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# Erring Knights of Desire: The Romance in Santa Teresa's *Libro de la vida* and Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*

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ERRING KNIGHTS OF DESIRE:  
THE ROMANCE IN SANTA TERESA'S LIBRO DE LA VIDA  
AND EDMUND SPENSER'S THE FAERIE QUEENE

by

Emily Marie Stanfill

A thesis submitted to the faculty of

Brigham Young University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Department of Humanities, Classics, and Comparative Literature

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BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

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As chair of the candidate's graduate committee, I have read the thesis of Emily M. Stanfill in its final form and have found that (1) its format, citations, and bibliographical style are consistent and acceptable and fulfill university and department style requirements; (2) its illustrative materials including figures, tables, and charts are in place; and (3) the final manuscript is satisfactory to the graduate committee and is ready for submission to the university library.

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## ABSTRACT

### ERRING KNIGHTS OF DESIRE: THE ROMANCE IN SANTA TERESA'S LIBRO DE LA VIDA AND EDMUND SPENSER'S THE FAERIE QUEENE

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This study explores how romance opens the texts of two sixteenth-century authors. The first is the autobiography, *Libro de la vida*, of Spanish nun, mystic, and reformer, Santa Teresa de Jesús. Amidst the narrative of her life and her instructions on how to better live the mystical life, Teresa uses the mode of romance to construct herself and God in complicated and often conflicting roles: she the wandering (sinning) knight-errant who quests towards the ideal lady, Christ; she the walled garden into which her lover enters for fleeting moments of bliss; she the passive feminine recipient of God's forceful loves; she her own black knight, her own dark forest, through which she must fight to reach the throne of the Beloved. Reading Teresa in this light underscores the ways in which she deconstructs the sublimating, transcending, and bodiless love

historically directed towards the God of the Western tradition to reveal a love fraught with mutability and painful separation. As God absents himself from her, mourning assails her and causes her to wish for death, the only bower that promises perfect proximity. In this conflicted realm of mortality in which she longs for death but must continue to live, Teresa moves past her desire into a space for faith.

In the second text, Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser uses the capaciousness of the romance genre to express his desires for certain political, economical, and spiritual ends by constructing the Faerie Queene as a representative of Elizabeth I who in turn represents the potential for the realization of these hoped for ideals. The study focuses on one particular interchange between the Faerie Queene and the culturally-loaded icon of Arthur, and how Spenser imbues this moment with ambiguity, both posturing Arthur as the Queene's lover and her progenitor. The magical space of romance thus allows Spenser to simultaneously criticize, encourage, and praise Elizabeth, despite the inevitability that she will disappoint him. Despite disappointment, Spenser continues to strive for the temporal perfection of England, which ultimately leads him to an unyielding hope for the perfection of the immutable kingdom of heaven.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

At first glance the inclusion of two such disparate texts and authors within the same study may appear illogical; however, the autobiography, *Libro de la vida*, of sixteenth-century Spanish mystic, nun, and reformer, Santa Teresa de Jesús (1515-1582), and the sprawling *Faerie Queene* of Elizabethan poet, Edmund Spenser (1552-1599) share not only the same historical period of the latter sixteenth-century, but also similar generic concerns. Although the texts do not occupy the same genre strictly speaking, Teresa's autobiographical *Vida* manifests the generic concerns of romance through her use of the romance mode, while Spenser explicitly places his *Faerie Queene* within the romance genre while including a variety of other modes (thus leading many to dispute its generic status). Despite this formal generic difference, romance resonates between them.

The romance unites these texts through its primary characteristic: questing towards the fulfillment of individualized desires. This pervasive narrative hope causes the plot to organize itself around the act of pleasing whoever may grant those desires. In the case of Teresa, she seeks to please God, her spiritual Groom, who grants her moments of union with His divine person. The underlying motivation for her writing and her spiritual methodology focuses on that rapturous end. In the case of Spenser, the entire text moves towards pleasing Elizabeth I for the power she has to realize various economic, political, and religious ideals. Romance's occupation with journeying to fulfill these desires allows the text to contain the concerns of various other genres: autobiography, pastoral, epic, allegory, encomium, etc., while simultaneously maintaining its status as romance. In this way, Spenser's *Faerie Queene* collapses the

concerns and preoccupations of epic and spiritual allegory into the single genre of romance, questing to realize those economic, political, and religious ends. Teresa's autobiographical confession similarly utilizes the romance's generic/modal flexibility, writing her text to function within the romance mode while remaining under a different generic umbrella. The romance mode unveils Teresa's desires (which she styles in classic romance formulations) and then complicates and undermines them through pushing their fulfillment outside of the realm of the text.

#### I. Sixteenth-century Spain and England

As foreground to the "space" of sixteenth-century Spain and the first events that tie Teresa's Spain to Spenser's England, stands the reign of the "Catholic Kings" Ferdinand II of Aragon and Isabel I of Castile. These two Spanish monarchs initiated dramatic events that influenced the Peninsula for centuries to come. Most significantly, in their zeal to gain the racial and spiritual purification of their people, these monarchs initiated three movements that changed the course of Spain's history: the expulsion of the Jews, the regaining of Granada from the Moors in 1492, and the establishment of an Inquisition<sup>1</sup> in 1478 ostensibly to ensure religious orthodoxy. The ramifications of these events created the Spain of Teresa's experience.

Prior to Teresa, however, the relations between Spain and England boasted a complex history whose blossoming in the Renaissance period stems from the unlikely marriage of the Tudor King, Henry VIII, to Catherine of Aragon, daughter of Ferdinand

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<sup>1</sup> The Inquisition of 1478 is not synonymous with the Inquisition instituted by Pope Paul III in 1542. The Inquisition established by Ferdinand and Isabel functioned as an arm of the state, working both as a racial authenticator as well as an institution upholding Catholic doctrine (as they race and religion intertwined). The Church both initiated and executed the later Inquisition.

and Isabel. Spain and England initially intended to forge their political ties through the marriage of Catherine to Arthur, Henry VIII's frail older brother. Upon Arthur's death only months after the union, the monarchs decided that the young and beautiful Catherine would marry Henry VIII upon his ascension to the English throne. During the course of eighteen years of marriage, Catherine failed to provide Henry with a male heir, birthing six children, three of whom were stillborn, two of whom died in infancy, and one who lived to become the frail, red-headed girl, Mary. Henry VIII's overweening pride and egotism eventually moved him to seek an annulment of his marriage with the Spanish princess, audaciously claiming Biblical justification (that no man should marry his brother's wife) and the wrath of God as the basis for his plea to the papacy for an annulment. Partially because Catherine's nephew, the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, exercised considerable influence over the Papacy during that period, the Pope denied Henry's claim. Consequently, during the years 1531-1535, Henry, once dubbed "Defender of the [Catholic] Faith," and his politically expedient councilors enacted parliamentary laws declaring England's separation from the Church, and Henry's new status as Head of the Church of England. Through these means, Henry legitimized his annulment from Catherine by means of his own authority, putting away the popular Spanish Queen shortly thereafter.

Henry's break from the Catholic Church marks the most pronounced moment of schism between England and Spain, as Henry not only spurned and sequestered a Spanish princess but also defied the power of Rome and the authority of the Church, which faith the Spanish had conscientiously and zealously defended for centuries. The Protestant Reformation initiated in the Germanic countries during these years caused additional

threats to the religious stability of these nations. During the following years, religious conflicts arose all over Western Europe as religion developed into one of the premiere concerns of its governments. Spain emerged as the forerunner in reestablishing the power and authority of the Catholic Church as it vigorously enacted the Inquisition, sniffing out and destroying heresy wherever it hid, and enforced the various other doctrinal and re-organizational efforts of the Counter-Reformation, particularly the Indexes prohibiting the publication and ownership of spiritually dangerous tracts.

England waffled during this period between Protestant and Catholic faith, a fickle bride to the Faith, seemingly without anchored conviction in comparison to her Spanish neighbors. When Edward VI, son of Henry VIII, ascended to the throne, he worked through Parliament to seal the English Reformation as a Protestant movement. After his death, his half-Spanish half-sister, Mary, daughter of Catholic Catherine of Aragon, tirelessly (and often violently) worked to undo Edward's work and establish England as a Catholic nation. She ultimately failed to reunite England with Rome officially. Her short-lived marriage to Spanish-Catholic, Phillip II in 1556 proved unpopular with the English polity, and upon her death two years later in 1558, England appeared ripe for a Protestant resurgence. At the age of twenty-five, Elizabeth I, borne to Henry VIII's mistress turned Queen, Anne Boleyn, ascended to the English throne as a politically savvy, prudent Protestant. Although Phillip II made Elizabeth an offer of marriage, she politely declined, instead using her desirability as a marriage partner and political ally to gain power abroad throughout her reign as the Virgin Queen.

Spain and England continued to attempt to thwart one another's power during the ensuing years. The English, increasingly more Protestant, hoped Elizabeth would

balance the powers of Europe and cause the downfall of Catholic nations, particularly Spain, which they viewed as the “whore of all the earth,” the Anti-Christ discussed in John’s visions in the Book of Revelation. Ostensibly through this balancing, ascending act, Elizabeth would function as the harbinger of the apocalypse, destroyer of the allegorical dragon, usher to the millennial reign of Christ. Simultaneously, Spain continued to stand as the most staunch and powerful proponent of Catholicism, seeking to consolidate its power abroad, and working internally to reform the Church through the enactments of the Council of Trent and maintain orthodoxy through the dramatic means of the Inquisition. It is in this context that one must view the works of Spenser and Teresa, as both authors participated in the concerns of their countries, whose interactions, particularly their religious machinations, deeply affected one another.

## II. Santa Teresa de Jesús

This historical setting shaped the life of Teresa in several significant ways. The expulsion of the Jews first initiated by Ferdinand and Isabel particularly affected Teresa in her endeavor to gain spiritual authority as her family derived from Jewish ancestry. Threatening expulsion, the monarchs permitted those Jews who would convert to Christianity to stay in Spain, although society continued to view the *conversos* or converts with the wary and vigilant eye of suspicion, doubting the authenticity of their Christian conversion and suspecting their surreptitious return to the practice of Jewish customs and rites. The Inquisition focused much of its energy on authenticating the beliefs of *conversos*, often employing torturous methods to persuade its victims to “confess.” At one point in her family history, Teresa’s grandfather, Juan Sanchez, a *converso*, “confessed” to minor sins relating to his return to Jewish worship despite his

full faith in Christianity. Due to the guarantees promised in the Edict of Grace of eased punishment and an avoidance of the brutal tactics of the Inquisition, many *conversos* felt it necessary to perjure themselves in order to protect their families and their interests. As punishment he and his children were paraded through the streets on successive Fridays in the “robes of shame.” This social stigma haunted Teresa’s family, causing her especial grief as she attempted to authenticate her own religious experience.

The majority of Teresa’s challenges resulted from living under the shadow and suspicion of the Counter-Reformation. As a woman and a mystic, the patriarchy remained particularly wary of her orthodoxy as society believed women to be prone to diabolical deceptions given their weak constitution originating with the seduction of Mother Eve by the Serpent. In addition, the priesthood felt threatened by their inability to mediate Teresa’s internal mystical experiences or validate them with any kind of doctrinal certainty. Teresa, however, carefully learned to fashion her words to present herself with a certain self-abasing excellence<sup>2</sup> and thereby remain in the good graces of the Church, despite several close encounters with the Inquisition and disapproving peers. Teresa wrote the majority of her works (including *Libro de la vida*, *Camino de perfección*, *El Castillo interior*, etc.) during the mid-1560s, circulating the works among her sisters and friends for their benefit and spiritual instruction. Her works were published posthumously in the 1580s. Pope Paul V beatified Teresa in 1614 and Pope Gregory XV canonized her in 1622.

My major contention concerning Teresa in this study is that her early reading and writing experiences with the romance genre in her youth affected the ways she chose to

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<sup>2</sup> Although some may call her strategies disingenuous, they were necessary to her survival given the religious climate of the period.

articulate her later spiritual life. In her *Vida* she writes herself into a divine romance, where God functions in various roles ranging from the idyllic, ultimately inaccessible Divine Lady, to the virile ravisher who enters her soul's garden, forcefully enthralling her with raptures without her consent or control. Teresa transforms into both the passive female in distress and the patient knight seeking the love of the Divine Lady while erring through the forest of mortality, a space fraught with mutability and the necessity of continued erring. Reading Teresa in this light underscores the ways in which she deconstructs the sublimating, transcending, and bodiless love historically directed towards the God of the Western tradition. She unveils the experience of God in mortality as inconsistent and painful as corporeality forces permanent union with God to exist as a possibility only in the life of death.

Mysticism lends itself to this romance formulation as mystics for centuries have articulated their search for the Divine in terms of an overpowering desire for God. The concern of chivalric romances with desire for the ideal Beloved translates well to the spiritual formulation of the Divine as an ideal Beloved, after whom mystics seek with ardent intent. When compared with the experiences of other female mystics, the eroticism latent in Teresa's text appears relatively mild. Hadjewich of Anvers declared:

Je désirais posséder mon amant tout entier, le connaître et le goûter dans toutes ses parties, sa personne jouissant de la mienne et la mienne demeurant là.... Puis il vint lui-même à moi et me prit tout à fait dans ses bras et me serra contre lui et tous mes membres éprouvaient le contact des siens aussi complètement que, suivant mon coeur, l'avait désiré ma personne. Ainsi, extérieurement, je fus satisfait et assouvie ... a ce

moment, nous étions unis sans différence. C'était ainsi: au-dehors voir, goûter, sentir, comme on goûte extérieurement le sacrement au'on reçoit, une sensation externe comme celle de l'amant et l'amante se donnant l'un à l'autre dans le plein contentement de regarder, d'entendre et de se mêler. (qtd. in Miquel 145-46)

I desired to possess my lover entirely, to know him and to taste him in all his parts, his body taking pleasure (*jouissant*) in mine and mine dwelling in his. ... He himself came to me and took me completely in his arms and clutched me against him, all of my limbs experienced contact with his as completely as my body craved his, following my heart. Thus, externally, I was gratified and sated ... At that moment, we were joined together without distinctness. It was thus: outwardly to see, to taste, to feel, like one externally partaking of the sacrament that one receives, an external sensation like that of the Lover and the Beloved giving themselves the one to the other in the full contentment of watching, of hearing, and of mingling. (my translation)

Her physical explicitness shocks the reader with its blatant sexuality and the unequivocal desire of Hadjewich for the body of Christ. An Italian saint and mystic, Angelina of Foligno, states that she prostrated herself nude on the cross to offer herself, both bodily and spiritually, to God. Teresa's relative subtlety lends itself to the nuance of romance and its containment of such passionate desire under the constraints of codes of behavior.

### III. Edmund Spenser

Spenser, also a man reflecting his time, sought to advise Queen Elizabeth on matters of state pressing to the English polity through his poetry. As Catholic Spain threatened to gain further control of Western Europe, he anxiously imbedded advice to Elizabeth concerning these foreign affairs and the necessity she ought to feel as monarch to gain as much territory as possible for the cause of Protestantism. As this became less and less of a possibility as Elizabeth aged, Spenser continued to hope while simultaneously reflecting England's fears of an heirless succession.

