy of the mystic tradition in the Latin Church. The examination of this historical context clarifies the spiritual atmosphere of the Middle Ages. Further analysis of the additional contributions beyond the Church Fathers provides an adequate foundation for the understanding and contextualization of the use of mysticism as a key theological mode within the Counter-Reformation art of Bernini. However, it is not simply a general mystical tradition that is to be examined, but specifically that of women mystics: the basis, significance, and impact of nuptial imagery on their religious lives and on the Christian Church. Despite overwhelming erudition that firmly places the eroticism of devotional literature and exercises of medieval female mystics within a venerable and long-established tradition, the sensuality of the language has been a topic of critical debate and remained a problematic issue that would be echoed in both the literary and artistic representations in the Baroque period.

How and why does early Christian and medieval mysticism employ erotic and marital imagery to delineate a union with God? Medieval speculative mystics relied on a mixture of early Judaic, Christian, Platonist, and Neoplatonist sources. They define union with the divine as a kinship between mankind and God in an undifferentiated reality that is for the most part verbally indescribable, save through the use of obfuscating metaphors. This union ultimately

¹ Bernard McGinn, “Love, Knowledge, and Mystical Union in Western Christianity: Twelfth to Sixteenth Centuries,” *Church History* 56 (1987): 23.

results in a fusion between the soul of man and God, which become indistinguishable: “Man is like a drop of water; God is like the ocean.”² Particulars such as ethics, histories, and facts give way to more broadly defined and universal concept of Unity. Mystics do not interpret a relationship with God in terms of morality. The initial connection is kinship, and the ultimate end is identity and union with God—efforts of reform and morality are essentially secondary.³ Bernard McGinn describes two central themes that are the basis of Christian mystical theology. First, God is unknowable because divine nature cannot be comprehended by rational means. Second, love is particularly accessible to God because He is love, and it is through the form and conferral of His love that humans are able to reciprocate this love with him.⁴

Terminologies of union have been variously defined since antiquity: the pure spirit unifying with the unknown One; spiritual senses; love of God; and the humanity of Christ. The basic principle remains at the heart of mysticism—an intimate union of God to his followers through Christ—despite variations in themes and definitions of union. Louis Dupré comments on the historical continuity of this mystical idea of unification with God and its importance within religion:

Strong opposition to the idea of mystical union did not emerge until theology had begun to separate the universal element of experience implicit in the original idea of grace from the privileged consciousness of union attained by few. Indeed, the tendency noticeable since the beginning of the modern age to sever faith from experience altogether resulted in marginalizing mystical life into a highly exceptional and hence suspect position. That the mystical drive survived these constant suspicions in all three branches of the Christian faith confirms the assumption that it may be an inherent feature of the faith itself.⁵

² Furse, 73-74.

³ Ibid., 74, 79.

⁴ McGinn, 12.

⁵ Louis Dupré, “The Christian Experience of Mystical Union,” *Journal of Religion* 69 (1989): 2.

Interpreting scripture, mystics favor sources that delineate a direct connection with God, while providing a metaphor for their own lives and practices. The ascent of Moses to Mt. Sinai in the Old Testament is one such example. Here the emphasis is placed on the act of ascension and ultimately, experiencing the presence of God.⁶

There is a long tradition of nuptial imagery within the Bible, beginning before 721 BC with the prophet Hosea, who adopted the annual marriage ritual of the Canaanite fertility cult. By folding the vivid espousal imagery of pagan mythology into the context of the Hebrew God, he utilized it to describe the relations between Yahweh and Israel. The Canaanite cult was not alone in their use of marital symbolism; it was found in many other near eastern mystery religions (Syrian, Phrygian, and Egyptian, etc.) that geographically and figuratively surrounded the sole monotheism of the Hebrew faith.⁷ These early sources absorbed into the Judaic tradition would find later resonance with the most prominent text upon which mysticism is founded: The Song of Songs.

Though scholars continue to debate the exact date and origin of the Song of Songs, it is generally dated to the second half of the fifth century BC, and attributed to King Solomon. However, it is possible that the work is a collection of older material written at different times, thought to be “folk songs of a poetic pastoral people.”⁸ Despite first century AD debate on preserving the Song of Songs within Scriptural text, Jewish scholars retained the work on the foundation of “prophetic tradition of nuptial imagery,” and it was thus considered part of the

⁶ Ibid., 82-83.

⁷ Marina Warner, *Alone of all her sex: the myth and the cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York: Knopf, 1976), 123.

⁸ Ibid., 125.

canon and henceforth attributed to King Solomon.⁹ One tradition of the Song of Songs has been interpreted as the love between God and Israel, but more specifically it can be read to celebrate the revelation of the Torah on Mount Sinai or the love that was subsequently revealed after the Ark of the Covenant was placed in the temple in Jerusalem. Akiba, a first century rabbi, advocated the addition of the Song to the Bible, stating: “. . . the whole world is not as valuable as the day on which Israel was given the Song of Songs; all scripture is a holy text, but the Song of Songs is the holiest of holy.”¹⁰ The inclusion of the Song legitimizes the expressive use of a sexual and matrimonial vocabulary by both Judaism and Christianity to describe the relationship between humanity and God.¹¹ The Song of Songs would become a critical text in the catalogue of mystical writing, utilizing an earthly vocabulary of love in conjunction with personal religious devotions. This language has a decisively erotic tone, through which the Song of Songs expresses an interpersonal relationship between humans and God as experienced by mystics. This lexis reflects a personal and practical component within mysticism, appealing to the poetic and warming the spirit.¹²

The symbol of the bride within a Christian context is used for the first time in the New Testament by St. Paul in his letter to the Ephesians (5:27) wherein he refers to the Church as Christ’s bride. The metaphor of Christ as bridegroom was repeated by Paul in his letter to the Corinthians, where he referred to himself as both mediator and best man, a role that John the Baptist would later assign himself in the Fourth Gospel. The identity of the bride remains

⁹ Ibid., 126. Cf. Rachel Fulton, “Mimetic Devotion, Marian Exegesis, and the Historical Sense of the Song of Songs,” *Viator* 27 (1996): 89.

¹⁰ Matter, “Mystical Marriage,” 31.

¹¹ Idem.

¹² Dupré, 84.

ambiguous in the literature after Paul, with more primacy given to the preparation for the last day—the Apocalypse—and the subsequent wedding feast—the final peace of the Church and the union of Christ and his followers. It is at this nuptial banquet that the symbol of the bride is linked with Mariology. In Revelation 21:2, John sees at the marriage feast the new era of the Church, embodied as bride coming down from heaven; because the Virgin Mary is synonymous with the Church, and because in the Apocalypse she was connected to this wondrous bridal descent, she also becomes the bride of Christ. Later Christians would thus identify the lover as Christ and the beloved as the Church, the souls of Christ’s followers, and the Virgin.¹³

Early Christian mystics would later absorb the Song of Songs and develop it allegorically through the work of eastern authors such as Methodius of Olympus, Origen, and Gregory of Nyssa, and in the west, Ambrose of Milan.¹⁴ Origen is the source of the earliest literary remnants of the Song of Songs interpreted as a mystical allegory. The prologues from his commentary provide the standard for interpreting the role of the beloved: either it is the soul, created in the image of the Word of God, or it is the Church, redeemed by the Word, or both.¹⁵ In addition to Origen, Ambrose of Milan draws on Platonic and Neoplatonic themes, adapting the erotic symbolism of the Song of Songs to describe the ascent of the soul and its union with God. The bridal imagery from the Song of Songs was especially utilized by Ambrose in conjunction with the newly converted and baptized, symbolizing a betrothal to Christ and the process of coming to understand newly revealed mysteries of the Church.¹⁶ In Ambrose’s works

¹³ Warner, 124-125.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 126.

¹⁵ F.B.A. Asiedu, “The Song of Songs and the Ascent of the Soul: Ambrose, Augustine, and the Language of Mysticism,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 55 (2001): 299-300. For a more extensive analysis of Origen, cf. Matter, 32.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 300-301.

De mysteriis and *De Isaac uel anima*, he wove his commentary with examples from the Song of Songs, stating “God the Word is able to speak to the Church in the passionate language of the lover . . . ”¹⁷ In the latter of the two treatises, he shifted effortlessly from the Church as the beloved, to the individual soul. It is pertinent to note that despite Ambrose’s use of nuptial imagery and conjugal love within the context of the spousal union of the divine, he rarely uses Jesus when referring to the bridegroom, preferring God, the Word, or Christ. As Jesus was divine and human equally, it was clear that such explicit language would have been problematic if applied liberally within an earthly framework, however partial it may have been.¹⁸ Generally, the early Church considered the love songs a commentary between Christ and the consecrated virgin or nun. Ambrose was the first to amalgamate the Virgin, Church, and individual Christian souls into the exegesis of the Song. Beyond the allegory of Christ, the Church, and individual Christian souls, primary scholars also extended the nuptial metaphor to the Christian virgin. The origins of this description of the Christian virgin as Christ’s bride are sourced to Tertullian in the third century. By the fourth century, it had entered common usage and Ambrose reported similarities between consecratory rites of virgins and actual wedding ceremonies. In addition, other early Christian examples of marital metaphors between God and the Church, for example Ephesians (5:25-32), became the source for the sacrament of human marriage. Asiedu encapsulates the historic, exegetical devotion to the Song of Songs and early monastic interpretations. In this summary, the basic issues of the progression from the physical to the spiritual are outlined:

Origen divides the wisdom of Solomon into three levels corresponding to the natural, moral and the mystical. For Origen, the allegorical reading of the Song is reserved for

¹⁷ Ibid., 303.

¹⁸ Ibid., 304.

those who have advanced through the first two stages. Consequently, only a mind trained in the other disciplines of the soul, able to overlook the obviously evocative language of the Song, can transcend the primary level of the text into the deeper contemplation that yields the mystical meaning of the Song. The asceticism involved is both intellectual and moral, since it requires an effacement of the text as something other than what it appears . . . The mystical reading of the Song of Songs as a description of the individual soul's union with God entail a preliminary "overwrite" of the text . . .¹⁹

In the Counter-Reformation period, Bernini would corporeally represent this transcendence and ultimate union with the divine by depicting his holy women in erotic terms and utilizing a larger thematic narrative to contextualize their mystical union with Christ. Through these supernatural representations of a connection with divine, Bernini's works would model for the viewer the means by which to achieve it.

Saint Augustine also comments on the Song of Songs, though he used erotic and nuptial imagery to a far lesser degree than Ambrose. Soon after his conversion, Augustine reflects on the power of the experience using imagery similar to that employed by Ambrose and the Song of Songs: "You pierced my heart with the arrow of your love and we carried your words transfixing my innermost being . . . They set me on fire with such force that every breath of opposition from any deceitful tongue had the power not to dampen my zeal but to inflame it more."²⁰ This quote becomes especially salient when juxtaposed with a strikingly comparable one made later by Saint Teresa, which Bernini sculpturally translates into the *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*—centerpiece of the Cornaro Chapel:

It pleased the Lord that I should sometimes see the following vision. I would see beside me, on my left hand, an angel in bodily form . . . 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 to 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 for God. The pain was so sharp that it made me utter several moans; and so excessive was the

¹⁹ Ibid., 312.

²⁰ Ibid., 302.

sweetness caused me by this intense pain that one can never wish to lose it, nor will one's soul be content with anything less than God. It is not bodily pain, but spiritual, though the body has a share in it—indeed a great share. So sweet are the colloquies of love which pass between the soul and God that if anyone thinks I am lying I beseech God, in His goodness, to give him the same experience.²¹

Saint Teresa had read the writings of Saint Augustine,²² and the similarities between Saint Augustine's reference to a heart-piercing and inflamed love for God and Saint Teresa's experience indicates a connection in the continuity of mystical language.

