

Sacred and Profane Entanglements: Religion, Sexuality, and the Body in Baroque Art, Poetry, and Religious Mysticism (1580–1700)

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1. Abstract

The Baroque era (approximately 1580–1700) stands out as a particularly vibrant and contradictory chapter in European cultural history, where the sacred and the secular became deeply intertwined in artistic, poetic, and mystical forms. Following the Catholic Reformation and the Council of Trent, Baroque art aimed to provoke strong emotional reactions, create a sense of immediacy, and achieve spiritual elevation. However, this artistic style often incorporated eroticized figures, sensual imagery, and emotional aesthetics that blurred the lines between spiritual ecstasy and physical desire. This research article delves into the complex relationship between religion, sexuality, and the body in Baroque art, poetry, and mystical literature from 1580 to 1700, positing that the era's aesthetic and theological constructs did not simply place sacred and profane elements side by side but intentionally merged them to create novel forms of devotional experience. Utilizing an interdisciplinary approach that includes art history, literary studies, theology, and cultural theory, the article examines significant artistic creations (especially those by Gian Lorenzo Bernini), mystical texts (notably by Teresa of Ávila and John of the Cross), and Baroque poetry. It reveals that Baroque culture reimaged the human body as a site of both spiritual transcendence and erotic intensity, turning sensuality into a means for divine connection. The study also investigates how this intertwining mirrors broader early modern concerns about discipline, desire, and religious authority during

the Counter-Reformation. By incorporating theoretical insights on affect, embodiment, and mysticism, the article concludes that Baroque culture viewed sexuality and spirituality not as opposing forces but as interconnected elements capable of producing profound devotional and aesthetic experiences.

2. Keywords

Baroque; Counter-Reformation; Mysticism; Sacred Eroticism; Body; Teresa of Ávila; Bernini; Religious Poetry; Embodiment; Sexuality; Aesthetics; Early Modern Europe.

3. Introduction

The Baroque period, spanning approximately from 1580 to 1700, marked the rise of a unique artistic and literary style defined by its emotional depth, dramatic flair, and vibrant energy. Although it is frequently linked to the dominance of Catholic visual culture following the Council of Trent (1545–1563), Baroque art and literature reflect a more intricate interplay between spiritual devotion and physical desire. Instead of dismissing bodily experiences, Baroque aesthetics emphasized the body as a vital conduit for perceiving and enacting divine truth.

This article delves into the intersections of religion, sexuality, and the body within Baroque art, poetry, and mystical writings, positing that Baroque culture fostered a "sacred eroticism" that

questioned modern separations between spiritual purity and sensual enjoyment. During the Catholic Reformation, visual and literary depictions of saints, martyrs, and mystical experiences increasingly employed emotional strategies that encouraged viewers and readers to engage both emotionally and physically. These strategies did more than embellish religious stories; they fundamentally altered the connection between devotion and desire.

A quintessential illustration of this dynamic is Gian Lorenzo Bernini's sculptural masterpiece portraying the ecstatic vision of Teresa of Ávila. This sculpture transforms a mystical experience recounted in Teresa's autobiography into a dramatic display where bodily ecstasy becomes the visual expression of divine union. Scholars have long debated whether such imagery represents spiritual transcendence, erotic undertones, or a combination of both; many have highlighted its "sensually charged" depiction of mystical ecstasy, exposing the tensions between physical sensation and spiritual elevation.

The Baroque era also saw the blossoming of religious poetry and mystical literature that used erotic metaphors—such as marriage, wounds, penetration, and fire—to describe union with God. These metaphors were not merely incidental but formed a central theological vocabulary rooted in medieval bridal mysticism, intensified by Baroque sensorial aesthetics. Mystics and poets increasingly portrayed divine love as a bodily experience, where pain and pleasure merged in ecstatic transcendence.

This study places these phenomena within their broader historical context, particularly the Counter-Reformation's focus on affective devotion and the regulation of bodies through

confession, penitence, and ritual. Simultaneously, Baroque culture was influenced by emerging philosophical and artistic theories of affect and spectatorship, which viewed emotional arousal as crucial to persuasion and spiritual transformation. As a result, Baroque art and literature developed an aesthetics of corporeal immediacy, where the sacred could only be grasped through embodied experience.