In the second chapter, I discuss how Spenser utilizes the romance to both reveal and veil his desires for certain political and spiritual ends by fashioning Queen Elizabeth, who represented the realization of these ends, as an object of desire within the text. Spenser employs the figure of Prince Arthur, perhaps the most famous figure of the chivalric romance, as the hero of the poem, as both lover and progenitor of the Faerie Queene, one of many representations of Elizabeth I within the text. As he places Arthur in contradictory roles, Spenser opens the text to a multitude of meanings as he implies various political and spiritual outcomes based on real-life Elizabeth's choices. The ambiguity of romance proffers Spenser a certain political safety as he both flatters and criticizes the Queen.

## Chapter Two: Santa Teresa and the Mode of Romance

In the second chapter of her *Libro de la Vida*, Santa Teresa, sixteenth-century nun, mystic, and Carmelite reformer, confesses that as a young woman she habitually indulged in reading chivalric romance novels, stating that, “Yo comencé a quedarme en costumbre de leerlos ... y parecíame no era malo, con gastar muchas del día y de la noche en tan vano ejercicio.... Era tan en extremo lo que en esto me embebía que si no tenía libro nuevo, no me parece tenía contento” (*Vida* 124). (“I began to become so addicted to this reading ... it did not seem wicked to me to waste many hours of the day and the night on this vain occupation.... I was so enthralled by it that I do not believe I was ever happy if I had not a new book”; *Life* 26). Although scholars have probed the influence of other authors and their works (especially St. Jerome and St. Augustine) on Teresa’s writings, the chivalric romance and its influence upon the saint, particularly in the way she articulates her relationship with God, has been glaringly neglected given the self-declared omnipresence of the genre in her early life. Teresa’s retrospective fear that the readings harmed her spiritual progression by “enfria[ando] los deseos, y comenza[ando] a faltar en lo demás” (*Vida* 124) (“chill[ing] [her] desires and lead[ing] [her] astray in other respects [specifically vanity and dressing in finery”; *Life* 26), seems to presuppose a complete divorce from the genre and its influence once out of childhood, and render as ridiculous the presence of parallels between her mature religious works and the themes and paradigms of the profane world of knights and ladies.

Upon rereading her *Vida* with an eye to romance, however, it becomes clear that in her autobiography Teresa writes herself into a divine romance. In this romance, she

casts herself and God in paradoxical, often gender-reversing roles: she the wandering (sinning) knight-errant who pines and yearns without satiation for the incomparable love of the perfect Christ, the occasionally loving, but ultimately unyielding *belle dame sans merci*; she (specifically the metaphysical, interior space of her soul) the walled garden, the hidden bower of bliss into which her lover enters for fleeting moments of amorous pleasures; she the passive feminine recipient of God's forceful loves; she her own black knight, her own dark forest, with whom and through which she must fight and struggle to reach the throne of the Beloved. Reading Teresa in this light underscores the ways in which her mysticism deconstructs the sublimating, transcending, and bodiless love historically directed towards the God of the Western tradition, revealing immortal-mortal love and desire to be fraught with mutability and some degree of the angst found in human loves. Such a reading, perhaps, also instructs us concerning the ways in which the typically profane romance genre yields itself to spiritual nuance, while simultaneously unveiling the problems and paradigms that constrain spirituality in this mortal life.

#### IV. The Romance in Spain

Teresa lived during a period in Spain obsessed with chivalric romances. Her young adulthood, during which she gained access to unknown quantities of these books, coincided with a marked flourishing of the genre. As Daniel Eisenberg remarks in his study on Spanish romances:

The romances of chivalry's greatest popularity in Castile coincides neatly with the reign of Carlos V (1517-1555). During this time the composition and publication of new romances, and the reprinting of the classics of the genre, flourished as it never had before and never would again. New

romances were published at the rate of almost one per year during this period, and there were twelve editions of the *Amadís* and eight of *Palmeín* [famous, foundational romances]. (41)

Given that Teresa was born in 1515 and left home to enter the Carmelite Convent of the Incarnation in Ávila in 1535, her years of reading would have corresponded exactly with this period of Carlos V's reign. Due to Teresa's family's relatively high economic status, Teresa would have had access to a wide variety of these published works. In fact, her family had a clandestine library in which Teresa's mother encouraged her to read (perhaps to hide her obsession from her father who did not approve of her frivolous reading material) (*Vida* 124, footnote 2). What specific works she read, however, remains currently unknown, besides the famous tale, *Amadís de Gaula*, the story of a heroic knight who combines religious ardor with chivalric love in his quest for the love of the incomparable Oriana (Medwick 16). Despite the absence of other specific sources, since the chivalric romances of the period followed formulaic conventions, it is not difficult to gain a sense of a typical romance that she may have read.

In addition to reading romances at a young age, Teresa also authored a romance entitled *El caballero de Ávila* (*The Knight of Avila*) in collaboration with her older brother of several years, Rodrigo. Although most scholars gloss over this detail, it reveals an additional, more involved layer of engagement with the genre. As the Spanish editor to her *Vida*, Dámaso Chicharro, states:

Hay que valorar suficientemente la importancia de los libros de caballerías en su formación. Teresa, hija de su tiempo, se dejó seducir hasta el extremo por ellos. Tan es así, que se propuso escribir—y escribió en

colaboración con su hermano Rodrigo—un libro de caballerías en el que, en lugar de ambientar su narración en países exóticos y con personajes fantásticos, creyó «profundizar» en la entidad del género situando la acción en su Ávila natal y con personajes conocidos... (123 footnote 1)<sup>3</sup>

It is necessary to consider sufficiently the importance of romances in Teresa's formation. Teresa, daughter of her time, was seduced to the extreme by the genre to such an extent that she decided to write—and wrote in collaboration with her brother Rodrigo—a romance in which, in place of setting her narration in exotic countries with fantastical characters, she thought to study the organization of the genre *in depth* by locating the action in her native Ávila with known characters. (my translation)

As both a reader and a writer of romance, Teresa intimately knew the basic literary conventions of the genre, choosing from among them to construct her own imaginary landscape. Significantly, Teresa chose not to emphasize the exotic and magical aspects of the genre, but rather elected to set *El caballero de Ávila* in her home town, filling it with familiar faces, perhaps even with those of her family and closest associates. Thus, her keen mind had practiced passing her surroundings through the visionary lens of romance and imposing the conventions upon her personal panorama. These early childish musings presage the articulation of the narrative of her own life in a romantic mode. Thus, such dominant romantic influences and experiences in conjunction with the ways in which mysticism yields itself to romantic conceptions, constrain her readers to examine her

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<sup>3</sup> Although little is known about this early work, Teresa's parents and friends noted her lively style and the passionate plot of her romance.

texts with a romantic eye, looking forward to what she might reveal in the ways she chooses to construct her world.

#### V. The Romance as Genre

Although over time variants of the romance developed in Spain<sup>4</sup>, the foreign origins (and its accompanying general motivations, and subject matter) remained intact from France and England. The term “romance” was initially applied to works written in the vernacular (*roman*) rather than in Latin. Eventually, the term became associated specifically with the narratives to emerge around 1150 C. E. from the court of Eleanor of Aquitaine and Henry II in England (where the court language was Anglo-Norman, a variant of French, rather than English). These “romances,” or stories of romance and adventure, took their subject matter predominantly from one of three antique sources: the legends of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table (*matière de Bretagne*), the pseudo-historical stories of Rome (primarily derived from the *Aeneid* and the battles at Troy), and the tales of battling French knights, most commonly Charlemagne and his paladins (knights), which were originally related in *chansons de geste*.

Interestingly, research suggests the existence of early strains of religious romances that played into the formation of the genre. As Elizabeth Archibald relates:

In the Middle Ages the term *roman* could be used of a life of Christ, as well as of a chivalric adventure story. Classicists today often include in their discussion of romance/novel/fiction some early Christian writings (second to third century) about the adventures of the early apostles and

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<sup>4</sup> Including Cervantes’ parodical *Don Quixote de la Mancha*

evangelists, stories which share a number of motifs and themes with the secular romances. (11)

Not surprisingly, many of these stories developed into hagiographies of the early Christian saints, texts that Teresa also read. Perhaps no narratives are more fitting to a Christian conception of the genre than the stories detailing the lives of saints, which combine elements of adventure and religious devotion. Perhaps a combination of these texts influenced Teresa as a child to run away from home to become a martyr for the Christian cause. Again in cahoots with her brother, Rodrigo, the two children surreptitiously left the housing compound early one morning, made their way through the bustling city, exited the medieval walls and were making their way on foot to the Moorish lands<sup>5</sup> when their uncle found them and returned them home. They had assumed that upon reaching the Moorish lands and declaring their faith, the Moors would decapitate them and they would gain God's approval and receive immediate exaltation (*Vida* 121).

Overtime, certain general characteristics emerged out of these various narrative strands, although not with consistent uniformity. In truth, a certain elusiveness haunts the genre, a refusal to be limited by a static set of tropes and conventions. And yet, given that the romance stands as a genre, we cannot help but attempt to define its limitations, however inconsistent, vague or multitudinous. In the face of such variety, romance scholar Gillian Beer attempts to distill the generic boundaries in terms of "a cluster of properties." As she states:

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<sup>5</sup> Since the Spanish regained Granada (Moor occupied territory) in 1492, Teresa and her brother would have had to leave the Peninsula to reach such lands, or render themselves anachronistic and "travel" to a former period in Spain. The childhood fantasy inherent to both options lends itself to the exotic nature of romance.

There is no single characteristic that distinguishes the romance from other literary kinds nor will every one of the characteristics I have been describing be present in each work that we would want to call a romance. We can think rather of a cluster of properties: the themes of love and adventure, a certain withdrawal from their own societies on the part of both reader and romance hero, profuse sensuous detail, simplified characters (often with a suggestion of allegorical significance), a serene intermingling of the unexpected and the everyday, [etc.]. (10)

As a source of comparison and augmentation on Beer's "clusters," Corinne Saunders identifies several characteristics in the introduction to *A Companion to Romance: From Classical to Contemporary*, one of the most comprehensive studies on the genre. She states:

Despite their variety ... the romances of the Middle Ages are linked by the motifs that echo through the genre: exile and return, love, quest and adventure, family, name and identity, the opposition between pagan and Christian. Such motifs form the backbone of romance. Romances require heroes and heroines, figures distinguished from the everyday by their ideal quality, and offset by similarly extreme, negative figures; they typically oppose a social, usually conservative, ideal of order with the threat of disorder of various kinds.... The pursuit of love, the special realm of the individual, is the particular but by no means the only subject of the romance, and love is often combined in medieval romance with the pursuit of chivalry. Romances offer escape and frequently open onto an exotic or

in some way aggrandized world.... They can also allow for incisive social reflection and comment, for the exploration of gender and relationships, for engagement too with the deep structures of human existence, on a level that we might call psychological, sometimes through a dream-like interweaving of fantasy and reality. Romance is a genre of extraordinary fluidity: it spans mimetic and non-mimetic, actuality and fantasy, history and legend, past and present, and is striking in its open-endedness, if frustrating in its capacity to defy classification and resolution. (2)

Given such characteristics as the ideal heroine, the interweaving of the unexpected and the every-day, the extreme negative figures that act as foils to the heroes, the deep structures penetrating to the core of human existence, the issues of love, chivalry, and gender, and the escape to idyllic worlds, it is clear why Teresa consciously or unconsciously found this generic mode vital to the conveying of meaning in her autobiographical narrative.

Furthermore, in an augmentation of the Christian components embedded within the genre, Northrop Frye, one of the premiere commentators on romance (he calls it the “summer” genre), picking up on resonances from the early religious strain of romance, stated in his work, *The Secular Scripture*, that “with the rise of the romantic ethos, heroism came increasingly to be thought of in terms of suffering, endurance, and patience .... This is also the ethos of the Christian myth” (88). This ethos again ties elements of

the medieval romance to its early Christian roots, to the lives of saints, and to elements of Teresa's autobiography.<sup>6</sup>

Whether or not one or all of these characteristics (to which list I would add the presence of the supernatural, as well as madness elicited by separation from the sought-after beloved) are present in a particular work, one underlying and overarching characteristic emerges consistently: the core presence and unveiling of individual desire. Whether the desire manifests itself as love/lust for the (body of) the beloved, or as the thirst for eternal life represented by the Holy Grail, or as a striving for the sweet glory won in combat, Redcrosse must quest for his Una, Lancelot for his illicit Queen Gwenivere, Achilles for his glory at Troy, Tristan for his Isolde, Orlando for his Angelica, Percival and Galahad for the salvation of the Holy Grail, no matter the obstacles that hedge their way.<sup>7</sup> Romance is quest for the fulfillment of a particular desire. Although we usually see that which is valued and desired in expectedly social and comparative terms—e.g., others, often more powerful, the woman or the object—the romance is fundamentally concerned with the fulfillment of what is represented as individualized desires. Indeed, the romance in many ways sets the value of the desired not just by staging its desirability as a general phenomenon in its world, but also by creating the desire as a product of the work one must perform to attain and fulfill that

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<sup>6</sup> Suffering, patience, and endurance stand at the heart of Teresa's experience as a nun and reformer of the Carmelite order. She sought to establish a more ascetic, stringent order, free of the excesses and riches of orders at that time. Her order, commonly called the Barefoot Carmelites, remains one of the most austere orders of the Catholic Church. Additional elements of suffering arose in Teresa's experience as she endured many illnesses (often debilitating) during her lifetime. During one of these early illnesses Teresa experienced her true conversion.

<sup>7</sup> It is interesting to note that all of the seekers in these classic instances are male, while all of the desired objects are female or feminized.

desire. The text nearly always subtly undermines and frustrates desire, deferring its fulfillment to a time and space outside of the text.

Two manifestations of this yearning for the fulfillment of desire (and its inevitable frustration) upon which this study will focus are the questing hero's desire to serve (and more fundamentally possess) the virtuous lady love, and in the harkening back to previous idyllic periods, whether they be the majestic and valorous court of Arthur or the heroic battling of Achilles at Troy (and whatever social, political, and/or economic ideals they may represent to the reading generation). And yet, due to the very nature of the genre, such desires are necessarily thwarted.<sup>8</sup> Romance anticipates its own undoing. As Patricia Parker states in her book, *Inescapable Romance*:

Romance is characterized primarily as a form which simultaneously quests for and postpones a particular end, objective, or object.... When the 'end' is defined typologically, as a Promised Land or Apocalypse, 'romance' is that mode or tendency which remains on the threshold before the promised end, still in the wilderness of wandering, 'error,' or 'trial.' (5)<sup>9</sup>

Thus, whether it is a desire for a lost historical/mythical/political/social ideal, or consummation with the beloved lady, the romance continually undermines attainment and possession of the ideals and desires it presents.

