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TERESA OF AVILA, COURTIER

RESUMEN

El artículo examina la opinión de Teresa de Ávila sobre la autoridad según sus metáforas cortesanas. Para Alison Weber, la inicial rebeldía juvenil de Teresa contra la autoridad paternal acabó transformándose en una necesaria sumisión de las carmelitas a sus superiores. Sin embargo, en sus metáforas cortesanas autoridad, obediencia y libertad se entrecruzan de maneras paradójicas, ambivalentes y aparentemente contradictorias, reflejando la tensión entre sumisión a la autoridad divina y la necesidad de preservar el libre albedrío. El artículo también examina los esfuerzos de Teresa por ganarse el favor de Felipe II y su supuesta audiencia con el monarca.

PALABRAS CLAVE: autoridad—obediencia—libre albedrío—corte—cortesano/a

ABSTRACT

The article examines Teresa of Avila's views on authority as reflected in her courtly metaphors. Alison Weber has argued Teresa's views changed from her youthful rebelliousness against paternal authority to the need for greater submission by Carmelite nuns to male superiors in their order. However, her courtly metaphors suggest she saw authority, obedience, and freedom overlapping in ways that seem paradoxical, ambivalent, and even contradictory, reflecting the tension between submission to divine authority and the need to preserve free will. The article also examines Teresa's efforts to win King Philip II's favor and her reputed audience with the monarch.

KEYWORDS: authority—obedience—free will—court—courtesan

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The possibility of royal encounters with all subjects was one of the central political myths of early modern Europe (Bercé 1990). According to this myth, all subjects, including the poor, widows, and orphans, should have ready access to the monarch, who should personally deliver alms, justice, and protection. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in Spanish chronicles, political treatises, and plays by renowned authors such as Lope de Vega and Pedro Calderón de la Barca, dramatic and occasionally humorous meetings provided an opportunity to ponder the ideals of good, Christian kingship. Actual face-to-face encounters, though rare, took place in different settings, from highly structured ceremonies inside the royal palace to spontaneous pleading by men and women in the streets. Living up to this myth shaped court etiquette and nearly every aspect of Spanish government, from towns and villages across the empire to the king's privy council (Corteguera 2009).

Teresa of Avila's writings show that the myth of royal encounters also made it an effective metaphor for rendering abstract religious mysteries tangible (Marcos 1999: 489). Teresa repeatedly described the Heavens as God's court, consisting of "His Divine Majesty" (or just "His Majesty"), a queen mother, and saintly courtiers interceding on behalf of petitioners seeking divine *favores*, *mercedes*, and *ganancias* (favors, rewards, and benefits). In *The Way of Perfection*, Teresa compared praying the Paternoster to pleading a petition to a *persona grave*, or person of authority, fully understanding what they are seeking, how they are seeking it, and why.² As in an actual royal audience with the Spanish king, the supplicant soul makes her petition to the Lord exchanging few words. In his palace, the Lord signals He has heard the plea and grants her the *merced*, or reward, an act that Teresa compared to a caring mother suckling her child.³ The image of a petitioner pleading a monarch in person vividly embodied the relationship between soul and God. Although these metaphors were widely used in early modern religious works, Teresa ably deployed them in support of her unique mystical theology.⁴

But what do courtly metaphors and language tell us about Teresa's views on authority? In a 2016 article, Alison Weber outlines three phases in Teresa's views on authority

² "Quién hay por disparatado que sea, que cuando pide a una *persona grave* no lleva pensando cómo pedirla, [...] y qué le ha de pedir, y para qué ha menester lo que ha de dar..." (*Obras completas*: 342 [chap. 30]). The emphasis is mine. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.

³ The body and the soul of the petitioner "[e]stán tan cerca, que ven que se entienden por señas. Están en el palacio cabe su Rey, y ven que las comienza ya a dar aquí su reino[...]" which is the "petition" made in the Paternoster: "*ad veniat regnum tuum*" (Thy kingdom come). "Está el alma como un niño que aún mama, cuando está a los pechos de una madre, y ella, sin que él paladee, échale la leche en la boca por regalarle" (*Obras completas*: 345, 347 [chap. 31]).

