

LONESOME KNIGHTS OF A SPANISH NUN

TERESA OF ÁVILA AND CHIVALRESQUE LITERATURE IN SIXTEENTH-CENTURY SPAIN

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On March 28, 1515, Teresa de Ahumada y Cepeda, the third of the nine children produced by Don Alonso Sánchez y Cepeda and Doña Beatriz de Ahumada, was born in the Castilian city of Ávila de los Caballeros, the “City of Saints and Stones.” It was the same year that saw the first printing of the tale of chivalry known as the *Demanda del Sancto Grial con los maravillosos fechos de Lanzarote y de Galaz*. The extremely popular genre to which the *Demanda* belonged –books of chivalry- grew in enormous popularity and quantity in these early years of the sixteenth century, at the same time as Teresa would begin to find herself attached to this type of literature, a connection, as this paper argues, that would last throughout her life. As she informs us, books in general “...began to make me think seriously when I was, I believe, six or seven years old” (Teresa, *Life*, 2). Books of chivalry would influence her patterns of thought in a profound way. The passionate young girl of tender years would subsequently stop reading these types of books upon her entry into the religious life. Yet as a penitent, humble woman of middle age, Teresa would employ the images, mentalities, and fantasies of this chivalresque literature that she had absorbed as an adolescent. Teresa’s particular attachment to these books represents a wider interest shared by a large segment of sixteenth-century Spanish society.

Teresa was very much influenced by her environment. Her native city, said to have been founded by Hercules, with its turrets and towers, stands in the midst of the bleakness and desolation of the harsh Castilian landscape. It was with pride and justification that Ávila was called the City of the Knights and Liegemen, and it was said that captains recruited its valorous soldiers on the strength of their birthplace alone. The impregnable walls, guarded by its eighty-two granite towers, encircled a small world whose life and culture were permeated by the code of behavior known as chivalry. In theory, the old and poor were venerated and succored, ladies defended, the truth always spoken, and the *pundonor* (the point of honor) was kept at the risk of death. It has been said that little Teresa never tired of hearing the story of Doña Jimena Blásquez, the governor’s wife, who, during her husband’s absence, defended the city’s ramparts against the Moorish Almorávides. Ávila had also been a staging point for the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa, the great victory of the Castilian-Leonese king Alfonso VIII (r.1158-1214) over the Moors.

The same violent intensity manifested itself in the religious life of the city, which abounded in stories of children being kidnapped and murdered by infidels who tore out their hearts to be used for sorcery; in 1491, a secret trial was held in Avila concerning the Holy Child of Guardia, who had been scourged, crowned with thorns, and crucified a hundred miles from the city (Auclair, 8). In the churches, one was immediately confronted by the intense and realistic religious art, depicting saints, the warriors of Christ, enduring horrible tortures.

It is not surprising then that Teresa should have been attracted to this cult of violence. Teresa herself was of a family steeped in the duality of martial traditions and deep faith. Her father, Don Alonso, an owner of magnificent estates, was a stern and devout man, respected on account of his great integrity, who nevertheless loved splendor and luxury. He always went about with his sword at his side and a rosary in his hand. Teresa says that “[h]e was a man of great truthfulness; nobody ever heard him swear or speak ill of anyone; his life was most pure” (Teresa, *Life*, 2). Teresa’s mother, Doña Beatrice de Ahumada, was considered to be a member of the finest flower of the Castilian nobility. Her family owed its name to a perceived miracle and a feat of arms performed by an ancestor, Don Fernando. Finding himself cut off with his three sons in a tower set on fire by the Moors, against whom he was fighting, Don Fernando managed to escape only by being concealed by the density of a great cloud of smoke sent by God. He thereby earned his name from the device that he was allowed to display on his armorial bearings: a tower surrounded by flames (*una torre ahumada*). This device, quartered with the bearings of Don Alonso, graced the entrance door of the residence of the Cepeda y Ahumada family, serving to remind the vivacious young girl, already noticeably passionate for war and glory, not only of the rights one gained by inheritance, but those won by great and noble deeds as well.

