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A Victorian Woman's Look at Bernini's *Ecstasy of St. Teresa*



Fig. 1: Gianlorenzo Bernini, *Ecstasy of St. Teresa*. Marble, ca. 1650. S. Maria della Vittoria, Rome. Photograph: Mark Bauer.

... for Saint Teresa—you need but go to Rome and see the statue by Bernini to immediately understand that she's coming. There's no doubt about it. What is she getting off on? It is clear that the essential testimony of the mystics consists in saying that they experience it, but know nothing about it. — Jacques Lacan (1973)

Is St. Teresa in Bernini's *Ecstasy of St. Teresa* having an orgasm? The answer is obvious, but not in the way Lacan so famously thought. It depends on the viewer and the viewer's historically contingent ideas about a whole host of things: about "the nature" of women's desire, about religious ecstasy and its relationship to the body, about the physiology and the cultural significance of a woman's orgasm, and about the visual signs that supposedly signify that orgasm. Ever since the 18th century, observers have taken for granted that there is something sexual going on in Bernini's sculpture—whether they are scandalized by it or take joy in her alleged *jouissance* like Lacan. The insistence that St. Teresa is in a state of sexual rather than spiritual ecstasy remains a staple of post-Enlightenment commentary on the work—despite the efforts of 20th- and 21st-century art historians to complicate and counteract this reading by providing the historical context, elucidating the way spiritual processes are translated into sensual and physical ones in Baroque art and in the language of mysticism that permeates the writings of St. Teresa. Art history's explanations of Bernini's sculpture, the theatrical centerpiece of the Cornaro Chapel in the church of Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome, have given me a better understanding of Bernini's work, including the conditions under which it was commissioned and created, the 17th-century texts and images that likely influenced Bernini, and the larger historical frame of Baroque sculpture and Counter-Reformation Catholicism.¹ But in this essay, I focus precisely on the (mis)interpretation since the 18th century that foregrounds the erotic and the secular—specifically, on the response of one Victorian woman writer, Anna Jameson, in 1850—because it is still culturally so prevalent (as Lacan's quip goes to show.)

¹ The literature on Bernini's *Ecstasy of St. Teresa* is vast. For historical context and comparanda, I have primarily relied on Irving Lavin's seminal 2-volume study of the Cornaro Chapel, *Bernini and the Unity of the Visual Arts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), Genevieve Warwick's *Bernini: Art as Theater* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), esp. 54-77 and Andrea Bolland's "Alienata da'Sensi: Reframing Bernini's S. Teresa," *Open Arts Journal* 4 (Winter 2014-15), 133-157. Chapter 3 of Franco Mormando's somewhat gossipy recent biography, *Bernini: His Life and His Rome* (Chicago University Press, 2011), 144-194, also focuses on the Cornaro Chapel.

Even 20th-century art historians who are most insistent on proper historical context can often not help but describe Bernini's sculpture in anachronistically erotic terms, and other commentators don't even try to avoid them.² So it is not surprising that 19th-century viewers, who inherited the 18th century's deep mistrust of both Baroque art and of mysticism as a quintessentially pre-modern, pre-Enlightenment religious practice, would see first and foremost the erotic element—and also, more often than not, reject it. But the Victorian art critic Anna Jameson, in her 1850 *Legends of the Monastic Orders*, seems to express an extreme view when she singles out Bernini among the 17th-century artists who all represent her with too much worldly “*materialism*,” a style of which, as per Jameson,

the grossest example—the most offensive—is the marble group of Bernini, in the Santa Maria della Vittoria at Rome. The head of St. Theresa is that of a languishing nymph; the angel is a sort of Eros; the whole has been significantly described as a “*parody* of Divine love.” The vehicle, white marble;—its place in a Christian church—enhance all its vileness. The least destructive, the least prudish in matters of art, would here willingly throw the first stone.³

In what follows, I will seek to situate Jameson's condemnation of the work—a singularity as hers is the *only* female voice in a chorus of 19th-century male responses—in three larger contexts: key comments by men on Bernini's *Ecstasy* and on the saint herself; Jameson's own writing on art history but also on the social roles of women; and the gender script for looking at art that Anna Jameson partly followed, but also importantly helped shape. I hope to show that there is

² Cf. Lavin, 111, who claims St. Teresa “is given a sensual, one may well say erotic, content it never had before” in Bernini's sculpture, and cannot help using eroticizing language on occasion, cf. 108, when he describes her pose as “*tantalizingly* elud[ing] a front view.” As Bolland points out, ahistorical readings of the work as exclusively erotic are the norm into the 21st century, a trend she seeks to counteract by producing a description that avoids erotic vocabulary altogether (cf. Bolland, 138, 134). Mormando makes the case that we need to acknowledge the erotic appeal of the sculpture even in its own time (cf. 165; he himself emphasizes its eroticism repeatedly, 161-4). A recent example of the persistent power of the erotic reading is Julia Kristeva's work of experimental fiction, *Teresa My Love: An Imagined Life of the Saint of Avila*, translated by Loran Scott Fox (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 3-4 (cf. also 222), even as Kristeva engages seriously with Teresa's writings, the history of mysticism, and the complex legacy of psychoanalytic and feminist interpretations of the saint.

³ Anna Jameson, *Legends of the Monastic Orders, as Represented in the Fine Arts* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1850), 440-441.

more to Jameson's seemingly straightforward rejection of Bernini's work than meets the eye. Jameson's complex and ambiguous response to both the saint and the art representing her is at the heart of her contradictory but also pivotal position in the emerging discourse of art history and art education for women in the mid-19th century.