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<sup>8</sup> Exceptions to this rule do exist, such as Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, which, despite the continual deferral of the narrative and individualized desires within the text, ends with a dynastic marriage.

<sup>9</sup> Although I believe Parker generally overstates this aspect of romance, her observations are appropriate and apt to the Renaissance romances she investigates, especially in the maddening deferral experienced in Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*. Given that both Teresa and Spenser (whom Parker discusses) fall into the Renaissance period and manifest aspects of deferral, I feel it is appropriate to apply this particular "characteristic" of romance to these texts.

## VI. Paradigms of Mortal and Immortal Desire

The primary issue to confront in viewing Teresa's *Vida* as a work in the romance mode is Teresa's desire for God and how, as in romance, she must remain at the threshold of its consummation. Such an angst-ridden conception of love between a mortal and an immortal contradicts our expectations based on traditional, cultural views of divine love and its apparent stability.

In his study on the dialectic of desire and mourning between mortals in the Western tradition, scholar Henry Staten observes that, "mourning is the horizon of all [mortal] desire" (*xi*). Such mourning, he asserts, arises from the anticipation of loss that accompanies any attachment to a desired, mortal, and therefore inherently losable love object. Since no attachment can remain absolute and ever-lasting, separation (or the threat thereof) thwarts perfect possession and heightens desire rather than satiating it (even in moments of consummation), which consequently introduces elements of mourning, anticipated loss, and anxiety in the lover's desire for the Beloved. Staten describes this phenomenon as follows:

It seems that desire must aim at the continued possession of or proximity to what is desired, such that loss of the loved thing, or even the anticipation of its loss, is necessarily the destruction of the happiness of the desiring subject.... Nothing short of perfect possession can satisfy its craving, for the desired good is either all there or it isn't; any flaw in the absoluteness of its presence is a wound in the substance of the lover. And what flaw could be more decisive than that of mortality? (2)

Given the impossibility of absolute presence/possession of the desired Other, European intellectual history traditionally has stressed a decisive move towards transcending mortal, wounded love in favor of “the eternal and unchangeable, in whose bosom there are no farewells” (Staten 7). Philosophers and theologians from Plato to Augustine have encouraged the sublimation of *eros* through a movement from particulars to the idea or ideal, to the end of liberating *eros* from the realm of the body and its accompanying mortal paradigms (Staten 3). In other words, to prevent mourning, individuals must learn “how to extract [his/her] libidinal substance from the mortal or losable objects in which it could be trapped” (Staten 5) and redirect it to a metaphysical absolute that does not change, a constant Divine, or God. If one allowed mortal objects to trap one’s libidinal substance continually, unmitigated mourning would ensue as all would continually die with the dying.

Such mortal love aptly characterizes the love of romances, the wounding impossibility of its perfect consummation, and the desire that is maintained precisely because of the impossibility of its perfect consummation. Even during the passionate interlude, the moment’s cessation looms inevitably, the call of battle, or service to Gloriana’s Court, or King Mark’s jealous footsteps sounding just outside the door.

As opposed to such romances, Teresa’s narrative should fall under the category of sublimated immortal love, investing her love as she does in a constant, divine Being. Such, however, is not the case. In her attempts to apprehend and unite intimately with the Divine as a “Bride of Christ,” Teresa (and the female mystical experience in general) unveils the traditional conception of immortal desire, revealing the impossibility of attaining the constant presence of God required to sate her desire. Whether or not God is

constant in His realm, mortals' experiences with the Divine in mortality are fleeting, inconstant, and for the most part unpredictable.

Thus, although the philosophers of the western world accurately report the phenomenon of the dialectic of mourning caused by “fornication with the world” in terms of mortal loves, the assumptions imbedded in their arguments concerning the stability of *eros* directed toward the Eternal as an object of desire during mortality, are problematic when we consider the consequences of investing love over and against the boundaries dividing the mortal and immortal spheres. Such boundaries remain insuperable and ultimately more threatening to one's happiness than the impending loss faced by two mortals, who are able, in a limited sense, to enjoy their loves while they may. Staten hints at how these philosophers betray the unfulfillable nature of ideal love by emphasizing their insistent presentation of that reasoning, of the superiority of immortal love over mortal. These philosophers fallaciously assume not only that mourning would not occur if one invests love in an immortal object, but implies as well that the Eternal is, by His very nature, unchangeable, and thus a constant recipient of sublimated mortal love.<sup>10</sup> Teresa's experience reveals otherwise.

## VII. Returning to Eden

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<sup>10</sup> I must insert here that I do not think that these philosophers experienced or even believed in the possibility of constant union with the Ideal or God while in mortality. I am suggesting, rather, that they see immortal love or desire as wholly different from mortal love—that love directed towards the immortal is not fraught with the angst or mourning of mortal loves given God's constant, immutable nature. For them, immortal love partakes of a stability unknown and impossible to attain in mortal loves. Augustine seems to suggest that even in mortality a portion of God's presence remains with him, giving him an other-worldly confidence, and the spiritual sustenance to act and live. Augustine asserts a more palpable presence to God in mortality and a resulting freedom from earthly concerns which is not manifest in Teresa's experience.

As mentioned above, the romance reveals a poignant longing for archaic periods (whether mythical or real), while simultaneously recognizing implicitly the impossibility of accessing them, thus producing within the text an escapist-like nostalgia as well as mourning provoked by the tacit recognition of the sought-after ideal as irretrievably, irrevocably lost. Although Teresa does not figure her autobiography as if in a previous era, she laces the text with the effects of being at a distance from a former, longed-for time. She manifests this acute longing in terms of a desire for *the* lost epoch, indeed, the only period not tainted by its future fall: the prelapsarian paradise of the garden of Eden where God and man communed daily, not yet separated by the chasms of death and sin.<sup>11</sup> Sin, and the erring it causes, stands as an impassable boundary between Teresa's intense longing and the presence of her Lord. As she states, "¿Cuándo, mi Dios, ha de estar ya toda junta mi alma en vuestra alabanza y no hecha pedazos, sin poder valerse a sí? Aquí veo el mal que nos causa el pecado, pues así nos sujetó a no hacer lo que queremos de estar siempre ocupados en Dios" (*Vida* 243) ("O my God, when can my soul be entirely united in Your praise, instead of being distracted and unable to control itself? Now I understand the harm done to us by sin, which has so bound us that we cannot do as we desire, and occupy ourselves always with God"; *Life* 119). Thus, due to the conditions imposed by the fall of the ideal after which she seeks, Teresa remains at a remove from the Promised Land, her own mortality, her own erring through the dark wood, to blame for the imposed distance.

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<sup>11</sup> This period would have special appeal to women, who, in the wake of the Fall, have shouldered the cultural blame and the weakness of the primal, damning desire. Medieval and Early Modern conceptions of female spiritual capacity regularly warned of the continued presence of this inborn flaw.

This longing for reunion and proximity with God lies at the emotional and spiritual core of mysticism. As Pierre Miquel relates, “[La mystique est un] quête de l’infini, nostalgie consciente ou inconsciente d’un paradis perdu, jouissance qui nargue la mort” (143) (“[Mysticism is] a quest for the infinite, a conscious or unconscious yearning for a lost paradise, an ecstatic bliss (*jouissance*) that scoffs at death”; my translation). Given the impossibility of regaining this paradise of unspoiled bliss, Teresa mourns its loss, lamenting her mortal state (even her life), all while persisting in her attempts to ascend to and possess God. Such is the inevitable quest of mortality, erring and doing deeds to win Christ’s love while the reward (consummation) remains afar off, impossible to reach under the confines of corporeality. Speaking of this deferral of reward in terms of all men, Teresa states, “[Ellos necesitan ser] como buenos caballeros que sin sueldo quieren servir a su rey, pues le tienen bien seguro. Los ojos en el verdadero y perpetuo reino que pretendemos ganar“ (*Vida* 230) (“They must be like good soldiers [knights], willing to serve their King without present pay because they are sure of their final reward. They must keep their eyes fixed on the true and everlasting kingdom which we are striving to attain”; *Life* 109). Thus, like a knight operating under the ideal of courtly love, Teresa and all who seek God must serve and perform deeds to honor Him and gain His love without expecting the reward of consummation, or even a glimpse of His lily-white hand.

#### VIII. The Divine Lover

It is this posturing of God as the Divine Beloved (Adam to her Eve) that opens up Teresa’s text fully to the world of romance. Throughout her writings, Teresa posits Christ as her earthly, physical lover (groom/husband) in an analogy of spiritual intimacy

and union that utilizes the language of romantic, sexual love<sup>12</sup>, a phenomena that has been richly explored by many critics and emphasized in popular culture. In her *Vida*, she explicitly defines union as “dos cosas divididas [que se hacen] una” (*Vida* 248) (“two separate things becom[ing] one”; *Life* 123). Such an unambiguous description reveals how she attempts to articulate the all-encompassing and possessing intimacy of spiritual union in terms of the most intimate expression of human union known to mortals: the literal merging of two physical bodies into a single entity. Christ’s loving embraces as described by Teresa amplify the sexual notion of the lover dwelling simultaneously internally and externally as Christ outwardly embraces (and overwhelms) as well as inwardly dwells within the mystic’s body and soul, a literal baptism in the lover’s presence.

Perhaps the most overt and famous example of the sexual nature of Teresa’s relationship with God (specifically, symbolic phallic penetration) comes from chapter twenty-nine of Teresa’s *Vida* in an episode in which an angel aflame with the love of God appears to Teresa in a vision and repeatedly pierces her heart with a flame and iron-tipped, golden arrow. The incident is fraught with the love/death paradox often associated with sex during the Middle Ages and Early Modern Period: excruciating pain coupled with an ineffable joy, penetration as the fatal wound.<sup>13</sup> She relates, “Al sacarle me parecía las llevaba consigo, y me dejaba toda abrasada en amor grande de Dios. Era tan grande el dolor que me hacía dar aquellos quejidos, y tan ecesiva la suavidad que me

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<sup>12</sup> As noted in the introduction, Teresa is not the first to articulate her relationship in this way. She is following a long tradition of Jewish and Christian rhetoric to this effect.

<sup>13</sup> It was thought in the medieval period that every time a person had sex, they lost a certain number of years off of their mortal life.

pone este grandísimo dolor, que no hay desear que se quite, ni se contenta el alma con menos que Dios” (*Vida* 353) (“When he pulled it out, I felt that he took them [her entrails] with it, and left me utterly consumed by the great love of God. The pain was so severe that it made me utter several moans. The sweetness caused by this intense pain was so extreme that one cannot possibly wish it to cease, nor is one’s soul then content with anything but God”; *Life* 210). Here, Teresa clearly appropriates the language of sexual union to articulate her encounter with the heavenly angel who penetrates, purifies and kills her with the love of God as represented by a flaming arrow (an apt representation of the inciting of her insatiable, burning desire as well as an obvious phallic symbol). Her description of the moaning incited by such wounding sweetness and the repetitive piercing of her entrails to the deepest part could hardly communicate more explicitly the sexual nature of her encounter. In Bernini’s depiction of the event, he captures the moment just following the arrow’s piercing, the rapturous apogee of her ecstasy (see Figure 1). Teresa lies prone, in a swoon, her limbs limp and heavy as if lifeless, a visual literalization of the metaphor of love/death. The idea of love/death and its implications for mortality will become important later on.

Additionally, articulating spiritual union in terms of the sexual draws the spiritual ideal of the western tradition down from its lofty, metaphysical heights to reveal the parallels and commonalities shared between the experiences of spiritual and corporeal love in mortality. As Mazzoni observes, “The common discourse of religion and sex defines both of them as essentially mystical as desiring an object (be it the propagation of the species or attainment of the absolute ideal) that is essentially beyond the self” (41).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Religion and sex share this characteristic with romance as well.

Thus, the two acts (spiritual and sexual union) share a mutual concern with the possession of love objects located outside of the self, as well as a desire to blur the boundaries of self to unite completely with these external love objects, perhaps suggesting a spiritual aspect to the physical act.

In essence, the spiritual lover moves through the language of bodily union (and the experience and sensations of the body) to articulate the experience of the spiritual, thus conflating mortal and immortal desire, inevitably revealing a parallel between the very nature of desire felt between the mystic and God, and between mortal lovers. Such a phenomenon does not originate with Teresa, but rather follows a long tradition of theological discourse that expresses erotic love for God in an attempt to convey the most divine experience of immortal possession.<sup>15</sup>

#### IX. The Divine Lady

In romances, knights often employ the language of religion to describe the redemptive nature of their heroines' love, ascribing to it a literal power of salvation. Given the implicit claim that a source other than God could act as a means of deliverance, Barbara Fuchs says, "[The romance genre's] version of love as sacred pursuit is inherently sacrilegious" (44). In Teresa's divine romance, she figures God not only as her lover, but also as the idyllic lady in an act of gender reversal meant to capture and

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<sup>15</sup> See *The Songs of Songs* in which Solomon beseeches, "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love is better than wine ... the king hath brought me into his chambers: we will be glad and rejoice in thee, we will remember thy love more than wine.... His left hand is under my head, and his right hand doth embrace me.... By night on my bed I sought him whom my soul loveth..." *The Songs of Songs* becomes an influential religious text—one that demonstrates the long association and frequent conflation of eroticism and mysticism. For a further discussion, see Anne Matter's *The Voice of My Beloved*.

articulate the core essence of her experience as questing towards another being whose love is redemptive. Although she never refers to God in the feminine, Teresa implicitly feminizes God by placing Him in the position of sought-after object, an archetypal position reserved for the female gender. With God postured as perfected lady, Teresa literalizes and takes to its sacred, and logical conclusion this idea of the lady's salvific love. God, through His sacrifice, through His love that redeems, becomes the ideal lady of the ideal romance, the only source of spiritual and temporal salvation for the languishing knights (sinners) who seek Him.

Casting God as the ideal lady, although consummately appropriate, again reveals as fallacious the notion of a Deity whose love is attainable in this life, as the romance constantly defers the complete and everlasting consummation of its heroes' loves. The knight (Teresa) offers the lady (Christ) her eternal service, willing to work without reward or hope of consummation or reciprocity. In its ideal form such love is bodiless, although, as in courtly love, the desire for unimpeachable consummation and tangible possession of the body of the Other hides only slightly veiled under the skin of the text.<sup>16</sup> Although God grants brief moments of union to Teresa, the instances are short-lived, wounded by the anticipation of their cessation, and followed by the withdrawal of God's

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<sup>16</sup> Here I can not help but think of Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptameron* and the way she unveils the idealism of courtly love in her story of Florida and Amador, Story 10, Day 1. Amador claims to love the Lady Florida without physical desire or ulterior motive, wishing only to serve and adore her from a distance. As he says, "I am not one of those men who hope that if they serve their lady long enough they will be rewarded with her dishonour. Such intentions could not be further from my heart, for I would rather see you dead than have to admit that my own gratification had sullied your virtue, had, in a word, made you less worthy to be loved. I ask but one thing in recompense of my devotion and my service. I ask only that you might be my true and faithful Lady" (131). By the end of the tale, however, he has gone mad, become deceptive, and attempted to rape her several times.

presence, in the silent space of which Teresa must enduringly quest onward. Teresa must return to her erring, *because* of her erring (sinning), just as the Redcrosse knight in Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* must leave Una after their marriage to continue questing *because* he is a knight and because no mortal can enjoy permanent union with truth (Una) in this life. As Lenz relates, "The romance hero customarily comes up against someone or something other from himself that almost always refers back to himself" (*x*). Thus, whatever obstacles Teresa confronts, and however external they may appear, they ultimately refer back to one internal issue: her state as an imperfect mortal who will inevitably sin and thus alienate God.