Erotic language within the mystical dialogue is an outgrowth of mankind's inability to describe the divine and the experience of the divine, thus employing the only metaphoric definition that comes close—the language of human love.²³ There are commonalities in the processes between erotic and mystical unions, despite the differences in their ultimate ends. Scholars have noted that it is both “natural and inevitable” that mystics came to use metaphors of marriage and love in their verbalizations of a spiritual union with the divine: these associations were readily available and recognized as fulfilling in an earthly life, and they were universally understood. In addition, this romantic language offers “a strangely exact parallel to the sequence of states in which man's spiritual consciousness unfolds itself and which form the consummation of the mystic life.”²⁴ The pragmatic nature of making the ineffable tangible compels mystics to forego the “arid terms of religious philosophy” in favor of a terrestrial expression of the perfect union: the Lover and the Beloved.²⁵

²¹ E. Allison Peers, *Saint Teresa of Jesus: The Complete Works* (London and New York: 1963), 192.

²² Jodi Bilinkoff, *The Ávila of Saint Teresa: Religious Reform in a Sixteenth-Century City* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989), 117.

²³ Ralph W. Hood, Jr. and James R. Hall, “Gender Differences in the Description of Erotic and Mystical Experiences,” *Review of Religious Research* 21 (1980): 195.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 196.

²⁵ Dupré, 10.

Historians are thus faced with a formidable challenge—endeavoring to assume and maintain a medieval perspective in spite of their contemporary situation. E. Ann Matter, utilizing Jean Leclercq, teases out the simplest solution:

. . . the use of the common language of love to represent different levels of human desire, and the adaptation of human love language to the ineffable love of God, is a ‘spontaneous symbolism,’ only to be expected from limited human language.²⁶

Differences in the language of medieval texts and a contemporary perception of this language essentially represent differences in the contextual use of symbolism and in the medieval conception of the body itself.²⁷ It is important to bear this perspective and the historical foundations of mysticism in mind, particularly when reading the writings of late medieval mystical women.

Medieval mysticism continued to build on the foundations laid by early Christian examples, expounding on erotic espousal analogies with the appropriation of socio-cultural models, liturgical inclusion, guided devotion and meditation, and the use of tangible objects of art. It was in this period that women mystics come into their own, adopting a position of teacher and not solely student, active and not strictly passive. It is pertinent to begin the foray into mysticism of the medieval period with an examination of important commentators and the implications of their texts. Though theologians and commentators of the Middle Ages differ in particular delineations concerning aspects of mystical union, the use of marital analogies is prevalent in their writing.²⁸

²⁶ E. Ann Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved: the Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 139.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 141.

²⁸ For the purposes of this thesis, I will focus on the general use of such terms, and not in the particularities and debates of their details (i.e. intellectualism and active versus contemplative lives).

New orders of Cistercians and Victorines contributed to the escalation of mystical theology and an interest in mystical life. Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1153) was an important author for the literary tradition of mystical marriage. During his abbotship at Clairvaux, he wrote eighty-six homilies (between 1135 and 1153) on the Song of Songs, and was widely considered one of the most important theologians of the period.²⁹ He was a significant figure among Cistercians and through his eminence and sanctity, he achieved canonical status among mystics and mystical theologians.³⁰ Bernard established a form of affective mysticism, described by the power and ascent of love, as well as the consciousness of knowing. In the *Sermones of Cantica*, he insisted that it is only by way of love that humans may reciprocally engage with God. Bernard went on to state that the highest form of love is marital, because it best expresses union.³¹ William of Saint Thierry, a contemporary of Bernard of Clairvaux, also found the nuptial imagery from the Song of Songs to be an appropriate analogy for the union between the spirit and God.³² The later heir of these scholars was Bonaventure, who continued the exploration of twelfth century mystical theology. On the subject of mystical rapture and its intellectual and affective points, he states in the third book of *the Commentary on the Sentences* it “is the most excellent knowledge which Dionysius teaches. It consists in ecstatic love and it transcends the knowledge of faith according to the common mode.”³³ Thomas Gallus, anonymous author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* (c. 1370), also placed primacy on the spiritual connection of love, stating: “. . . it is

²⁹ Matter, “Mystical Marriage,” 33.

³⁰ McGinn, 8.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

³² *Ibid.*, 10.

³³ *Idem.*

love alone that can reach God in this life, and not knowing.”³⁴ Gallus further delineated the nature of spiritual union by using two examples: Moses, whose experience of God came by way of ecstasy after climbing Mt. Sinai, and Aaron, priest in the temple, who could experience the divine at any given moment.³⁵ It is clear that medieval commentators were within the established literary tradition of the early Church with regard to metaphoric and conceptual use of love, both spiritual and corporeal.

The development and rise of the female mystic and saint is punctuated by several important points: an explicitly appropriated command of mystical marriage metaphors, an increase in first-person authorship as a result of the spread of lay vernacular, and an elevation in status as a result of spiritual precedence and performance. Christ himself set a precedent in the importance of women. He established a special bond with women that may be recalled by female mystics. In the Gospels, some of the most devoted and trusted followers of Christ were women. Mary and Martha were Christ’s chosen examples of active and contemplative lives. Mary Magdalene was “a great sinner” who was redeemed and to whom Christ first revealed himself after the resurrection; it was she who carried the news to his disciples. The Marys were present at Christ’s crucifixion, death and entombment, and were the ones to anoint his body. Furthermore, the established symbolism of the Virgin Mary as Church and Christ’s espousal to the Church was the foundation for the association of nuns as brides of Christ.

The evolution of female spirituality has occurred largely because of their exclusion from central aspects of the Church, particularly priesthood and the Mass, with select nuns only breaking out of their enclosure through the verbal and written word; the subsequent response was

³⁴ Ibid., 13.

³⁵ Ibid., 14.

the exceptional justification of their authority. However, one must consider these nuns to be the exception, and not the rule. Most nuns did not seek to reform or rebel against the constraints of their monastic setting and doctrinal authorities. It is the challenge of contemporary historians and readers to view these women without the perspective of the present. Many nuns had scant interest in mysticism. For those that did, Jeffrey Hamburger warns readers not to think of them as being in a perpetual state of ecstasy: “More often than not, female mystics, at least as idealized by their advisers, served (or were co-opted) as champions of orthodoxy and ecclesiastical reform . . . ”³⁶

In the period of the later Middle Ages, from 1200 to 1400 respectively, female saints comprised a larger portion of new saints than they had in the centuries just before and after. Italy in particular saw a rise in lay penitent women, brought about by the support of mendicants, who also promoted more lay women than men and were more intent on the hagiography of the interior life of devotional women. It is no surprise that the most famous lay saints of the period were female. At this time, new saints exhibited an advantaged experience of the divine, in addition to their already established hagiographical expression of power in miracles, charitable works, and asceticism.³⁷ Female mystics commanded respect in the medieval period by the nature of their virtue, piety, and the quality of their person. Additionally, there was a persistent idea that God worked through the humble in order to teach important lessons, a notion which worked in women’s favor. These pious women were often publicly regarded as prophets, due to their visions and livelihoods, and their private lives were not without this influence.³⁸

³⁶ Jeffrey F. Hamburger, *The Visual and the Visionary: art and female spirituality in late medieval Germany* (New York: Zone Books, 1998), 31.

³⁷ John Wayland Coakley, *Women, men, and spiritual power: female saints and their male collaborators* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 9.

³⁸ Monica Furlong, *Visions and Longings: Medieval Women Mystics* (Boston: Shambhala, 1996), 9.

Ironically, it is due to their exclusion that female monastics come to experience a more overwhelming sense of inclusion and elevation. Devotional meditation, in the form of guided imagery, was used in conjunction with visual and literary devices in order to teach lay people and nuns that were unable to read Latin. Apart from repetitive prayer, this device was one of the only forms of meditative exercise. Many women experienced visions as a result of devotional meditation, and such events were positively bolstered by popular opinion that considered them to be important achievements.³⁹ Female mystics had visions of being initially visited by the Virgin Mary, who allowed her monastic daughters to hold, cuddle and caress the infant Christ. Later, the Virgin presided at their mystical marriage, giving her blessing or joining their hands. Mary served as a guide in the nuptial imagery, rejoicing in the union between the women and her son. Visions of mystical marriage were highly ritualized and modeled on secular rituals. In heaven, Christ and his visionary bride joined hands, exchanged vows and rings, and occasionally nuptial robes, and the ceremony itself was understood as a promise of eternal life in heaven after her death. Female mystics were instructed to address their erotic relationship with Christ in this manner in order to focus their earthly desire instead of sacrificing it, and to strengthen it through purification in order to ultimately transform it into a consciously spiritual union with the divine.⁴⁰

Such visions, guided by imagery of mystical marriage and nuptial symbolism established in the early Church and propagated throughout the Middle Ages, became a central tool and regular vocabulary amongst female mystics, in addition to being a significant catalyst in the perception of holy women of the period. After the twelfth century, female mystics elaborated the

³⁹ Elizabeth Petroff, "Medieval Women Visionaries: Seven Stages to Power," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 3 (1978): 38.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 39-40.

nuptial mysticism that had primarily been within the masculine realm, and consequently they number higher after about 1200. Though acute types of penance were practiced by men, women were almost entirely unique in their “psychosomatic imitation” of the various sufferings of Christ, particularly the marks of flagellation; their bleeding often took place on Fridays or at the hour of the Crucifixion. Additionally, their affective response (ecstasies, etc.) and accompanying “paramystical phenomena” were also more prevalent.⁴¹ Caroline Walker Bynum asserts:

. . . cases of psychosomatic manipulation (manipulation from within) are almost exclusively female . . . Trances, levitations, catatonic seizures or other forms of bodily rigidity, miraculous elongation or enlargement of parts of the body, swellings of sweet mucus in the throat, and ecstatic nosebleeds are seldom if at all reported of male saints but are quite common in the *vitae* of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century women. The inability to eat anything except the eucharistic host is reported only of women for most of the Middle Ages . . . Despite the fame of Francis of Assisi’s stigmata, he and the modern figure Padre Pio are the only males in history who have claimed all five visible wounds. There are, however, dozens of such claims for late medieval women. Francis (d. 1226) may indeed have been the first case (although even this is uncertain); but stigmata rapidly became a female miracle, and only for women did the stigmatic wounds bleed periodically.⁴²

Bynum also points out that certain phenomena occurred more frequently in women, such as holy exuding (particularly after death), bodily swelling (mystical pregnancy), sickness or persistent pain, and a higher percentage of miracle-working relics in the late medieval period.⁴³ Perhaps most salient was the mark on the wedding finger that women would often manifest. These “espousal rings” delineated their deeply personal connection to Christ.⁴⁴ Women also asserted themselves in the realm of devotional exercises. The institution of the feast of *Corpus Christi*

⁴¹ Furlong, 27.

⁴² Caroline Walker Bynum, “The Female Body and Religious Practice in the Later Middle Ages,” in *Fragments for a History of the Human Body*, edited by Michel Feher, Ramona Naddaf, and Nadia Tazi. 3 vols (New York: Zone, 1989), 165.

⁴³ Bynum, 166. She further states that “incorruptibility either of the whole cadaver or of a part seems a virtual requirement for female sanctity by the early modern period.”

⁴⁴ Furlong, 27.

came at the insistence of female mystics, who had influenced the shift in concentration to the Eucharist as a pivotal point in Christian devotional life. This Eucharistic focus, stemming from late medieval spirituality, is a direct connection to modern Catholicism.⁴⁵ The primacy of the Eucharist is particularly important in the Counter-Reformation period, which in many ways reinforced the orthodoxy of the medieval period. The power of the Eucharist and its ability to facilitate a spiritual union with the divine is a central theme in Bernini's representations of his holy women, a topic that will be addressed in the next chapter.