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I came to the reception of Bernini's work with a very specific question in mind, namely, how interpretations of the *Ecstasy of St. Teresa* are affected by the gender of the viewer—how women see and respond to Bernini's work. This turns out to be a rather tricky question, because until the mid-twentieth century, the vast majority of commentators are men, and it is not until the 1970s that, for the first time, a woman—a delightfully strident radical feminist at that—publicly expressed her anger that a man (Lacan, in this case) proclaimed so confidently that he saw Bernini's Teresa having an orgasm. But even more than four decades after Luce Irigaray first took Lacan to task for assuming that he could recognize a female orgasm as a matter of course, that he knew more about female orgasms than the women who experienced them, and, to top it off, that a male sculptor could most accurately capture this uniquely female experience, my own reaction to reading commentary after commentary by male spectators who simply *knew* what they saw basically was the same as Irigaray's.⁴ But as a woman writing in the 21st century, I can

⁴ The famous passage from Lacan, quoted at the outset, is from his seminar "On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge," in *1972-73: Encore, the Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XX*, translated by B. Fink (New York: Norton, 1998), 76. When the transcript of Seminar XX was first published in 1974 in French, Luce Irigaray responded with an acerbic and outraged essay, "Cosi Fan Tutti," originally published in August 1975, and reprinted in *The Sex Which Is Not One*, translated by Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 86-105, esp. 90-91. For a detailed discussion of Lacan and Irigaray, see Dany Nobus, "The Sculptural Iconography of Feminine Jouissance: Lacan's Reading of Bernini's *Saint Teresa in Ecstasy*," *The Comparatist* 39 (October 2015), 22-46. Nobus also provides a slightly different translation of Lacan's remarks based on the audio tape of the seminar. The broader historical context for the discussion of mysticism and the erotic in 20th-century French theory (including but also going beyond Lacan and Irigaray) is provided in Amy Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2002).

push back: I can deconstruct the history of men's attempts to define and prescribe what a woman's orgasm is, what it looks like, and whose pleasure it is about. And I can challenge the idea that the female orgasm can be "seen" in a woman's facial expression and body language, and, even further down in the *mise-en-abyme* of representations, in a work of art by a man that *is said by later viewers* to capture said facial expression and body language (even though Bernini himself might have vehemently disagreed and claimed that he was presenting St. Teresa's account of her transverberation as written in her *Life*).

As a 19th-century woman, Anna Jameson, by contrast, would not have had the vocabulary or the argumentative help of the feminist history and theory of sexuality that has enabled women to talk about their bodies and their desires in new ways, and so it is not surprising that it was extremely rare for female writers at the time to comment publicly on what they thought of Bernini's work. Even as Victorian women began to gain ground as published authors, engaged with the emerging discourse of academic art history, and weighed in on women's rights in the context of the so-called "Woman Question," the ways and contexts in which this could be done—and certainly the ways in which female sexual experience could be discussed—were highly prescribed. This is a crucial context for Jameson's remarks on Bernini, which stand out, even as Jameson herself stands out as an important proto-feminist "career woman" of her time. Jameson (1794-1860) made her living as a writer from the 1820s to the end of her life, and was an early advocate for women's educational and professional opportunities—but most importantly, she was arguably "the first professional English art historian." As one of the very first women to write in a sustained way and with expertise about the visual arts, her work culminated in a hefty 5-part series of books on *Sacred and Legendary Art* (published between 1848 and 1864) that became many Victorian readers' and travelers' compendium as they tried to

make sense of the iconography of the religious art they saw in the churches and museums of Europe.⁵

But although Jameson did much to educate a larger British (and largely Protestant) public on the (Catholic) sacred art of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, in ways that consciously emphasize historical context and artistic, rather than religious, values, Baroque art was profoundly alien to her. In that respect, she was perfectly in line with the art history of her time, which did extend the canon of Western art backwards from the High Renaissance to the 15th and even 14th centuries, but had no taste for what critics at the time thought of as the excesses of the Baroque, in particular when it came to sacred art. As an active participant in this emerging discourse, she was thus no more and no less prejudiced against the Baroque than her peers. For example, John Ruskin, Britain's foremost Victorian art critic, only mentions Bernini twice across his entire oeuvre, and has nothing but scorn for the handful of other Baroque sculptors he discusses in passing.⁶ And the influential Swiss art historian Jakob Burckhardt, who did write with some appreciation of 17th-century painting, dismisses Baroque sculpture almost entirely. This distrust of the Baroque was a legacy of the Enlightenment and can be loosely traced back to

⁵ Cf. Adele Holcomb, "Anna Jameson: The First Professional English Art Historian," *Art History* 6 (June 1893), 171-187. Holcomb, later Ernstrom, has been Jameson's champion since she wrote the groundbreaking chapter on Jameson in *Women as Interpreters of the Visual Arts, 1820-1979*, edited by Claire Sherman and Holcomb (Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 1981), 93-122. Across her many articles on Jameson, Holcomb / Ernstrom sidesteps Jameson's complex rhetorical negotiations within the male-dominated spheres of art criticism and publishing. This is redressed by Judith Johnston, in *Anna Jameson: Victorian, Feminist, Woman of Letters* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1997) and more recently, Hilary Fraser, especially in *Women Writing Art History in the Nineteenth Century: Looking Like a Woman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). -- In singling out Jameson's remarks on Bernini, I acknowledge a bias toward Anglophone sources, but I hope to find further commentary by 19th-century women beyond Britain in future research into the 19th-century reception of Bernini's sculpture.

⁶ Rudolf Wittkower, in his 1955 introduction to *Gian Lorenzo Bernini: The Sculptor of the Roman Baroque*. 3rd ed, edited by Howard Hibbard, Thomas Martin, and Margot Wittkower (London: Phaidon, 1997) creates the impression that Ruskin said about Bernini that it was "impossible for false taste and base feeling to sink lower," but the phrase, while showing Ruskin's dislike for the Baroque, is used in reference to the funerary monument for the Doge John Pesaro in the church of the Frari in Venice, a work from the 1660s in which Bernini had no involvement. Cf. *The Stones of Venice, Volume II. The Works of John Ruskin* Volume 10: Ed. E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London, George Allen, 1904), 112. Ruskin's other brief references to Bernini (cf. Vol.13, p. 520 and Vol 22, p. 424 of the *Works*) are only mildly negative, and again do not relate to his *Ecstasy of St. Teresa*.

new developments in Christian theology (away from mysticism and toward Deism), in philosophy (away from religious “superstition” and towards Enlightenment rationalism) and in taste or mentality (away from Baroque “excess” towards Neoclassical “simplicity”). The emphasis on the separation, or even absolute opposition, of the spiritual and the secular made it nigh impossible for viewers beginning in the 18th century to “see” the spiritual experience of St. Teresa’s transverberation in or even through Bernini’s sculpture.

