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EROTIC DEVOTIONAL POETRY: RESISTING NEOPLATONISM IN PROTESTANT CHRISTIANITY

by

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Approved_____

Date_____

ABSTRACT

A genre best known for its appearance in Eastern religions, erotic devotional poetry uses sensual imagery to access an experience of the divine. Historically, many Christian traditions, excluding the mystical ones, have pushed back against such literature, seeing it as an impure model that degrades divinity by association with the physical, especially in the specific physical ritual of sex. This stance is a hallmark of Protestant Christianity. The idea of a dichotomy and hierarchy between soul and body, though, comes not from theology but from the introduction theologians made between Western philosophy, particularly Platonic Dualism, and Christianity, which was then solidified by Enlightenment ideals. My project identifies the theological and philosophical basis for erotic devotional poems and looks to the way that they, particularly in the writing of Rainer Maria Rilke, have resisted the intrusion of Neoplatonism upon spiritual practice.

PREFACE

A voluptuous woman in her bed
can praise God,
even if she is nothing but voluptuous and happy
Adélia Prado, "Consecration"

The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!" Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds.
Matthew 11:19 (ESV)

If the Son of God Himself, the Word made Flesh, is too much of the flesh, well then may God have mercy on us all. Jesus of Nazareth, the catalyst of the Christian faith, was accused of eating too much, drinking too much, and being too sociable with all the wrong sorts of people. His first miracle, according to the Gospel of John, was turning water into wine at a wedding to keep the party going after all of the non-miraculous wine had run out. This vision of a sensuous, life-of-the-party Christ is not one familiar to the Protestant tradition that I was raised in. I was raised on Matthew's account of the Sermon on the Mount, which addresses spiritual hunger, rather than on Luke's description of the Sermon on the Plain, which has a social focus that looks to end physical hunger[1]. Faith, in light of that spiritual bent, is a system of ideals set apart from physical being. That ascetic focus on the soul is one many Western readers will recognize, one that only became explicit to me after witnessing other practices of worship than the dispassionate ones my church often taught.

This awakening of sorts happened during my junior year of college when I studied abroad at the University of Hyderabad in Telangana, India. Before I can describe how that experience triggered my research, though, I have to acknowledge that my writing comes out of a particular location: I am a college-educated, middle-class, Anglo female. I'm also an aroace[2] Christian. This book[3] is informed by my experience and may reflect its limits, but my hope is that it can also speak to others whose identities are located differently. That

[1] For further exploration into different culturally-influenced readings of the Bible, I recommend the book *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes* by Brandon J. O'Brien and E. Randolph Richards.
[2] "Aroace" is shorthand in the queer community for aromantic and asexual. The term is used to describe someone who does not experience romantic or sexual attraction, or experiences it in a limited manner.
[3] The following thesis is, of course, not a whole book, but I refer to the project as one because there is much more to the question than I can fully explore in a simple introduction and chapter focused on a single poet. This subject I have stumbled into deserves its own field, one that doesn't exist yet outside of the scholarship of Rhema Hokama. So, to stay on subject, I must continually reference connections that have not been fleshed out as if they exist in the rest of my imaginary book.

said, literal location greatly influenced my course of study, culminating in an exploration of the relationship between erotic devotional poetry and Neoplatonism.

For the purpose of this book, I have developed a working definition of **erotic devotional poetry** that describes it as poetry expressing worship or prayer through ***eros***, which includes not only desire or sexual imagery, but also the structures and language of human relationship. In Hyderabad, a center of Sufi mysticism, I was introduced to a long history of syncretism between Hindu and Muslim traditions, both of which are known for their use of erotic devotional poetry in worship. In fact, most of the erotic devotional poetry one will find, and the only poems that will come up on the first page of a Google search, will originate in Hinduism. Studying in such a setting, I began to wonder why that was. What about my religion (Protestant Christian, and within that, Presbyterian) made imagery of the body so inappropriate, so utterly indecent, especially as a way to talk about the divine? Why was the sensual used to glorify other gods, while for my God sensual language was considered an indignity that She[4] would suffer?