An increasing emphasis on the sacrament of marriage in twelfth century theology and canon law also coincides with marriage becoming a more visible and powerful spiritual metaphor. Though it seems that female monastics associated most with Christ, and male monastics with the Virgin, it is important to keep in mind that medieval commentators did not make marked distinctions between sexual and affective responses, or male and female.⁴⁶ Spousal metaphors remained salient from early Christianity into the Middle Ages, particularly for delineating the pertinence of the virginal state. Works such as the thirteenth century *Holy Maidenhead* homily went far to disparage union with men, and exalt the joys of a marriage with Christ. Saint Catherine of Alexandria (d. 307) and Saint Catherine of Siena (d.1380) were both well known female saints who had mystically wed Christ. Though the first well known depiction of Saint Catherine of Alexandria's celestial wedding is from 1337, earlier paintings illustrating the infant Christ presenting her with a ring from the arms of the Virgin do exist.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as mother: studies in the spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 18.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 162.

⁴⁷ Warner, 127.

The concept of mystical marriage was not just restricted to the monastic context in the medieval period; socio-cultural ceremonies and celebrations also employed nuptial metaphors, specifically “marriages” between religious and political figures, or “marriages” between religious figures and symbolic models—the sea, poverty, etc. Particularly in the cloistered life of the Middle Ages, but beginning as early as the fourth century, nuns were urged by theologians to conceive of their lives in terms of brides espoused to Christ. Although male monastics and even doges of the Middle Ages might have envisioned themselves as participants, and occasionally even as brides, in the mystical marriage, it was the women of the period who most fervently embraced the marital allegory. Women who had been mystically wed to Christ acquired an elevated status and prestige above ordinary women. The brides of Christ were provided a Marian model through liturgy and twelfth century texts on the Song of Songs. One particular text, *St. Trudperter Höhe Lied*, most likely written by a confessor to cloistered nuns, elevated Mary as “a model for the pious soul; nuns are exhorted to seek to become, like her, daughters of God, mothers of Christ, and brides of the Holy Spirit.”⁴⁸

By the late Middle Ages, the association of female monastics as brides of Christ was an almost wholly essential aspect of female spirituality.⁴⁹ It is at this time that there is a marked shift from the use of marital metaphors to a more sexualized language of love. One should also recall the earlier words of Catherine of Siena, who asserted that it was through the foreskin of Christ’s penis that he had wed her and all of humanity: “Note well that the Son of God married us in the circumcision, cutting off the tip of his own flesh in the form of a ring and giving it to us

⁴⁸ Matter, “Mystical Marriage,” 34-35. For literary evidence of the lives of nuns and the context of mystical marriage written by both male and female monastics, cf. Matter, 35-41.

⁴⁹ *Idem.*

as a sign that he wished to marry the whole human generation.”⁵⁰ The concept of mystical marriage can be traced as an outgrowth from the religious community that evolved into a form of private and personal mystic devotion. This transformation was first and foremost promoted by spiritual directors—teachers, confessors, etc.—and eventually appropriated by women, as evidenced in their direct literary accounts. This documentation from female monastics had increased steadily after the year 1200. Biographies, prayers, meditations, and mystical experiences written for and sometimes by women, became a possibility due to the development of vernacular language within literature, making it possible to have the primary information today.⁵¹ Saint Catherine of Siena was a prominent figure of this tradition, and spoke in her writings of her marriage to Christ.⁵² Other examples of this direct use of nuptial imagery can be found in thirteenth century Saint Clare of Assisi, who illustrated her adoption of the nuptial metaphor in her letters to Agnes of Prague, compelling her “to think of herself as a bride, a mother, and a sister of Jesus Christ” and forego a secular marriage.⁵³

Saint Gertrude of Helfta, also from the thirteenth-century, spoke with increasingly physical terms, using the word *amor* frequently in her invocations to God. Historian E. Ann Matter notes that the use of the “explicitly erotic term—*amor* (love) rather than other words for love such as *dilectio* or *caritas*—indicates the consummation of this mystical marriage between the nun practicing this discipline and God. It is evident that mystical marriage was a concept fully integrated into the spiritual life of Gertrude.”⁵⁴ Women also went beyond metaphors of earthly

⁵⁰ Matter, “Mystical Marriage,” 37.

⁵¹ Bynum, *Jesus as mother*, 170.

⁵² Matter, “Mystical Marriage,” 37.

⁵³ *Idem*.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 36. For an in-depth analysis on Gertrude of Helfta and the Nuns of Helfta, cf. Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 170-247.

love in the context of mystical marriage, and developed an explicitly physical language and experience for connecting to Christ. A particularly graphic example comes from Agnes Blannbekin, a Viennese Beguine, who had a vision in which she received Christ's foreskin in her mouth and reported that it had a honey-like sweetness.⁵⁵ Bynum elaborates:

Women regularly speak of tasting God, of kissing Him deeply, of going into His heart or entrails, of being covered by His blood. Their descriptions of themselves or of other women often, from a modern point of view, hopelessly blur the line between spiritual or psychological, on the hand, and bodily or even sexual, on the other.⁵⁶

Lidwina of Schiedam and Gertrube of Delft both felt such a maternal longing for the infant Christ that milk exuded from their breasts. Lukardis of Oberweimar and Margaret of Faenza would kiss their "spiritual sisters" with open mouths, and experienced a physically shaking, ardent grace flowing from one to another.⁵⁷

Perhaps the culmination of this evolution in female piety and its importance within religious devotion is best illustrated in an example of spiritual teaching and guidance from a treatise entitled "Von Ihesus pettlein" (On the little bed of Jesus).⁵⁸ The document would have been read in segregation from other references or texts, and it makes use of imagery that may seem unorthodox to contemporary readers. Using real and imagined art, "Von Ihesus pettlein" guided the female monastic in her theological exercises, drawing on a pictorial language that was almost exclusively influenced by the Song of Songs. According to late medieval authors, the "little bed" from the title of the document refers to the flower-strewn bed of consummation used

⁵⁵ Bynum, "The Female Body and Religious Practice in the Later Middle Ages," 164.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 168.

⁵⁷ *Idem.* Interestingly, medieval men also experienced visions and affective experiences, but seemed to learn their practices from, and defined themselves through, the feminine. In addition, although male authors also use physiological language to describe their experiences with God, they do so in a remarkably impersonal way.

⁵⁸ Hamburger notes that this treatise is "utterly conventional," 387.

by Christ in his union with the soul.⁵⁹ “Von Ihesus pettlein” functioned within a tradition of a spiritual advisor acting as a guide to his spiritual daughter, and was understood by both the reader and author as functioning inclusively, rather than exclusively to a single reader. Despite this general delivery, nuns would have taken the message personally. In the treatise, the author describes the convent as “a series of antechambers that lead its inhabitants toward the consummation of their marriage with Christ in heaven,” and the heart, specifically, is “a palace fit for Christ the king,” and later, “a bridal chamber where Christ consummates his marriage with the soul.”⁶⁰ After guiding the nun through a series of visualizations, the adviser at the end of the letter must leave her to her own practices, but entreaties her to pray on his behalf:

Take your beloved in your arms and press him lovingly to you and kiss his sweet, rosy lips for my sake, for it is not for me as a sinner to do such a thing; it properly is the prerogative of his brides. But I still desire from the bottom of my heart that such a loving embrace from my most merciful Lord take place for my sake. Pray to Him over time for me.⁶¹

Historian Jeffrey Hamburger maintains that this plea by her adviser recognizes the nun as belonging to the spiritual elite through her specialized relationship with Christ; the visionary experience was a privilege of Christ’s brides.⁶² In this example, the female mysticism of the medieval period blooms, placing the visionary in an elevated position that allows her, much like Mary, to appeal to Christ on mankind’s behalf.

⁵⁹ Hamburger, 387.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 389.

⁶¹ *Idem.*

⁶² *Ibid.*, 390.

CHAPTER 4 BERNINI'S BRIDES OF CHRIST

In the Baroque period, specifically 1650-1680, there was an overall resurgence of mysticism in art, particularly in Rome.¹ Mysticism in Baroque art, specifically the depiction of visions, ecstasies, and raptures, is unique in its involvement with the viewer, who, by the nature of artistic design, is compelled to engage in its supernatural events.² The very concept of such an engagement is a paradox, since the visionary subjects that artists endeavor to illustrate can neither be seen nor depicted. The state of a mystical episode often defies the expressive capabilities of the individual, much less any person witnessing the event, and mystics have maintained that transcendent encounters elude both description and representation. The visual and the visionary are inherently problematic.³

Around 1640, artists began to depict what Wittkower called a “dual vision.” This duality suggests that the viewer is encouraged to be an active participant in the otherworldly, mystical manifestations, rather than simply being an outside observer. In the visionary example of this, a saint and their personal experience are one component, and the reactionary experience of the viewer is another—the unreal has been made real through the work of the artist. Wittkower states: “Representations of dual visions are extreme cases of an attempt to captivate the spectator through an appeal to the emotions.”⁴ This emotional appeal was viewed as the main vehicle of religious persuasion. To elucidate the “dual vision,” Wittkower uses the master of the technique and the period’s clearest example, Bernini’s *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*: “Bernini’s *St. Teresa*,

¹ Wittkower, *Art and Architecture in Italy*, 2.

² Baroque scholars have highlighted this particular characteristic in Bernini’s work. Charles Avery states: “Bernini, skilled dramatist that he was, always aimed at stunning the bystander into reverence and acceptance. He does not appeal unassumingly or apologetically, but veritably demands suspension of disbelief.” Cf. Avery, 141.

³ Victor I. Stoichita, *Visionary experience in the Golden Age of Spanish art* (London: Reaktion Books, 1995), 7.

⁴ Wittkower, *Art and Architecture in Italy*, 2.

shown in rapture, seems to be suspended in mid-air, and this can only appear as reality by virtue of the implied visionary state of mind of the beholder.”⁵ The main goal of Baroque artists can thus be described as creating an “emotive experience” through imagery, and this was “achieved through narrative and rhetorical language of gesture and expression.”⁶ One of the hallmarks and greatest innovations of Baroque art, specifically employed in the pursuit of evoking this mystical state, was the use of illusionism, which reached its pinnacle in Rome and was employed by a number of painters such as Cortona, Baciccio and Pozzo. Anthony Blunt calls Bernini the “greatest master” of this technique, stating:

I use the word greatest deliberately, because, though many of his contemporaries and successors used illusionism with the utmost ingenuity to produce striking and dramatic effects, Bernini—almost alone—used it to express a particular kind of deeply felt religious emotion and so raised it to an altogether higher level of imaginative creation.⁷

Heightened corporeality and emotional states were depicted in order to connect the viewer to the narrative and elicit an intensely spiritual response. Highly dramatic scenes and graphically depicted agonies of Christ and the saints combined with stronger naturalistic treatments to create an era of heightened realism in art and a more vivid and tangible presentation of the *human* experience of the divine. It is imperative to note that such overt displays of bodily sacrifice and spiritual heroism, united in the visual narrative, closely echo the primary reaffirmation of the Counter-Reformation: the sacrament of the Eucharist. Protestants such as Zwingli sought to reduce the significance of Holy Communion and Luther’s doctrine relegated the important

⁵ Idem

⁶ Wittkower, *Art and Architecture in Italy*, 92.

⁷ Anthony Blunt, “Gianlorenzo Bernini: Illusionism and Mysticism,” *Art History* 1 (1978): 71.

sacrament to consubstantiation. The Catholic response was firm and direct: the bread and wine became the body and blood of Christ in complete transubstantiation.⁸

It is through mystical concepts and illusionistic techniques, and with the primacy of the Eucharist in mind, that Gianlorenzo Bernini seeks to convey the otherworldly condition and mystical union with the divine in three particular Brides of Christ—Venerable Sister Maria Raggi, Saint Teresa of Ávila, and Beata Ludovica Albertoni. The aesthetic similarities between their works have actively been noted by scholars, but few have given any consideration to commonalities beyond the surface. Bruce Boucher, discussing the *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*, notes: “. . . the saint’s face is tilted back, her half-closed eyes and open mouth allude to that combination of ecstasy and death first seen in the memorial to Maria Raggi which reappears later in the *Blessed Ludovica Albertoni*.”⁹ These works of art not only serve their own means, functioning as independent commissions and evoking the individual goals of the patron, but they also serve as models for Counter-Reformation Catholics, demonstrating a union with Christ through a conflation of metaphorical devices that suggest the power of the Eucharist. This message becomes especially clear when simultaneously considering Bernini’s works of these three women and providing a context for their perceived erotic representation. In this interpretation it is necessary to consider not only the supporting textual and visual references, as they would have been understood both by Bernini and by important ecclesiastical figures who sanctioned and commissioned the works, but also to understand the *bel composto* and iconographic whole of these pieces.