This meant that by the time Anna Jameson wrote about representations of St. Teresa in 1850, she could already look back on a long line of (men’s) comments that stressed the erotic nature of Bernini’s sculpture—even as some writers appreciated the eroticism, while others, like Jameson herself, clearly disapproved of it. Even though writers like Jérôme-Joseph Lalande and Charles de Brosses in the 18th century are much more explicit in their descriptions of the sculpture, Jameson echoes their rhetorical strategies to evoke its eroticism by describing the figure group with the help of Graeco-Roman mythology. When she writes that “The head of St. Theresa is that of a languishing nymph; the angel is a sort of Eros,” her “Eros” is preceded by Lalande seeing “Amor,” and one anonymous writer even spotting a “feathered Mercury.” Describing St. Teresa’s pose as “languishing” also suggests excess sensuality, since “languor” has sensual and sexual connotations throughout the 19th century, including in comments on Bernini’s sculpture.⁷

⁷ Cf. again Jameson, 441. For Lalande’s language, cf. Joseph Jérôme le François Lalande. *Voyage d’un François in Italie, fait dans les années 1765 & 1766* (Venice and Paris: Desaint, 1769), 528-529. The angel as “feathered Mercury” and Teresa’s “languor” appear in the anonymous series of articles called “Walks in Rome.” Cf. No. VIII in the series, *The New Monthly Magazine* 20, No.17 (1821), 122. For Charles de Brosses, see *Lettres Historiques et Critiques sur l’Italie* (Paris: Ponthieu, 1798), 334. The two most famous *positive* comments on the presumed erotic nature of St. Teresa’s ecstasy before the 20th century are those by Stendhal in the 1820s and by Hippolyte Taine in the 1860s, both very explicit. Cf. Stendhal (Henri Beyle), *Promenades dans Rome* (Paris: Delauney, 1829), 336-7, and Hippolyte Taine, *Voyage en Italie, Tome 1: Naples et Rome* (Paris: Hachette, 1866), 380-1. Taine’s language is particularly sensual and full of double entendres, but even Stendhal’s enthusiasm for the voluptuousness (*volupté*) of Bernini’s work seems to me to anticipate Lacan’s laconically (Lacanically?) punny remarks. For the earliest art-

These verbal echoes reinforce the sexual meaning that Jameson is trying to express here in her more euphemistic language, without being too direct and thus “improper,” as a woman writer. But even her euphemisms—her superlative use of “offensive” and “gross” (in the 19th-century sense of “vulgar”)—acquire sexual connotations when she points out that the work’s material, “white marble;—its place in a Christian church—enhance all its vileness,” since the whiteness of the marble is implicitly associated with sexual purity, reinforced by its location, thus making the sculpture’s alleged pagan eroticism all the more “vile” and disgusting. But Jameson does not only echo, in more euphemistic, less suggestive terms, the language of earlier comments by male writers from pre-Victorian times who profess their dislike of the sculpture but are not specifically “art critics.” A comparison of Jameson’s disgust with the vehement dislike expressed by cultural historian Jakob Burckhardt shows that she is also aligned with the attitude of 19th-century authorities in her own field of expertise. In the *Cicerone*, his 3-volume guide to the art to be seen by travelers to Italy first published in 1855, five years after *Legends of the Monastic Orders*, Burckhardt singles out Bernini as the sculptor whose work—specifically, his treatment of the human figure, his draperies, and his extensive use of allegory—epitomizes the worst of the Baroque. In discussing the *Ecstasy of St. Teresa*, Burckhardt stresses the erotic dimension in more explicit terms than Jameson, but his disgust is not dissimilar to hers:

In a hysterical fainting fit, her gaze broken, lying on a mass of clouds, the saint has flung back her arms and legs, while a lustful angel aims at her with the arrow (that is, the symbol of divine love). In this case, one frankly forgets all questions of mere style because of the outrageous degradation of the spiritual element.⁸

historical discussion of the 19th-century reception, focusing on Stendhal, Taine, and Burckhardt, see Walther Weibel, “Die Darstellung der Ekstase.” *Jesuitismus und Barockskulptur in Rom* (Strassburg: Heitz & Mündel, 1909), 82-94.

⁸ “In hysterischer Ohnmacht, mit gebrochenem Blick, auf einer Wolkenmasse liegend, streckt die Heilige ihre Glieder von sich, während ein lüsterner Engel mit dem Pfeil (d.h. dem Sinnbild der göttlichen Liebe) auf sie zielt. Hier vergisst man freilich alle blossen Stylfragen über der empörenden Degradation des Uebernatürlichen.” Cf. 708 in *Der Cicerone: Eine Anleitung zum Genuss der Kunstwerke Italiens. 2. Band: Sculptur*. 2nd edition (Leipzig: Seemann, 1869). The first edition of 1855 also contains exactly this phrase, cf. 708. Burckhardt’s palpable disgust is

Jameson clearly sees a similar “degradation of the spiritual element” in Bernini’s emphasis on the material and sensual, but it is his observation that this “degradation” makes the viewer “forget[.] all questions of mere style” that is most relevant here. While Burckhardt is not quite ready to *destroy* the sculpture, his condemnation and Jameson’s claim that “The least destructive, the least prudish in matters of art, would here willingly throw the first stone” both equally signal that aesthetic judgment—her “matters of art” and his “questions of style”—needs to be set aside when a work of art creates such outrage by combining sexual and sacred content.⁹

That is strong stuff for Jameson and Burckhardt alike—two writers who are both well-known for an emphasis on historical context and contingency of artistic style that is still rather unusual in the age of mostly “moralizing” judgments about art. It bears repeating how striking it is that Jameson admits she would “cast the first stone” at Bernini’s work—completely uncharacteristic for a woman writer whose guiding principle of her series on *Sacred and*

striking because he is among first art historical to provide the cultural context that led to the renewed appreciation of the Baroque among the early formalists, specifically Heinrich Wölfflin, who was one of his students. But his appreciation for the Baroque was almost exclusively reserved for the Baroque painters. Burckhardt’s use of the word “hysterical” is worth noting, because within a decade or two of Burckhardt’s remarks, the discourse on mental illness in the emerging discipline of psychology, with Jean-Martin Charcot, Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer, not only begins to use this word to refer to deviant female behavior, but, practically from the beginning, comes up with ahistorical diagnoses of female mystics as “hysterics,” with Freud and Breuer famously referring to St. Teresa as “the patron saint of hysterics” in an essay from the early 1890s.