The article thus examines three interconnected areas:

Visual art, particularly sculpture and painting;

Baroque religious poetry;

Mystical writings that describe bodily ecstasy and divine union.

By collectively analyzing these areas, the study illustrates that Baroque culture intentionally blurred the line between sacred and profane sensations. The body became a contested yet fertile ground where religious devotion and erotic affect converged, revealing a cultural logic in which sexuality could serve not as a threat to spirituality but as its most potent metaphor and vehicle.

4. Review of Literature

Academic debates concerning the interplay of religion, sexuality, and the body during the Baroque era have developed within various fields such as art history, theology, literary studies, psychoanalysis, and cultural theory. This review of literature brings together significant works that shed light on the contradictory presence of both sacred and profane elements in Baroque culture.

4.1 Early Interpretations: Spiritual Sublimity vs. Sensual Excess

In the early stages of art historical study, Baroque religious art was frequently viewed as a tool for promoting Counter-Reformation devotion. The Council of Trent prioritized clarity, emotional impact, and doctrinal accuracy in religious artworks, urging artists to produce pieces that would inspire faith and uphold Catholic doctrine. Despite this doctrinal emphasis, scholars have observed that sensual imagery remained prevalent in Baroque art. There were concerns about the "affective potency" of lifelike, sensuous figures that could evoke both spiritual awe and forbidden desire.

This duality was especially evident in the analysis of Bernini's creations. Some critics lauded his sculptures as the ultimate expressions of spiritual ecstasy, while others criticized them for their seemingly erotic nature. This conflict between interpretations set the stage for contemporary discussions on sacred eroticism.

4.2 Mysticism and the Erotics of Devotion

The exploration of Christian mysticism has uncovered a deep-rooted tradition of using erotic imagery to articulate the union with the divine. Medieval sources, like the Song of Songs and the works of Bernard of Clairvaux, developed a language of bridal mysticism that depicted the soul as a lover longing for a divine connection. Baroque mystics adopted and amplified this tradition, focusing on sensory experiences—such as warmth, wounds, sweetness, and penetration—as manifestations of divine affection.

Teresa of Ávila's autobiographical accounts of transverberation—where an angel pierces her heart with a fiery spear—served as a textual basis for Baroque visual and literary portrayals of ecstatic devotion. Her claim that the experience was spiritual yet also involved the body became a

pivotal point for interpretation in later academic work.

Contemporary scholars contend that mystical ecstasy should not be viewed merely as sublimated sexuality but rather as a culturally accepted way to convey intense emotional devotion. These interpretations highlight the historical context of early modern Catholicism, where bodily experiences were not seen as separate from spirituality but as an essential part of it.

4.3 The Body in Baroque Visual Culture

Art historians have thoroughly examined the dramatic and sensual aspects of Baroque sculpture and painting. The era's interest in dynamic forms and emotional immediacy is exemplified by Bernini's sculptures, Caravaggio's use of dramatic lighting, and Rubens's voluptuous figures. By transforming sacred stories into theatrical displays, viewers were enabled to engage with religious events as active participants rather than passive onlookers.

Researchers observe that Bernini's sculptural settings often mimicked theatrical stages, encouraging viewers to emotionally engage with scenes of divine interaction. This theatrical approach was in line with Counter-Reformation efforts to persuade the faithful through emotional involvement.

Simultaneously, psychoanalytic and feminist analyses have investigated how these depictions sexualized the bodies of female saints, prompting discussions about gender, power, and the politics of religious imagery. These critiques emphasize the dual role of Baroque art as both a tool for devotion and a platform for cultural negotiation concerning sexuality and authority.

4.4 Literary and Poetic Expressions of Sacred Eroticism

Baroque religious poetry also utilized erotic imagery to convey spiritual yearning. Spanish mystic poets like John of the Cross depicted divine union with images of wounds, flames, and lovers' embraces. These poetic techniques paralleled visual depictions of ecstatic bodies, indicating a wider cultural rationale where sensual language facilitated transcendent experiences. Literary scholars have contended that Baroque poetry fostered an "aesthetics of excess," marked by emotional intensity, paradox, and sensual imagery. This excess was not indicative of moral decay but rather a conscious attempt to express the ineffable through intensified sensory language.

