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Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity

Alison Weber

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Celebrated as a visionary chronicler of spirituality, Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) suffered persecution by the Counter-Reformation clergy in Spain, who denounced her for her "diabolical illusions" and "dangerous propaganda." Confronting the historical irony of Teresa's transformation from a figure of questionable orthodoxy to a national saint, Alison Weber shows how this teacher and reformer used exceptional rhetorical skills to defend her ideas at a time when women were denied participation in theological discourse. In a close examination of Teresa's major writings, Weber correlates the stylistic techniques of humility, irony, obfuscation, and humor with social variables such as the marginalized status of pietistic groups and demonstrates how Teresa strategically adopted linguistic features associated with women--affectivity, spontaneity, colloquialism--in order to gain access to the realm of power associated with men.

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