⁹ Jameson’s call to “cast the first stone” is doubly anchored in her Protestantism—in alluding both to Christ’s words from the Gospel of John in the New Testament (“He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her,” John 8:7), and to the destruction of sacred images by the iconoclasts of the early Reformation. But the contradictions that underlie the sentence are startling. It is doubtful that Jameson (although she would have known the general history of iconoclasm) was aware of the deep irony of evoking the idea of smashing Bernini’s sculpture, given the image on the main altar of S. Maria della Vittoria, a painting allegedly damaged by iconoclasts in the Thirty Year’s War and celebrated as a miraculous image responsible for a Catholic victory in the Battle of the White Mountain in 1620 (cf. Bolland 136 and 152-153). But for Jameson to invert the meaning of a Bible verse that was typically used to question the idea of judging others and to remind us that we are all sinners borders on the bizarre. Not only does she repurpose this passage to imply that she is, in fact, without sin and justified in casting the first stone; the sculpture is implicitly equated with the sinner, who in the Biblical context is an adulterous woman. Bernini’s sculpture of a female saint here morphs strangely into the adulteress who *escapes* punishment because the scribes and Pharisees realize that they are not without sin—but whom Jameson herself would willingly punish. It is possible that Jameson intentionally reinforces what she sees as the sculpture’s improper display of women’s sexual behavior by evoking the adulteress of John 8:3-8, but this makes her contrarian use of the passage even more problematic, so I suspect that she simply did not think the use of the clichéd phrase all the way through.

Legendary Art is an “artistic and aesthetic, not religious” approach. In the introduction to the *Legends of the Monastic Orders*, she makes clear that she wants her (implicitly British and Protestant) readers to think of the works of sacred art that she describes, despite its Catholic provenance, as the “most sacred, most venerable, most beautiful, and most gracious, on earth or in heaven” and that even monastic art, though more alien to her audience than images of Biblical figures also revered by Protestants, is still “historically interesting, as the expression of a most important era of human culture.” In fact, it is this emphasis on the “historically interesting” in sacred art that caused Adele Ernstrom to single out Jameson’s approach to “Christian Art” as progressive, in comparison to contemporaries like Alexis-François Rio and Lord Lindsay, from whose moral and spiritual evaluation of such “Christian Art” Jameson distanced herself.¹⁰

Thus far, Jameson’s assessment of Bernini’s work does not seem very different from that of male commentators who, like Lalande and Burckhardt, share her discomfort with its perceived eroticism, even as she is paradoxically both more euphemistic in her language and more offended than they are. But her outrage has a larger context that complicates matters and reveals the proto-feminist (if also deeply Protestant and “Victorian”) facet of her interest in St. Teresa. Jameson’s lengthy excursion on St. Teresa as a historical figure in *Monastic Orders*, which

¹⁰ Cf. Jameson, *Monastic Orders*, xiv, xviii, and xix, and Ernstrom, “Why Should We Be Always Looking Back? ‘Christian Art’ in Nineteenth-Century Historiography in Britain,” *Art History* 22, No. 3 (September 1999): 432-433. For the point that Jameson’s alleged “artistic” perspective is still motivated by a larger spiritual (but not Catholic, but sort of Unitarian) impetus, cf. Sheridan Gilley, “Victorian Feminism and Catholic Art: The Case of Mrs Jameson.” *The Church and the Arts: Papers read at the 1990 Summer Meeting and the 1991 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society. Studies in Church History* 28, edited by Diana Wood (Oxford and Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1992), 381-391. Beyond these and similar remarks in her books and articles on sacred art, Jameson is typically both remarkably tolerant of a variety of artistic styles and also of the representation of the nude, the most likely topic in art to bring out the “prudish” Victorian matron in women writers. While Jameson’s confident, frank, but also rather slapdash judgments on Titian’s “Venuses and Virgins” in her very early *Diary of an Ennuyée* (London: Henry Colburn, 1826) are perhaps not relevant for the writer in mid-life (cf. 108 and 317), she still strikes a very neutral pose on the question of the appropriacy of nude figures and allows for their importance for certain “Scripture subjects” such as Eve or David, in her *Handbook to the Courts of Modern Sculpture* (London: Crystal Palace Library and Bradbury and Evans, 1854), 8.

precedes her (much shorter) discussion of the Saint's representation in art, provides some clues as to what lies behind her vehement response, beyond the overall dislike of the Baroque which so "ill-treated" St. Teresa. As she introduces her as the founder of the order of the Barefooted (or Discalced) Carmelites, Jameson praises the saint not only as "a most extraordinary woman of her age and country," but as someone who would have been "a remarkable woman in any age and country." She continues:

Under no circumstances could her path through life have been the highway of commonplace mediocrity; under no circumstances could the stream of her existence have held its course untroubled; for nature had given her great gifts, large faculties of all kinds for good and evil, a fervid temperament, a most poetical and "shaping power" of imagination, a strong will, singular eloquence, an extraordinary power over the minds and feelings of others, — genius, in short, with all its terrible and glorious privileges. Yet what was she to do with these energies — this genius? In Spain, in the sixteenth century, what working sphere existed for such a spirit lodged in a woman's form?

The ensuing 6-page biographical sketch is the evidence for Jameson's idea that St. Teresa's "enthusiastic and energetic mind found ample occupation" in traveling across Spain to a number of convents and monasteries, despite the limitations of her time.¹¹

This focus on the saint's activity as foundress of her order makes clear that Jameson, like her then-friend Harriet Martineau, and like the women of the next generation (including Florence Nightingale and George Eliot), admired St. Teresa for what we might term her "social activism" and what they saw, in equally anachronistic terms, as her finding an appropriately feminine "working sphere" for an intelligent woman. Such admiration puts St. Teresa in the same category

¹¹ Of the pages Jameson devotes to St. Teresa in *Monastic Orders* (433-443), the first half is dedicated to biography. In what follows, I am quoting from 433-439 unless otherwise noted. As for the art related to the saint (discussed on 439-442), Jameson uses the phrase "ill-treated" to describe the way St. Teresa is represented, even in her Table of Contents (cf. viii, 439). In her discussions of specific works beyond Bernini, she importantly highlights Rubens's paintings *Saint Teresa of Ávila's Vision of the Holy Spirit* and *Saint Teresa Interceding for the Souls in Purgatory* as the best representations of the saint, including a (flipped) etching after the latter (the only full-size rendering of a female saint among the 11 included etchings, 10 of whom are by Jameson herself). In her appreciation of Rubens, she is again in line with the taste of her time, which puzzlingly exempted Rubens from the general scorn heaped on the art of the Baroque. Cf. Jameson's preface to her friend Robert Noel's 1840 translation of Gustav Waagen's *Peter Paul Rubens* (London: Saunders and Otley, 1840), xv.

as other female saints widely admired by Victorian women (such as St. Catherine of Siena and St. Elizabeth of Hungary), and is clearly part of Jameson's impetus in writing about the art relating to the monastic orders, since she pointedly writes in her introduction to the book that

the protection and better education given to women in these early communities; the venerable and distinguished rank assigned to them when, as governesses of their Order they became in a manner dignitaries of the Church; the introduction of their beautiful and saintly effigies... into the decoration of places of worship and books of devotion,—did more, perhaps, for the general cause of womanhood than all the boasted institutions of chivalry.