As a Western, Protestant Christian, I had internalized the idea that the spiritual was separate from and superior to the world we live in. But that belief is not scripturally supported nor reflected in the acts of Christ. At least, it appears in far fewer instances in the Bible than it does in texts with similar cultural impact, like the writings of Hellenistic philosophers. Christianity, as it grew, was accepted into cultures with pre-existing philosophies. Thus, the Christianity that was handed down to me had been reconciled with Greco-Roman philosophy and social structures soon after its conception, thousands of years ago. And it continued to update with the changing worldviews. The reason for this conjunction of theology and secular thought is that, as a religion is proselytized, explanations of it are given in terms of the science and philosophy that people already understand to be true, and leaders will often emphasize their connections so that people will grasp the plausibility of a new belief system.

But if those exclusionary, ascetic demands that were voiced by the Pharisees while they accused Christ of gluttony—and were later voiced by Neoplatonists, modernists, and fundamentalists—exist apart from the Word and represent instead the culture that surrounds Christ's message, then readers are left to wonder: *where did those demands come from*? And how can a continued juncture of words and the material (or the sensual) help to heal such division? Those are the questions I aim to answer.

[4] While God is often referred to with a masculine pronoun, the God of the universe is not limited to one cultural construction of gender and is, in the Bible, sometimes referred to with feminine metaphors like that of a hen (Matthew 23:37; Luke 13:43). Throughout this book, I make a point of interchanging masculine and feminine pronouns with the androgynous "They/Them," which can function as a singular pronoun while simultaneously referring to the triune nature of God.

INTRODUCTION

The poem is the most bodily of the literary arts, the most erotic.

Ross Gay

There is a sensuality built into poetry by its use of line and by its foregrounding of sound, and that sensuality pairs well with the attentive character of reverence, making erotic devotional poetry as a genre less far-fetched or paradoxical than imagined. Really, across the globe, erotic devotional poetry wouldn't strike the average reader as far-fetched at all; it is a particular brand of Platonic Dualism, evolving into Cartesian Dualism, that put the reasoned reverent and the ecstatic erotic at odds. So what does all this philosophy jargon that I'm throwing around mean, and what place does it have in theology and poetry? If you care for the history, read on. Otherwise, you can skip ahead to a take closer look at the selected poets.

Now, for the definitions: **Platonic Dualism** is the oldest written model that accounts for the soul and the body existing as separate entities, with one continuing on after death, making the other (the body) not the true person. The soul is not described in such a way in the Torah. Instead, this idea of the soul comes, then, from Plato's *Republic*, written in 380 BCE. In the *Republic*, the physical world is compared to shadows on a cave wall, with ideal forms being the caster. A person is defined by their soul instead of their presence. Furthermore, those defining forms that cast the shadows are not present—not what we see in day to day life—so the world that feels the most solid to us is, in fact, a blinding illusion. This idea of a being beyond being gives rise to a hierarchy and binary between the physical and the spiritual or mental, "But this notion of the being beyond being does not come from theology" (Levinas 364). And it's not an idea that Plato supports in all of his works, either—his *Symposium* is rife with rowdy, quite physical, hermeneutics[5], and the dualism of his *Republic* is contradicted in his *Phaedo* and *Timaeus* (von Thaden 195). Nevertheless, it's a model that formed the base of **Neoplatonism**[6]. The binary nature of Platonic Dualism is one Neoplatonic theologians grasped onto and worked into their own representations of human relations with the divine.

Two major Neoplatonist voices that imported Platonic Dualism into their faith were Saint Augustine of Hippo and Saint Gregory of Nyssa, who wrote between the fourth and fifth centuries CE. The texts I draw from primarily in this summary of their teachings are Augustine's *Confessions* and St. Gregory's dialogue, modeled after the dialogic style of Plato, titled *On the Soul and the Resurrection*[7].

Though in the *Confessions* Augustine purports to have found philosophy's answers lacking in his education, he still introduces into his faith the idea of soul and body as separate entities, with a hierarchy

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[5] Hermeneutics are methodologies of interpretation or ways of accessing knowledge. Though usually used in the context of reading literature, the term can also be used in reference to a way of interpreting knowledge gained through experience, too.

[6] Neoplatonism is a philosophical and religious system developed by the followers of Plotinus in the 3rd century AD based on the teachings of Plato.