Although mortality seems to be the culprit for the impossibility of consummation, it is God who leaves Teresa rather than vice versa. It thus appears as if God willfully removes himself, despite his ability to remain (although perhaps his absence merely mirrors her own mortality). Reflecting this frustration and a feeling of abandonment, Teresa renders Christ the merciful and yet unmerciful (in terms of the tantalizing presence of his absence) *belle dame*, a lover like unto Ariosto's fickle Angelica, who magically renders herself invisible with an enchanted ring to the utter consternation and confusion of her pursuing lovers. The fear of such separation and abandonment laces Teresa's text. At one point she states that, "[el alma] no osa bullirse ni menearse que de entre las manos le parece se le ha de ir aquel bien; ni resolgar algunas veces no querría" (*Vida* 224) ("[the soul] dares not move or stir, for fear that this blessing [God's presence] may slip through its fingers; sometimes it is afraid even to breathe"; *Life* 104). Such paralyzing fear ultimately reveals, yet again, the brief moments of union as fraught with the awareness of their impending cessation, a self-awareness that taints even the most

ecstatic of raptures. Immortal love shares with mortal loves the fear of cessation, a certain helplessness to maintain proximity. As Miquel relates:

Dans l'érotisme, l'expérience s'accompagne d'une certaine insatisfaction due à la précarité et à l'exigence d'une répétition. Le mystique sait ... que son expérience, si limitée qu'elle soit, lui ouvre un champ immense où l'initiative ne lui appartient pas, il ne peut provoquer ce à quoi il aspire: Dieu seul peut combler son désir. (Pierre 147)

In eroticism [both physical and mystical], the experience is accompanied by a certain lack of satisfaction due to the precariousness of and the demand for a repetition. The mystic knows ... that his experience, as limited as it is, opens to him an immense field where the initiative does not belong to him; he cannot provoke that to which he aspires: God alone can satisfy his desire. (my translation)

Thus, as the ideal lady, Christ represents a perfect version of redemptive love while still remaining, like many women in romances, at a remove from the knight's outstretched fingers. The distance between the knight's desire and its consummation only heightens its effects.

#### X. The Presence of Absence

In the wake of the divine encounter, in the quietness following the rapture, Teresa must grapple with the sudden absence or deferral of the presence of God. Mystics often

articulate this phenomenon in their texts as the palpable presence of absence, a lack felt so keenly it is tangible. As McIntosh states<sup>17</sup>:

Mystical texts often evoke the presence of God precisely by the virtuoso excess of their rhetoric of God's *absence*: such texts are (like the continually self-giving life of Jesus) always straining, undoing themselves, in the attempt to express their 'object.' But since that 'object' is really infinite, such a mystical text is 'never anything but the unstable metaphor for what is inaccessible. Every 'object' of mystical discourse becomes inverted into the trace of an ever-passing Subject.' (109)

Thus, despite mystics' copious descriptions of union with God, their experiences inevitably stress the absolute impossibility of accessing and permanently possessing the Divine. Consequently, when approaching interactions between humanity and God, we must discard the traditional model of sublimated, transcendent Divine *eros* inherited from the history of our culture in favor of the conflicted, mourning-fraught model of mortal *eros*. In the wake of divine ecstasy, Teresa's descriptions reveal the inevitably transitory nature of union with God in mortality and the profound suffering and mourning produced by experiencing the impossibility of keeping the elusive Beloved ever-present, the state of constantly embracing shadows of presence.

## XI. The Interior Bower of Bliss

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<sup>17</sup>This passage also partially quotes a statement made by Michel de Certeau in his *The Mystic Fable*, vol. 1, *The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 1992), 77.

In an attempt to sidestep the implications of this palpable absence, this lost paradise, and perhaps even in hopes of preventing it, of “containing” God, Teresa endeavors to rebuild a space, a “garden” within her soul, away from all prying eyes, out of reach of the strictures of a domineering patriarchy that sought to control and circumscribe female religious experience, a garden wherein the conditions of Eden could be recreated, in other words, where she could intimately enjoy direct communication and immediate proximity and union with God. No literal “king’s chamber” or “garden enclosed” or spiritual “cave of lovers” exist for her to enter, and such physical locales would prove inadequate given the metaphorical nature of the union. In response to these constraints, Teresa’s body and soul becomes the bower of bliss, the haven in the wilderness of mortality, “un huerto en tierra muy infrutuosa . . . para que se deleite el Señor” (*Vida* 193) (“a garden for [her] Lord’s pleasure”; *Life* 78), where the ephemeral presence of the divine lover may enter for fleeting moments of bliss. Here God becomes the forceful lover who violently inserts himself into Teresa’s garden, taking His pleasure when and where He wills. Here Teresa functions as an unorganized space, a dunghill that becomes organized, cultivated, and tamed by the presence of God who makes the flowers of the soul to bloom and spread their intoxicating fragrance.

Locating the garden within the interior of herself highlights the complicated nature of joining together with God in mortality as Teresa can only create the place for union in some abstract metaphysical sphere or some equally abstract interior realm of the soul where God may penetrate the boundaries between mortality and immortality in fleeting moments. The soul acts as the crossroads for the divine and the mortal, the circle in the square.

This sense of interiority is vital to the essence of the experience of union and its hoped for effects. Ahlgren describes the necessity for the location of this space in the interior realms by stating that, “Mystical union is then a ‘breaking through’ of fragmented visions of God to an actual living in the Trinity. The knowledge of God experienced in mystical union is an experiential [embodied] epistemology, in which God is a reality lived within oneself, not an Otherness perceived from the outside” (86). Thus, through union in this interior place, the experience of God, previously exterior and fragmented becomes interior and whole, a paradox of simultaneously dwelling within God, and God dwelling within the seeking soul. Metaphors of union strive towards the reality of such consuming, all-encompassing, divine possession; interiority so filling it brims and spills out to the exterior, overpowering the body and senses of the mystic.

In *Las moradas*, Teresa constructs this space for the internal dwelling of the Otherness of God in terms of an interior castle that has seven different levels described as concentric circles, with the innermost enticing the seeker as the place for the soul’s ultimate (and inevitably temporary) spiritual marriage with God. The creation of the soul as a castle resonates with the landscape of medieval romances, whose narratives generally revolved around the castles and courts of various kingdoms. Such a construction also emphasizes the idea of attempting to enclose and contain God within a delimited space. The 7<sup>th</sup> level of interiority within the soul’s castle seems a labyrinthine place, enclosed by layers and layers of heavy stone. This interior model carves out a space wherein the self can disappear in the love embraces of the Divine, a space into which no earthly authority may pry. Michel de Certeau articulates this notion (and the

accompanying paradoxes) of the intra-[person]al ‘bower of bliss’ the interior castle becomes for God and the soul, when he states:

The models of the celestial Jerusalem, ... of ‘paradise,’ ... and of ‘Heaven’ ... become miniaturized and combined in a translucent gem where ‘He takes His delights.’ Such is the ‘soul of the just.’ ... It is a strict delimitation of a space one must ‘enter when one is in it already,’ a place where one dwells without dwelling there—and whose center is also exteriority (God). The coinciding of these opposites organizes the entire discursive formation devoted to the ‘interior castle’ where, as Carmelite addressees are told, despite ‘how strictly cloistered you are,’ ‘you will take your delight’ (*deleitáros*), ‘for you can enter it and walk about in it at any time without asking leave from your superiors.’ (95)

The private “space” of the interior soul allows the mystic’s relationship with God to remain wholly personal and unmediated, a necessary and potentially dangerous aspect of the mystical relationship given the intense scrutiny and skepticism of female experiences with the Divine during the Inquisition period in Spain.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> During this time, the Inquisition condemned many female mystics as heretics for their unmediated, personal relationships with God. Many of them admitted to falling prey to the cunning seductions of the Devil, like Magdalena de la Cruz who confessed before the Inquisition that she had made a pact with a demon at age twelve, which demon also gave her a black man who invited her to engage in carnal sin (Ahlgren 21). Society viewed women as particularly prone to these kinds of deceptions. As expressed in a work of the period, “En ellas no es tan fuerte la razón como en los varones, que con la razón que en ellos es mayor, refrenan las pasiones de la carne; pero las mujeres más son carne que espíritu; e, por ende, son más inclinadas a ellas que al espíritu.” [“Reason is not so strong in them as in men, and with their greater reason men keep carnal passions in check; but women are more flesh than spirit, and therefore are more inclined to the passions than to the spirit”] Martín de Córbona *Tratado que se intitula Jardín de las nobles donzellas*, ed. Fernando Rubio (Madrid, 1946), p. 91. Thus, the Inquisition feared

Many nuns and mystics both feared and yearned for a secluded space in which to enjoy the love embraces of God, a safe place free of the constant and pervasive fear of heresy and diabolic deception. Teresa herself constantly sought reassurance directly from God, from her superiors, as well as from vigilant analysis of her visions that the Devil held no sway over her soul or her senses. Much of her discourse focuses on specific ways to discern the source of spiritual revelations (which she does by contrasting her sacred experiences with those recognizably originating with the devil in episodes where demons literally attack her), an articulated and meticulous method meant to lead the seeking soul safely into the interior garden of the soul. The Inquisition submitted Teresa to its scrutiny several times during her lifetime. Although never officially convicted, her preoccupation with that possibility bleeds through the entirety of her text. She clearly states that if she believed herself guilty of significant spiritual deviancy, she would turn herself into the Inquisition of her own free will and throw her books into the flames with her own hands. Although Teresa desired a private relationship with God, she had no desires to undermine the Church or advocate doctrine contrary to its teachings.<sup>18</sup>

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female corporeality and its spiritual transgressions, in their private relationships with God.

In addition to being weak and prone to personal deception, women who engaged in personal religious exercise were also in danger of being associated with a group called the *alumbrados*. This group had become deceived through interior prayer. Acceptable prayer practice was increasingly becoming associated only with vocal prayer. (See also Allison Weber's first chapter).

<sup>18</sup> Although Teresa insisted upon remaining in the good graces of the Holy Mother Church and never questioned the authority of the priesthood, she was frustrated with the lack of literature available to those seeking spiritual guidance. The Valdés Index had strictly prohibited the majority of the mystical treatises. As Ahlgren states:

The Valdés Index of Prohibited Books was not merely a list of books prohibited to the public; it was an edict intended to limit the scope of religious speculation and to define religious faith and practice very

Although the language of the union still remains in the realm of the body, even increasingly so as the soul moves towards the center, placing union with God in the interior paradoxically moves the encounter away from the dangers of exteriority and the affecting impressions and potential deceptions of the sense-ridden body. The privacy of the experience, however, still remained dangerous in the inability of confessors and priests to mediate it (which situation the authorities often combated by having the nuns write down their experiences, much like *Libro de la vida*.) Regardless, although both de Certeau and Teresa claim that one may enter this interior space of the soul at any point, given the proper spiritual preparation, in reality, the Beloved may or may not be present there; delight may or may not be there for the taking.

## XII. [Rape]ture

In Teresa's descriptions of her experiences with God, one immediately notes the force with which God imposes His presence upon her and that it is He who comes to her, not vice versa. Here again we see a gender reversal in which God becomes the virile aggressor and Teresa the submissive woman taken in a thrall. This reversal

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narrowly as the province of an educated elite whose task was not speculation but transmission of dogma.... For women the indexes of prohibited books posed special problems of literacy and lexicon. Because most women did not read Latin, the Valdes Index systematically denied them the texts and vocabulary they needed to describe their religious experience in orthodox terms. Thus it was difficult for them to challenge confessors who gave them poor spiritual counsel and to avoid pitfalls in any sort of religious discourse, particularly when they sought to describe mystical experience.... Religious women, increasingly pressured by their confessors into experiential exegesis, scrambled to find a vocabulary that would separate them from innovators and establish them within orthodox circles. (17-20)

Although Teresa claimed that she would be the first to censor her books if they proved heretical, more than once she used her powers of persuasion to prevent such measures. She wanted the women of her convents to have the spiritual guidance and vocabulary necessary to both correctly seek mystical experiences and articulate them.

emphasizes a different aspect of her relationship with God: her complete inability to control their encounters (in terms of either instigating or ending them). This role as submissive receiver culturally fits that of the passive feminine. Significantly, the root of the word *rapture* derives from the idea of rape (which now has sexual implications), or being carried away. In one definition of *rapture*, the OED calls it, “The act of carrying away, or fact of being carried, onwards; force of movement.” In Teresa’s experience, God enacts this spiritually violent, ecstatic rapture as He assumes the masculine role of ravisher. The undertones of sexual force in this spiritual ravishing augment His role as her divine lover.

While overcome by visions, Teresa, powerlessly enthralled by a supernatural force, literalizes the archetype of a maiden in distress. She says in the *Vida*, “Está en otro poder toda, ... no me parece la deja el Señor para nada libertad (310). (“[In these visions] the soul is wholly under Another’s power, and during this very brief period the Lord does not seem to leave it free for any experience whatever”; *Life* 176). She later adds, “La hemos de mirar cuando el Señor la quiere representar y cómo quiere y lo que quiere; y no hay quitar ni poner, ni modo para ello aunque más hagamos, ni para verlo cuando queremos, ni para dejarlo de ver” (*Vida* 346). (“We have to look at them [the visions] when the Lord is pleased to show them to us—to look as He wishes and at what He wishes. We can neither add nor subtract anything, nor can we obtain a vision by any actions of our own. We cannot look at it or refrain from looking at it.... ;*Life* 205). Teresa’s words highlight the dominant, overwhelming control of God in His relationship to the seeking mystic, even to the point of loss of the individual’s freedom to either

summon or deny His presence, or exert any control over one's own body or mind while in His thralls.<sup>19</sup>

Occasionally these raptures came in the form of physical levitation, “un ímpetu tan acelerado y fuerte” (“a quick and violent shock”) that would lift her bodily off the ground, like an “águila caudalosa” (“powerful eagle rising”). As she feels it coming upon her, she describes the futility of resisting, stating, “[Necesitamos] ir adonde nos llevaren, de grado, pues os llevan aunque os pese. Y en tanto extremo, que muy muchas veces querría yo resistir, y pongo todas mis fuerzas, en especial algunas que es en público ... [pero es] como quien pelea contra un jayán fuerte quedaba después cansada” (*Vida* 264-65). (“We have to go willingly wherever we are carried, for in fact, we are being born off whether we like it or not. In this emergency very often I should like to resist, and I exert all of strength to do so, especially at such times as I am in a public place.... It has been like fighting a great giant, and has left me utterly exhausted”; *Life* 137). One time Teresa attempted to prevent herself from levitating due to the presence of many great ladies in the convent celebrating a feast day. She lay on the ground and told her nuns to hold her down, but the levitation took its course regardless, much to Teresa's embarrassment (see chapter twenty of the *Vida*). Such physical force, the levitation of a body against gravity and the pull of several comparable bodies, emphasizes the raw, assertive power of God

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<sup>19</sup> Another important aspect of this rape/rapture is the physical pain caused by this sudden paralysis of Teresa's body. As Miquel states, “le contact divin traumatise le corps” (144) (“the divine touch traumatizes the body”; my translation). Teresa reports the effects of the rapture when she says that, “Algunas veces se me quitan todos los pulsos casi ... y las canillas muy abiertas, y las manos tan yertas, que yo no las puedo algunas veces juntar; y así me queda dolor hasta otro día en los pulsos y en el cuerpo, que parece me han descoyuntado” (*Vida* 269). (“Sometimes my pulse almost ceases to beat at all.... My bones are all disjointed and my hands are so rigid that sometimes I cannot clasp them together. Even the next day I feel a pain in my wrists and over my whole body, as if my bones were still out of joint”; *Life* 140).

and the ways in which He both spiritually and physically ravishes Teresa as the male aggressor in her divine romance.