This pronounced interest in the role of women in the Catholic church also needs to be read in the context of the proto-feminist interest in the Virgin Mary, for which Anna Jameson was again the one to create the link to the visual arts, especially in her 1852 *Legends of the Madonna*.¹²

But the interest in these “early communities” of women went beyond the arts, and she wrote about their history in the 1850s as well. Admittedly, Jameson's was a “conservative,” separate-but-equal feminism, which saw such charitable activities as fundamentally still domestic and thus suitable for the “maternal organisation, common to all women” by virtue of their sex. In this context, highlighting Teresa's role as the founder of her order meant that she endorsed her public activism as both socially important and appropriately feminine, which aligned her with proto-feminists of her own generation like Harriet Martineau and Elizabeth

¹² Cf. Jameson, *Monastic Orders*, xx, also discussed in Gilley, 389-90, in this larger context. For the proto-feminist interest in St. Teresa, cf. Carol Slade's “The Meaning of St. Teresa's Work in Four Victorian Women” in *Santa Teresa: Critical Insights, Filiations, Responses*, edited by Martina Bengert and Iris Roebeling-Grau (Tübingen: Narr Francke Attempo, 2019), 149-176, focuses on Martineau, Jameson, Eliot, and Nightingale. Jameson herself ends her discussion of St. Teresa in *Monastic Orders* with a lengthy passage from Martineau on Teresa's role as “reformatrix” of her order and as a “woman of genius and determination;” cf. Jameson, 443, quoting from *Eastern Life: Present and Past* (London: Moxon, 1848), 235. *Legends of the Madonna. As Represented in the Fine Arts. Forming the Third Series of Sacred and Legendary Art* (I have consulted the second edition: London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, & Roberts, 1857), was probably Jameson's most popular book, partly because of the pronounced Victorian interest in the Virgin Mary. In the extensive scholarship on the feminist facet of that interest, Jameson is highlighted in Kimberly Adams, *Our Lady of Victorian Feminism: The Madonna in the Work of Anna Jameson, Margaret Fuller, and George Eliot* (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 2001), Gail Houston, *Victorian Women Writers, Radical Grandmothers, and the Gendering of God* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2013), and Elizabeth Alvarez, *The Valiant Woman: The Virgin Mary in Nineteenth-Century American Culture* (University of North Carolina Press, 2016), esp. 82-113.

Barrett-Browning, but also with the next generation of female activists like Emily Davies, Bessie Rayner Parkes, and Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon.¹³

However, precisely because she was so invested in St. Teresa as a “social activist,” Jameson was also downplaying what didn’t fit this view of the saint—namely, her mysticism, which she could not successfully separate from the eroticism that she saw both in Bernini’s sculpture and in St. Teresa’s own language. How much argumentative trouble the saint’s mysticism causes Jameson is clear from the contradictory strategies by which she tries to make it go away: On the one hand, she attributes it to the saints’ early disposition, and suggests that possibly, her “fervour of temperament was mistaken for spiritual aspiration.” That this “fervour” is shorthand for the taint of eroticism is made clear when Jameson criticizes the language of St. Teresa as having “the orientalism of the Canticles”—that is, sharing in the explicit eroticism of the Old Testament’s *Song of Songs*, which to a large extent legitimized mysticism’s use of sensual, erotic language as a way to describing the ecstatic union with the divine. Jameson wishes to excise or diminish this sensuality in *her* St. Teresa—and of course it is precisely what she sees (and doesn’t wish to see) in Bernini’s “languishing nymph.” On the other hand, she seeks to blame this facet of St. Teresa’s writing on external, male influence: everything about her that was “strong, and beautiful, and true, and earnest, and holy, was *in herself*; and what was morbid, miserable, and mistaken, was the result of *influences around her*.” Her “visionary excitement, her egotism, her pretensions to superior sanctity and peculiar revelations from

¹³ Jameson’s *Sisters of Charity, Catholic and Protestant, Abroad and at Home* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1855) and *The Communion of Labour: A Second Lecture on the Social Employments of Women* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, and Roberts, 1856) were the culmination of Jameson’s work on the “Woman Question.” Her feminist credo, which she shared privately with her friend Ottilie, but which appears in somewhat rephrased form in a minor published work in the 1840s, insists on “both sexes being *equally* rational beings with improvable faculties” but also on the mentioned “maternal organisation” of all women. Cf. *Letters of Anna Jameson to Ottilie von Goethe*, edited by G.H. Needler (London etc.: Oxford University Press, 1939), 233-4. Jameson had personal connections to all of the listed women activists; cf. Johnston’s biography for a detailed discussion of Jameson’s personal and professional relationships with other Victorian feminists.

heaven” are “fostered and flattered by the ecclesiastics around her,” and thus generated by her male “spiritual directors” under whose “express command” she writes her *Life*.¹⁴