[7] These writings, which advocate for celibacy, were circulated over 600 years before the Second Lateran Council, where a ruling was approved that forbids priests to marry.

ordering them. In Book 10 he writes, "Clearly there is a body and a soul in me, one exterior, one interior… But the interior part is the better…I tell you, my soul, you are better, since you vivify the whole bulk of the body" (Augustine 10.6). This way of ordering reality should be familiar to anyone who has read Plato's *Republic* (or my stellar, if incomplete, summary of it immediately prior), in which the "soul" is invented as an immaterial and immortal substance constituting the true person. Augustine supported much of what he read in Plato's writings, to the extent where he believed that all fundamental truths could be found in Plato's work, except, of course, for the Incarnation (Augustine 7.21). I'm not sure exactly how familiar you, dear reader, are with the basic tenets of Christianity, but the Incarnation is kind of a big deal. One that vindicates the human body, and one that binds Christ to humanity's experience of the temporal and the spatial, thus affirming the physical and transcending any binary between divine nature and humanity through Christ's existence as both fully human and fully God[8]. The incarnation, like erotic devotional poetry, thus resists Platonic Dualism's binary, which was introduced by early theologians, such as Augustine.

St. Gregory, even more than Augustine, saw the body as a wild thing to be controlled by the mind. Drawing upon Plato's example of mind as charioteer, his dialogue warns Christians not to let their mind become tangled in the reins (Gregory 76). Whereas Augustine makes the distinction that the mind may be led astray by the body, but the body is not inherently evil for its temptation, St. Gregory depicts the body as something that will drag the mind down and turn humanity into "beasts" (58). He argued that much of human emotion, too, is not "essential" to our being since there is, "clearly no such thing as desire or anger appearing in the divine nature" (Gregory 51). St. Gregory wrote a brilliantly constructed dialogue, but that statement is not scripturally supported. It ignores the many biblical instances of God's wrath and Her feelings of loss or disappointment that can only follow the desire for a different outcome[9]. This silencing of emotion limits our ability to describe and relate to God. The silencing also explains, however, how bodied, emotionally-laden imagery relating to the Christian deity became considered obscene and how the idea of a "Christian love" became a dispassionate and impersonal one.

Before I can dive into the disembodied, distanced take on Christian love that so abhors erotic devotional poetry, though, the solidification of Platonic Dualism into Cartesian Dualism[10] must still be mentioned. **Cartesian Dualism** was birthed from a Neoplatonist take on the soul by René Descartes. In his *Meditations* in the seventeenth century, Descartes calls into question his experience of the world, removing certainty layer by layer from his surroundings, his senses, and his body itself, to reveal the single fact that he could be certain of: the fact that he was thinking. Existence, therefore, becomes grounded in thought instead of, well, bodily existence. That model greatly resembles the Platonic description of physical experience as being

[8] St. Peter Chrysologus posited that the humanity of Christ is the original sacrament from which all the others flow. He wrote "That the Creator is in his creature and God is in the flesh brings dignity to man without dishonor to him who made him" (Chrysologus).
[9] Exodus 34:6-7; Numbers 11:33; 32:13; and many more Old Testament examples abound.
[10] Cartesian Dualism is also commonly referred to as Substance Dualism or Mind-Body Dualism.

only a shadow on the wall while true meaning, the ideal, exists outside of the sensual. This location of identity in thought instead of body is one that's not accessible to many peoples who find their identities located by physical experience, by class, by hunger, and by treatment of their bodies (Mignolo). Descartes, coming from a place of privilege as a well-off white male, settled on his conclusions about certainty while sitting in slippers in front of his fire—his philosophy may very well have turned out differently if those fuzzy slippers had gone up in flames (it is difficult to dismiss the reality of excruciating third-degree burns)—but he passed the evening unscathed, so, despite the limited nature of his argument for true existence, it was still embraced as the founding stance of Western Modernity. His philosophy served to reaffirm Neoplatonist rankings of body and soul, which value the rationality of the mind above any possibly deceptive senses. Human physicality is less important, in this model, than the ability to refine rational thought, since that is a more difficult and active task than any passive sensory reception.