It is not surprising that this passion should find itself manifested in the medium by which these values were transmitted: books of chivalry. Teresa informs us that, as a fifteen-year old, she “...contracted a habit of reading these books” (Teresa, *Life*, 6). Repentantly, she tells of her attachment: “I thought there was no harm in [reading these books] when I wasted many hours night and day in so vain an occupation...So completely was I mastered by this passion, that I thought I could never be happy without a new book” (Ibid.). It was a passion stimulated by her mother. Doña Beatriz, sickly and rather reclusive, had a great affinity for these tales. “She was very fond of books of chivalry,” says Teresa, “...perhaps she [read these books] to distract her thoughts from her great sufferings, and occupy her children, that they might not go astray in other ways. It annoyed my father so much, that we had to be careful he never saw us” (Teresa, *Life*, 6). Her father, whose own library was stocked with such weighty and ponderous titles as Guzmán’s *Treatise on the Mass*, Boethius’ *Consolations of Philosophy*, and *The Life of Christ in Pictures*, saw in these books of chivalry immorality and mawkishness, and as Teresa would later see them, as a path to further sins.

What might Teresa have read during these stolen moments? The novels that were read during this time were, more often than not, long accounts, usually featuring the impossible exploits of a gallant knight-errant who epitomizes the ideals of valor and loyalty, and always fights triumphantly against evil, which is represented by strange and fantastic characters that inhabit, like the knight, fantastic landscapes and scenes. The defense of the weak, a love for adventure, and an almost mystic love for a lady were the ideals that guided his actions. Based on three primary bodies of material- that dealing with Britain, including the large body of Arthurian cycles (called the *matière de Bretagne*); that concerning itself with Rome, which included stories featuring Alexander, the city of Thebes, and the Trojan War; and that dealing with France, which included those stories dealing with Charlemagne and his paladins-, these books saw their greatest

popularity and diffusion at the turn of the fifteenth century. The recent invention of printing (introduced in the 1470s) served an important role in popularizing these tales; they were the first popular literature to demonstrate the commercial possibilities of the printing press. The literature took its strongest hold in Spain, soon after the discovery of the New World; this literary fashion would soon spread to neighboring countries. The great appeal these books held for Spaniards is not surprising when one considers the great activity of Spain's printing presses; no fewer than 720 books (compared to England's 258) were printed during this time at twenty-five different towns before the end of the fifteenth century.

In 1508, there appeared the first printed version of the most famous group of tales of all, *Amadis de Gaula* (Amadis of Gaul). Its authorship is sometimes credited to Vasco de Lobeira (ca.1360-1403), a Portuguese knight, although it is Garcia Ordóñez (or Rodríguez) de Montalvo (ca.1450-ca.1500) who revised the first three books written in the fourteenth century, wrote the fourth himself, and subsequently published them. Written in prose, the romance relates the birth of the eponymous hero, who is the love-child of King Perión of Gaul and Princess Elisena of Brittany, his great love for the princess Oriana, his numerous trials, and his great victories against knights, sorcerers, and giants. Amadis, called the "Lion-Knight" (from the device on his shield), "Beltenebros" ("darkly beautiful"), and the "Knight of the Burning Sword," is the very model of chivalry: he is represented as a poet and musician, a linguist and gallant, as a knight-errant and king. The appeal of this tale cannot be underestimated. Despite the obvious influence of Arthurian tales- Don Galaor, Arcalaus el encantador, and Urganda la Desconocida are reincarnations of Gawain, Merlin, and Morgane le Fée, respectively, - *Amadis* is an entirely original work with enormous appeal. In addition to featuring the very paragon of knighthood, *Amadis'* martial and sentimental idealism- although not without its moments of sensuality- does not glorify adulterous love, in contrast to the typical French romances. *Amadis* saw many imitators and successors over the years.