Carol Slade, in her recent essay on Victorian women’s interest in St. Teresa’s works, sees Jameson’s dismissive attitude towards St. Teresa’s mystical writings (which of course lie at the very heart of her canonization and veneration in the 17th century) as anti-Catholic and basically ignorant about the historical conditions in Spain at the time. Granted, Jameson never traveled to Spain (while she had done much first-hand research on art in Italy *in situ*), and her knowledge of the Spanish art she critiqued was both limited and derivative, while her knowledge of Spanish religious culture was equally deficient. But I would argue that Slade overlooks an important context for Jameson’s emphasis on St. Teresa’s activism and the downplaying of the mystical writings in the *Monastic Orders*: It is defense of her admiration for the saint against the misogyny of those who can only see (and mistrust) the mystic, and she directly refers to one of the worst offenders of her time: “Mr. Ford calls her ‘a love-sick nun:’ in some respects the epithet may be deserved—but there have been, I am afraid, some thousands of love-sick nuns: there have been few women like St. Theresa.” Jameson quotes this almost innocuous, only slightly derogatory phrase from Richard Ford’s 1845 *Handbook of Spain*, but a closer look at Ford’s comments makes clear how far *less* anti-Catholic Jameson actually is than Ford, a renowned expert on Spain and Spanish art. When Ford, whose book was part of the popular travel-guide series of *Murray’s Handbooks*, discusses the saint apropos of a tour of Avila, he opines that she was deluded, and that the papal commission that decided on her canonization was wrong when it “placed this love-sick nun in the calendar of Romish saintesses, instead of in

¹⁴ Cf. Jameson, *Monastic Orders*, 441, 434, and 437-438. Regarding the importance of the language of the Song of Songs for the mystics, see the concise summary by Stephanie Knauss, “Aisthesis: Theology and the Senses,” *Crosscurrents* (March 2013), 112-116. Jameson’s idea that mysticism comes with the “infusion of Orientalism into Western Christianity” is another can of worms; see Jameson’s *Monastic Orders*, xxi-xxii.

Bedlam” (i.e. an insane asylum). He calls her writing “solemn humbug” and then launches into a full-on misogynist rant:

These Santa Teresas and Catherines of Sienna [sic] &c., were but the Pythonesses and Sibyls of old, reproduced under new names. The Circes and Sirens changed men into beasts just as these *santas* made them fools; but so it has ever been since the father of all lies selected the first woman to beguile the first man, and father of all men; for when a lady is in the case, bird-lime is never wanting for the wicked one to catch male souls. Their persuasive eloquence, which requires small fuel of facts, added to sexual influence, is irresistible.¹⁵

Jameson does not directly address this screed, and indeed cedes to Ford when she grants that there may have been many “love-sick nuns,” but by emphasizing Teresa’s activism and her “real piety, simplicity, and good sense,” while downplaying anything about her that could be interpreted as sexual or erotic, she actually turns the tables on Ford and his misogynist compeers. St. Teresa is not Ford’s Sybil in trance or Siren entrancing men with her sexy “eloquence,” since Jameson ultimately insisted that male “ecclesiastics” and “spiritual directors” were responsible for her mystical outpourings. From this argument about the bad influence of men on the saint, it is only a short distance to the argument that artists (again men) who emphasize her ecstasy and her physical body are just as much at fault, bringing out the wrong St. Teresa by emphasizing the “*materialism* of the conception” (“all Spanish pictures of her sin in this respect”) that so notoriously culminates in her threat to destroy Bernini’s “languishing nymph.”¹⁶

¹⁵ Cf. Jameson, *Monastic Orders*, 434. For her sources, Jameson seems to have used a compendium of *Artists of Spain* and a French edition of Teresa’s writings (cf. Slade, 160-1 on the translation she probably used), as well as Richard Ford’s *Hand-Book for Travellers in Spain, and Readers at Home*, Vol. 2 (Cambridge University Press, 2011, Orig. pub. London: J Murray, 1845); For Ford’s passage on St. Teresa and the siren-like “saintesses,” see 805. William Lister’s *Bibliography of Murray’s Handbooks for Travelers* (Dereham: Dereham Books, 1993), 125, provides a brief sketch of Ford’s biography and the history of the handbook, the first edition of which Ford withdrew at his own expense after friends warned him that his anti-Spanish, anti-Catholic tone would get travelers in trouble with the Spanish authorities. And yet, Ford’s *Handbook* and his expertise on Spain came in for high praise.

¹⁶ Jameson, *Monastic Orders*, 434, 437-8, 440-1. Jameson’s emphasis on the revolting nature of excess “materialism” is repeated multiple times in *Monastic Orders*; cf. esp. the Introduction, xvii-xxi. Cf. also Jameson’s letter to Ottilie from June 2 [1849], where she writes about the process of working on *Monastic Orders* that “there is a *reality* in these monkish personates which puts them beyond the reach of poetry” (cf. Needler 167).

In other words, it is men—the Catholic priests, the Baroque artists, and now, in her own time, writers like Richard Ford—that make St. Teresa a “love-sick nun” by drawing attention her physical body, her ecstasy, and thus to her 19th-century sensibility, her sexuality—things that Jameson wants to separate from the “real” Teresa, the reformer and activist who represents “that thoroughly feminine principle of womanly dignity.” It is easy to bracket the resulting willful erasure of Teresa the mystic, including not only of her body, but also of her writing, as the sexually repressed and repressive (as well as anti-Catholic) attitude of the stereotypical Victorian matron. But it is important to keep in mind that such anti-sexual, anti-sensual attitudes are also a hallmark of much Victorian proto-feminism, as mid-19th-century women search for a model for establishing authority that does not interfere with the separation of the spheres, but is still compatible with the Victorian ideology of the moral and emotional superiority of women—the “rulers” of the domestic sphere, whose influence is indirect but powerful, and by extension also compatible with the dictum of women’s sexual purity and “maternal organisation” (as per Jameson’s feminist credo). This anti-erotic view of women thus needs to be read as a refusal to be viewed reductively as only sexual, only in terms of the body, by men; it is part and parcel of Jameson’s and her proto-feminist peers’ interest in professions and education for women, of their emphasis on women’s active minds and social functions that is so clearly present in Jameson’s admiration of St. Teresa. A sort of “danger feminism” *avant la lettre*, this particular call for women’s rights is thus not that different from the first-wave feminists in the 1970s drawing attention to the way in which women were objectified and sexualized by the patriarchy.¹⁷

¹⁷ For the “principle of womanly dignity,” cf. Jameson, *Monastic Orders*, 435, for her “feminist credo,” cf. Needler 234-5. The repressive Victorian script for women when it came to discussing sexual matters needs to be acknowledged *in spite of* and *alongside* the proliferation of the 19th-century discourse on sexuality at large. To be clear: I do not dispute Michel Foucault’s argument in his *History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, translated by Robert Hurley (New York, Vintage Books/Random House, 1990), that it is a myth that the 19th century severely repressed when it came to discussing sexuality, and that long before Freud, there was an expansive discourse on it. But Foucault completely sidesteps the fact that while women’s sexuality was incessantly talked *about*, women