⁸ Petersson, *The Art of Ecstasy*, 10-11.

⁹ Boucher, 139.

The Memorial to Maria Raggi

Gianlorenzo Bernini's *Memorial to Maria Raggi* is located on the east face of the second compound pier, across from the high altar, on the north side of the nave in Santa Maria sopra Minerva in Rome and is generally dated to 1643 (Figure 3).¹⁰ A swath of black marble cloth, edged at the sides and bottom with *giallo antico* marble, appears as if animated by some unseen wind, held in place by a gilt-bronze cross at the top, placed like "a large stick-pin fastening the cloth to the pillar."¹¹ The marbleized cloth serves to both enframe and transport¹² the oval gilt-bronze medallion of a bust-length portrait of Maria Raggi, which is carried vertically by two winged cherubs of the same material. In order to emphasize visibility, her head projects fully from the background and is cantilevered by her hands, which are pressed ardently to her bosom in a gesture of devout emotion.¹³ Below the medallion-bearing cherubs is an inscription in luminous gold letters, curving with the drapery, which states the patronage and personage of the monument. On the lower left corner is a gilt-bronze heraldic shield, tilted slightly to the right, which serves as a counter-diagonal to the left tilt of the surmounted cross.¹⁴

Historians have generally accepted this work as simply a memorial to Maria Raggi, designed in the tradition of other funerary monuments of the period and owing most to Bernini's other notable cenotaph, the *Memorial to Alessandro Valtrini* (Figure 6). However this work represents far more than merely a memorial to a candidate for beatification and Tertiary nun of

¹⁰ Judith Bernstock, "Bernini's Memorial to Maria Raggi," *Art Bulletin* 62 (1980): 249. Though Bernstock has proposed a date from 1647-1653, I will be using the most widely accepted date of 1643-1647. For more on issues of dating, cf. Lavin, note 9, 68.

¹¹ Hibbard, 110.

¹² Bernstock, 254.

¹³ Avery, 143.

¹⁴ *Idem*.

the Dominican Order. It represents the first of three women that Bernini would represent in visionary, ecstatic, and transitory states, both as part and parcel of a greater iconographic whole and as a demonstration of the powerful union between Christ and humanity, delineated through Eucharistic metaphors.

Maria Raggi was born in 1552 and just twelve years later, in accordance with the will of her parents and against her wishes, she was married. As a child Raggi was reported to have been devoted to prayer and penitence, and she would lament the loss of her virginity for the rest of her life. Raggi would be widowed six years into her marriage, in 1570, the mother of two surviving sons. In 1572 she became a Tertiary nun in the Dominican Order after successfully discouraging a suitor that was supported by her friends. She arrived in Rome in 1584 and received lodgings near Santa Maria sopra Minerva, where both her sons were stationed within the Dominican Order. She was celebrated for her piety, humility and self-mortifications. Raggi was sought after for her prayers and advice, and she performed miracles and experienced visions.¹⁵

In interpreting this cenotaph, scholars, and likely Bernini himself, have correctly utilized a witness' account of her death used in her candidacy for beatification. Irving Lavin provides a translation of this account in his book *Bernini and the Unity of the Visual Arts*:

Suor Maria held her eyes fixed on the altar of her oratory, and she told me to mark her with the sign of the cross; it was so that this servant of God always made the sign of the cross when she had some vision, and I was sure that she had one then. It must have been very good, for, the sign of the cross made, she extended her arms as if wishing to embrace someone, and she immediately closed them in the form of a cross on her breast, inclining her body and making a great bow. Then she raised her head and fixed her eyes in the oratory and repeatedly proffered the sweet name of Jesus, and in particular she uttered the words, Lord, Jesus, receive my spirit. She said those words with devotion; and then she pronounced three times the name of Jesus, and at the last, with admirable peace and quiet,

¹⁵ Bernstock, 246.

she gave up her spirit to the Creator, leaving all those present consoled by so happy a death and melancholy and tearful for her absence.¹⁶

Thus he concludes, on the basis of this description, that Bernini's monument "graphically illustrates her actions in dying." Bruce Boucher begins his reading of the cenotaph in the same fashion and likewise concludes that Bernini has illustrated Raggi in the moment of death.¹⁷ But what is the moment that her actions depict and what is the meaning of that moment?

There is a notable change that Bernini made to this cenotaph from his previous intentions, known from a workshop drawing (Figure 7). Originally, Raggi's head appeared crowned with thorns¹⁸ and turned in a more upward fashion, as presumably her eyes were as well, towards the cross that surmounts the monument. Her arms were open and her hands exhibited the stigmata. Lavin concludes: "The first version of the monument was thus explicitly a vision of the cross and a display of the wounds."¹⁹ In her most notable vision, Christ on the cross appeared to her and bestowed upon her the stigmata, which she asked him to conceal from others, but not remove from her body, and the marks became visible on her hands after her death.²⁰ In addition to the wounds in her hands, side and feet, she also experienced great pains in her head, to which she attributed as confirmation of being a bride of Christ, since his crown of thorns caused him the same pain, emphatically stating: "Sono Sposa di Gesù Cristo e porto la sua Corona"²¹ (I am the Bride of Jesus Christ and I carry his Crown). It is especially important to note that she calls

¹⁶ Lavin, 68-69.

¹⁷ Boucher, 113.

¹⁸ Anthony Blunt states it was a crown of flowers, not thorns, and thus bequeathed to her by the Virgin. Cf. Blunt, 72. Judith Bernstock also agrees with Blunt, stating that it is a crown of roses and thorns, and may refer to the marks witnessed on Raggi's forehead. Cf. Bernstock, 250.

¹⁹ Lavin, 69.

²⁰ Bernstock, 246.

²¹ *Idem*. Due to the unavailability of the primary source, I am quoting directly from Bernstock's direct quotation of P. Innocenzo Taurisano, *La serva di Dio Suor Maria Raggi da Scio* (Rome: Terziaria Domenicana, 1958), 39.

herself by the proper pronoun, “Sposa di Gesù Cristo,” thus confirming the formal religious context of the title. In another episode that Judith Bernstock calls “her most potent vision,” Christ, in a resplendent white garment, spoke to Raggi using this same nuptial imagery as she lay on her deathbed, entranced by him for a whole day and night: “sta di buon animo Suor Maria sposa mia, che Io t'aspetto”²² (remain of good spirit Sister Maria my wife, I await you). This use of marital vocabulary is common in the mystical tradition. Though Raggi was not explicitly a mystic, she did experience visions, and there was also a generally established understanding of nuns as the Brides of Christ.

It is pertinent to note that in the early version of the monument, Bernini has departed from the eye-witness account. However, in the final version Raggi does not bear the crown of thorns and there is only faint indentation on the back of her hands (suggesting the stigmata, but not emphasizing it),²³ her hands are folded over her breast, and her head inclines toward the direction of the altar. Her parted lips appear to utter “the sweet name of Jesus” in the tradition of Bernini’s speaking portraits. Lavin interprets the final version to be the later moment in the witness’ account of her death, presumably after her vision has concluded, and places in a footnote a further explanation of these changes:

The turn toward the altar, as well as the attitude of devotion including both hands, relates the work to the tradition of the effigy in eternal adoration (Bruhns, “Ewigen Abetung”); Bernini later used variants of the gestures in the Fonseca portrait and in the Ludovica Albertoni, where also the *in extremis* expression recurs.²⁴

²² Ibid., 251. Bernstock further suggests that Bernini may have been playing off of her vision with the placement of her monument, since Michelangelo’s Risen Christ was one pillar away on the same aisle.

²³ Avery, 143.

²⁴ Lavin, 69.

He goes on to reference Anthony Blunt's suggestion that Bernini deviated from the initial version because it was unsubstantiated evidence used in the process of her beatification, which was incomplete.²⁵

What Lavin relegates to footnotes are important points that should be taken into account when interpreting this monument. In his conclusion, Lavin asserts the workshop drawing expresses the initial moment during the vision and proposes the final version is the moment *after* the vision has ended. Though I concur with his summary that Maria Raggi's monument depicts her "actions in dying," I will posit an alternate reading, utilizing the witness' description used in the process of Maria Raggi's beatification and previously uncontextualized miraculous events surrounding Maria Raggi as reported by her biographers.

Returning to the cenotaph, the miraculous events of her life can now be contextualized with the description of her death, and ultimately, the representation that Bernini depicts. As Maria Raggi is dying, she looks toward the altar of her oratory, finding comfort at the site of both Mass and Holy Communion. Actively remembering and visualizing the body of Christ transubstantiating on the altar, he appears to her in a vision. She asks for the sign of the cross, which is given, at which point she extends her arms to embrace Christ her spouse before her, enfolding him to her breast as she inclines her body. She then raises her head, anticipating the ascension of her soul as she utters the name of her beloved husband, finally united in death and everlasting life. Bernini has not illustrated her *after* her final visionary moments, but *during* them, at the climactic point at which her soul is united with Christ through her death—she is *both* rapt with vision and dying. Her luminous medallion delineates her in this supernatural light with her arms folded in an embrace across her chest and her lips parted, speaking the name of her

²⁵ Idem. Cf. Blunt, 72-73. I agree with Blunt's suggestion as to why Bernini abandoned the initial iconography. It has also been noted by numerable Bernini scholars that the artist does not take unauthorized license in his work.

betrothed in sweet adoration as she transcends her mortal life and ascends to heaven, supported by two cherubs and led by the cross, the black marble drapery accentuating her flight.²⁶ Bernini has, as Howard Hibbard so eloquently states, “petrified the evanescent.”²⁷

But how does this memorial relate to the viewer? What of the placement on the compound pillar and the orientation of Maria Raggi’s heavily-lidded gaze? First and foremost, the monument honors and promotes Raggi as a candidate for beatification. As a result of this, it also delineates the visionary and miraculous nature of her life through the dramatic and spiritually emotional moment that Bernini has represented—her visionary and supernatural death. Bernini has endeavored to convey the mystical nature through the formal qualities of the work and provoke a spiritual response in the viewer. The location of the monument is of particular importance, as it is on the last compound pier before the altar, and directly faces it on a diagonal.

Charles Avery has found a special significance for this placement. He notes the following:

Maria faces diagonally towards the high altar and thus looks in the direction of Michelangelo’s *Christ* which stands by the left pier of the chancel. This was almost certainly intentional, for it recalled another vision that the nun experienced on her deathbed, when Jesus appeared and said, ‘Be of good cheer, Sister Maria, my wife, for I am awaiting you.’ So here Bernini set up a dramatic interplay at a spiritual level between the spectator and what were actually two inert pieces of sculpture.²⁸

For Avery, the placement sets up an interesting dialogue between Michelangelo’s *Risen Christ* (1521) and the *Memorial*, utilizing Christ’s words to the dying Maria Raggi, with the viewer between the two pieces of sculptural. Though the idea that the works “talk back” to one another,

²⁶ Lavin, 70. Though we differ in our interpretation of the circumstances and moment represented, Lavin also eloquently concludes: “In the Raggi monument the billowing cloth and the medallion carried aloft by airborne messengers are brought together to create a visual metaphor for the spiritual transport expressed by the portrait . . . the moment of the soul’s ultimate union with God.” For Lavin, Raggi is without any narrative context, and while this is literally correct, her textual evidence is impossible to ignore in the reading, thus providing a framework that functions much like a narrative.