Given the arbitrary and unpredictable nature of His visitations, Teresa cannot stem the libidinal flow towards God as He constantly inserts Himself into her experience, preventing any kind of economizing of the self against the threat of loss, and thus, mourning. When He decides not to manifest Himself to her, she is denied any way of accessing Him as she describes in saying, “me dejó el Señor padecer, temiendo mil peligros” (*Vida* 316). (“Our Lord left me to suffer my fear of a thousand dangers”; *Life* 180). The absence of God not only leaves Teresa no confirmation of legitimate religious authority, but also causes her to fear spiritual death, as only God’s presence authenticates her spiritual life and state of progression. He thus arbitrarily visits and departs from her soul, leaving her in a state of hesitant suspension, devoid of her lover and in spiritual exile. She states:

Que ninguna cosa se puede, ni para ver menos ni más hace ni deshace nuestra diligencia.... Antes nos hace estar humildes y temerosos viendo que, como el Señor nos quita el poder para ver lo que queremos, nos puede quitar estas mercedes y la gracia, y quedar perdidos del todo, y que siempre andemos con miedo, mientras en este destierro vivimos. (*Vida* 347)

No effort of ours makes us see more or less, or calls up or dispels a vision ... on the contrary, it makes us humble and afraid, when we see that just as the Lord takes away our power of seeing what we will, so He can also remove these favours and His grace, with the result that we are utterly lost.

Let us always walk in fear therefore, so long as we are living in this exile.

(*Life* 206)

Consequently, although the “Platonic-Stoic-Christian [tradition] caution[s] that no object that may be lost is to be loved in an unreserved fashion—that only a limited or conditional libidinal flow toward such objects is to be allowed, such that the self remains ready and able to retract its substance from the object before the unmasterable violence of mourning might assail it” (Staten 10), experience reveals such expectations as untenable when approaching union with God, as He constantly leaves Teresa subject to the mourning caused by capricious absence.<sup>20</sup>

### XIII. Celestial Madness

When God leaves Teresa, the garden reverts to the wilderness of the soul, the space of the black knights of self-doubt and sin. As Teresa articulates, “Que estando en mí sin Vos, no podría, Señor mío, nada, sino tornar a ser cortadas estas flores de este huerto, de serte que esta miserable tierra tornase a servir de muladar, como antes” (*Vida* 223). (“For so long as I am in myself without You, Lord, and am like the cut flowers of the garden, I can do nothing, and this wretched soil is once more the dunghill that it was before”; *Life* 102). Teresa thus reveals the possession of God’s love to be mutable, as all earthly happiness is mutable, as she is mutable. Concerning this mutability she asserts:

Porque los de acá, por maravilla me parece entendemos adonde está este  
contento, porque nunca falta un «si-no»; aquí todo es «sí» en aquel

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<sup>20</sup> Such mourning is similar to what Staten observes in the experience of Christ’s disciples, who were commanded to love Christ (both God and man) without reserve. Christ’s crucifixion caught the disciples in the unmasterable violence of mourning as they were unprepared for his sudden absence, despite Christ’s warnings. The disciples’ experience of the materiality of Christ resonates with mystics’ experience of Christ through corporeal (as well as spiritual) means.

tiempos; el «no» viene después, por ver que se acabó y que no lo puede tornar a cobrar, ni sabe cómo; porque si se hace pedaxos a penitencias y oración y todas las demás cosas, si el Señor no lo quiere dar, aprovecha poco. (*Vida* 219)

Those of us who are on earth, it seem to me, rarely understand where this satisfaction lies. It is always up and down. First we have it, then it leaves us, and we find that it has all gone and that we cannot get it back, since we have no idea how to do so. Even if we wear ourselves to shreds with penance and prayer and other austerities, it is of little use unless the Lord is pleased to grant us that joy again. (*Life* 99)

In this reverted wilderness a “celestial locura” (*Vida* 234) (“heavenly madness”; *Life* 112) seizes Teresa’s soul; she transforms into the uncivilized madman like Orlando in his fury, the unorganized dung-heap, metaphorically lost and wandering through the forests of the soul. She describes this state in the following terms:

Ni entonces sabe el alma qué hacer; porque ni sabe si hable, ni si calle, ni si ría, ni si llore. Es un glorioso desatino, una celestial locura, adonde se deprende la verdadera sabiduría, y es deleitosísima manera de gozar el alma.... Querría ya esta alma verse libre: el comer la mata, el dormir la congoja; ve que se la pasa el tiempo de la vida pasar en regalo y que nada ya la puede regalar fuera de Vos; que parece vive contra natura, pues ya no querría vivir en sí, sino en Vos. (*Vida* 234-37)

The soul does not know what to do; it cannot tell whether to speak or to be silent, whether to laugh or weep. It is a glorious bewilderment, a heavenly

madness, in which true wisdom is acquired, and to the soul a fulfillment most full of delight.... This soul longs to be free. Eating is killing it, sleep brings it anguish. It sees itself wasting the hours of this life in comforts, though nothing can comfort it now but You. It seems to be living unnaturally, since now its desire is to live not in itself but in You. (*Life* 112-14)

Through this madness God becomes the poison and the cure, the *pharmakon*<sup>21</sup>, the source of debilitation, and the life force. Such oscillations between possession and absence, madness and union haunt the mystic, causing her to desire ultimately to end her sorrows by reuniting with God in death.

#### XIV. The Balm

Ironically, death, an effect of the Fall, becomes the only state in which the soul and humanity can (re)attain permanent union and reunion with God. The painful presence of absence and the ultimate impossibility of perfect possession of God thrusts Teresa into a state of mourning whose only balm is death—in whose dark halls resides the only eternal walled garden. In a moment of desire for death, Teresa relates:

Víame morir con el deseo de ver a Dios que no sabía adónde había de buscar esta vida, si no era con la muerte. Dábanme unos ímpetus grandes de este amor que, aunque no eran tan insufrideros como los que ya otra vez he dicho ni de tanto valor, yo no sabía qué me hacer; porque nada me satisfacía, no cabía en mí, sino que verdaderamente me parecía se me arrancaba el alma. (*Vida* 350)

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<sup>21</sup> See Jacques Derrida's *Plato's Pharmacy* from *Dissemination*, Trans. Barbara Johnson, University of Chicago Press, 1981.

I found myself dying of the desire to see God, and I knew no way of seeking that other life except through death. This love came to me in mighty impulses which, although less unbearable and less valuable than those that I have described before, robbed me of all power of action. Nothing gave me satisfaction, and I could not contain myself; I really felt as if my soul were being torn from me. (*Life* 208)

Thus, Teresa ultimately finds her very mortality, the root cause of her exile, to hinder her way. All earthly activities become a burden as her desire for the eternal consummation found in death overwhelms her.

This unreserved libidinal flow towards God causes acute mourning in Teresa to the extent that life becomes burdensome and her soul longs for death. The yearning for God becomes more poignant the more deeply she travels towards the center of her soul. She states, “Este estado [viene] con tan grandes ímpetus y deseo de ver a Dios [que] todo cansa, todo fatiga, todo atormenta; si no es con Dios u por Dios, no hay descanso que no canse, porque se ve ausente de su verdadero descanso” (*Vida* 321). (“[This state of love] comes with a great impulse and longing to see God.... Everything wearies and exhausts such a soul; everything torments it. If its rest is not in God, and does not come from God, it is mere restlessness, for it sees that its true rest is far away”; *Life* 184). At another time in her *Vida* she states, “¡ Oh artificio soberano de el Señor, qué industria tan delicada hacíades con vuestra esclava miserable! Ascondíadesos de mí y apretábademe con vuestro amor, con una muerte tan sabrosa que nunca el alma querría salir de ella” (350). (“O supreme cunning of the Lord, with what delicate skill did You work on Your miserable slave! You hid Yourself from me, and out of Your love You afflict me with so

delectable a death that my soul desired it to never cease”; *Life* 208). Thus, it appears God’s very purpose is to cause a consuming death-wish in His disciples, to incite a burning so fiery that they cannot wish it to cease and cannot wish it to continue. Life, as she said, becomes a torture, an impediment to future bliss.

Although Teresa claims that in the seventh level of her interior castle, the soul finds a desire to live, as well as rest from suffering in its permanent interior spiritual marriage with God, she does not convince us as she admits that occasionally the soul desires to throw off this mortal exile and enjoy, eternally, the loving embraces of God. Thus, we must conclude that her sentiments remain close to what she described in a soliloquy, in which she states:

¡Oh deleite mío, Señor de todo lo criado y Dios mío! ¿Hasta cuándo esperaré ver vuestra presencia? ¿Qué remedio dais a quien tan poco tiene en la tierra para tener algún descanso fuera de Vos? ¡Oh Vida larga!, ¡oh vida penosa!, ¡oh vida que no se vive!, ¡oh qué sola soledad!, ¡qué sin remedio! Pues, ¿cuándo, Señor, cuándo?, ¿hasta cuándo? ¿qué haré, Bien mío, qué haré? ¿Por ventura desearé no desearos? ... ¡Oh, muerte, muerte, no sé quién te teme, pues está en ti la vida! (*Exclamaciones* 3)

O my delight, Lord of all created things and my God! How long must I wait to see You? What remedy do you provide for one who finds so little on earth that might give some rest apart from You? O long life! O painful life! O life that is not lived! Oh, what lonely solitude; how incurable! Well, when, Lord, when? How long? What shall I do, my God, what

shall I do? Should I, perhaps, desire not to desire you? ... O death, death,  
I don't know who fears you, since life lies in you! (*Soliloquies* 448)

#### XV. The Space for Faith

It seems contradictory that a close relationship with God would result in a deep desire and longing for death, nay, even that God's purpose in the experiences He grants the seeking soul is to instill such a desire. Why instill a desire whose realization would alienate the Inciter, whose laws and commandments remain clear and unequivocal in regards to self-slaughter? Perhaps the desire for death coupled with the commandment to live opens up a space for faith, a paradigm under which mortals must move forward despite "seeing through the glass darkly." Abiding in this contradictory space, in which the mortal simultaneously hopes for and recognizes the impossibility of consummation ultimately purifies and proves her worthy of the final, justifying consummation found with God outside the text of this life.

As Teresa returns to her erring, to confronting her soul and its commixture with flesh in the dark woods of mortality, she must work *despite her desire*, with an eye towards all moments of union, all fleeting glimpses of the Divine, and finally to the ultimate union with God after death. Through the command to live she must find a way of being, a faithful state of becoming that requires her to fulfill God's desires for her during this period of mortal exile. Teresa moved through her desire for death to improve the space around her as she worked tirelessly the last twenty years of her life to reform the Carmelite order. She founded sixteen Discalced Carmelite convents and as many male cloisters, venturing out into the world to establish places of refuge for others, despite her desire for such refuge and seclusion herself. She wrote several books,

pushing them through the censorship of the Inquisition to provide specific guidelines for others questing through mortality, others seeking secret gardens of bliss with God. Living to sixty-seven years old she proved to be a knight worthy of slaying innumerable dragons, both those she found breathing fire inside of her, and those she confronted as she quested, despite knowledge that the reward of her Beloved Christ lay afar off, in a country of whose borders she could only dream.

#### XVI. Conclusion

Romance and the paradigms of desire structuring those texts indubitably influenced Teresa's writing. Through the lens of romantic archetypes and conventions, Teresa depicts a paradoxically merciful and unmerciful God for whom the soul yearns, and whom the soul must acknowledge as unattainable given the nature of mortality and the inability to regain the garden of bliss. This recognition taints the experience of the mystic, causing her to mourn and yearn for death, tantalizing her with her own impotency to apprehend and possess the Divine, leaving her confused in the wild, growing darkness of her once bright garden.

Chapter Three: A Knightly Queen and Presséd Gras—The Implications of Arthur as

Progenitor and Lover in Book I of Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*

Many scholars have disputed the generic status of Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, debating whether to categorize the text under the umbrella of epic<sup>22</sup>, spiritual allegory, romance, encomium, or some “generic mutt” containing elements of them all. Although convincing arguments exist for all of these categorizations, Spenser himself states at the beginning of his poem that “Lo I the man, whose Muse whilome did maske, / As time her taught, in lowly Shepherds weeds, / Am now enforst a far unfitter taske, / For trumpets sterne to chaunge mine Oaten reeds, / And sing of Kings and Ladies gentle deeds” (x). Thus, by Spenser's own admission, in *The Faerie Queene* he has relinquished the less sophisticated (according to Renaissance standards) genre of pastoral poetry (the oaten reeds) in favor of the romance<sup>23</sup> genre that sings of “Kings and Ladies gentle deeds.”

During the Renaissance, intellectuals considered epic as the highest poetical form (based upon the Augustan-inspired tale of nationhood, *The Aeneid*). Given the societal associations of romance in the Elizabethan period with frivolous women and other-worldly concerns, Spenser may have felt some reluctance to label his poem as such

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<sup>22</sup> Robin Wells develops a convincing argument in favor of epic based on the ways in which Spenser models himself after Virgil, whose *Aeneid* stands as the epitome of an epic text—the narrative of the establishment of empire to the glorification of Augustus. Spenser hoped to become a kind of new Virgil, the national poet of England positioned to sing the praises of Elizabeth I and her New Jerusalem.