The deep irony is, of course, that Jameson's anti-sexual attitude is not just directed at Bernini's implicitly obscene "languishing nymph," but also against a part of St. Teresa herself, namely the part who writes in the language of the *Song of Songs*, acts with too much "fervour" and retains too much of the worldly "passions and feelings" she had as an unprincipled adolescent. In that respect, Jameson's comments on Bernini are, at first sight, very similar to other comments on the sculpture, which tend to equate Bernini's representation of St. Teresa with the saint herself. The collapse is of course especially apparent in Lacan's quip, since he sends us to Rome to see Bernini's *sculpture* in order to see proof that the *saint* is, without doubt, "coming"—Irigaray specifically called Lacan out for referencing Bernini, rather than reading St. Teresa's writings—but it is also clearly present in Stendhal and the remarks on Bernini in the "Walks in Rome" in the 1820s. The premise of folding St. Teresa into her representation by Bernini is typically the claim has "translated" Teresa's writing into visual imagery, an idea still visible, with more nuance, in much art-historical writing on Bernini's *Ecstasy*. But when writers other than Jameson collapse the saint with her representation, there is no other St. Teresa beyond the text—that is, beyond her own description of the transverberation in Chapter XXIX of her *Life*. She is only and always the saint in ecstasy. For Jameson, by contrast, there *is* another St. Teresa—the activist and reformer that she wants to see, to the exclusion of the ecstatic mystic. While that may blindside her to anything spiritually significant about a mystic's sensual, embodied encounter with the divine, it also allows her to make the saint socially and spiritually relevant to herself in her own time. This in turn aligns her with 20th-century feminists, who are still grappling with St. Teresa as both "activist" and "mystic" (not that they would accept

themselves could not easily or publicly participate in this discussion. In that respect, repression was alive and well in the 19th century, and so it is not surprising that women's contributions were, like Jameson's, often couched in euphemistic and "repressive" anti-sexual and anti-sensual terms.

Jameson’s dualistic idea that the two “sides” can be cleanly separated), and with her complex negotiation with male-dominated Catholicism.¹⁸

What insisting on the activist St. Teresa and the downplaying of her ecstasy importantly does *not* entail for Jameson is “looking away,” i.e. not looking at Bernini’s sculpture, and this is the last point I would like to make about Anna Jameson’s oddly-angled admiration of St. Teresa, which rejects both her mystic writing and Bernini’s representation of her mystical experience so rigidly and absolutely. Jameson stands out among the “danger feminists” and “Victorian matrons” of her time, whose insistence on women’s moral superiority was inseparable from the rejection of all things sensual and erotic, because she is always still willing to look. Look and



Fig. 2: “Look down, Conchita!” “Yes, Mother, I’ve seen that I wasn’t supposed to look.” Cubas, “In the Museum of Paintings,” *Mundo Cómico* 4, no. 138 (June 20, 1875):3.

¹⁸ Cf. Lacan 76, Irigaray 91, Stendhal 366, and the anonymous “Walks in Rome,” 122; for art-historical assumptions about the direct influence of Ch. XXIX of St. Teresa’s *Life*, cf. Lavin 107-124. For examples of 20th-century feminist approaches to St. Teresa, see Alison Weber, *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity*. Princeton and London: Princeton University Press, 1996, Carole Slade, *St. Teresa of Avila: Author of a Heroic Life* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995) and most recently, Julia Kristeva’s *Teresa My Love* and several of the essays in the 2019 collection in which Slade’s “Four Victorian Women” (q.v.) was published.

perhaps be outraged—but still look at the art work in question. In that respect, she typically does not follow the implicit and sometimes explicit prescription to “not look” for women’s interaction with art that is inappropriately sensual, as in an 1875 Spanish cartoon about women visitors to the Prado in Madrid, which, when made into a public museum, incited major debates about the display of famous nudes for women to see (Fig.2)—or, most pertinently, in the striking “meta-painting” of Bernini’s *Ecstasy* by Odoardo Borrani (Fig.3).¹⁹



Fig. 3: Odoardo Borrani, *Estasi di Santa Teresa*. Oil on Canvas. 1883. Palazzo Pitti, Florence.

¹⁹ Joy Kasson, in her *Marble Queens and Captives: Women in Nineteenth-Century American Sculpture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990) discusses in detail how 19th-century illustrations of museum visitors can function, alongside the ubiquitous pamphlets, as “viewing instructions.” She shows in multiple illustrations relating to the Philadelphia Exhibition of 1876 that women are regularly shown looking away from nude neoclassical sculpture (cf. Kasson 43-45). Eugenia Afinogueva reprints and discusses the 1875 cartoon in her book *Prado: Spanish Culture and Leisure, 1819-1939* (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 2018), 172.

The 1883 *Estasi di Santa Teresa*, is a late work by Borrani, a member of the Florentine Macchiaioli school, and one of several works by Macchiaioli painters (including by Borrani himself) that represent women in the presence of works of art. Borrani here shows Bernini's sculptural ensemble in all its sensual splendor, its whites and golds surrounded by multi-color marble, with a praying Carmelite nun kneeling just outside of the Cornaro Chapel, her head bent. The nun's devout attitude suggests that she is in deep communion with the divine (even the angel's spear is directed at her heart rather than at St. Teresa's, a deliberate change that Borrani made compared to Bernini's actual sculpture). But she is, importantly, not looking at the saint in ecstasy. The nun's pose may signal a woman's admirable self-containment and independence, something that Albert Boime argues is present in other paintings of women by Borrani and other Macchiaioli, and that points to their awareness and partial endorsement of a new appreciation of women's political and social involvement kickstarted by the *Risorgimento*. But I am seeing an implicit emphasis on the idea that the nun, compositionally, conceptually, and spiritually connected to St. Teresa, can bypass the visual connection to her order's founding saint, and thus the dangers of sensual engagement with the sculpture. That is, of course, profoundly ironic, since we as viewers of Borrani's painting get to see both the splendor of the work *and* the nun whose pose refuses its impact.²⁰

Anna Jameson would not have put herself in the position of Borrani's nun. Her outraged description of Bernini's work is predicated on looking at it, in person, which she undoubtedly did on her various long research trips to Rome in the 1840s and 1850s. As much as she disliked the sensual, earthly element of sacred art, and wanted its women—the Biblical figures, the martyrs