⁴ In *Primera Guía de pecadores* (First guide to sinners), Fray Luis de Granada also compares praying to God to a supplicant coming before the ruler, but without Teresa's mystical interpretation (282 [Part 1, chap. 1], 300 [Part 1, chap. 2]).

in the Discalced Carmelite order, starting with an initial “dissident” phase for the years 1562–1567, followed by an “accommodating” phase between 1568 and 1575, and finally, a “contemporizing” phase from 1576 to her death in 1582. Initially Teresa favored shared authority between prioresses and male superiors in the order, which allowed cooperation between nuns and friars, convents’ administrative autonomy, and disciplinary mildness and discretion. But over time, as she lost her initial trust in prioresses’ decision-making abilities, particularly on spiritual matters, Teresa demanded stricter discipline to superiors. This lay the ground for the posthumous reform of the Discalced Carmelites’ constitutions by the order’s general Nicolás Doria, which “ended the discretionary authority of prioresses on spiritual matters, limited as much as possible contact between women and men (be they relatives or confessors), and in general, put convents under the centralized and firm control of a council of friars” (Weber 2016: 245–46).⁵

Examining Teresa’s courtly metaphors in this context is not without its risks. Weber’s discussion centers on “administrative authority,” shaped by the practical necessities of the “government” of convents, whereas courtly metaphors describe mainly the soul’s relationship to God. Nonetheless, the English intellectual historian Quentin Skinner observes: “If we wish to understand a given idea even within a given culture at a given time . . . we shall have to study all the various contexts in which the words were used—all the functions they served, all the various things that could be done with them” (Skinner 2002: 84). Weber took such an approach in *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity*, where she considered Teresa’s discussion of the government of convents in *The Book of Foundations* alongside the future saint’s adolescent rebelliousness toward parental authority (Weber 1990: 122–25). Similarly, examining Teresa’s courtly metaphors in light of early modern political myths can yield new perspectives on how Teresa envisioned relationships of authority in general, and in turn, how religious ideas informed those political myths.

At first sight, Teresa’s courtly metaphors seem out of place in Weber’s three phases. According to Weber, Teresa’s early works *The Book of Her Life* and *The Way of Perfection* belong to her initial dissident phase, when she “fought so long and so persistently against hierarchical authority” (Weber 1990: 123). Yet Teresa’s courtly metaphors in these works emphasize instead the surrender of the will as demonstration of love and loyalty to God. This is most explicit in *The Book of Her Life*, where she stated that at the culmination

⁵ “Doria acabó con la autoridad discrecional de las prioras en asuntos espirituales, limitó lo más posible el contacto entre mujeres y hombres (fueran parientes o confesores) y, en general, puso los conventos bajo el control centralizado y firme de un consejo de frailes.”

of the mystical union the soul “no longer wants to desire, nor would it want to have free will—and this is what she begs the Lord. She gives Him the keys of her will” (*The Book of Her Life* 2008: 130).⁶ Submission to God does not preclude what Weber calls Teresa’s “antiauthoritarian” stance toward paternal, political, and ecclesiastical authority, precisely to carry out what she considered God’s will (Weber 1990: 128). However, a closer look at these metaphors suggests a way to reconcile such diametrically opposed views on authority.