While most Neoplatonists and modernist thinkers insist that ideas should be valued over their actualization—and by doing so stick to that same hierarchy which erotic devotional poetry sets out to dismantle—theologian David Jensen has a different take: "it is not more difficult," he writes, "but easier, to love humanity (or God) in the abstract…as the psalms of lament attest, the real test of our love for God is to keep loving an intensely personal God in spite of and in the midst of affliction that comes from God. Love is easy, in other words, until it takes a uniquely human face or the long history of covenant with God" (Jensen 24). In this quote, Jensen is responding to a belief popularized in Protestant Christianity by Anders Nygren's 1930 book *Agape and Eros*—he is referring to the belief that it is more Godly to love humanity in general than to love the individual.

A distant and aloof interpretation of ***agape***[11], in Nygren's book, is valued above the immediacy of *eros*. Until that point in the early 1900s, *eros* had primarily been dismissed only informally for its association with the "sensual"; *Agape and Eros*, though, formalized the more important *agape* as a distinctly Christian sort of love. Nygren went so far as to assert that "nothing but that which bears the impress of agape has a right to be called Christian love" (92), an assertion that placed *agape* at the center of Christianity itself in the consciousness of Western Protestant Christians. This forced antagonism of *eros* and *agape* harkens back to the age-old (Augustinian-old) rivalry of body and soul, with the clear champion being soul, and *agape* reigning as the perfect soul-love. Augustine, at least, strove for a synthesis of *eros* and *agape*, but Nygren dismissed the synthesis as illegitimate, instead leaning into Martin Luther's call for a theocentric love, which rejects any attempts to ennoble self-love and which was meant to distinguish Catholic beliefs about *caritas*[12] from Protestant ones during the **Protestant Reformation** (Kim 34-35). In his text *God, Desire, and a Theology of Human Sexuality*, Jensen

[11] *Agape* is a term used in the Septuagint (the Koine Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible), and in the New Testament, where it indicates the unconditional love of Christ. It is also used in Plato's *Symposium* and takes on the meaning of what is now commonly referred to as "Platonic Love," or the love of friendship.

[12] *Caritas* is the descriptor for an ideal Christian love for humankind. Augustine believed that caritas involved both *agape* and *eros*. Luther is often interpreted as dismissing *eros* from the equation altogether.

writes that "It is better in the tradition's eyes to love another selflessly than to affirm self (and others) through eros," (7). Tradition, though, may not extend as far back as many are led to believe.

Many of the beliefs I have discussed were only cemented during the **Enlightenment**[13] in Europe or written into being in the early twentieth century. Thusly, academics often warn their peers and pastors against reading current philosophical trends back onto our histories: "too often modern scholars read a Cartesian ontological dualism back into the writings," writes Robert H. von Thaden Jr. in his article "Glorify God in Your Body" (195)[14].

Poets, however, often resisted this construction of faith that von Thaden cautions against. German poet Rainer Maria Rilke, especially, seemed aware of the way these oppositions between types of love and between body and soul had crept into Christianity instead of originating within it. "This increased ransacking of life," he writes in his "Letter from the Young Worker," "is it not the consequence of the devaluation of the Here and Now which has been going on for centuries?" This devaluation is not what he believes God meant for humanity. Instead, he argues that the "the gist of God's great user's guide" is to "take the Here and Now in one's hand, lovingly, with the heart, full of wonder" (75). Indeed approaching the "Here and Now" with wonder is a habit poets through history have identified as the basis of their poetics[15].

Diving into this distinction between abstract love and embodied love for the Here and Now—the type one sees in erotic devotional poetry—monk, poet, and social activist Thomas Merton writes in his book *Silence, Joy* that *agape* and *eros* should feed into each other: "It was because the saints were absorbed in God that they were truly capable of seeing and appreciating created things, and it was because they loved Him alone that they alone loved everybody" (25). A distinctly "Christian" love, in his vision, should be one animated by God's love for creation. A greater devotion to God should not result in transcending the earth by leaving it behind or casting it aside, but rather result in infusing the earth with transcendence. The "Holy" is gifted rather than ranked. Addressing such imported hierarchies as those found in Neoplatonism, Merton writes that "In trying to believe in their ego as something 'holy' these fanatics look upon everything else as unholy" (24). Upholding the Enlightenment's ego or the immaterial soul as transcendent can be damaging. In order to maintain a hierarchy, something must be classified as "less than," even if that means going against the mandate presented to Peter in Acts 10:15: "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." Still, in the time since Neoplatonic theologians like Augustine and St. Gregory incorporated the Platonic definitions of body and mind/soul into the Christian lexicon, the body has been seen as an impure appendage to personality. An