4.5 Theoretical Approaches: Affect, Embodiment, and Transgression

Current theoretical models highlight the significance of emotion and physical experience in comprehending Baroque culture. Utilizing phenomenology and affect theory, researchers suggest that Baroque art aimed to evoke intense reactions from its audience, turning passive viewers into emotionally involved participants. This interactive aesthetic merged the lines between the observer and the artwork, as well as between sacred stories and physical sensations. Additionally, cultural historians view Baroque sacred eroticism as a managed transgression: by integrating sensual imagery within religious settings, the Church could exploit the allure of desire while preserving its doctrinal control. This approach enabled a contradictory blend of discipline with pleasure, and control with ecstasy.

4.6 Summary

The literature presents a multifaceted academic field where interpretations span from spiritual elevation to erotic defiance. Earlier research often attempted to distinguish sacred devotion from sensual imagery, but more recent studies

highlight their inseparability within Baroque culture. This article expands on these perspectives by suggesting that Baroque aesthetics deliberately fostered the intertwining of religion, sexuality, and the body to enhance devotional experiences and address early modern concerns about desire and discipline. This intentional merging challenges traditional dichotomies and prompts a reevaluation of how devotion is embodied and articulated. By emphasizing the physical and emotional aspects of faith, Baroque art and literature demonstrate a dynamic interaction between suppression and liberation. Thus, this intertwining functions not only as an aesthetic approach but also as a cultural negotiation of power, identity, and transgression.

5. Methodology

In this study, an interdisciplinary qualitative approach is employed, merging visual analysis, textual interpretation, and historical contextualization to explore the interconnectedness of religion, sexuality, and the body within Baroque culture. The methodological framework incorporates the following strategies:

5.1 Art Historical Analysis

In-depth examination of significant Baroque artworks is undertaken, concentrating on aspects such as composition, gesture, lighting, spatial configuration, and viewer interaction. Special emphasis is placed on the depiction of ecstatic figures and the theatrical presentation in both sculpture and painting. These examinations uncover the ways in which Baroque artists manipulate visual components to provoke strong emotional reactions and direct the viewer's attention through dynamic movement and contrast. The interaction between light and shadow not only heightens the dramatic impact but also highlights the physical presence and spiritual intensity of the figures portrayed. By meticulously arranging spatial elements, the

artworks offer immersive experiences that dissolve the line between art and observer.

5.2 Literary and Textual Analysis

The research explores Baroque religious poetry and mystical writings, focusing on the use of metaphors, narrative frameworks, and rhetorical techniques that incorporate erotic language to depict spiritual experiences. These works demonstrate how erotic imagery acts as a compelling metaphor to express the depth and closeness of divine interactions. The fusion of sensual and spiritual language blurs traditional boundaries, encouraging readers to perceive mysticism through a profoundly embodied perspective. Additionally, the narrative frameworks frequently parallel the development of a romantic relationship, symbolizing the soul's path toward unity with the divine.

5.3 Historical Contextualization

The study places artistic and literary creations within the socio-religious framework of the Counter-Reformation, investigating the impact of institutional religious goals on aesthetic decisions and depictions of the human form. This analysis uncovers the influence of religious doctrines on both thematic content and stylistic features, using visual and literary methods to uphold moral and spiritual values. The depiction of the human body was meticulously controlled to embody ideas of purity, discipline, and divine order. As a result, artists and writers worked within these limitations to create works that met ecclesiastical standards while also resonating with audiences on an emotional and intellectual level.

5.4 Theoretical Framework

- The examination utilizes:

- Affect theory, which focuses on emotional involvement and sensory perception,
- The phenomenology related to bodily experience,
- Theories of gender and psychoanalysis,
- The cultural history concerning sexuality and religion.

5.5 Table (Methodological Overview)

Table 1. Interdisciplinary Methodological Framework

Domain	Method	Key Focus
Visual Art	Formal and iconographic analysis	Ecstatic bodies, theatrical staging
Literature	Close reading	Erotic metaphors, mystical language
History	Contextual analysis	Counter-Reformation religious culture
Theory	Affect and embodiment	Emotional and bodily experience

6. Analysis

6.1 Baroque Visual Art: The Sacred Body as Spectacle





In Baroque art, one of the most remarkable displays of sacred eroticism is the depiction of ecstatic figures that merge the spiritual with the sensual. Gian Lorenzo Bernini's sculptural work for the Cornaro Chapel exemplifies this blend. Finished in 1652, the ensemble turns a mystical vision into a theatrical display, with Teresa's fainting form becoming the centerpiece of a divine encounter.