Even though the encounter between an all-powerful monarch and a powerless, submissive petitioner offered a compelling image for starkly asymmetrical relationships of power, the lopsided encounter between monarch and subject allowed for more give-and-take than may at first seem possible. At the most superficial level, ruler and ruled needed each other for their very existence. If no body politic, from a family to an empire, could exist without a “*cabeza*,” a single figurehead of authority, such as a father or monarch, it was no less true that without subjects “there would be no Dominion.”⁷ This reciprocal necessity extended deeper to what the German sociologist Norbert Elias described as a “mesh of dependence” that entangled subject and ruler alike. “To the everyday way of thinking,” he explained, “it seems that the ruled depend on the rulers, and not the rulers on the ruled” (Elias 1983: 140). Yet ceremonies and rules of etiquette at once established a king’s position of supremacy and “entrapped” and “coerced” him. The game of chess offered a vivid image of this interdependence between ruler and ruled, since each move on the chessboard forces a counter-move by others. Taken together, these ideas suggest some of the ways in which the lopsided balance of power between ruler and subject did not always translate into complete subservience and passivity.

For early modern Spanish writers, inherent in that mutual dependence between monarch and subject was a tug of wills, sometimes expressed with images of hunting, chasing, or bargaining. The tug of wills had to be subtle, given that one of the parties was none other than the monarch, to whom all subjects owed obedience and deference. For example, one Flemish courtier described seeking permission from king Philip III by writing a petition using his most elegant Spanish, “all made up and contrived in the most beautiful language to capture his benevolence” (Lhermite 1890–96: vol. 2:268–69). Although the “*gracia real*” (royal grace) was entirely free, subjects’ petitions responded to a principle of negotiation based on a contract: the supplicant received his or her reward in exchange for some kind of service to the monarch (Nubola 2002: 31). Even when a monarch

⁶ “Ya no quiere querer, ni tener libre albedrío no querría, y así lo suplica al Señor: dale las llaves de su voluntad” (*Obras completas*: 112 [(chap. 20, par. 22)]).

⁷ “I sudditi, senza i quali non può esser Dominio [...]” (Botero 1589: 3; quoted in Maravall 1997: 319). On the need for a single *cabeza*, see Campo y Gallardo 1639: 5.

such as the Spanish king had absolute powers that, at least in principle, seemed to place him above the law, subjects were not entirely at his mercy. Such a condition would have turned free vassals and subjects into the servants and slaves of a tyrant. Rather than diminish the monarch's majesty, ruling over a free people made that majesty shine more brightly (MacKay 1999: 177).

Catholic theology similarly sought to acknowledge God's absolute power while leaving wiggle room for free will. Teresa underscored the petitioner's powerlessness in *The Interior Castle*, where she stated that God is under no obligation to grant a petitioner's plea: "We have no part, no matter the effort we put into achieving [divine grace], because it is God who does it."⁸ Yet, though God acts not out of obligation on anything humans do, early modern theologians described God as if unable to deny charity, not only to the pious supplicant undergoing heroic trials, but even to the greatest sinner who felt sincere contrition. In an extreme example, the Spanish Jesuit Juan Eusebio Nieremberg argued that "Contrition is so efficacious, that if one had [committed] all of the sins of [the ancient heretic] Arius, Mohamed, Luther, the Anti-Christ, together with all of the sins of Lucifer and his acolytes, with only one act of true contrition [the sins] would all be pardoned, and [the soul] would become as beautiful as an angel."⁹ Humans may have appeared nearly powerless before the divine and earthly authority of God and monarch, yet for them to remain free it was essential to recognize the possibility of choice and action.

Teresa of Avila was no stranger to such subtleties. Juan Marcos notes her conception of the relationship to God as a business and commercial transaction, *negocio*, involving a constant weighing of costs and benefits (Marcos 1999: 492–93). A business transaction implies trading and negotiating between two parts, even if, as Teresa insisted, no matter what humans do they will always remain indebted to God. Such notions applied as well to the relationship between subject and ruler. Teresa's commercial and courtly metaphors shared a similar vocabulary, such as *beneficios*, *ganancias*, and *negocios*. The relationship between supplicant and ruler was similarly predicated on a contract in which subjects served their ruler in exchange for rewards and honors.

Teresa expresses a more forceful spiritual exchange in her chess metaphor: "[H]ow quickly we shall give checkmate to this Divine King! He will not be able to move out

⁸ "[N]o somos ninguna parte, por diligencias que hagamos para alcanzarlo, sino que es Dios el que lo hace [...]" (*Obras completas*: 411 ["Moradas quintas," chap. 1]). On Teresa's concept of divine grace and free will, see Ciro García, 2000.