<sup>23</sup> Some argue that the reference to trumpets made in this passage indicates the genre of epic rather than romance. Additionally, the whole declaration may mimic Virgil, as early Renaissance editions of *The Aeneid* included lines (no longer considered genuine) stating Virgil's generic progression from pastoral (in *The Georgics*) to epic.

publicly, preferring instead to associate his text with the manly genres of epic and allegory. And yet, despite their protests, serious male Renaissance authors constantly used the genre to high and mighty purposes. As Newcomb declares:

Why, if men insisted that romance was idle, was it relied on to furnish so many kinds of profit to both men and women? Throughout the English Renaissance, male writers and readers used the genre to treat war and love, to test questions of politics, class, nation, gender, and representation. For all their dismissal of romance to women, men led the way to articulating the unique value of its capaciousness and indirection—a value that women readers and writers also tapped. Men’s deep commitment to the genre’s profits required their belated acceptance of its pleasures. (131)

Indeed, it is romance’s capaciousness for a variety of modes, themes and interests and its oft-times frustrating indirection that renders it indispensable to Spenser’s poetical project.

Spenser openly stated that he hoped to outdo both Tasso and Ariosto, which he visually signifies by elongating his stanzas one line past theirs. Most sixteenth-century critics considered Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso* to be a romance, of which fact Spenser would have been fully aware. Thus, perhaps Spenser hoped to “outdo” these two poets by merging Tasso’s epic concerns into Ariosto’s romantic mode to produce a poem unlike any other.<sup>24</sup> As King argues, “Spenser’s masterpiece is arguably the most complex experimentation with romance in English. The status of the text as a romance is not arbitrary, but essential” (147). The “complex experimentation” lies in Spenser’s

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<sup>24</sup> Lodovico Ariosto (1474-1533) published his romance *Orlando Furioso* in 1532, while Torquato Tasso (1544-95) published his romance *Rinaldo* in 1562 and his epic *Gerusalemme Liberata* in 1581.

ability to refashion the epic (political) and spiritual concerns of his day into a fantastical romance peopled by mythical figures, fairies, hell-born dragons, giants, and magical powers that tap into the divine.

As a genre, romance's capaciousness is due primarily to its core characteristic of structuring itself around the fulfillment of individualized desires, as opposed to epic, which ritually sacrifices the protagonist's desires on the altar of empire.<sup>25</sup> Thus, Aeneas abandons his personal desire with the love-sick Dido in Carthage in response to the higher call of establishing Rome, the glory of which he will never personally partake. In opposition to epic, Spenser utilizes the genre of romance to process, arrange, and represent his individualized desires (as embodied in his characters), which center around pleasing, praising, and subtly advising his monarch, Queen Elizabeth I. Given that Elizabeth represents a multitude of ideals, i.e. the immortal Virgin Queen, spiritual and political head of the apocalyptic New Jerusalem, Marian-like mediator, real world economic salvation, etc. traditionally treated in separate genres (epic, spiritual allegory, encomium, etc.), the romance collapses the concerns of these various ideals into a single matrix by means of symbolically layering them within the characters representing Elizabeth who are then figured as the prime objects of desire to be sought within the text of the poem. Spenser thus unites his desires for certain outcomes in matters of state, for economic success at the hand of the magnanimous abundance of his monarch, for the establishment of Elizabeth as the divine and holy harbinger of the millennial New Jerusalem, and others through embodying all of these layers in the person of the Faerie Queene, the politicized, economized, spiritualized ideal lady of our knights' questing.

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<sup>25</sup> I must note that things become more complicated in Homer and Christian epic.

In addition, Romance uniquely allows for movement within and between created, imaginary worlds and the real world, between past and future, history and myth, etc. Such flexibility proffers infinite possibilities to the author like Spenser who has a multitude of potentially conflicting, layered messages he hopes to communicate. As a humanist advisor, Spenser both critiques Elizabeth and instructs her, a potentially dangerous project given Spenser's vulnerable social and economic situation; however, the temporal ambiguity of romance provides him the necessary buffers, allowing him to place his narrative in the imaginary, and yet socially and politically pertinent, *Faerie lond*. As Saunders states, "Romance is thus both escapist and socially pertinent, looking backwards and forwards" (3). Spenser plays this ambiguity to his advantage. In light of Spenser's deep concern with the political choices and state of Elizabethan England at the time of his writing, this chapter will focus on how Spenser uses the vehicle of romance to voice his political desires and commentary, to embody the issues of epic while maintaining the romantic content of endeavoring to please and questing to obtain the love of the *Faerie Queene*.

The roots of romance in the English court certainly lend themselves to political purposes. As Newcomb relates, "In the Caroline period, responding to what Annabel Patterson (1984) has called the 'royal romance' of Charles and Henrietta Maria, the genre acquired a central role, addressing politics in the guise of love. As Martin Butler puts it, 'romance and high politics are related activities; they share a vocabulary of 'courtship,' 'intrigue,' and 'service'" (132). This phenomenon of "politics in the guise of love" manifests itself prolifically in the court of Elizabeth, who constructed herself as a lover whom "suitors" must please to gain their desired end. As Norbrook states, "Elizabeth's

cult of courtly love actualized a metaphor that was always latent in monarchical systems of government: relations between individual and authority were not those of citizen and state but those of a subject, a dependent, to a single individual whose favour had to be ‘courted’” (117). Elizabeth took this monarchical metaphor to a literary extreme.

In order to provide her male peerage a context within which to submit themselves to a female sovereign while maintaining accepted gender boundaries and expectations as outlined in romance and courtly love, the Queen postured herself as the ideal lady whom her subjects must adore and court (Norbrook 110). Elizabeth compelled those who wished to gain favor in her sight to conduct themselves as loyal, unwavering suitors, filling their rhetoric with words of passionate love and overt flattery. Many were those who tasted Elizabeth’s wrath upon her discovering their extracurricular amatory exploits, which the structure of the court impelled them to keep absolutely secret, a practice which generally did them little good in the end. She, and only she, deserved to remain at the heart of their attention and love.<sup>26</sup> Thus, Spenser aptly utilizes the romance genre’s preoccupation with romantic love and desire to discuss Elizabethan political issues and machinations, a device especially suited to Elizabeth’s court due to her conscious decision to frame political relationships in an amatory mode.

One specific moment in the text relates a brief encounter between young Prince Arthur, a common character of romance (although unusual for being portrayed in his youth), and Gloriana, the Faerie Queene who represents Elizabeth I, ruler of the other-worldly kingdom of Faerie lond. Spenser first introduces Arthur as Una’s comforter as

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<sup>26</sup> One of these unfortunate souls was Sir Walter Raleigh, who played a key role in acquiring a pension for Edmund Spenser from the Queen. Upon discovering that he had secretly married one of her ladies-in-waiting, the Queen imprisoned him in the Tower of London, only to release him several years later.

she mourns the capture and imprisonment of Redcrosse by the giant, the “monstrous mass of earthly slime,” Orgoglio, and the evil seducer, Duessa. As a noble and gallant knight, Arthur immediately takes up arms and after a bloody battle, he defeats the ungodly giant, setting the enfeebled and emaciated Redcrosse free from the depths of the dark, stinking dungeon. Here, the yet-pagan Prince Arthur delivers Redcrosse not only as a temporal victor but also as a spiritual savior, figuring Christ as he destroys the lumbering giant with a divine light issuing from his shield (the proverbial shield of faith) and releases Redcrosse from the dungeon in an act mimicking Christ’s harrowing of Hell. Thus, prior to the interlude between Arthur and the Faerie Queene, the reader is already prepared for Arthur’s ability to represent several layers of meaning, to act as a figure of multiple generic concerns.

During the period of rest following the battle, Una questions Arthur concerning his quest, which he reveals as a untiring search for his elusive love, the Faerie Queene. As is typical of romance, this passionate love enters Arthur against his will, as a prick of the “avenging boy” (Cupid) who soon “curbd [Arthur’s] libertie.” As Arthur states, “No fort can be so strong, / Ne fleshly brest can arméd be so sound, / But will at last be wonne with battrie long, / Or unawares at disavantage found” (I. ix. 11). Thus, by no choice of his own, love assails him, reducing him to its bidding. Arthur then relates the inciting incident between him and his love, a “bower of bliss” encounter that ignites a desire within Arthur whose consummation is postponed, in true romance style, through the entirety of the text. In this particular narrative moment, Arthur represents Spenser’s individualized political desires, rather than his desires for the spiritual triumph of ignorance and sin in the fallen world as in the previous episode.

## XVII. The Encounter

In Book I, canto xi, Arthur recounts a dream or an event, he cannot distinguish which, wherein while sleeping upon a couch of verdant grass, a “royall Mayd” laid her dainty limbs by his side and bade him love her, ravishing his heart with words all through the night. When he awoke, his Queene was gone; “nought but pressed gras” remained “where she hadd lyen” (I.ix.15). In this palpable presence of his Queen’s absence, Arthur vows to seek the “divine face” of the elusive Faerie Queene in labor and suffering until he finds her.

Given the implied sexual nature of their encounter, Arthur’s quest represents one towards full consummation (as did Teresa’s), a union with his sprightly lover in a space other than that of dreams. Spenser makes clear in his *Letter to Raleigh* that the Faerie Queene spoken of in this incident refers directly to the person of Queen Elizabeth I, patron of, and subject of glorification in the poem. As he states, “In that Faery Queene I meane glory in my generall intention, but in my particular I conceive the most excellent and glorious person of our souveraine the Queene, and her kingdome in Faery land” (2). Implicit in this intimate exchange between a representation of Elizabeth I and the culturally loaded icon of a yet-to-be King Arthur, is the fact well known to the Elizabethan polity (which was also reinforced in Britomart’s Aeneas-like vision of her progeny in Book III) that the Tudor family claimed themselves as the last remaining descendents of King Arthur. Thus, Spenser employs the magical space of romance, as represented in the *selva oscura* of Faery land, to plumb the complicated implications of simultaneously representing Arthur and Elizabeth as both hereditary kin and potential lovers. Specifically, Spenser’s positing of Arthur as both progenitor and questing lover

of the Queen allows Spenser to glorify Elizabeth as the hereditary and cultural inheritor of the magnificence of King Arthur, to encourage her appropriation of Arthur as justification for imperialist policies, as well as to comment on Elizabeth's construction of power around her female body, and the foreboding issues of succession England would face on the event of Elizabeth's death.

#### XVIII. Arthur as Progenitor

In his *Letter to Raleigh*, Spenser highlights Arthur as the hero of his poem, suggesting that he is equal to the great epic heroes of Homer, Virgil, Ariosto, and Tasso (while yet remaining fixedly in the narrative of romance) as well as a perfect representation of the virtue of magnificence, "which vertue for that (according to Aristotle and the rest) it is the perfection of all the rest, and containeth in it them all" (2). Given the greatness of Arthur's mythic status by Spenser's time in sixteenth-century Elizabethan culture, he seems an inevitable choice for the central hero in a British romance laden with epic concerns. Spenser states:

I chose the historye of king Arthure, as most fitte for the excellency of his person, being made famous by many mens former workes, and also furthest from the daunger of envy, and suspition of present time.... I labour to pourtraict in Arthure, before he was king, the image of a brave knight, perfected in the twelve private morall vertures, as Aristotle hath devised. (1-2)

In addition to Arthur's embodiment of holistic magnificence and mythic stature, he is also an effective choice because Arthur's literal historical distance from the Elizabethan

period allowed Spenser to posit his narrative in the past while simultaneously commenting on salient political issues current to his day.

Thus, by his own admission, Spenser centers his poetic project on the person of Arthur in relation to the Faerie Queene. Interestingly, however, textual analysis of the 1590 edition of *The Faerie Queene* by scholars like Josephine Waters Bennett reveals that Spenser probably imposed Arthur's presence in the poem as an afterthought subsequent to his completion of the majority of the first three books, as evidenced by Arthur's underdevelopment as a character and his general scarcity (53). The reasons for this important late addition become clear through examining the ways in which the Tudors used the icon of Arthur starting with Henry VII until Arthur's height of popularity late in the Elizabethan period in maneuverings cementing Arthur as a politically loaded character still enmeshed in the mode of romance.

In 1485, Henry VII ascended to the throne of England as the first Tudor monarch. In order to establish his legitimacy and bolster his fledgling authority, Henry claimed to descend from the mythic Welsh King Arthur through a complicated genealogy running through Owen Tudor (Giamatti 58). By this time, the myth that Arthur would eventually return from his seclusion at Avalon to redeem his people had been sufficiently anglicized so that Arthur's Messianic return was stripped of its tribal specificity and rendered applicable to all people of the British Isles. Consequently, Arthur functioned as a particularly apt icon for an ascending King hoping to extend his power and influence over the entirety of Britain (Summers 53).

At his coronation, Henry flew banners imprinted with a red dragon, linking the icons of the red dragon of his progenitor, Cadwalader, with the dragon of Uther

Pendragon, Arthur's father (Millican 39). In a bold anticipatory move, on September 19, 1486, Henry VII named his first-born son Arthur in hopes that his son would embody the fulfillment of the prophecies concerning King Arthur's redemptive return and usher in a golden age during his reign. However, before Arthur could inherit the throne, he passed away at the age of sixteen in 1502 just months after his marriage to the Spanish princess Catherine of Aragon, thus stymieing his father's clever political move (Giamatti 58). This genealogical inheritance of Arthur's line through the Tudors, combined with their propagandistic iconic borrowings of Arthur as myth, established a viable connection between the British kings and the Tudor princes, imbuing the Tudors with substantial mythic power (Hume 145).

After the Tudors established their line, however, Arthur's popularity waned until the last two decades of Elizabeth's reign. During the intervening period, historians had begun to question the historicity of Arthur's more outlandish exploits (mostly as set forth in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia*), claiming most of the stories associated with the famous sixth-century Briton king as fantastical fables. Although belief in the existence of a great historical king named Arthur continued, by the time of Spenser, the popular imagination viewed Arthur more as an icon of important cultural potency as derived from previous authors and chivalric romances rather than as a strictly historical figure. Given that Elizabeth came to power as the last of the true line of the historic Arthur, the myths associated with the historic King developed as symbols ripe for appropriation when the time became opportune (Rovang 84). In the later successful years of Elizabeth's reign, the myth became important in cultivating a sense of golden-age accomplishment as well as in justifying an aggressive foreign policy through claims of supremacy over the British

Isles, as well as other countries (Bennett 68-69). According to legend, after driving the Saxons out, Arthur proceeded to conquer the British Isles (Ireland, Wales, Scotland), as well as Iceland, Greenland, Norway, and even Rome. Despite the fact that historians had found most of these claims to be fallacious, Elizabethan politics capitalized upon their pseudo-historicity to promote imperialist policy.

In 1577, Dr. John Dee, mathematician, court astrologer and advocate of a strong English navy, published his treatise entitled *General and Rare Memorials Pertayning to the Perfect Arte of Navigation*, in which he claimed that due to Arthur's ancient conquests, Elizabeth had claim over Norway, Iceland, the Faeroes, Ireland, Friesland, and most of the New World (including America and the Arctic). In subsequent meetings with the Queen, Dee provided Elizabeth with titles to those lands, to which gesture she responded with great enthusiasm and approbation (Summers 125; Bennett 70). Obviously, Elizabeth did not make such claims the foundational basis for the realm's foreign policy; however, this incident reveals the potential propagandistic power inherent in the myths of Arthur as well as the way the romance figure of Arthur began to lend himself and his native genre to the appropriation of political issues.