We cannot doubt that Teresa read *Amadis*. Many of its images, as we shall see, would later appear in her own writings. The allure of this fiction, which was so overpowering that the literate elements of all the social classes surrendered to it, contributed to enormous sales in books, with the book merchants of Medina del Campo, to cite an example, reporting turnovers of 10,000 to 20,000 ducats (Davies, 69). Not only were girls of Teresa's age and status reading these romances but members of the highest ranks of society as well. The seemingly austere Philip II (1527-1598), besides being a lover of art and music (he played the guitar very well), was also a keen collector of books, amassing up to four thousand at the Escorial, many of which were knightly romances.

Teresa's dedication can be described in similar terms. Francisco de Ribera, the saint's sixteenth-century biographer, reports that "...her wit was so excellent and...she imbibed their language and style so well that, within a few months, she and her brother, Rodrigo de Cepeda, composed a novel of chivalry full of adventure and imagination, and it was such that a good deal might be said of it..." (Leonard, 23). This novel, called *El caballero de Ávila* (ca.1529), was written on the pages of an exercise-book, and recounted the adventures of the Spanish knight Muñoz Gil, who was already famous in

the annals of the city. Placed amidst native surroundings as a point of departure into the realm of the fantastic, the novel demonstrates Teresa's already flourishing writing ability (her brother let her do most of the work), as well as her particular fondness for such literature, whose spirit would never leave her.

Chivalresque literature in Spain acquired enormous importance. The public identified itself completely with the world of the fictional knights of these books, which exerted an intense influence on contemporary manners, morals and mentalities. In an age when chivalry still played a large part in the collective life of the upper levels of society, the ideals and deeds of knights, fictional and actual, were taken very seriously. Insights into this survival of chivalric habits and activities come not only from romances like *Amadís de Gaula* but from the widespread recording of the deeds of real knights. Thus, the *Libro del passo honoroso* (1588) recounts the real exploits of the young knight, Suero de Quiñones. In 1434, with the permission of John II, king of Castile and León (r.1406-1454), Quiñones challenged all comers by holding the bridge of San Marcos over the Leonese river Órbigo, which was situated on the vital artery that led to the great pilgrimage site of Santiago de Compostela. Quiñones, with the help of nine loyal companions, would fight no less than sixty-nine knights (both Spanish and foreign) over the next few years.

Providing a touch of color and a pleasant escape for the readers' essentially drab lives, these books nevertheless fostered the acceptance of affected standards of value and false attitudes toward reality. The prevalence of these tales in sixteenth century Spain should not be underestimated. People, both high and low, lived and breathed the chivalresque. Philip II, despite being a highly educated man, drew his knowledge of English history and Scottish geography from Geoffrey of Monmouth's mostly mythical *Historia Regum Britanniae* (The History of the Kings of Britain, 1136), the basis for the Arthurian legends; his contemporaries derived their fantasies concerning Britain from the *Amadís*. Thus, one finds Juan de Varaona, visitor to England during Philip's reign, judging English beauty to have few Orianas, and calling the islands of Wight and Man by which they are known in the *Amadís*: "Insola Firme" and "Mongaza," respectively (Entwistle, 237). The theologian Melchor Cano, writing in the 1590's, tells of a priest, who, convinced that nothing was false once it had been put into print, firmly believed that the deeds of Amadis and the knight Clarian had actually been accomplished (Thomas, 153). Daily conversation was peppered with phrases taken from knightly romances: "*Con la grande polvareda perdimos a don Beltrán*" ("In the dust of battle we lost Sir Bertram"), taken from a verse from the *Romance de Roncesvalles*, came to be used for any kind of loss; the expression "*ténganme envidia y no mancilla*" ("Envy me but don't dishonor me") was adapted from a line in the romance by Conde Claros. In short, these tales were everywhere.