⁹ "Es tan eficaz la contrición, que, si uno tuviera todos los pecados de Arrio, Mahoma, Lutero, el Antecristo, y juntamente todos los pecados que hicieron Lucifer con sus secuaces, con sólo un acto de contrición verdadero se le perdonara todos, y quedara hermoso como un ángel" (Nieremberg 1957: 384).

of our check nor will He desire to do so" (*The Way of Perfection* 2004: 98).¹⁰ Similarly, in *Conceptions of Love of God* and *Interior Castle* she compared the mystical experience to the restless trials between lovers in Song of Songs. The Lord is a hunter chasing after his beloved pray, but His best weapon was love, not punishment. Even though the male beloved ultimately wins out, victory only comes when the female beloved willingly surrenders out of love. We must read the Lord's victory and the beloved's defeat in the context of the power of love to bring together opposite wills the way music harmonizes high and low notes: True love can resolve the tug of wills into a harmonious single will.¹¹

This brings us back to Weber's three phases of Teresa's views on authority. The 1577 *Interior Castle* belongs to Teresa's last "contemporizing" phase, when, in Weber's words, "obedience to secular and religious authority was paramount." (Weber 1990: 155). Yet, once more, Teresa's courtly metaphors in this work do not exclusively emphasize obedience more than anything else. Rather than appear submissive and passive, the image of the female supplicant at a royal audience is one of someone determined to undertake arduous efforts to win her petition. The royal castle is not a welcoming place; it teems with petitioners busy with their *negocios*, the business of court, who must confront several figures of authority, including *alcaldes*, *maestresalas*, and *mayordomos* (guards, palace servants and officials), as well as legions of demons intending to frustrate supplicants' path to the royal privy chamber (380 ["Moradas primeras," chap. 2]). Many spend "their life and their income" to reach the *Señor*, feeling great disappointment as they watch the closing of "the door that leads to where the King is," because "though the earthly king may have many subjects [*vasallos*], not all can enter his chamber." Teresa repeatedly refers to the supplicant as *vasalla*, or woman subject or vassal. Rather than give up, she encourages supplicants, as the king's *vasallas*, to persevere with the promise of the rewards awaiting them: "Behold the saints who entered the chamber of this King," Teresa writes, "and you will see the difference between them and us." Finally, through the intercession of two powerful *cortesanas*, or women courtiers, the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene, the soul may request a royal audience. Teresa urges her nuns, as God's *vasallas*, to ask for and receive "the wealth, treasures, and delights there are," as well as great *ganancias* and *mercedes*.¹² The surrender of the will is therefore the triumphant climax to a frenzy of activity.¹³

¹⁰ "[D]aremos mate a este Rey divino, que no se nos podrá ir de las manos, ni querrá" (*Obras completas*: 310 [chap. 16]).

¹¹ On the link between musical and political harmony in Lope de Vega's *El villano y su rincón* and *Fuenteovejuna*, see López de Estrada, 1969: 535–36.

¹² "[...] la riqueza y tesoros y deleites que hay" (*Obras completas*: 408, 410, 411 ["Moradas quintas," chap. 1]).

¹³ Teresa described the similarly active role of the soul during the seemingly passive state of mystical visions (see Corteguera 2010: 261–62).

When Teresa assumes in her writings the role of knowledgeable guide for navigating the perils of courtly life to capture the benevolence of His Divine Majesty, she could have drawn on her own experience as petitioner to Philip II of Spain. In her four extant letters to Philip, Teresa presents herself as humble *vasalla* forced by necessity to beseech his favor. As in petitions from humble men and women, she kisses his hands and offers to pray for his health and that of his family as gratitude for his favor.¹⁴ She also solicited the intercession of powerful nobles and others with connections in court, particularly her close collaborator and first provincial of the order Jerónimo Gracián, whose brother Antonio was secretary to Philip II.