²⁰ Cf. Albert Boime, *The Art of the Macchia and the Risorgimento: Representing Culture and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 188-189 and 259-265, on the representation of women in Borrani's paintings relating to the Risorgimento. The genre paintings of women in museums and churches have not been discussed in the (sparse) Anglophone literature on Borrani and Macchiaioli.

and saints, the Madonna herself—to be represented as pure, asexual, and queen-like, she was never one to not look. She looked closely, and then described what she saw, even if she didn't like it—even if she had to come up with convoluted and euphemistic language to express her outrage. And she expected other women to look as well. Indeed, what makes Jameson such an interesting figure in the history of 19th-century writing by women on art is that she does not merely follow an existing script for women's engagement with art, but actively participated in constructing and changing this script in her own work, under her own name, at a time when many women wrote about art only under the cloak of anonymity—and that she called very directly for including art in the attempt to improve women's education.

For example, in her article “Some Thoughts on Art: Addressed to the Uninitiated” in the *Art-Journal* of March 1, 1849, she welcomes the *Art Journal*'s series of engravings of sculptures, because it means access to art “for THE MILLION,” and because to better art education “particularly... of young women.” “Superficial knowledge of all kinds is the perdition of women,” she says, and calls for teaching “the elementary principles of the Fine Arts” to girls as part of their overall education. Even as the goals of such an education are conventionally Victorian—firmly wedded to a universal canon established by classic Greek art and geared toward generating a “moral” or “virtuous” taste—observation and contextual knowledge are still the basis for developing such taste. As much as she steered her readers (and herself) towards sacred Medieval and Renaissance art, and by that token neither challenged the canon of her time nor the prescriptions on women's piety and virtue, nothing in Jameson's art-historical writing suggests that there is art that women should avoid investigating. All of her books on art were geared to make a more careful study of works of art open to all, and they perhaps came as close as any Victorian writing to giving women an idea of what art they should find interesting or

know about. For her audience, including in particular women, to see, research, and judge works of art for themselves was the end goal for Jameson, who spent her life doing so.²¹

But Anna Jameson's enthusiasm for looking at all art and for teaching others how to look at it leads us full circle back to the unresolved and unresolvable contradiction of her aggressive rejection of Bernini's *Ecstasy of St. Teresa*: If she had indeed cast "the first stone" in outrage, she would have prevented future viewers from seeing it. That this contradiction remains (along with the unsettling implications of the use of the phrasing from John 8:7) seems to me to be a measure of Jameson's discomfort with Bernini's work as art that the "materialism" and "reality" makes art like this emotionally too intense to be looked at—and to her mind, that is a gendered response: In the 1826 *Diary of an Ennuyée*, where Jameson's diarist-narrator, a thinly veiled alter ego, reflects at length on her horror at the sight of "revolting and sanguinary images" during her travels in Italy, she claims: "I can only see with woman's eyes, and think and feel as I believe every woman *must*, whatever may be her love for the arts." As women, she says, "we do not look upon pictures to have our minds agonized and contaminated by the sight of human turpitude and barbarity, streaming blood, quivering flesh, wounds, tortures, death and horrors in every shape, even though it should all be very *natural*."²²

Interestingly enough, these horrible images from which she "turned away loathing, shuddering, sickening" in the 1820s are the very "crucifixions, martyrdoms, and other scripture

²¹ Cf. Jameson's "Some Thoughts on Art, Addressed to the Uninitiated." *Art-Journal* (March 1849): 69-70. Anna Jameson died in early March 1860, as a result of a cold that she caught from trudging through nasty winter weather from her apartment to the British Museum every day, where she was conducting research for the fifth book in her series of Sacred and Legendary Art, on the figures of Christ and John the Baptist. Lady Elizabeth Eastlake, an acquaintance who was also gaining a reputation as an art historian, completed *The History of our Lord as Exemplified in Works of Art* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts & Green, 1864) after her death.

²² For the quoted passages and the overall context, cf. *Diary of an Ennuyée*, 333-336. The justification for seeing Jameson's narrator as an alter-ego is that we know from her letters she shaped this odd hybrid text (novel, travelogue, art-historical ramblings) from two separate diaries she kept during her 1821 journey to Italy. Cf. Beatrice Erskine, *Anna Jameson: Letters and Friendships (1812-1860)* (London: Fisher and Unwin, 1915), 43 and 65.

horrors” that the later Jameson, in the 1840s and 1850s, manages to integrate, appreciate, and explain to other potential viewers in her books on sacred art. Over the decades, she clearly taught herself to react to the violence in sacred art in a different way and look closely. But her horror at the sensuality of Bernini’s work can be seen as the last bastion of her insistence that some art is emotionally too stirring, so that even she would advocate against looking at it. Jameson’s lack of a vocabulary to verbalize her intense discomfort with Bernini’s sculpture (and even less explain whether it is discomfort with female sexual arousal *per se*, or with its public display, or with its display in a sacred environment) results in that striking call to commit an act of destructive violence against the offending art work by “throwing the first stone”—rather than to keep staring at it, as I did in 2019, trying to figure out what was so unsettling about the work I had been so curious to see.

I concluded that I could not erase the three centuries of comments from my mind that suggest that I am seeing a woman having an orgasm, even though on second thought, I realized that I have no idea what an orgasmic woman “looks like” beyond the visual conventions used to represent, variously, religious ecstasy, physical orgasm, sleep and loss of consciousness and even death (the Big One, not the little one). It seemed like a fleeting private moment strikingly exposed and eternalized, frozen in marble, in a place that seems very public (and highly theatrical, as Bernini scholars have pointed out). I didn’t want to look away (much less to destroy the sculpture), but it seemed like I was looking at something not meant for my eyes—a private moment, whether sensual or spiritual, that makes the saint seem so vulnerable, so very much turned inside out by the artist, that looking at her feels like a violation. And maybe, just maybe, Anna Jameson’s prissy Victorian assumption about the “vileness” she was seeing was not so far removed from the unease I felt when I saw Bernin’s *Ecstasy of St. Teresa* last summer.



Fig.4: Gianlorenzo Bernini, *Ecstasy of St. Teresa*. Detail. Photograph: Mark Bauer.

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