Bernini's portrayal is directly inspired by Teresa's autobiographical description of transverberation, where she recounts an angel piercing her heart with a fiery spear, causing both pain and sweetness. This experience is portrayed as both spiritual and physical, a paradox that is central to Baroque aesthetics.

The sculpture's theatrical presentation heightens the viewer's involvement. Concealed lighting creates a dramatic effect similar to a spotlight, while sculpted onlookers in balcony-like settings enhance the feeling of observing a staged performance. This setup transforms a private mystical experience into a public devotional display.

The saint's bodily position—head tilted back, mouth slightly open, and limbs at ease—has led to interpretations highlighting its sensual aspects. Some critics consider the piece one of the most sensually charged works in Baroque art, though discussions continue about whether the imagery is erotic or purely spiritual.

Instead of settling this debate, the sculpture intentionally maintains the tension between physical pleasure and spiritual transcendence. The saint's physical vulnerability and emotional depth encourage empathetic engagement from

viewers, implying that divine experiences must be understood through bodily sensations.

6.2 Baroque Poetry: Language of Desire and Divine Union

Baroque religious poetry often employs erotic imagery to express mystical yearning. Poets like John of the Cross and Francisco de Quevedo use symbols of wounds, flames, kisses, and lovers' embraces to depict divine love. These metaphors turn spiritual experiences into a dramatic narrative of desire and fulfillment.

The frequent use of the wound motif mirrors visual depictions of transverberation, indicating a common symbolic language across artistic and literary forms. The wound symbolizes the point where divine love enters the body, creating both pain and pleasure—a duality that reflects the Baroque interest in paradox.

Additionally, Baroque poets frequently portray the soul's union with God as a mystical marriage, reminiscent of bridal mysticism traditions. This language merges the lines between erotic and spiritual intimacy, suggesting that desire leads to transcendence rather than diverting from it.

6.3 Mystical Writings: Ecstasy and the Embodied Soul





Baroque-era mystical texts offer essential evidence for exploring the intertwining of sexuality and spirituality. Teresa of Ávila's accounts of ecstasy highlight the physical aspect of mystical experiences, suggesting that the body partakes in spiritual joy, even though the experience surpasses mere physical sensation. This viewpoint aligns with a broader theological notion of the body as a conduit for divine grace. Instead of viewing flesh and spirit as opposites, Baroque mysticism sees them as mutually dependent. Ecstasy is portrayed as a threshold state where physical sensation and spiritual union meet. The vivid emotional language found in mystical writings also corresponds with the Baroque aesthetic of emotional intensity. Mystics frequently describe experiences of overwhelming sweetness, burning love, and ecstatic surrender,

emphasizing that divine encounters must be both felt and comprehended.

6.4 Gender and the Eroticized Female Body

In Baroque sacred art, a striking characteristic is the prominence of female saints shown in moments of ecstatic vulnerability. These portrayals have been seen as both empowering and as a means of maintaining patriarchal dominance over women's bodies. On one side, they emphasize women's ability to have direct divine encounters; on the other, they frequently turn female suffering and submission into an aesthetic. The sensual depiction of female mystics' bodies prompts inquiries into the relationship between gender, power, and devotion. Although male mystics also recounted ecstatic experiences, their bodies were seldom depicted with the same sensuality. This difference indicates that Baroque culture utilized the female form as a symbolic arena for addressing the tensions between desire and discipline.

6.5 Suggested Figure and Table Integration





Figure 1: Bernini’s sculptural representation of

mystical

ecstasy.



Figure 2: Visual depictions of female mystics in Baroque painting.