Hagiographical tradition had even affirmed that Philip granted Teresa at least one audience, possibly in 1569 or 1577, despite the absence of any hard evidence. Then in 1915 Bernardino de Melgar, Marquis of San Juan de Piedras Albas, announced that for “fortuitous and unexplainable reasons” he had received a previously unknown autographed letter in which Teresa described a royal audience to Doña Inés Nieto, wife of Juan de Albornoz, secretary to the Duke of Alba (Melgar 1915: 28).¹⁵ The letter, which had belonged to Teresa’s relatives, passed through a succession of owners until it reached Francisco Llorente Poggi, conservator of national monuments in Avila, who sent it to Melgar just in time for the four-hundredth anniversary of the saint’s birth. Although its first page, the location and date of the meeting, as well as its subject matter were missing, the letter offered a dramatic account of an audience with Philip:

I was quite upset when I began to speak to him, for he fixed his penetrating gaze on me—the sort of gaze that goes right down into the soul—and it seemed to wound me. So I lowered my eyes and told him what I wanted as quickly as I could. When I had finished giving him my account of the affair, I looked into his face again, and it seemed to have undergone a change. His gaze was gentler and more thoughtful.

Philip asked if she wanted anything further: “I said I had asked for too much already. Then he said to me: ‘Go away easy in your mind, for it will all be done, just as you ask.’” She then threw herself on her knees to thank him for his great goodness. He commanded her to rise and made “such a courtly bow as I had never seen before, and [he] held out his hand to me again. I kissed it and went away jubilant, praising His Divine Majesty in my soul for the kindness which the Caesar had promised to show me” (cited in Slade 2008: 239).¹⁶

¹⁴ *Obras completas* (“Epistolario de Santa Teresa”): 787–88 (letter no. 45, 11 June 1573), 827–28 (no. 77, 19 June 1575), 999–1000 (no. 195, 18 Sept. 1577), 1007–8 (no. 204, 4 Dec. 1577).

¹⁵ Melgar presents his account of the discovery of the unedited letter as a three-part report; the first part transcribes the letter, and the remaining parts provide analysis to corroborate the letter’s authenticity.

¹⁶ “Toda turbada empecé a hablarle, porque su mirar penetrante, desos que ahondan hasta el ánima, fijo en mí, parecía herirme, así que bajé mi vista, y con toda brevedad le dije mis deseos. Al terminar de enterarle del

Renowned historians such as Gregorio Marañón, Henry Kamen, Geoffrey Parker, and Joseph Pérez have cited this letter as evidence of Philip's support and close relationship to Teresa, even though specialists have long doubted the letter's authenticity (Manero Sorolla 2001: 827–28; Slade 2008: 240–41). Granting an audience to Teresa seemed plausible given his ultimate support for her new order, his interest in her writings, which he collected and read after her death, and his endorsement of her canonization process. Even the letter's almost melodramatic description of the royal audience echoed contemporary testimonies about the impact Philip II produced on those who stood before him. Parker cites the Venetian ambassador Leonardo Donà's assertion that “[b]rave men who had withstood a thousand dangers trembled in his presence, and no one looked on him without emotion” (Parker 1998: 15–16). Kamen similarly points to the example of the poet Alonso de Ercilla, who “tried to express himself to Philip but was disconcerted by the royal gaze. The king told him finally, ‘Don Alonso, speak to me on paper’” (Kamen 1997: 222–23).

Teresa herself contributed to the impression that Philip could favor her with an audience. According to Carol Slade, she “fed the tradition of personal favor from Philip” by suggesting in her letters and in her works a familiarity with him, when in fact “[d]uring her lifetime, Philip's support for the Discalced was sporadic, and he probably never took an interest in Teresa herself” (Slade 2008: 241). The compelling use of courtly metaphors to convey a range of spiritual and emotional experiences for those aspiring to become heavenly courtiers may have also made it more credible to imagine Teresa as a favored *vasalla*.