Not surprisingly, these were the values and mentalities that would be carried across the ocean with the *conquistadores*, who saw themselves as replicating, or even surpassing, the deeds of the all of the noble examples of the great heroes of chivalry. Their heads were filled with fantastic notions that shaped the way in which they saw this strange new world. In his firsthand account of the Spanish conquest of Mexico, Bernal Díaz del Castillo (ca.1492-ca.1581) records the impression that the first glimpse of

Tenochtitlán reminded the conquistadores of “the enchanted things related in the book of Amadis because of the huge towers, temples, and buildings rising from the water and all of masonry” (Leonard, 43).

Many of Teresa’s brothers, their lives permeated with such values, traveled across the sea in search of glory and riches. Rodrigo, her favorite brother, was so confident that he would find innumerable riches in America that he left all of his property to Teresa before leaving. He would subsequently drown in the River Plate of South America. Lorenzo would find greater success, becoming Governor of the Municipal Council of Quito (as well as mayor of that city), Treasurer of the Royal Coffers, and son-in-law of one of the conquerors of Peru.

In 1536, the year in which the conquest of Peru ended, Teresa entered the Convent of the Incarnation, a solid structure located just beyond the ramparts of Ávila, and took the habit on the second of November. The nature of Teresa’s religious conversion is not a concern of this paper. What is important to note is that the religious life had already appealed to her as a child. “I used to delight exceedingly,” Teresa relates, “when playing with other children, in the building of monasteries, as if we were nuns; and I think I wished to be a nun, though not so much as I did to be a martyr or a hermit” (Teresa, *Life*, 5). Indeed, she recounts how she “...had a great desire to die a martyr’s death.” In 1522, she and Rodrigo had set out to obtain martyrdom in “the country of the Moors”; their uncle stopped them on the outskirts of the city before they could do so. After this episode, Teresa and Rodrigo endeavored to become hermits: “...in an orchard belonging to the house we contrived, as well as we could, to build hermitages, by piling up small stones one on the other, which fell down immediately; and so it came to pass that we found no means of accomplishing our wish” (Ibid.).

This particular appeal would find itself becoming fused with Teresa’s other interest –that of reading books of chivalry- in her adult life. By no means were these incompatible interests. It has already been noted that the culture in which Teresa was raised practiced the codes of chivalry and the rites of religion with equal intensity and devotion. Amadis himself, on Oriana’s rejection, flees into the wilds and becomes a hermit in the island fastness of Peña Pobre (Poor Rock), until he should win back Oriana’s favor. What became different upon entrance into the religious life was the nature of the combat –literal battles against knightly foes became spiritual ones against a more ferocious adversary, the Devil; the imagery and mentality would remain the same. Teresa’s love of mighty deeds (*hazañas*) would now be simply moved to the spiritual sphere.

With the same intensity that characterized her love for Amadis and his fellow knights, Teresa “...began to root out the habits which bad companionship had formed” (Teresa, *Life*, 11), that is, to begin to rid herself of two habits in particular: Teresa’s “wish to please others by [her] appearance” (Teresa, *Life*, 6) and her love for books of chivalry. The aversion her father felt towards these books has already been noted. Teresa’s *El caballero de Ávila* had been read to her mother before being burnt so that her exacting father could not see it. By no means was Don Alonso alone in his condemnation of these “lying histories.” He would have agreed with Juan Pérez de Moya (1513-1596) when