²⁷ Hibbard, 110. Hibbard’s comment is based on formal stylistic elements, as he does not address any iconographic interpretations.

²⁸ Avery, 143.

re-enacting the last moments of Raggi's life is interesting, there is a more compelling one to be made.

In her biographical accounts Sister Maria Raggi fixed her gaze on the altar as she was passing from this life to the next. Her monument's placement on the pier across from the altar reconstructs this, emphasizing both the visionary and literal aspects of her mystical episode. In this "dual vision," Raggi's perpetual orientation and sightline leads the viewer to the altar, the place where they too will witness the body of Christ transubstantiated into the host, and where they can achieve a divine connection through it. For the viewer, the power and importance of the Eucharist is conflated with the ultimate mystical union with Christ, delineated by Maria Raggi. Though the average viewer who engages with the *Memorial of Maria Raggi* may not possess her same qualities, they are directed through Bernini's monument as to how to achieve her same union with God—not as a Bride of Christ or through supernatural gifts, but through the sacrament of Holy Communion, a rite available to any Catholic.

The Cornaro Chapel

The Cornaro Chapel and its *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* follow the *Memorial to Maria Raggi* chronologically, and therefore possess similarities in stylistic developments. Both works function in a funerary capacity (Maria Raggi unto herself, and Teresa as part of a larger mortuary chapel and a context of her own death), and both exhibit mystical states in which the women are united with Christ. Judith Bernstock observes their shared visionary connection with God: "It is the ecstatic trance shared by Maria and Teresa, the spiritual and physical totality of their union with God, that makes these women kindred spirits."²⁹

²⁹ Bernstock, 254.

However, they are also comparable in their iconographic message and the means with which they model, to the viewer, an ultimate union with Christ. Like the monument to Maria Raggi, it is within Teresa's writings, among other literary (and visual) sources, that Bernini found his inspiration and source for the program of the Cornaro Chapel. However, in order to properly interpret the message and meaning of the Cornaro Chapel, it must be considered in its entirety. Church chapels have a history of thematic coherency in their programs, but the chapels of Bernini are unique in that their amalgamation of sculpture, painting, and architecture coalesces to delineate a central theme.³⁰

The Christian mysticism that found a period of heightened popularity in the Middle Ages also surged during the Counter-Reformation, particularly among religious women in Spain, where it served as an outlet for female monastics in a country noted both for its religiosity and for its conservatism.³¹ Four women saints came out of the Counter-Reformation. Of these, none cultivated the influence or literary appeal equal to the mystical writings of Saint Teresa of Ávila. Teresa's rise to fame, much like her life, would not be undaunted. Indeed, it was impeded at length by the fears, hostility, and skepticism of male clerics. Religious women faced strict censorship in their writing as part of the Church's long-standing position against female religious leaders, and Teresa of Ávila was no exception. After being investigated for heresy twice by the Inquisition and anticipating further interrogation, she preemptively wrote her spiritual autobiography. Though her spiritual leaders sublimated her family's conversion from Judaism and physical and spiritual struggles, they praised her visions as godly. The publication of the transcript was denied however, as one of her male confessors said, "it is not fitting that writings

³⁰ *Bel composto*. Cf. Lavin, 6

³¹ Hsia, 148, 151. The Inquisition was staffed by Dominicans, who were deeply suspicious of both women mystics and Jesuits.

by women be made public.”³² His recommendation prompted the Inquisition to withhold it from reproduction until four years after her death in 1586. In the last years of her life she had been revered as a living saint, and by this time her reputation had spread throughout Spain. The response to her *Vida* was overwhelming, quickly translated, and immensely successful. It had both immediate and long-term effects; R. Po-Chia Hsia calls it, “the single most important work of mysticism in early modern Catholicism . . . the exemplum for the shaping and writing of the religious life of women.”³³ Teresa was a strong feminine voice that prevailed despite male subjugation, not only in her life time, but after her death. During her canonization process, the choir of her supporters would sing her praises, calling her “a mistress of masters” and “more learned than the learned men.”³⁴ Teresa was a very dynamic figure in the history of the Church, and raised topics that directly addressed issues of the Counter-Reformation: gender, authority, sexuality, and pioussness.

The Cornaro Chapel and its *Ecstasy of St. Teresa* are located in the left transept of Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome (Figure 1). The church itself was built in first decade of seventeenth-century and was originally dedicated to Saint Paul, but was reconsecrated to the Madonna in 1622 for the honorific recognition of a great Catholic victory over the Protestants in 1620, which had been facilitated by a miraculous image of the Virgin.³⁵ Inside the church, the left transept was dedicated to Saint Paul and the right was dedicated to Saint Teresa. Federico

³² Ibid., 145. This is pertinent to note, particularly for the topic of this paper, as some scholars and critics attribute the censorship of her writing expressly because of its “sensuality.” Though the language of mystics is erotic in its earthly attempt to describe spiritual love, this should be the foregone conclusion for the sequestering of her autobiography. Hsia provides a very viable alternative interpretation throughout this chapter (9) on the subject of religious women in Counter-Reformation Spain.

³³ Ibid., 144-45.

³⁴ Ibid., 148.

³⁵ Lavin, 77.

Cornaro's choice for his chapel on the left and the subject of Saint Teresa for its altarpiece indicates a desire to further elevate her importance since the left transept is usually "liturgically nobler, gospel side" of the high altar. In addition, the foundress had no permanent chapel in the church at that time and it also would receive more light, being on the unobstructed part of the building (the Discalced Carmelite convent buildings were on the north).³⁶ The chapel space selected by Cornaro had previously been dedicated to Saint Paul and originally exhibited a painting of him in ecstasy. This adumbrated the rededication of the chapel to Saint Teresa since it was on the feast of Saint Paul that Teresa had her first vision.³⁷

The architectural framework for the Cornaro Chapel began circa 1647, with work on the sculptural program continuing into the 1650s. The integration of the chapel into the overall church design was of the utmost importance because as a transept arm, it was a fundamental part of the overall architecture.³⁸ The vault of the chapel is permeated with heavenly glory, designed by Bernini and executed by Guidobaldo Abbatini (Figure 8).³⁹ Frescoed angels playing instruments and strewing flowers, the dove of the Holy Spirit, clouds, and light consume the vault and wall, creating the illusion that heaven itself is osmotic, pervading our world.⁴⁰ In order to further enhance this otherworldly, metaphysical presence, the fresco spills over the chapel architecture and gold-painted stucco reliefs illustrating Teresa's life that decorate the vault.⁴¹ The arched entryway to the chapel is adorned with additional stucco angels and cherubs, who hang floral swags and a banner bearing the words spoken by Christ to Teresa (but also meant for

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 79.

³⁷ Boucher, 135.

³⁸ Lavin, 84.

³⁹ Boucher, 136.

⁴⁰ Hibbard, 134.

⁴¹ Scribner, 90.

all mankind) in one of her visions: “Nisi coelum creassem ob te solam crearem” (“If I had not created heaven I would create it for you alone”).⁴²

The walls are covered with marble colored in contemplative shades of yellow, gray, and green, with the complexity of both color and pattern culminating around the architectural framework of the sculptural group itself. The altarpiece is set within a niche framed by pairs of columns and surmounted by a pediment. Charles Scribner elaborates: “Through the interplay of concave and convex shapes, the pediment of heaven’s portal bows outward as if in response to the force within.”⁴³ The altar frontal is effaced with a gilt bronze and lapis lazuli relief of the Last Supper and above it, within the architectural proscenium-like niche, the sculptural group proper, the *Ecstasy of St. Teresa*, is seemingly suspended on a cloud as gilt wood rays stream down from the top of the housing (Figures 9-10). Here Saint Teresa is elevated on a cloud, her body limp under her voluminous mantle as she reclines slightly. Her face is a vision of idealized, but smoothly expressionless beauty. Her eyes are heavily-lidded and unseeing, appearing to roll back, and her lips are parted, seemingly in gasp. Teresa’s tunic is grasped at the side by a cupid-like seraph who smiles sweetly and knowingly down at Teresa’s physically unconscious form; in his other hand he holds gilt-bronze arrow. His touch is divine as he raises her effortlessly from into a metaphysical plane.⁴⁴ Bernini had windows built on the outside of the church wall to let in natural light that would have fallen through the top of the niche and the ochre glass onto the gilded rays, suffusing the sculpture of the *Ecstasy* itself (Figure 11).⁴⁵

Regrettably, the original illusionistic and supernatural qualities of the altarpiece have been all but

⁴² Lavin, 139.

⁴³ Scribner, 90.

⁴⁴ Lavin, 111.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 104.

ruined by modern electrical lighting. Lavin maintains that despite even the brightest natural light, the interior would have demanded a momentary adjustment of the eyes, “and then, as if suspended from the glistening beams, the softly tinted figures would glow, vaguely, like ghostly apparitions midway between nothingness and reality.”⁴⁶

On walls adjacent to the *Ecstasy* and opposite of one another, are the distinguished busts of Federico Cornaro and other notable members the Cornaro family (six other cardinals and a doge, four on each side) in draped balconies of *giallo antico* marble rimmed with black marble (Figures 12-13).⁴⁷ Interestingly and previously unnoted in scholarship is the repetition of this color pattern from the drapery of the preceding *Memorial to Maria Raggi*. The formal connections between her cenotaph and the *prie-dieux* (coretti) of the Cornaro effigies should not go unrecognized. Bernini likely used this complimentary formal quality to distinctly mark the funerary function of the chapel.⁴⁸ The Cornaros are set against an illusionary relief of architecture reminiscent of a church interior, and they interact among themselves and with the outside world. The floor of the chapel is the “first polychrome, figured, marble intarsia pavement since antiquity,”⁴⁹ and depicts two half-length, gesticulating skeletons in roundels on either side of the altar (Figure 14). Cardinal Federico Cornaro is buried underneath the pavement just before the altar.⁵⁰

As in the *Memorial to Maria Raggi*, there are two distinct themes in the Cornaro Chapel that are combined in a visual metaphor for the viewer: the power of the Eucharist and the

⁴⁶ Idem.

⁴⁷ Marder, 113.

⁴⁸ Though Federico Cornaro is the only member of the family buried here, the seven other effigies span a time period of two centuries (cf. Scribner, 90), thus they come to the chapel from a world beyond the present.

⁴⁹ Lavin, 134.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 135.

connection to Christ through mystical union. In order to understand how these themes are visually narrated, it is important to treat them both as a whole and in the order in which the viewer encounters them, as Bernini utilized a consciously constructed framework that virtually forces the viewer into the optimal viewing position.⁵¹ As the faithful proceeds down the nave, his gaze is met by a leaning cardinal (and also Federico Cornaro himself), who leads him to the optimal viewing point for the chapel: directly in the middle of the crossing under the church's main dome. It is at this point that the *bel composto* comes into visual and conceptual fruition.⁵² The perspective of the architectural reliefs behind the Cornaro family members is calculated from this point in front of the chapel, which can now be considered as a whole: “. . . a vaulted architectural unit containing an inner sanctuary at the back and at the sides a perspective design that extends the space laterally . . . ”⁵³

The Cornaro family members are a critical component of the chapel. Not only do they initially engage with the viewer and lead him down the nave, they also delineate a critical eucharistic component. Though the Cornaro effigies are often described as witnesses, it is important to clarify the nature of how and what they witness. They are not looking at the *Ecstasy* itself, but instead concern themselves with the underlying meaning of the altarpiece in relation to the altar.⁵⁴ Lavin compares the Cornaro men to figures in Raphael's *Disputation of*

⁵¹ Wittkower, *Art and Architecture in Italy*, 12.