Both in *The Faerie Queene* and in his personal politics, Spenser advocated an aggressive stance in foreign policy, especially in dealing with the Netherlands and Ireland. By reaffirming Arthur as progenitor of Elizabeth, Spenser foreshadowed Arthur's dynastic fulfillment in Queen Elizabeth as the figure destined to unite the British Isles (as well as the entirety of Western Europe) under a single Protestant English monarch. Arthur became the symbolic energy driving history towards the advent of Elizabeth's reign (Cain 120). English society commonly believed that such unification

would usher in the Apocalypse and the attendant millennial reign of Christ. English efforts to ally the reformed Protestant nations against the Anti-Christ as embodied in Catholic countries (especially Spain) and all under their influence manifested their apocalyptic concerns (Norbrook 112).

Although most of the overt references to specific issues in foreign policy are related in the second three books of the 1596 edition of *The Faerie Queene* (especially V and VI), this may have more to do with Spenser's growing desperation and disillusionment with Elizabethan politics rather than a manifestation of his lack of interest in foreign relations in the first three books. The allegory of the last three books becomes increasingly transparent, as issues and events at court hide only slightly veiled in the narrative.

In the first three books, Spenser cleverly couches his political commentary within the religious narrative frame of Redcrosse's quest to destroy the dragon, which event had very specific apocalyptic references. John Hankins has claimed that Spenser based the entire structure for Book I of *The Faerie Queene* upon the Book of Revelations, laden as it is with representations of the dragon and Duessa sitting upon the back of a many-headed beast, among others. In the sixteenth-century, society viewed the second half of the Book of Revelations specifically as an allegory of the struggle between Protestant and Catholic forces (99), which concern had direct, relevance to foreign policy as Protestant countries attempted to realize the allegory by uniting and fighting against Catholic forces and influences. As related by Jan van der Noodt in *A Theatre for voluptuous Worldlings*, which Spenser translated at the early age of sixteen or seventeen:

The head of the Beast is wounded, in places where gods word is preached. As in *England, Fraunce, Scotland, Poland*, and else where, as euery one may wel perceiue, except he will needs be blinde. For it is euident to al men, that in most places, Bulls and Pardones of the Pope are little set by, hys power and might trodden vnder feete, hys name blotted out, his Purgatory, Masses, Pilgrimages, Idols, and other like trumperies, cried out vpon. If this be not a deadly wound on the head of the beast, I think it to haue none at all. If this be not a manifest token of his fall to come, there is none to be looked for. (qtd in Hume 93-94)

The English polity would have viewed any aggressive policies toward Catholic countries in foreign relations as direct assaults on the metaphoric Anti-Christ of popery (Wells 19). Consequently, when specific issues arose during Elizabeth's reign, Spenser strongly allied himself with the Leicester and Essex circle who importuned the Queen to take more strident action against the Catholic foes.

The struggle for the Netherlands during Elizabeth's reign brought this issue into focus. In the 1580's, a militant Calvinist faction that sought to establish a Protestant state in the Netherlands revolted against the Dutch monarch. The Earl of Leicester immediately sought support to aid the faction. Because Elizabeth considered it unnatural for a rebel faction to rise against a divinely ordained sovereign, she was quite reluctant to offer the rebels any aid. The situation grew increasingly desperate, however, and eventually Elizabeth's advisors persuaded her to intervene in 1585, sending Leicester and his troops over to aid the struggle. Three days later, Antwerp fell to the Spanish. Many blamed Leicester's incompetence and overweening pride for the failure, while others

claimed that if Elizabeth had acted with more alacrity, Antwerp might not have fallen to the Catholic enemy (Norbrook 119). Antwerp was never gained by the English, despite further efforts.

Given the abject failure of the Dutch campaign, when later attempts to establish an English Protestant presence in Ireland met with continual failure, Spenser advocated swift action, declaring the urgency of the issue in his 1595 critique entitled *View of the Present State of Ireland*. The Arthurian myth justified Elizabeth's right to rule over all of the British Isles; however, many complicated problems existed with Catholic Ireland, which had been reduced to a violent and desolate land plagued by famine, fire, and general wildness. Spenser felt very close to this specific problem since he had lived in Ireland since 1580 as secretary and aide to his patron Arthur Lord Grey. Under Lord Grey he witnessed some of the bloodiest campaigns in English history, which significantly influenced his desire for quick, decisive military action to the end that Ireland could be brought under English control within a year's time and subsequently governed by an English ruling class (Jenkins 131-32). Spenser felt that Elizabeth's inconsistent and indecisive policies towards the reformation of Ireland endangered the Protestant cause (Norbrook 127). Elizabeth never took decisive action, however, and in 1595 a rebellion erupted in Ulster under Tyrone, which eventually swept to Munster in 1598 destroying Spenser's house, Kilcomen. Spenser returned to London and died several weeks later in Greenwich (Norbrook 131). In Spenser's experience, Elizabeth ultimately failed to live up to her political, apocalyptic and mythic potential as heir to Arthur and his greatness.

Spenser's invocation of Arthur as central hero and progenitor in *The Faerie Queene* would have significantly complimented Queen Elizabeth, whom he sought to influence as well as glorify with the apocalyptic symbolism of Arthur. His late addition of the anglicized king manifests the cultural significance of Arthur at the time as well as confidence in Elizabeth's abilities to realize in her reign the teleological culmination of British destiny in defeating Catholic powers and establishing a peaceful rule fit for the establishment of God's kingdom on earth. That confidence was ultimately in vain as Elizabeth failed to take decisive action in her foreign policies. Spenser offers further critique and encouragement to the Queen through additionally positioning her as Arthur's lover.

#### XIX. Arthur as Lover

During Elizabeth's reign as Queen of England, she cultivated her power by paradoxically constructing her image in terms of both masculine power as well as feminine sexuality, the forbidden but desired female body. As a fitting example, she declared in her famous 1588 Tilbury speech made on the Eve of the defeat of the Spanish Armada, "I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too!" (qtd. in Norbrook 101). Elizabeth gave this speech androgynously dressed in knight's armor while sitting upon a horse, clearly demonstrating to her subjects her capacity to act with the bravery and martial bravado characteristically attributed to men, while yet remaining a woman. And yet, much of Elizabeth's power abroad and at home was structured around her "weak and feeble" female body, its potential fertility coupled with its total inaccessibility as chaste virgin.

Specifically, as previously mentioned, Elizabeth controlled the courtiers in her retinue through amatory manipulations, posturing herself as a beloved to whom her subjects were bound to show complete fidelity. To seek and curry her favor was to seek after her desirable person, to literally ‘court’ her. Under this structure Spenser himself sought to gain Elizabeth’s good graces, to love her as her suitor. His entire poetic project revolves around pleasing her, the poem itself acting as an emissary of his ‘love,’ flattering her by representing her as the desired and powerful Faerie Queene, the truthful Una, the beautiful Belphoebe, the knightly lady Britomart, and others, all while manipulating the text to bend her monarchical will to his and live up to what he perceived as the ideals embedded (signified) within her person (as political, spiritual, and economic icon).

In the greater world, Elizabeth’s balance between roles as desired female and King of England proved precarious. Abroad, Elizabeth used her desirability as a marriage partner to play countries off one another to prevent alliances between Catholic countries. Elizabeth’s role as woman, as beautiful *Virgin*, was essential to the power she wielded as Queen. For example, during the 1580s, Elizabeth seriously considered accepting the marriage offer of the son of Catherine de Médicis, the French Duke of Alençon (later Duke of Anjou), a man twenty years the Queen’s junior. The polity expressed grave concern over this Roman Catholic alliance, despite the expectation that such a political union with France would deal a blow to the powerful, Catholic Phillip of Spain who was poised to usurp more territory by becoming the King of Portugal as well. Much to her advisors’ frustration, and despite public declarations that she would make him her husband, public kisses on the mouth, lavish gifts of diamonds and other

“trinkets,” and her affectionately nicknaming him her “frog,” Elizabeth refused to make the final arrangements to marry Alençon, despite his unequivocal demonstrations of affection and publicly-expressed desire for the union.<sup>27</sup> She claimed such a union would endanger her life, that she would not long survive the ceremony, due to her peoples’ disapproval of the match. Although ample evidence exists suggesting that Elizabeth felt deep affection, perhaps even love, for her French “frog,” it appears as if she maintained his hope long enough to keep relations with France on a good footing while simultaneously keeping Spain on tenterhooks.

When John Stubbs, Puritan landowner from Norfolk, suggested in his pamphlet entitled, *The Discoverie of a gaping gulf whereinto England is like to be swallowed by another French marriage if the Lord forbid not the banes by letting her majestie see the sin and punishment thereof*, that Elizabeth ought not consider the marriage due to her inability to bear children (which was arguable) and the idea that the Roman Catholic Duke could have only devious reasons for wanting to marry a woman so much older than himself, Elizabeth’s fury knew no bounds. Stubbs’s audacious insinuations that Elizabeth could no longer bear children and therefore no longer functioned as a viable player in European politics as well as that she had courted the marriage as a vain, self-indulgent response to a younger man’s flattery landed Stubbs in the Tower and eventually on a scaffold where an executioner bloodily removed his right hand. After shouting, “God Save the Queen!” Stubbs fainted in a swoon (Hibbert 193).

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<sup>27</sup> At one point he declared in a fit of passion that he would rather die than live without her. She responded well to such flattery, although it ultimately proved futile in this particular instance.

As demonstrated by this story, given the derivation of much of her power from her sexuality, aging rendered Elizabeth politically vulnerable. In 1590, when Spenser published the first edition (consisting of the first three books) of *The Faerie Queene*, Elizabeth was 57, making her the oldest Tudor monarch to survive to date (Henry VII had died at 52, and Henry VIII at 56), as well as a woman beyond the life expectancy of aristocratic females at that time (Hadfield 29). Elizabeth knew that her virginal power lay in her youth (and its companions of beauty and fertility), and that old age would decrease, if not negate, the efficacy of her political viability. Erasmus revealed the feeling of the time towards older women when he said, “A maiden is something charming, but what’s more naturally unnatural than an old maid?” (qtd. in Frye 100). Spenser himself describes the horror of old age in a woman through his description of Duessa after Redcrosse and Arthur strip her of her popish accoutrement, “royall robes, and purple pall, / And ornaments that richly were displaid” (I.viii.46). Her nakedness reveals “misshapéd parts” and “driéd duges, like bladders lacking wind,” “a loathly, wrinckled hag, ill favoured, old, / Whose secret filth good manners biddeth not be told” (I.viii. 46-7).<sup>28</sup> In the face of these cultural stigmas, Elizabeth tenaciously clung to her power, despite the fact that (or perhaps especially because) she knew her death was highly anticipated. In a letter to James VI of Scotland, her eventual heir, Elizabeth confided, “Though a King I be, yet hath my funeral been prepared (as I hear) long,”

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<sup>28</sup> Perhaps such a description of old age would put Spenser in danger of Elizabeth’s wrath; however, Spenser cleverly uses Duessa as a dramatic foil to Una, a young and beautiful maid and another representation of the Queen. He thus sets Elizabeth up as the truth that opposes deception, and a youth that renders old age all the more horrible.

smugly commenting that those around her were more prepared for her funeral than she (qtd. in Frye 98).

In her declining years, most important to Elizabeth was that she continue to function as a politically active sovereign. She greatly feared being left out of the decisions of her own government, especially since many of her closest advisors had passed on, and many thought that her age rendered her incapable of managing the state. Roland Whyte, Robert Sidney's agent present at the court during the latter part of Elizabeth's reign reported that the many rumors circulating concerning the Queen's failing health and vitality "troubled her Majestie a little, for she wold say, *Mortua sed non sepulta* [I prefer death to being consigned to obscurity]" (qtd. in Frye 99). Such sentiment reveals that the center of Elizabeth's concern was her country (inextricably connected to her fame), which had often been depicted as her only lover. Separation from the matters of state meant sinking into the obscurity of death. Thus, Arthur, as cultural icon of England, provided the perfect lover to Elizabeth as Faerie Queene.

To combat these forces, Elizabeth employed several tactics to promote the illusion of youth and vitality (and thus political viability), including commissioning ageless representations of her person, as well as making far fewer public appearances, thus heightening the general feeling of her inaccessibility, which distance would hopefully incite her desirability. The most prominent portraits Elizabeth commissioned in her later years depicted her person in the flower of youth, a maid of supernatural desirability. The most overt of these is the "rainbow" portrait in which the painter portrays Elizabeth as a blushing, blooming youth, the essence of fertile virginity (see Figure 2). In the portrait her hair is down in the style of English maidens, her bodice is low-cut and suggestive, her

whole person (hair, neck, ears, etc.) decorated with pearls (representative of chastity), in her crown is nestled the crescent moon of the virgin goddess Diana, her face is radiant and youthful, and in her hand she holds a rainbow with the inscription “Non sine sole iris,” meaning “No rainbow without the sun.” Here, Elizabeth constructs herself as specifically sexually viable, centering her body as the sun and therefore the center of the universe as well as the source of all life (Frye 101-02).

Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* similarly constructs Elizabeth as a desirable maid who stands at the center of a fantastical world, an act of flattery designed to please the Queen and reinforce her own propagandistic agenda. The romance functions as an ideal space for this project as the genre expects a certain idealization of its characters. Each romance reveals its heroine as the most beautiful and chaste, the most desirable woman a man could possibly fathom. In the scene that serves as the main text of this chapter, Arthur describes the Faerie Queene in predictably idyllic romance terms, although with additional elements of sexual desirability that exceed generic expectation. The languishing Arthur describes the encounter to Una in this way:

And slombring soft my hart did steale away,  
 Me seeméd, by my side a royall Mayd  
 Her daintie limbes full softly down did lay:  
 So faire a creature yet saw never sunny day. (I.ix.13)

Here, in typical romance fashion, Arthur asserts that his “royall Mayd” reveals herself as the most fair or beautiful creature that ever greeted the light of day. The repetition of the soft “L” and “S” sounds through the verse infuses it with an unmistakable sensuousness,

especially in the line, “Her daintie *limbes full softly* down did *lay*,” as the reader feels the rhythm of her retiring movement. Arthur continues:

Most goodly glee and lovely blandishment  
 She to me made, and bad me love her deare,  
 For dearely sure her love was to me bent,  
 As when just time expired should appeare.  
 But whether dreames delude, or true it were,  
 Was never hart so ravisht with delight,  
 Ne living man like words did ever heare,  
 As she to me delivered all that night;  
 And at her parting said, She Queene of Faeries hight. (I. ix. 14)

In this verse, the Faerie Queene convinces Arthur to love her through pleasing flattery and assurances of her own devout love. With mere words (potent magic in Spenser’s humble estimation) she creates herself as the end of his desire, ravishing his heart with speech whose bent the reader can only imagine. In this instance “ravish” communicates a physical sexuality while simultaneously implying that she literally carries off his heart, thus fragmenting him and inciting him to seek the wholeness he has lost. Arthur concludes:

When I awoke, and found her place devoid,  
 And nought but pressed gras, where she had lyen,  
 I sorrowed all so much, as earst I joyd,  
 And washed all her place with watry eyen.  
 From that day forth I loved her face divine;

From that day forth I cast in carefull mind,  
 To seeke her out with labour, and long tyme,  
 And never vow to rest, till her I find. (I.ix.15)

Through her disappearance, the Faerie Queene (like God in Teresa) incites Arthur's desire through departing and leaving him with the tantalizing presence of her absence, an impression of her dainty body still visible in the grass. The distance she creates between Arthur and herself incites Arthur to quest for consummation, a movement towards wholeness.