Table 2. Comparative Features of Sacred and Erotic Imagery

Feature	Sacred Function	Erotic Resonance
Wound/Penetration	Divine love entering soul	Sensual bodily imagery
Ecstatic Posture	Spiritual surrender	Physical rapture
Light/Illumination	Divine presence	Sensory stimulation
Theatrical Staging	Public devotion	Spectacular display of body

7. Discussion

The study indicates that Baroque culture did not view religion and sexuality as conflicting elements but rather as complementary aspects of religious experience. This connection can be explained through three interconnected dynamics: emotional persuasion, physical embodiment, and regulated transgression. Emotional persuasion involved the use of imagery and rhetoric filled with emotion, which connected spiritual devotion to sensual experiences. Physical embodiment highlighted the believer's bodily presence, where gestures and sensory involvement intensified religious passion. Regulated transgression permitted the temporary relaxation of normative limits, creating a sacred environment where desire and devotion coexisted within ritual practices.

7.1 Affective Persuasion and Counter-Reformation Devotion

The Catholic Reformation focused on engaging emotions to deepen faith. Baroque artists and writers used vivid imagery and compelling stories to inspire spiritual devotion in their audiences. The human body served as a conduit for experiencing divine truth directly, without relying solely on intellectual understanding. This approach was part of the larger Counter-Reformation initiative to reinforce religious authority through persuasive displays. Artistic depictions of ecstatic bodies acted as educational tools, showcasing the transformative impact of divine love while also captivating audiences with their sensory allure.

7.2 Embodiment and the Mystical Experience

Baroque mysticism questions the separation of body and soul by emphasizing their interconnectedness. Mystical texts argue that spiritual experiences are physically felt, resulting in sensations like warmth, discomfort, sweetness, and ecstasy. These accounts propose a phenomenology of divine interaction that is

grounded in physical perception. This focus on the physical aspect mirrors early modern theological discussions regarding human nature. By incorporating physical sensations into spiritual experiences, Baroque mysticism supported the unity of body and soul and recognized sensory experiences as a valid means to achieve transcendence.

7.3 Controlled Transgression: The Sacred Erotics of Devotion

Baroque devotion's use of erotic language and imagery can be seen as a way to manage transgression. By embedding sensual imagery within religious settings, the culture harnessed the allure of desire while keeping its expression in check. This approach enabled the articulation of powerful emotional and physical experiences without challenging religious authority. The blending of the sacred with the profane played a strategic role: it converted potentially disruptive desires into means for spiritual growth. Instead of repressing sensuality, Baroque culture channeled it towards divine purposes.

7.4 Implications for Understanding Early Modern Culture

In Baroque culture, the intertwining of religion, sexuality, and the body highlights wider early modern concerns regarding discipline, desire, and authority. The artistic advancements of the era mirror a cultural phase where religious organizations aimed to utilize emotional influence while upholding moral authority. Additionally, this intertwining questions contemporary beliefs about the division between spirituality and sexuality. Baroque culture implies that religious devotion can not only coexist with but also rely on physical and sensual experiences.

8. Conclusion

The Baroque era (1580–1700) marks a distinct historical phase where the sacred and the secular were not just placed side by side but were deeply interwoven. Through the mediums of art, poetry, and mystical literature, Baroque culture crafted an intricate language of sacred eroticism, positioning the human body as a pivotal site for divine interaction.

This study has shown that Baroque aesthetics purposefully obscured the lines between spiritual transcendence and sensual experience. It employed theatrical displays, emotive language, and vivid imagery to provoke strong devotional reactions. The fusion of religion and sexuality in Baroque culture was neither accidental nor contradictory; rather, it was a calculated approach grounded in Counter-Reformation theology, mystical traditions, and emerging theories of affect and embodiment.

Examining visual art, poetic expressions, and mystical texts reveals that the Baroque body embodies both the sacred and the profane: it serves as a conduit for divine grace and a center of intense sensory experience. The ecstatic portrayals of saints, erotic imagery in religious poetry, and vivid depictions of mystical union collectively illustrate that early modern spirituality embraced the complexity of human desire rather than rejecting it.

In essence, the intertwining of religion, sexuality, and the body in Baroque culture challenges contemporary divisions that separate the sacred from the sensual. It encourages us to rethink how physical experiences can act as potent channels for spiritual expression and transformation. By recognizing this complex interaction, we gain a

deeper understanding of the cultural and theological forces that shaped one of the most visually and emotionally captivating periods in European history.

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