⁵² Lavin, 98.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 95. At this point, the Cornaro Chapel may additionally be viewed as a three-dimensional form of the antiquated “illusionistic sacrament tabernacle,” which parallels the equally archaic narrative altar front. Bernini revived these forms in order to explicitly emphasize the sacramental representations. For further connections to the Eucharist and sacramental architecture, cf. Lavin 85-98.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 101.

the Sacrament, and suggests that it is in this capacity they function as confessors, manifesting their persuasion.⁵⁵ He states:

The Cornaro family portraits form a carefully planned exposition of the theme of the Eucharist through the contrasting and complementary routes to salvation: reason and faith . . . The group on the left displays the internal path of logic, prayer and contemplation; that on the right the external one of revelation, communication and action. Referring as they do to the pavement, the altar, the altarpiece and the vault, the Cornaro effigies embrace the entire chapel and bear double witness, as it were, both to the miraculous effects and the mystical substance of belief.⁵⁶

Bruce Boucher echoes Lavin's comment, asserting that the figures, despite their inability to visually engage with the altarpiece, reinforce through their poses "the chapel's principal theme of the beneficial nature of the mass."⁵⁷ He also notes that Bernini has integrated the figures "much as a painter might include donors in a polyptych . . ." ⁵⁸ This comparison of a multi-paneled altarpiece will also be echoed in the Altieri Chapel.

The center panel within the Cornaro Chapel's polyptych is the altarpiece of the *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*. Though Teresa experienced a breadth of visions and ecstasies, the episode in which her heart is pierced by an angel is the most famous and best reproduced. The use of her transverberation was imperative, as it had become Teresa's "trademark," and was equated with the martyrdoms and miracles of other saints.⁵⁹ The subject is one of heightened emotional and religious drama, keeping with both the tradition of mysticism and the Baroque:

It pleased the Lord that I should sometimes see the following vision. I would see beside me, on my left hand, an angel in bodily form . . . 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 to my entrails. When he drew it out, I thought

⁵⁵ Ibid., 102.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 103.

⁵⁷ Boucher, 138.

⁵⁸ Idem.

⁵⁹ Lavin, 84.

he was drawing them out with it and he left me completely afire with a great love for 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 that one can never wish to lose it, nor will one's soul be content with anything less than God. It is not bodily pain, but spiritual, though the body has a share in it—indeed a great share. So sweet are the colloquies of love which pass between the soul and God that if anyone thinks I am lying I beseech God, in His goodness, to give him the same experience.⁶⁰

The transverberation of Saint Teresa, as depicted by Bernini, “becomes the point of contact between earth and heaven, between matter and spirit.”⁶¹ Teresa is in the state of ecstasy,⁶² by her account, unable to move or speak aloud,⁶³ but spiritually and internally burning painfully and sweetly with the love for God. There are three ways in which Bernini's altarpiece is innovative within the traditional representations of transverberation and which come together here in particularly innovative ways: the recumbent pose of Teresa; the cloud-borne setting; and an overtly sensual content not previously depicted.⁶⁴ Like in the *Memorial to Maria Raggi*, Bernini overlays themes of ecstasy, death, and mystical union within one work. However, in the *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*, Bernini is able to draw on a larger body of *sanctioned* themes and therefore he is able to overlay several episodes from her life to elucidate the overarching theme of a mystical/eucharistic connection to God.

The recumbent pose of Teresa marks a noted change from previous depictions, which usually showed her kneeling. This reclining pose may represent her death as well as her ecstasy. Lavin points out that the correlation between the two “was endemic to the mystical tradition: the

⁶⁰ Peers, 192. I have mentioned this quote previously as a juxtaposition with Saint Augustine in Chapter 3.

⁶¹ Lavin, 113.

⁶² Lavin, 113-115, asserts that the sculpture could also represent Teresa's death in addition to the angelic episode, as she died in ecstasy, which would further compound the connection of her joining Christ as his bride after death. Though this is a considerable point, I feel the connection to eroticism and marriage to Christ stands alone in her writings, previous artistic depictions, and other features of the Cornaro chapel.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 113.

pain of spiritual love was conceived as a wound, and the wound was mortal.”⁶⁵ The moment of actual death was the final, culminating union between lover and beloved. Though Teresa had been weakened by illness, she in fact died in ecstasy. It is reported that just before she died, she spoke in terms of endearment to her beloved spouse. Evidence of her miraculous death was provided by witness, as well as Teresa’s own foretelling, and afterwards it was confirmed in a vision to her fellow nuns. Her supernatural death was entered in the official documents of her canonization. Teresa is a mystical martyr, having died of her faith, rather than for her faith.⁶⁶

There are two visual references that particularly demonstrate this concept of mystical martyrdom that Bernini (in addition to the primary literary sources) would have known. The first is an engraving by Anton Wierix, *The Mystic Transverberation of Saint Teresa* (Figure 15), which Lavin calls “one of the most important influences on the Teresa chapel . . .”⁶⁷ In Wierix’s engraving, Christ appears as a boyish archer or cupid, shooting a flaming arrow into the breast of Saint Teresa, who falls back into the arms of two angels. God the Father, the dove of the Holy Spirit, and a host of musical angels preside over the scene, while two angels descend from heaven bearing a bridal crown of flowers and a martyr’s palm. Teresa’s wound of love and her death are metaphorically linked by the caption at the bottom of the engraving. Bernini has placed Wierix’s dove and music-making angels in the vault of the chapel and the palm of martyrdom appears at the underside of the main window (Figures 8 and 16).⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Lavin, 113.

⁶⁶ Lavin, 114.

⁶⁷ Lavin, 116.

⁶⁸ Idem.

The second example is from an important altarpiece (that Bernini certainly knew, according to Lavin) by Palma Giovane, *Transverberation of Saint Teresa* (Figure 17).⁶⁹ In this painting, Christ appears in heaven above, pointing to the wound in his side with one hand and gesturing toward heaven with the other. A shard of light descends from his breast wound, illuminating Saint Teresa in ecstasy below. Her eyes are closed as she kneels; her arms open to receive the spear in her breast at the hands of an angel, while another supports her body from behind. Though Lavin connects this painting on “a sacramental level, between the transverberation, the Eucharist and salvation”⁷⁰ (there appears to be an altar at the lower left of the painting), it can also be read (in conjunction with both literary evidence and Wierix’s engraving) as a visual support for the representation of Teresa as mystical martyr, a point that remains unexplored in extant scholarship. In Giovane’s painting, the connection between the breast wound of Christ to the breast wound of Teresa through gesture and use of light functions as an *imitatio Christi*. Hagiography delineates a series of imitative actions, beginning with the Gospel, which the legend itself imitates: the saint imitates Christ and the faithful, in turn, imitate the saint. The story and the action are thus conflated.⁷¹ Thomas Heffernan states: “Christ’s behavior in the Gospels was the single authenticating norm for all action.”⁷² Christ’s life is both a delineation of Christian perfection, therefore sacred, and it is also the perfect model for others. As a result, there are clear similarities between the lives of the saints, not only to Christ but also to one another, which was the effect of hagiography as a genre—the suppression of individual

⁶⁹ Idem.

⁷⁰ Idem.

⁷¹ Susan Ashbrook Harvey, “Women in Early Byzantine Hagiography: Reversing the Story,” in *That gentle strength: historical perspectives on women in Christianity*, edited by Lynda L. Coon, Katherine J. Haldane, and Elisabeth W. Sommer (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990), 37.

⁷² Thomas J. Heffernan, *Sacred biography: saints and their biographers in the Middle Ages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 5.

details for the modeling of the greater whole.⁷³ Visually, the suffering and wound of Christ is connected to the mystical wound of love endured by Teresa and her martyrdom comes more fully into focus. *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* is a “hybrid” representation of her transverberation and her death.⁷⁴

The second innovative component was the inclusion of levitation into the transverberation imagery. This addition was facilitated by the fact that the location of the transverberation is not specified by Teresa, who emphasized only its rare but repeated occurrence.⁷⁵ Teresa’s levitations were unique in the fact that they occurred in public, specifically at mass when she received communion, and were witnessed by numerous individuals. Her acute devotion to the Eucharist became a central aspect of her mystical piety, and she experienced both ecstasies and levitations when she received the Holy Sacrament. These demonstrations were an emphasized point in her biographies and in her canonization process.⁷⁶ By overlaying Teresa’s transverberation with her cloud-borne atmospheric levitation, Bernini is compounding his visualization of Teresa as a eucharistic metaphor directly *with* her mystical connection to the divine. Charles Scribner eloquently describes the overall effect: “Sculpture and painting are complemented architecturally by the tabernacle in which Teresa’s transverberation is exposed, suggesting a gleaming Host suspended in a bejeweled monstrance.”⁷⁷ The power of the Eucharist, “that active principle of love which joins humanity and divinity, and here links

⁷³ Karen A. Winstead, *Virgin Martyrs: Legends of Sainthood in Late Medieval England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 1-2.

⁷⁴ On the “hybrid” of transverberation/death, cf. Lavin, 118. I support his conclusions here.

⁷⁵ Lavin, 90.

⁷⁶ Lavin, 120.

⁷⁷ Scribner, 90.

Teresa's transverbation-death on the one hand to Christ, on the other to all men"⁷⁸ is made visible by Bernini in his representation of the *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*.⁷⁹ The concept of Teresa as both a mystical and sacramental metaphor for the Eucharist is additionally supported both literally and figuratively by the altar frontal beneath her tabernacle-niche. This gilt-bronze and lapis lazuli Last Supper inhabits the terrestrial realm of the viewer and "serves as the liturgical equivalent to Teresa's more intense and exceptional communion with God."⁸⁰

The third and final innovative technique for depicting Saint Teresa was the overtly sensuous physicality that she evidences. Mystics had long employed terms of physical, earthly love in their endeavors to illustrate their emotions and experiences, and the metaphor of marriage to Christ is fundamental to the idea of mystical union.⁸¹ Teresa of Ávila wrote expressly in this language in her controversial commentary on the Song of Songs, *Conceptions of the Love of God*: "This divine union of love, with which I live, makes God my prisoner and frees my heart . . ." In addition to her response to the Song of Songs, Teresa wrote prose in a similar way:

One enjoys without understanding how one enjoys: the soul is consuming itself in love and does not understand how it loves: it recognizes that it enjoys this that it loves and knows not how it enjoys: it understands well that it is not a pleasure that the understanding strives to reach.⁸²

Consequently, themes of marriage, mystical unions, and an ecstatic love for God became closely associated with Teresa both in art and literature. Pope Urban VIII (d. 1644) composed two

⁷⁸ Lavin, 121.

⁷⁹ Idem.

⁸⁰ Petersson, *Art of Ecstasy*, 89. Lavin suggests that Bernini likely modeled his narrative altar frontal of the Last Supper after one on the back wall of the Lateran sacramental altar, further compounding the overarching eucharistic themes of the chapel, and even more importantly, referencing specifically the Holy Sacrament and the table relic of the Last Supper. Cf. Lavin, 126.

⁸¹ Lavin, 121-122.

⁸² Weibel, 83.

hymns to honor the saint, in which he describes her marriage to Christ: “With the dart of divine love / Thrust into your wounds you will fall / O victim of love . . . And she heard the voice of her Spouse / Come, sister, from the summit of Carmel / To the wedding feast of the Lamb / Come to the crown of glory.”⁸³

In the Cornaro Chapel, Bernini was influenced by both Teresian literature and artistic precedents in his illustrations of Teresa’s nuptials to Christ. Apart from the visual sublimity of the *Ecstasy of St. Teresa*, two key components in the vault decoration also provide a guide for interpretation. First, there is an episode found in Teresa’s *Relations* in which she has a vision that Christ takes her as his spouse by presenting her with a nail that symbolizes their union. This scene is represented on the right side of the barrel vault, with Christ taking her right hand and giving her a nail of the cross as a sign of her espousal (Figure 18). Second, there are two engravings by Anton Wierix—the previously cited *Mystic Transverberations of St. Teresa*, and an additional engraving by the same artist, *Transverberation of Saint Teresa* (Figures 15 and 19). From the first engraving, Bernini has placed the palm of martyrdom beneath the window and transposed the dove of the Holy Spirit and music-making angels to the vault. In conjunction with nuptial imagery, Bernini also takes the floral crown (it serves a dual purpose as both martyrdom and bridal imagery) and places it between the hands of two angels at the very center of the entrance archway (Figure 20). In the second engraving, God the Father oversees an angelic host who cascade flowers over Saint Teresa in a varied illustration of her transverberation. The engraving is crowned with a passage from the Song of Songs, clearly illustrating the dialogue of love between Teresa and Christ.⁸⁴ Bernini has repeated the flower-

⁸³ At First Vespers and at Matins, Lavin, 117.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 130-131.

strewing cherubs in the vault, who further delineate the joyous sanctification and observance of Teresa's mystical marriage (Figure 20).