[13] The Enlightenment was a European movement in the late 17th and 18th centuries that emphasized individuality and reason as the basis for learning.
[14] The article, which discusses misconceptions about and faulty portrayals of Christian asceticism, provides several valuable resources for looking to the way monks have practiced asceticism to refine and strengthen their bodies rather than punish them for existing.
[15] *Poetry in Theory: An Anthology 1900-2000*, edited by Jon Cook, is an excellent source for the collected poetics of influential Western poets and critics.

embodied love, therefore, would be classified as impure, or even obscene, compared to the abstract soul-love that is *agape*.

Probably my favorite quote on the idea of obscenity comes from Marcella Althaus-Reid's book *Indecent Theology*. She describes the obscene as the uncovered. "Obscenity," she writes, "does not renounce the viscosity of materiality but sets it free by exposing it. Obscenity leads us towards a theology of exhibitionalism, which is a very encouraging sign for the task of affirming reality and the suppressed aesthetics of Christianity" (Althaus-Reid 111). One example she provides is the dark-skinned Christ of Black Theology, which is seen as obscene because it uncovers racism under the guise of a white Jesus (Althaus-Reid 111). Likewise, erotic poetry exposes Protestant Christianity's tense relationship with the earthly. This tension did not bar all eroticism from Christianity, however. Erotic devotional poetry was often uplifted when it came from mystical or sacramental writers, and mysticism stands as a veritable force against the influence of Neoplatonist ideas and modernist rationality.

Mysticism is an experience of, or at least perception of, union with the divine. This experience often has a sensory element—it is felt in the body and described with the ecstatic diction of the body. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* identifies mysticism as a "practice of religious ecstasies," which occur during "alternate states of consciousness." Mystical experiences thus take place on the physical plane and do not require a separation of soul and body since the presence of the divine is concrete. A loosened consciousness allows contact with the divine in a model opposite to the Neoplatonists' and modernists' model. "Mysticism," writes Jensen, "doesn't flee the terrestrial; it embraces it because this earth, this flesh, these bodies, are named and claimed by God. Indeed, we encounter God through the terrestrial… mysticism blesses the ordinary in and of themselves, as objects of the divine love" (29). While Plato and St. Gregory both warned that the mind may become caught in the reins of the body and be dragged from its chariot, believing that people could approach ideals or their deity only by controlling their body and directing their mind, mystic thought unravels the knots that the mind, in its quest for control, has wound around the body.

Believing in a God beyond comprehension, mystics focus more on the human *experience* of the divine than on apologetics. Some take on what they view to be problematic philosophy directly, like Sufi mystic Shah Siraj Awrangabadi, who wrote an indictment of both Eastern and Western thinkers in one of his ghazals: "He forgets anxieties of both worlds who drinks from love's bottle / He forgets the investigations of Jamshed and the delusions of Aristotle" (Kugle 263). Others, like Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite[16], were themselves philosophers who upheld mystical theologies. Dionysius advocated for depictions of Christ that emphasized what he was not (National Gallery). "That One which is beyond all thought," writes Dionysius, "is inconceivable by all thought." Dionysius's thought leaves conception of the divine to a language beyond existing

[16] Also known as Pseudo-Denys, Dionysius lived in the fifth or sixth century and wrote in the voice of first-century Dionysius the Areopagite, who was a judge in the court of Athens converted by St. Paul.

models of truth. Like mysticism. Or like the language of sensuality, intimacy, and relationality that is intrinsic to erotic devotional poetry.

Poetry in particular is a useful way—for mystics, and for everyone else—to enter this space beyond thought. As Ross Gay asserted at a panel titled "Black Poets on Poetics": "The poem is the most bodily of the literary arts, the most erotic." The poem is a form meant to foreground its own existence even as it conveys information. Reliance on literary devices such as metaphor and meter, along with the use of blank space, draws attention to poetry's unconventional use of language. The experience of reading itself thus becomes important; it is not an activity undertaken to acquire information alone but is also a way of enjoying the perception. Poetry as such intersects idea and physicality. Experience, here, finds itself equal to the abstract realm of ideas to which Neoplatonism gives authority.