It might seem striking to urge nuns to model their spiritual journey after courtiers' quest for royal favors, considering that an unmarried woman seeking favors in court could be confused with a courtesan. Teresa used the word “*cortesana*” only in the sense of a woman courtier to refer to the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene. Yet according to tradition, Mary Magdalene had been a courtesan, in the sense of a “free woman,” before becoming a saintly courtier (Covarrubias Orozco 1995: 360 [s.v. *cortesana*]). As Slade points out, Teresa rejected Mary Magdalene's portrayal as a prostitute as a mere insult from people envious of the favors Christ showed toward her (Slade 1995, 59–60). Instead of the reward for repenting from a life of sin, Mary Magdalene's rise to heavenly courtier was the culmination of a life not unlike

negocio torné a mirar su semblante, que había así como cambiado. Su mirar era más dulce y posado. Díjome si deseaba algo más. Contestéle que harto era lo pedido. Entonces me dijo ‘Vete tranquila, que todo se proveerá según tus deseo[s]’[...]. Me postré de rodillas para darle gracias por su gran merced. Mandóme alzar; y haciendo a esta monjuela, su indigna sierva, una gran gentil reverencia como nunca otra ví, tornó a tenderme su mano, la cual besé; y salíme de allí llena de júbilo, alabando en mi alma a su Divina Majestad por el bien que el César prometía hacerme” (*Obras completas*: 1321]). This edition of Teresa's works sets this letter apart from her correspondence in an appendix titled “Otras cartas de Santa Teresa.”

Teresa's: a pious woman raised in comfort who had chosen a path of indefatigable *trabajos*, in the double sense of works and trials, all in the service of the Divine Majesty (*Castillo Interior*, in *Obras completas*: 479 ["Moradas séptimas," chap. 4]).

As a practical woman familiar with the foibles of human nature, Teresa would not have confused the ideals of a heavenly court with the difficult realities of administering convents inhabited by sometimes rebellious nuns. Weber lists among those difficult realities Teresa's disappointment with some of her followers, her fear of association with the *alumbrados*, and "pure exhaustion" after many decades of extraordinary efforts to found and run the Discalced Carmelites. Teresa's shifting views on authority may have also turned in the direction of "the winds blowing in favor of a rigorist royalism" (Weber, 2016: 252).¹⁷ For some or all of these reasons, greater obedience became essential to guarantee the future of her order.

Teresa's courtly metaphors, with their emphasis on the surrender of the will to a higher authority, might suggest that the potential for her later authoritarian stance had deep roots. However, studying the various political and religious contexts in which those metaphors were used suggests the need to broaden our understanding of early modern authority, obedience, and freedom. Rather than conceive of all three as absolutes, they overlapped in ways that strike us as paradoxical, ambivalent, or simply contradictory. It is difficult for us to perceive the difference between slavery and forms of freedom so constrained that we would consider them servile or demeaning. Yet these distinctions were of utmost importance, both in theory and in practice, in theology as well as in politics.

Teresa's courtly metaphors were not concerned with government—that was a matter of practice and experience. Moreover, God represented the ideal of authority, the model against which all human government invariably failed to stand up to. Rather, in the exchanges between soul and God at the heart of her metaphors lies the possibility of freedom through subjection.

It may seem paradoxical that Teresa sacrificed the initial freedom of prioresses and nuns she had fought so hard to win in the interest of ensuring the future of the Discalced Carmelites. She may have distrusted the ability of all but a few prioresses to oversee nuns' spiritual needs. At the same time, her courtly metaphors suggest that Teresa also trusted that the right balance of obedience and discipline, neither too lax nor so extreme as to harm health, would set the soul free to reach the divine majesty and win the riches, pleasures, treasures, rewards, and great benefits awaiting them.

¹⁷ "Es posible que [Teresa] viera que los vientos soplaban a favor de un regalismo rigorista."

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