this moralist declared that chivalresque tales were "...the bait which the devil dangles before the sentimental feelings of frivolous boys and girls" (Auclair, 12). Teresa's biographer, Franciso de Ribera, whose compliments on the wit employed by Teresa in the writing of her own tale of chivalry have already been noted, had nevertheless found it necessary to attempt to exonerate her from such a sin. Echoing Pérez de Moya's sentiments, he asserted that it was the Devil who had induced her to read such literature. In a similar vein, the historian Pedro Mexia would declare in 1547 that "...[these books] are a pattern of immorality, cruelty, and lying, and the more attentively a man reads them, the greater an adept in these vices will he become" (Thomas, 158). The knight Suero de Quiñones, who has already been referred to as an example of the seriousness in which the chivalric code was taken during this time, is nevertheless also cited by some modern scholars as a good example of the befuddlement caused by such foolish fantasies. Indeed, despite its "middle-class respectability" and its glossing over of sexual scenes ("Galaor took his pleasure with the maiden that night in a way which shall not be recounted here, because in similar cases, which are against the laws of virtue, men should pass lightly over such things, holding them in little esteem"), *Amadís de Gaula* is by no means a morally edifying collection of tales. The illegitimate children born of unlawful unions between knight and damsel were exposed by their mothers to almost certain death. Palmerín de Oliva's mother leaves her son on a mountain in a cradle of water-willow suspended from the branches of an olive tree (hence his name). After giving birth to Amadís, Elisena dispatches him in a skiff shaped like a coffin on the open sea, with a letter calling her son by the first nickname he would receive- "Sin Tiempo" ("Without Time," since she thought he would not live long)-, which would declare that he is a king's son.

During this time, ecclesiastic authorities, alarmed by the effects these books had on young men and women and seen as a peril to good literature and morals, accordingly railed against them in long, angry tracts. In 1543, in his *Advice to Curates*, Bernal Díaz de Luco, an adviser on the Council of the Indies and later bishop of Lugo, not only attacked the ignorance of both the clergy and the masses, but also the vogue for reading this literature. Secular authorities were equally vehement in their condemnation. A Cortes of 1555 was so alarmed by the deleterious influence of the impossible narratives of knight-errantry upon honest diligence and frugal living that it petitioned that all such books should be collected and burned.

Teresa would subsequently foster regrets about her reading habits: "...the evil I learned did me much harm" (Teresa, *Life*, 6). Nevertheless, the fervor in which she fought her spiritual battles owes much to the books of her youth, now replaced by the books on prayer and meditation introduced to her by her pious uncle, Don Pedro Sánchez de Cepeda. Teresa would later compare these "good books" to an effective spiritual weapon: "With a book to help me- it was like a companion, and a shield whereon to receive the blows of many thoughts" (Teresa, *Life*, 20).

It is evident that Teresa saw herself as a knight, fighting against all of the enemies of God (whom Teresa called the "Captain of the fort"), which can be identified as not only her own weaknesses, but also her personal enemies, the Devil and his minions, and Protestants (*luteranos*): "I think I could go forth alone by myself against all the

Lutherans, and convince them of their errors” (Teresa, *Life*, 371). The *pundonor*, the form of pride whose meaning she had learnt in the tales of chivalry, had bound her to the religious life. Courtly love and divine love, exalted by the same heroic conception of moral obligation, were considered to be fundamentally connected. Life would become a spiritual adventure, what Teresa called, in the spirit of chivalry, the “royal road.” Julián de Ávila, Teresa’s courageous and charming chaplain, is not being facetious when he declares to Teresa: “I will be your squire and your chaplain. I mean it, if you will have me” (Auclair, 144).

Teresa, God’s knight-errant, would travel along the dusty roads of Spain without being tied down too much by earthly concerns: “I’ve scarcely a *blanca* in my pocket; and who’d give credit to a gadabout like me?” (Auclair, 173). Teresa had been much too exposed to the adventures of Amadis of Gaul and Esplandián to be troubled by an empty purse. It is unnecessary to recount in this paper the entire sequence of events in the life of Teresa of Ávila. What is important to note is that she encountered throughout her life incredible trials and tribulations, both internal and external, physical and spiritual, as a nun, as a reformer, and as a woman. “The devil put before me,” Teresa relates, “that I could not endure the trials of the religious life, because of my delicate nature. I defended myself against him by alleging the trials which Christ endured...” (Teresa, *Life*, 13). To become a nun, Padre Silverio de Santa Teresa has said that “...sense [had] struggled against spirit and made her heart a battlefield” (Auclair, 30). To reform the religious life of Spain and found a new order, that of the Discalced Carmelites, Teresa suffered many trials and persecutions. She met all of her adversaries, whoever and whatever they might have been, with a resoluteness comparable to a stalwart knight: “And so I say that if I were asked which I preferred, to endure all the trials of the world until the end of it, and then receive one slight degree of glory additional, or without any suffering of any kind to enter into glory of a slightly lower degree, I would accept- oh, how willingly!” (Teresa, *Life*, 306). Juan de Salinas, a Dominican Provincial and one of Teresa’s confessors, would declare to a friend: “You informed me wrongly when you told me that Mother Teresa was a woman...she’s a man and one of those most worthy to wear a beard” (Auclair, 232).