While conventional authorial language often enforces conventions, poetic language can shatter and expand them. In the act of destabilizing a reader's usual expectations for imagery and formatting, poems are subject to increased opportunity for destabilization of other assumptions. One way poets foster this destabilization is through ambiguous or metaphorical language. By balancing two alternate, often paradoxical, interpretations, a metaphor can transcend usual binaries. Poetry can exist as both interpretations *simultaneously*. This residence in ambiguous states resists Neoplatonic binary reasoning. Despite attempts to assign more value to what the metaphor stands for than to the metaphor itself, ambiguous language resists reduction. A singular interpretation is possible—light, for example, exists as both a particle and a wave, but can only be observed as one or the other—yet a singular interpretation is faulty in the way that it ignores alternate possibility (light is still known to exist as both particle and wave simultaneously, despite our limited observational ability). A more literary example would be the *Song of Songs*[17]. Theologian David Jensen points out that, "Though much of Christian tradition has interpreted the Song allegorically, and much contemporary biblical interpretation focuses on the Song as a poem of sexual love, it represents a false dichotomy to choose one interpretation over the other" (13). The Christian God Themself is triune, representing diversity in unity, three in one, and They are not meant to be broken down to find out which one is "real." Ambiguity—read, *Mystery*—is intrinsic to the deity to which Christians are devoted.

Poetry is a form well suited to this devotion, making it a prime place for the devotional to intersect with the erotic. It is a genre that for millennia took on the shape of set forms, as prayers and liturgy do. Scholar Rhema Hokama writes extensively on the way that devotional literature[18] shaped the erotic in Shakespeare's poems. In a recent article in *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Hokama describes how Shakespeare defended his habit of

[17] The Song of Songs, also known as the Song of Solomon, is often attributed to the biblical character King Solomon, but the poem greatly resembles many Sumerian and Egyptian love songs composed by women of an earlier time. Egyptian love poems of a similar structure date from 1550-1080 BCE (when the Jews were purportedly in Egypt). Female singers of erotic verses were also known in Israel, where they were condemned by the prophets. It may be that the allegorical teaching of the poem by rabbis is all that saved it from being condemned like the rest. For more background on the Song, I suggest Sam Torode's translation of and introduction to *The Song of Songs*.

[18] Specifically the *Book of Common Prayer*. Other scholars working in this field are Ramie Targoff and Timothy Rosendale.

seemingly rewriting the same love poems over and over again in his Sonnet 108: "like prayers diuine," Shakespeare writes, "I must each day say ore the very same, / Counting no old thing old" ("Love Rites" 199). Poetry, by blessing the ordinary and embracing the concrete details of the terrestrial, is devoted to love in its many irreducible forms, and its form gives it the feeling of prayer[19]. With its inherent irreducibility, devotionalism, and physicality, poetry is the perfect locale for resistance to Neoplatonism in Protestant Christianity, and it's a good form to look to for healing dichotomies and subverting hierarchies.

Throughout the course of my research, I have come to suppose that maybe the reason Plato was so disgruntled by the arts isn't that they inaccurately depict true forms—that they lie—but rather that their many ways of being subvert the order he tries to impose on our world.

This book, the culmination of my research, examines the work of five poets: 1) the author of the Song of Songs, 2) English poet John Donne, 3) Spanish mystic Saint Teresa of Ávila, 4) German poet Rainer Maria Rilke, and 5) contemporary Brazilian writer Adélia Prado. The erotic devotional work examined ranges from the tenth century BCE to the modern day and across a variety of Christian traditions. The canonized Song of Songs functions simultaneously as an allegory and a love story; John Donne's sonnets take on the form of a love poem in their address to God while approaching God as a woman to be won over; Saint Teresa of Ávila shifts focus from the Fall of humanity onto relationship with the divine by painting the crucifixion as bride price instead of penal substitution[20]; Rilke upends usual Neoplatonic binaries (light/dark, feminine/masculine, *agape/eros*); and Adélia Prado in her work asserts that "it is the soul that is erotic." All take a step, by combining words and the sensual, toward challenging the divisive reasoning of Neoplatonism and toward describing the divine and the world as beings worthy of love.

[19] Contemporary poet Natasha Oladokun speaks often of how poetry is a spiritual practice, each prayer a poem.