Though only briefly noted by most scholars (Lavin is the only exception), the ascending intarsia skeletons in the pavement of the Cornaro Chapel must be considered to conclude a complete reading of the overall program. These roundels provide an important message of hope and salvation in light of the chapel's greater narrative. First, it is important to clarify what the skeletons represent. They are neither complete nor incomplete in their half-length form as they emerge from their darkened roundels, indicating clearly that they are in the process of *rising* from below. Though some have interpreted their presence as a *momento mori* in Federico Cornaro's funerary chapel, they cannot be *solely* assigned this role, since they do not threaten humanity with a foreboding message of mankind's fate. Lavin asserts: "On the contrary, they are downright enviable as they rise in prayer and exultation from the lower depths to bask in the light of heaven . . . they are joyous promises of reintegration and redemption."⁸⁵ Viewed in this context, they refer to Ezekiel's (37.7) vision of the resurrection, but with a unique twist: the left figure's hands are joined in devotion, while the right figure opens his arms in the *orans* manner, mirroring the gestures used in conjunction with the Virgin to the left and John the Baptist to the right of Christ in depictions of the Last Judgment (Figure 14).⁸⁶ Lavin stresses Bernini's innovation: "By combining and reinterpreting the notions of the floor as an infinite space, as a solid surface, and as a place of interment, Bernini made of it what it had never been before—the upper limit of the underworld. Visually, the floor and vault are mirror images . . ."⁸⁷ The dead reside in a realm below the earthly one of the viewer, but rise with Teresa, in the blessed

⁸⁵ Lavin, 136.

⁸⁶ *Idem*.

⁸⁷ Lavin, 137.

salvation that is bestowed through the rite of Holy Communion and the recognition of Christ on Judgment Day. Though the viewer faces their own mortality in the countenance of the skeletal images, they promise redemption and everlasting life.

In this moment, the *Ecstasy of St. Teresa* comes into full focus as seen through the lens of the complete Cornaro Chapel program. Teresa, the Bride of Christ, floats supernaturally before the viewer, supported merely by a cloud and the most delicate of touches from the Angel who bears the fiery dart of God's love. She is the very picture of a mystical, ecstatic, and otherworldly union with Christ as she ascends towards the heavenly scene that opens onto the vault of the Cornaro Chapel, where the dove of the Holy Spirit awaits her. Recalling the disputation of the Cornaro effigies, observing her placement *above* the altar supported by the relief of the Last Supper simultaneously conflates the visual display of mystical matrimony and makes her the Eucharistic metaphor for the viewer. Just as in the *Memorial to Maria Raggi*, the faithful here experience a "dual vision." Teresa is united to Christ through her mystical martyrdom, marriage, and the power of the Eucharist. The viewer is likewise connected to Christ through the sacrosanct rite of Holy Communion, wherein he is able to connect with God.⁸⁸ Like Maria Raggi, Teresa ascends towards heaven in a mystical state of union with the divine, modeling for the viewer the possibility of this communion through the transubstantiated body of Christ. The "dual vision" thus functions here as a didactic tool. The viewer is not meant to copy Teresa, as her space and experience is clearly and literally separated from the earthly realm, but he should experience the power of her example and follow the most accessible path to their own union with God, the Eucharist.

⁸⁸ Lavin, 125-126.

The Altieri Chapel

Following the precedent of the *Memorial to Maria Raggi* and the stunning narrative of the Cornaro Chapel, there was but one other comparable program that united painting, sculpture, and architecture: the Altieri Chapel and its *Blessed Ludovica Albertoni*. As noted above in the quote from Bruce Boucher, the three women share similarities in their formal modeling. I hope to delineate further details that place this chapel alongside the *Memorial to Maria Raggi* and the *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* as mystical Brides of Christ that model a union with Christ through the Eucharist for the lay viewer.⁸⁹

The Altieri Chapel is the funerary chapel for Ludovica Albertoni, renovated by her distant but contemporary relative, Cardinal Paluzzi degli Albertoni, who had married into the papal family of the reigning Clement X Altieri, and had taken his name as a result (Figure 4). The chapel was refurbished in honor of her beatification and the sanctioning of her cult in 1671. The most important result of Bernini's renovation is the focal point of this chapel, the sculpture of Ludovica Albertoni, which he has placed above the altar and under which lay her remains (Figure 5). Ludovica Albertoni, sculpted in highly polished white marble lies semi-recumbent, contracting on her deathbed with her knees drawing towards her chest, which she clutches as it rises. Her face is ethereally beautiful and her lips are parted to drink her last breaths of life, gasping not only in expiration, but in the joy that the union of her death brings. Her head is thrown back and her face is upturned, seeming to seek the light that streams over her from Bernini's hidden window within the recessed alcove that he has constructed for this lighting effect. The recessed portion extends beyond the altar wall and is framed with an archway which

⁸⁹ The debate over semiotics and iconography in the Altieri Chapel and Blessed Ludovica Albertoni is incredibly convoluted, with a myriad of methodologies endeavoring to interpret the intricacies and "dual visions" Bernini depicted. For the purposes of time and space in this purpose, I am limiting my reading.

also produces a telescopic effect. Above her is a Giovanni Battista Gaulli (“Baciccio”) altarpiece of *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne* (c. 1674), on the frame of which are stucco putti heads, attached in a strongly diagonal orientation towards the animated figure of Ludovica Albertoni, but seeming to float adoringly above her. A marbled cloth of red Sicilian jasper cascades from her bed towards the viewer, effectively uniting the space between her—within the recessed alcove—and the realm of the viewer. The dove of the Holy Spirit rests in the center of the chapel’s dome, his wings outstretched to receive the spirit of Jesus’ bride.⁹⁰ The wall space on either side of the altar has frescoes of Saint Clare displaying the Eucharist and Ludovica Albertoni distributing bread to the poor, by Gaspare Celio.⁹¹

Ludovica Albertoni, like Maria Raggi, was a Tertiary nun who was intensely religious and had married only to obey her parents. After she became a widow at age thirty-three, she took the habit of the Franciscan Tertiary Order. Albertoni was known most for her piety and charitable works, and though she had reportedly levitated during prayers, her “face enflamed by religious rapture,” she was not known as a mystic or a visionary. At age sixty, she became ill with a fever and reportedly longed for death so that she would be united with Christ. She began to take communion more often, stating that she was comforted by the Eucharist. Albertoni would die in fervent prayer in 1533.⁹² As a woman who was not known for ecstatic states, why would she be

⁹⁰ Scholars debate over whether Albertoni is in ecstasy or agony, life or death. Scholars who posit she is dying include: Boucher, 142-143; Hibbard, 220-227; Shelley K. Perlove, *Bernini and the Idealization of Death: the Blessed Ludovica Albertoni and the Altieri Chapel* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1990), 44; Torgil Magnuson, *Rome in the age of Bernini* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International; Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1982), 305-307. Historians who assert she is in ecstasy include: Avery, 152; Frank H. Sommer, “Iconography of action: Bernini’s Ludovica Albertone,” *Art Quarterly* 33 (1970): 35; Petersson, *Bernini and the excesses of art*, 40; While certain scholars are unclear or unconcerned: Marder, 297; Charles Scribner, “Transfigurations: Bernini’s Last Works,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 135 (1991): 498; Giovanni Careri, *Bernini: flights of love, the art of devotion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 51-86. For the purposes of this paper, I will operate under the interpretation that is both dying and in ecstasy.

⁹¹ Careri, 51-52.

⁹² Perlove, 4-5.

depicted in such a manner at the moment of her death? The explanation for this lies not only in the sculpture itself, but in Bernini's concept of the *bel composto*.

As in the previous examples of the *Memorial of Maria Raggi* and *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*, this investigation begins by looking at the textual references that relate to the design of the Altieri Chapel. One of two documents testifying to the new cult of Ludovica Albertoni, a Carmelite panegyric by Bernardino Santini entitled *I voli d'Amore* (Flights of Love) and published in 1673, has an overtly mystical tone and even compares her to Saint Teresa of Ávila by way of her contemplative talent.⁹³ The introduction begins:

Spos' a Santi Imenei
De l'amato suo ben l'aure piu belle
Sul giglio Nazaren Sue Rose inesta
L'Eroe de Semidei
De' raggi arresta
Sul crin di casta Ninfa oro di Stella
LODOVICA al diletto
Offre il sen, dona il cor, riposa in petto

(Bride wed in Holy Matrimony to her beloved in the gentlest breezes joins her roses to the lily of the Nazarene. The hero of celestial semigods covers the hair of the chaste nymph with stardust. To her beloved, Ludovica offers her breast, yields her heart, and rests in his bosom)⁹⁴

The panegyric commingles original poetry with selections from biblical quotations and juxtaposes Ludovica with various other characters, to present Ludovica as a Bride of Christ:

Observe (if you please) LUDOVICA rising from the earth and embracing Jesus on the Cross . . . Great was the piety of LUDOVICA, who united herself living to her dead beloved so that through her ardor he might be revived . . . But the living conveys life to the dead, though the one who is dead has sacrificed his being and his life for the living one. Between these two persons there is only one death, yet both have died of love . . . Between these two subjects there existed only one life, nor can more than one life exist where the hearts reigns undivided . . . That is, LUDOVICA dies with her expired beloved while the bridegroom dwells in her bosom . . . Neither life nor death can separate the lover of God from God . . . Let us leave LUDOVICA with Jesus, as though alive, spreading her wings

⁹³ Careri, 52.

⁹⁴ As quoted in Careri, 58.

toward the object of her love . . . Silence! Do not wake her, for it is sweeter to die than to live without . . . ⁹⁵

Ludovica Albertoni, in the mystical language of her flourishing seventeenth century Carmelite cult, is established as a Bride of Christ who upon her death was united with her betrothed. The other document that bears witness to the cult of Ludovica is a biography written by Friar Giovanni Paolo of Rome in 1672, which praises her virtues, piety and good works, specifically her charity to the poor of Rome. This contrast between her active life and her contemplative one is also illustrated visually in the art of her chapel. The representation of Ludovica in her expiring and ecstatic state was assuredly chosen by Bernini because of her new Carmelite devotion⁹⁶ as well as for the theatrical aspect of the subject, which would be more likely to compel viewers spiritually and emotionally.

Returning to the interpretation of the iconography within the Altieri Chapel, we must observe several key elements that explain the conflation of Ludovica's agony and ecstasy. The chapel's altarpiece, *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne* by Baciccio is the first of these components (Figure 21). The importance of this painting is evidenced by the intense collaboration between Baciccio and Bernini, known from the accuracy of the drawings made by the painter of Bernini's sculpture and exact location of the altarpiece.⁹⁷ In the work, the Virgin gently compels the Christ child into the open, waiting arms of her mother, Saint Anne, while above the Holy Family, winged putti throw flowers. Shelley Perlove has noted several important ways in which the painting relates to the sculpture. To begin, there is a similarity in lighting between the two pieces. The fictive light in the altarpiece corresponds with the actual

⁹⁵ As quoted in Careri, 67-68.