The chivalresque permeated sixteenth-century Spanish society. It was everywhere, and consequently unavoidable. At the forbidding Convent of the Incarnation, the sounds of flutes and tambourines playing the latest *romance* are said to have been heard. Teresa, who is known to have disliked “gloomy saints,” frequently improvised amorous poems for the education and entertainment of her nuns, who themselves are known to have composed *coplas*. Chivalresque imagery pervades in her writings. We find Teresa comparing the soul to a “...brilliantly shining and beautiful castle, this pearl from the Orient, this tree of life planted in the very living waters of life- that is, in God” (Teresa, *Interior Castle*, 39), whom she significantly enough calls the “God of Chivalry” (Auclair, 327). The gate of entry to this castle is prayer and meditation; the outer courtyard is the dwelling place of lost souls; the interior, the very center of this castle, “...made entirely out of a diamond or of very clear crystal, in which there are many rooms, just as in heaven there are many dwelling places” (Teresa, *Life*, 35). Teresa compares divine love to “...pellucid water running in a bed of crystal” (Teresa, *Life*, 211); the gifts of God she receives in a vision are “...four large stones incomparably

more precious than diamonds” (Teresa, *Life*, 222); a “...splendid necklace of gold...” symbolizes the loving grace of the Virgin (Teresa, *Life*, 269). Finally, one finds her likening her tiredness brought on by her “raptures,” to “...contending with a strong giant” (Teresa, *Life*, 137); she represents her suffering from the Devil’s attacks as “...the devil turned his batteries against me...” (Teresa, *Life*, 128); and the final triumph of her soul is likened to “...a queen in its kingdom, having everything under its feet” (Teresa, *Life*, 244). Despite the decidedly “subconscious transfusion” of these allusions, one is nevertheless tempted to perceive them as evidence of Teresa’s practicality, for these are images that the literate masses could identify with and thereby gain some measure of spiritual enlightenment.

Teresa’s life is not the only one to serve as an example of the fusion of the chivalresque and the spiritual during the sixteenth century. Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), while a young squire, read the adventures of the knight Amadís with the same passion that would characterize his subsequent militant form of Christianity. Teresa, as God’s knight-errant, found herself at home in two worlds: that of the concrete and the practical and that of the mystical and otherworldly.

The 1570s in Spain were characterized by increased religious intensity and crusading fervor. Teresa’s activities parallel a wider Castilian crusade. A great victory in the form of the battle of Lepanto (October 7, 1571) had inaugurated this fervent decade. One of the combatants in this battle, a young Castilian named Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra (1547-1616), would subsequently write the masterpiece that would transform and exalt the chivalresque novel as it would also signal its decline and its replacement with the realist genre of literature known as the picaresque.

By the end of the sixteenth century, Spain would find itself exhausted, drained, and in decline. Teresa of Ávila would find herself in a similar state by the time of her death in 1582, lamenting, “I haven’t got one sound bone left...” (Auclair, 423). Canonized in 1622 and made the patron saint of the Spanish regiments and troops of the military commissariat in 1915 by King Alfonso XIII (r.1886-1931), Teresa embodies the spirit of an entire society, which, consumed though it was by its passion for fantastic tales of knights and damsels, was nevertheless inspired by a spiritual battle between good and evil that transcended these fabulous and prolix narratives.

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