Clearly, the Faerie Queene is the quintessence of sexual desirability in this passage. And yet, Spenser preserves her chastity through staging the interchange in utter ambiguity. He does this by containing the scene within a dream-like state (whether or not it is dream or reality becomes irrelevant) and revealing that the mysterious woman ravished Arthur *only* with words all through the night. Simultaneously, however, the interchange is fraught with sexual tension through the use of sexually charged phrases alluding to physical presence and tangibility ('full softly down did lay,' 'ravished with delight,' 'pressed grass,' etc.) and the description of the intimate proximity of their bodies.

In addition, Arthur is clearly physically affected by the presence and, subsequently, the absence of the lady. The Queen not only ravishes his heart, but also causes him to lose physical (and metaphorical) control of himself as manifest by an outpouring of wild tears watering the imprint of where her body used to lie (a reaction similar to Teresa's). Even when he relates the story to Una nine months after the event, his face grows pale, betraying the intensity of his passion (I.ix.16). Through such a

depiction, Spenser mimics what Elizabeth hoped to achieve in her later years by maintaining a physical distance between herself and her people, an act that would hopefully incite their desire and cause them to quest towards her. In addition to creating the distance necessary for the workings of desire, Spenser also imbues Elizabeth with the potential for sexual fertility she desired while tantalizing the reader and Arthur with her maddening chastity. Constructing herself as physically and sexually inaccessible gave her person (as well as her body) a nearly sacred power. Elizabeth as absence, as potential presence, as well as omnipresence became essential to maintaining her power through her declining years.

Despite the denial (or deferral, in typical romance form) of consummation between Arthur and the Faerie Queene, the poem moves towards the hope that Arthur will, through his ardent questing, find the Queen and consummate their relationship. The lack of closure and the deferral embedded in the romance form (as discussed by Patricia Parker) prevents the realization of any implied promise. Additionally, Spenser did not finish the poem, thus adding another layer of thwarted narrative closure. The ambiguity embedded in the romance of whether or not consummation occurs, however, allows for textual richness and the exploration of several profitable interpretations or projections concerning the end of the pair's relationship, a politically savvy strategy on Spenser's part given the potentially dangerous political implications of these projections. Spenser's depiction of Arthur in the fictional space of his youth stands at the heart of these interpretations. Paul R. Rovang articulates the significance of this narrative move:

Spenser's Arthur is not the mature king of those accounts [medieval chronicles], but young Prince Arthur. The treatment of Arthur at this

obscure stage gave Spenser more room to fabricate, much as the childhood of Jesus gave apocryphal writers latitude for invention. The Arthur whom we meet in *The Faerie Queene*, ‘the image of a braue knight, perfected in the twelue priuate morall vertues’ is free from the shortcomings of the mature King Arthur of Mallory’s work, who commits incest, slaughters infants, becomes a cuckold, and attempts to burn his queen. (101)

Thus, the narrative potentiality inherent to Arthur’s youth provides the basis for Spenser’s political projections that warn and tantalize Elizabeth on the threshold of her political and physical demise.

If indeed the pair joins in marriage beyond the end of the poem, King Arthur’s adult mistakes, as well as the disintegration of his ideal kingdom through betrayal and civil war, would be negated, or bypassed, by a new history as represented in his marriage with the powerful Faerie Queene. Such a dynastic union would allow Arthur to fulfill the quest for empire and marriage he remained unable to attain peacefully in his mythic lifetime, as well as heal the historical wounds inflicted by the destruction of his ideal kingdom. As for Elizabeth, the appropriation of Arthur through a symbolic marriage would metaphorically imbue her with the perfected virtues encapsulated in the British epitome of manhood, thus bestowing her person with the balanced powers of both male and female. Such a balance would ostensibly enable her to accomplish the daunting task of unifying the British Isles, balance the politics in Europe, and usher in a new golden age, which tasks she seemed unable to accomplish heretofore. If the union occurs, it could only occur in the space of romance where the interplay between past, present, future, as well as history, and myth is not bound by the driving force of epic.

On the opposing side, Patricia A. Parker predicts the impossibility of such consummation by observing that, “Arthur will not reach his Faerie Queene until the realm of history coincides with that of Faerie, a synapse the poem is not prepared to cross” (82). Perhaps the reason the poem remains unprepared to cross this particular synapse is that Spenser also embeds other issues pressing upon his sixteenth-century consciousness in the potentiality (which the romance genre seals) that Arthur will continue to err through the end of the poem. If Arthur does not find his Queen, Arthur’s history will continue with all of its tragedies. Given that his reign ended in internecine warfare spurred on by his inability to produce an heir and thus secure succession, the deferral of consummation inherent to romance allows Arthur to act as a warning to Queen Elizabeth that her inability to secure an heir for her own succession could drive her country into civil war. As Andrew Hadfield aptly observes:

The virgin queen Elizabeth was now far too old to have children and so her people, Spenser implies, will be plunged into uncertainty, chaos and gloom when she dies because she has not secured the succession. The civil war that destroyed Arthur’s Britain may be visited on the island after the Tudor dynasty expires.... Arthur’s barren union is mirrored in Elizabeth’s barren virginity: she has led suitors nowhere, content to flirt and play off one against another without delivering the goods, oblivious of the historical precedent, just as the Faerie Queene leads Arthur on.... An encounter that looks as though it promises union and procreation only serves to remind readers of the missed opportunities of the past and the impending death of both queen and regime. (Hadfield 30-31)

Thus, although Spenser constructs the Faerie Queene as the very image of life and fertility in her interaction with young Arthur, it is a vain fertility, a portrayal of lost potential. Because ultimately the queen was not divine (as Christ was in Teresa's experience) Elizabeth carried the seeds of decay and the promise of falling short of the ideal within herself, the inevitable barrenness of mortality. Ironically, Mary Queen of Scots, Elizabeth's executed political rival and cousin, proved ultimately more powerful than Elizabeth by producing an heir, James VI of Scotland, who would succeed to the throne of England after Elizabeth's impending demise. Although Spenser never concluded this episode between Arthur and the Faerie Queene, given the age of the queen, little possibility remained of her ability to rectify the issues of succession in her remaining time as queen. However, typical of Spenser, and of the romance, the text of the poem opens more doors than it can close, proffering contradictory interpretations and asking questions that ultimately deny closure. The richness of the ambiguity lies at the heart of Spenser's genius, as well as at the heart of the romance.

Although Spenser ostensibly added the romance character of Arthur after completing much of his poem, this inclusion opened his text to an astounding range of political commentary stemming from Arthur's positioning as both progenitor and lover of the Faerie Queene. Spenser's use of Arthur in the romance structure positions the text to confront both epic and romantic concerns as Arthur represents the ideal epic forbearer to an illustrious British monarch (as Virgil's Aeneas did for Augustus), as well as the perfect, enamored knight destined to love and quest after the incomparable Faerie Queene. Arthur remains essential to Spenser's didactic project within *The Faerie Queene* as he paradoxically positioned him in contradictory roles that ultimately frustrated one

another. In the end, Elizabeth failed to meet Spenser's expectations. The Queen passed away in 1603, heirless, and ruler of a disjointed realm.

## XX. Conclusion

Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of Spenser's later work is his unending desire and hope that Elizabeth will fully realize her political, dynastic and spiritual potential all while he tacitly implies within the romance structure of his text that Arthur will never achieve consummation with his beloved Faerie. As articulated by Patricia Parker, the romance is "a form which simultaneously quests for and postpones a particular end, objective, or object.... 'Romance' is that mode or tendency which remains on the threshold before the promised end, still in the wilderness of wandering, 'error,' or 'trial'" (5). Thus, Spenser contradictorily writes as if he fully expects Elizabeth to become the Queen he idealizes while his very form, the inherent structure of his text, acknowledges that she will not. In this sense, like Teresa, this space between sweet expectation and the loss and mourning of reality (mortality) opens up a space for faith, a state of being that requires the individual to balance precariously within the tension of expectant hope and honesty with oneself that such ideals will never be realized within the text of this mutable life. Spenser's text therefore acts as a manifestation of his hope. Perhaps he believed his words would carry the ravishing power like those of the Faerie Queene. As Edwards says, "Art is a response to banishment and a way through the 'feigned' re-creation of distant objects of desire, to make banishment endurable or even 'mery'" (Edwards 51). *The Faerie Queene* thus emerges as Spenser's coping mechanism, the vision of the realization of his desires, as well as the acknowledgement of their defeat.

Despite the fact that after the publication of the first three books of *The Faerie Queene* in 1590 Elizabeth was far too old to realize the ideals she signified, Spenser, undaunted, continues to flatter and didactically advise her in his mid-*Faerie Queene*, 1591 poetic project, *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe*, later published in 1595. By this time Spenser appears to have finally reconciled himself to living on the outskirts of the kingdom in the more frontier-like Ireland, out of Elizabeth's grace, and at a distance from the English court and its cultural opportunities. Perhaps in response to this realization, Spenser chooses Colin, a humble shepherd, an icon culturally stripped of power, as his poetic voice.

Through the voice of Colin Clout, Spenser instructs Elizabeth (despite the late hour) through both flattering praise and pointed criticism. When glorifying Elizabeth's court, Spenser describes it as one like unto heaven, where heavenly graces abound. Of this celestial sphere, devoid of social ills, he says:

No wayling there nor wretchednesse is heard,  
 No bloodie issues nor no leprosyes,  
 No griesly famine, nor no raging sward,  
 No nightly bodrags, nor no hue and cries;  
 The shepheards there abroad may safely lie,  
 On hills and downes, withouten dread or daunger:  
 No rauenous wolues the good mans hope destroy,  
 Nor outlawes fell affray the forest raunger.  
 There learned arts do florish in great honor,  
 And Poets wits are had in peerlesse price:

Religion hath lay power to rest vpon her,  
 Aduancing virtue and surpressing vice. (312-23)

Given the social and political realities of the age, every citizen of England would recognize this description as blatant hyperbole. Although Spenser's project, in part, and perhaps despite himself, is also to immortalize Elizabeth through the act of writing (a process he describes as leaving her name upon every growing leaf of every tree), it seems as if he tantalizes her with the potential of what her realm might have been had she realized her potential as a perfect ruler. Her court could have been celestial in nature, even divine, the New Jerusalem hoped for by the faithful, a place free of disease, crime, famine and war where the arts flourish, poets are given their due, and true religion reigns. This portrayal is not an indictment or accusation of failure, but rather a moment fraught paradoxically with hope for the future and a deep sense of loss. Here he seeks to lead Elizabeth unassumingly in her office through his poetic skill, "for loue will not be drawne, but must be ledde" (129). To this end he humbly articulates social problems that clearly needed allaying in Elizabethan England—poverty, crime, ill-health, etc. His poetry calls for improvement, even through his mourning.

In a turn from the political to the spiritual, comparing Elizabeth's realm to heaven in this specific list of qualities also sets the reader yearning for that perfect sphere where the graces of heaven will abound, uncontaminated by the abuse of "gracelesse men" (327). Spenser ultimately longs for this sphere, visualizing it in both of the poems discussed, setting it against the reality of failed expectations and the limitations of mortality. David Shore articulates this device of showing the mortal nature of our existence, the consequences of the fall, through the poet's vision of a higher realm. He

says, “There is no escaping the central reality of the fall, and only in the poet’s recreation is there a realization of the golden age. The poet’s ability to perceive and recreate a golden world enables him to descry and denounce with authority the abuses of the fallen one” (Shore 128). And later:

Only the poet, as Sidney has stated with such memorable eloquence, is able to deny the restrictions which fallen nature would impose on the realm of human desire: ‘Nature never set forth the earth in so rich tapestry as divers poets have done; neither with pleasant rivers, fruitful trees, sweet-smelling flowers, not whatsoever else may make the too much loved earth more lovely. Her world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden. (Shore 114)

The core of Spenser’s poetic project and his ultimate plea for his Queen, the nation, and himself lies embedded in his vision of the yet unattained celestial realm of Elizabeth. He pleads for all to seek the grace of God that remains unattained and untapped, and gratefully apply it in each his own sphere, ruler and citizen, celestial Queen and humble shepherd. He states, “For end, all good, all grace there freely growes, / Had people grace it gratefully to use” (324-25). All are left tantalized by the potential, questing toward realization and consummation through the delicate space of faith.

#### Chapter Four: Conclusion—In the Space of Faith

Perhaps the most important resonance these two rich texts share is how they use the romance genre to create a space for faith by acknowledging the vast distance between our desires and our capacity to realize them. In addition to structuring and revealing their pressing political and spiritual desires, these authors provide a space for the reader to share those salient and necessary desires for temporal and spiritual wholeness while simultaneously questioning and reveling in the complexities and fragmentation inherent to erring towards desires whose consummation remains ultimately beyond the boundaries of human experience. In the space of that distance, the romance urges the reader to continue the quest, to work and err despite the impossibility of perfect realization. In this way, the romance recognizes the limits of mortality, the frailty of humanity, while imbuing those weaknesses with the vital necessity to hope for better.

Teresa's and Spenser's experiences with this faith, however, prove radically different. Teresa places her faith in the eternally immutable Christ, a figure who appears to disappoint her in this life, to abandon her to mortal fears, while merely reflecting the distance caused by her own mortality. Despite her painful experience of Christ's capriciousness, His promises remain fixed and attainable in the next life. For Teresa, paradise looms just beyond the boundaries of mortal experience. Spenser, on the other hand, hopes for the salvation of his country, for the realization of all of the potential Elizabeth held as monarch, only to come face to face with Elizabeth's mortality and her inability to attain such heights. His hope for temporal wholeness (which included aspects of political triumph abroad, sociological stability within England, the eradication of crime

and poverty, and economic prosperity for himself) holds within itself the seeds of its own disappointment, reaching as it does for mortal perfection through an imperfect mortal. Elizabeth fails Spenser; England fails Spenser. At the end of his tragic life, Spenser had every reason to despair, disenfranchised and alone; however, in his texts, his faith and hope for this life draws him towards the perfection of the next, where the glory of heaven heals all earthly disappointments. These two varieties of faith although directed towards different aims share the invitation to live as if their realization were possible, to build earthly gardens whose sweetness tantalizes us and impels us towards the ineffable sweetness of God's perfect grace.



Figure 1: Bernini's "The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa"



Figure 2: "The Rainbow Portrait" Elizabeth I

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