⁹⁶ Careri, 52.

⁹⁷ Idem. and Perlove, 19.

illumination of the sculpture, depicted as entering from either side.⁹⁸ She also suggests that the stucco cherub heads mounted on the frame of the altarpiece, hovering intently above the body of Ludovica, are extensions of the boldly foreshortened cherubs of the painting, thereby they strew white roses not only upon the Virgin and Child with Saint Anne, but also on Ludovica herself.⁹⁹ The chapel's dedication to Saint Anne and Ludovica also aligns the two women. Viewed in Bernini's *bel composto* through the unification of light and space, Saint Anne's act of receiving the infant Christ in the painting formally mirrors Ludovica's reception of him as her divine spouse at the moment of her death below.¹⁰⁰ Like Maria Raggi, she folds her arms around him, pressing him to her chest, gasping both in death and with joy at the final union in the ultimate spiritual love.¹⁰¹ The extension of the winged putti strewing flowers from painting to sculpture, as suggested by Perlove, confirms this reading as a celebration of the mystical union between Ludovica and Christ her spouse. We have seen this iconography before—in the vault of the Cornaro Chapel.

It is known from the aforementioned textual evidence that Ludovica Albertoni placed a great degree of importance on the rite of Holy Communion, and the taking of the Eucharist had notable effects on her person, as it did for Maria Raggi and Saint Teresa. Like these two other holy women, Ludovica Albertoni is also visual evidence of the power of the sacrament. This achieved in two aspects within the chapel: her sculpture above the altar and the frescoes of Saint Clare displaying the Eucharist and Ludovica Albertoni distributing bread to the poor on the

⁹⁸ Perlove, 20.

⁹⁹ *Idem*.

¹⁰⁰ Careri, 64-65; Boucher, 143.

¹⁰¹ It has been previously noted by Lavin that Raggi's gesture is later repeated by Albertoni. While his reading describes an *affetti* of spiritual devotion, I am applying that gesture here as an ultimate *affetti*.

flanking altar walls. First, Bernini has placed Albertoni above the altar in a similar fashion to Saint Teresa, and through this placement, creates an analogous liturgical function. As the priest stands before the sepulcher altar and raises the Host to the height of the sculpture, there is visual conflation of the Eucharist and Ludovica Albertoni.¹⁰² Her union with Christ in death is aligned with the means by which the viewer can achieve her sublimated connection to Christ in life. Second, the death and mystical union of Ludovica Albertoni is framed by the frescoes on the flanking altar walls, which are juxtaposed and ultimately amalgamate with the altar sculpture itself. In this manner, they also instruct the viewer on how to achieve the unification that Albertoni demonstrates. Giovanni Careri clarifies this process:

In fact, although we were able to identify the process of conformation in Ludovica's imitation of Saint Anne in the act of receiving Christ, the beholder is not invited by a mediating figure to imitate her spiritual attitude. The worshipper is invited to do so, however, in sacramental form at the moment of the Eucharist, becoming one with Christ through Holy Communion. While the blessed, who is infused with the ecstasy of Divine Grace, has internalized the Christ whom Mary is offering Anne, the believer may, within the limits of his possibilities, conform to Ludovica in the act of communion. In displaying the sacred host, the figure of Saint Clare confirms and reinforces the importance of the moment of the Eucharist in the worshipper's prayer in the Albertoni Chapel.¹⁰³

However, the viewer's experience of Ludovica here is much more intimate than that of the Cornaro Chapel, which overwhelms in its grandeur and otherworldly visionary qualities. In this private space, the faithful gazes upon Ludovica Albertoni, a woman known for her charity and life of good works, as she passes from this life to the next. She is both otherworldly and approachable, human and elevated *beata*. Her death is neither martyrdom nor miracle, but one that anyone can achieve.¹⁰⁴ Saint Clare displays the Eucharist and Ludovica Albertoni distributes bread to the poor, demonstrating that through good deeds and the rite of Holy

¹⁰² Perlove, 45.

¹⁰³ Careri, 84.

¹⁰⁴ Perlove, 50.

Communion, any layperson can achieve the connection with God illustrated through the exquisite sculptural display of Ludovica Albertoni above the altar.

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

In order to understand the modes and meanings in the mystically-thematic works of Gianlorenzo Bernini, it is first necessary to take into account the historical and contemporary literature of the period, the artist, and the subjects he seeks to represent. Contextualizing the surrounding socio-cultural, religious, and political issues facilitates a more thorough engagement with the innovations of Bernini's art. By establishing the foundations of mysticism and moving forward from a medieval precedent, rather than backward from the contemporary period, any prurient perceptions of eroticism within Bernini's work become rightly aligned with the sacred. With this clarity and examining the chapels as a narrative whole, the reader can consider the works (as closely as a contemporary viewer is able) within a seventeenth century framework.

Moving beyond formal similarities and relating the three holy women of Gianlorenzo Bernini as a group reveals the innovative methods that the artist employed in order to convey the message of the Counter-Reformation—the way to Christ and everlasting life is through the Church, the rite of Holy Communion, the belief in the power of the saints, and a lifetime of good works. Bernini has a specific technique for accomplishing these goals. His “dual visions” present visionary and physically transcendent states in a spectacular display, provoking an emotional and spiritual response from the viewer. The evolution of Bernini's technique is evident in the progression of his work. The power of the Eucharist is a recurrent personal theme in the lives of all three of his holy women that has been harnessed for the purposes of the Church. Despite the fact that only Saint Teresa was formerly recognized as a mystic, all three women experienced paramystical phenomena when taking communion. Conversely, it is the active component that is aligned with both Maria Raggi and Ludovica Albertoni, but is

underrepresented in Teresa's hagiographical art. However, when considered as a group, the multi-faceted message of the Church comes into focus.

Visually, Bernini develops these themes by overlaying multiple narratives of divine union. In the *Memorial to Maria Raggi*, he blends ideas of vision, death, union, and ascension in a single monument that interacts with the site of the Holy Communion—the high altar—in a restricted spatial environment. In the Cornaro Chapel, Bernini is able to create a multivalent narrative that repeats and reinforces the power of the Eucharist and mystical union with Christ through the synthesis of the *bel composto* on a grand scale. The spectacular display is both didactic and affective as it engages the viewer. Like the *Memorial* and the Cornaro Chapel, the Altieri Chapel also conveys the same themes of union with the divine through the Host. It is in this chapel that the balance has been found between a mystical model and a utilitarian one. Ludovica Albertoni appears supernaturally before the viewer. Bathed in directed light and luminously rendered by Bernini's virtuosity, she elicits a spiritually emotional reaction in the viewer. However, she is in a mortally transcendent state that awaits all mankind, with the means by which to achieve her sublime death and ultimate connection to Christ framing her—the Eucharist and a life of good works. Utilizing the mystical unions of his Brides of Christ—Sister Maria Raggi, Saint Teresa of Avila, and Beata Ludovica Albertoni—Bernini presents a mystical model paralleled with functional means to metaphorically encapsulate the power of faith, delineated through a unification of light, color, sculpture, painting and architecture.

APPENDIX
LIST OF ART WORK CITED

1. Gianlorenzo Bernini, Cornaro Chapel, Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome, 1647-1652. Marble, stucco, gilded bronze, and fresco. (From Adams, *Art Across Time*, figure 17.20)
2. Gianlorenzo Bernini, *Ecstasy of St. Teresa*, Cornaro Chapel, Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome, 1647-1652. (From Adams, *Art Across Time*, figure 17.21)
3. Gianlorenzo Bernini, *Memorial to Maria Raggi*, Santa Maria sopra Minerva, Rome, 1643-1647. Colored marble and gilded bronze; life-size medallion and putti. (From Boucher, *Italian Baroque Sculpture*, figure 102)
4. Gianlorenzo Bernini, Altieri Chapel, San Francesco a Ripa, Rome, 1671-1674. (From Hibbard, *Bernini*, figure 121)
5. Gianlorenzo Bernini, *Blessed Ludovica Albertoni*, Altieri Chapel, San Francesco a Ripa, Rome, 1671-1674. Marble. (From Avery, *Bernini: Genius of the Baroque*, figure 198)
6. Gianlorenzo Bernini, *Memorial to Alessandro Valtrini*, San Lorenzo in Damaso, Rome, 1641. Marble. (From Boucher, *Italian Baroque Sculpture*, figure 105)
7. Gianlorenzo Bernini, *Drawing for the Memorial Maria Raggi*. Biblioteca Vaticana. (From Lavin, *Bernini and the Unity of the Visual Arts*, figure 123)
8. Guidobaldo Abbatini, *Vault decoration*, Cornaro Chapel, Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome, 1647-1652. Fresco and gilt-painted stucco. (From Lavin, *Bernini and the Unity of the Visual Arts*, figure 183)
9. *Last Supper*, Cornaro Chapel, Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome, 1647-1652. Gilded bronze and lapis lazuli. (From Lavin, *Bernini and the Unity of the Visual Arts*, figure 180)
10. Gianlorenzo Bernini, Cornaro Chapel, Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome, 1647-1652. Marble, stucco, and gilded bronze. (From Lavin, *Bernini and the Unity of the Visual Arts*, figure 151)
11. Exterior view of light chamber, Cornaro Chapel, Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome, 1647-1652. (From Lavin, *Bernini and the Unity of the Visual Arts*, figure 144)
12. Cornaro family monument, east wall, Cornaro Chapel, Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome, 1647-1652. Polychrome marble and stucco. (From Lavin, *Bernini and the Unity of the Visual Arts*, figure 154)
13. Cornaro family monument, west wall, Cornaro Chapel, Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome, 1647-1652. Polychrome marble and stucco. (From Lavin, *Bernini and the Unity of the Visual Arts*, figure 155)

14. Pavement, Cornaro Chapel, Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome, 1647-1652. Polychrome marble intarsia. (From Lavin, *Bernini and the Unity of the Visual Arts*, figure 192)
15. Anton Wierix, *The Mystic Transverberation of Saint Teresa*, 1614-1622. New York, Metropolitan Museum. Engraving. (From Lavin, *Bernini and the Unity of the Visual Arts*, figure 278)
16. Vault decoration, Cornaro Chapel, Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome, 1647-1652. Fresco and gilt-painted stucco. (From Lavin, *Bernini and the Unity of the Visual Arts*, figure 188)
17. Palma Giovane, *Transverberation of Saint Teresa*, 1615. San Pancrazio. (From Lavin, *Bernini and the Unity of the Visual Arts*, figure 269)
18. *Bethrothal of St. Teresa to Christ*, vault decoration (detail), Cornaro Chapel, Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome, 1647-1652. Gilt-painted stucco. (From Lavin, *Bernini and the Unity of the Visual Arts*, figure 191)
19. Anton Wierix, *Transverberation of Saint Teresa*, 1614-1622. New York, Metropolitan Museum. Engraving. (From Lavin, *Bernini and the Unity of the Visual Arts*, figure 272)
20. Vault decoration, Cornaro Chapel, Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome, 1647-1652. Fresco and gilt-painted stucco. (From Marder, *Bernini and the Art of Architecture*, figure 99)
21. Giovanni Battista Gaulli ("Baciccio"), *Virgin and Child with Saint Anne*, Altieri Chapel, San Francesco a Ripa, c. 1674. Oil on canvas. (From Perlove, *Bernini and the Idealization of Death*, figure 20)

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jessica Peyton Bell was born and raised in North Carolina. As an undergraduate she attended the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG), where Drs. Heather Holian and Carl Goldstein mentored her in the concentration of Italian Renaissance and Baroque art. She was awarded her B.A. in art history at UNCG in 2005 and graduated *summa cum laude*. At the University of Florida, Ms. Bell has focused primarily on Roman Baroque art, benefiting from the scholarship of Drs. Robert H. Westin and Elizabeth Ross. After completing the M.A. in art history in May 2008, Ms. Bell plans to pursue her Ph.D.