[20] *Bride price* is a term used to describe the traditional practice of a gift given to the family of the bride upon marriage. In biblical times men would often offer their labor before the marriage as an alternative to the bride price (Genesis 29-30: the story of Jacob, Leah, and Rachel). This practice, rather than "paying" for the bride was meant to acknowledge that a woman was a valuable resource in her home and would be missed. *Penal substitution* is a Protestant understanding of atonement in which a price was demanded for sin and Christ paid the price. By focusing on the crucifixion as bride price (see, "To a Professed Nun" and "In a Profession"), Teresa of Ávila makes the moment about relationship instead of demanded violence.

TIMELINE

~900	First iteration of the Song of Songs
~500	**Song of Songs** appears as finalized version in the Torah
~428 to 348	Plato (Platonic Dualism)
BCE / CE	
~27 to 36	Christ's Ministry
66 to 110	Gospels of the New Testament are written
335 to 394	St. Gregory of Nyssa (Neoplatonism)
354 to 430	St. Augustine of Hippo (Neoplatonism)
~400	New Testament texts are commonly accepted as canon
1483 to 1546	Martin Luther (Protestant Reformation)
1515 to 1582	**St. Teresa of Ávila**
1572 to 1631	**John Donne**
1596 to 1650	René Descartes (Cartesian Dualism)
1875 to 1926	**Rainer Maria Rilke**
1890 to 1978	Anders Nygren
1935 to Present	**Adélia Prado**

RAINER MARIA RILKE: BREAKING THE BINARY

You, my own deep soul,
trust me. I will not betray you.
My blood is alive with many voices
telling me I am made of longing. (I, 39)

those who find you
bind you to image and gesture.

I would rather sense you
as the earth senses you.
In my ripening
ripens
what you are. (II, 15)

The poems in Rainer Maria Rilke's *Book of Hours*[21] were read, originally, only by the woman to whom he dedicated them. They were deemed too personal to publish; to him, they were *Gebete*, prayer[22]. The theology of Rilke's poetry has been of interest to people from many faiths and spiritual backgrounds, not only to those from the Protestant Christian background that this book examines in particular. Rilke was not a Protestant—he was spiritual, raised Catholic, and reflective on his observance of Russian Orthodox tradition—but his poetry pushes back against the trends seen in Protestant Christianity, making his work relevant to this discussion. Most of the poems in *Book of Hours,* which has three sections, subvert conventional descriptions of God and interrogate the way we conceive of Them using explicitly sensual language.

Regarded as a master of German lyrical poetry for *Book of Hours*, Rilke attracts readers with his prayers that voice Sufi devotionalism, Buddhist imagery of Way, emptiness, and reflection, and Hindu ideas of creative production that involve an almost tantric[23], relationally-bound play between energies. Piercing all those pieces, though, is Rilke's dedication to broadening our language for God. He acknowledged in his poetry that "There is no image I could invent / that [God's] presence would not eclipse." He found it best, "then, simply / to say the names of things" (I, 60). This acknowledgement stems from Rilke's belief that using conventional

[21] For this book, I am relying on the translations from German by Joanna Macy and Anita Barrows, finalists for the Pen/West Translation Award and widely cited by English-speaking Rilke academics. Though these translations depart from the formatting of the original poems, the translators' notes are insightful and make a convincing case for the layout they settled on.
[22] The introduction to *Rilke's Book of Hours* was particularly helpful to me in contextualizing Rilke's poetry.
[23] Tantric play, though the term is now primarily about sex, refers to the unification of Hindu god Shiva's masculine energies and the goddess Shakti's feminine energies that culminates in the birth of the cosmos. It is, above all, a celebration of diversity within harmony.

descriptions for God silences other, unvoiced, aspects of divine nature and that this silencing limits our ability to describe (and speak with) God. Upon instance of the "first murder," writes Rilke, "A screaming shattered the voices // that had just come together to speak you / … And what they have stammered ever since / are fragments / of your ancient name" (I, 9). Rilke seeks to fill in the gaps, knowing full well that God is too vast to be bound and named with only one voice or hermeneutic approach but only sensed within voices coming together[24].

This particular puzzle of describing God, and especially of depicting Christ, who is both fully divine and fully human, is one artists have struggled with for millennia. One tactic that artists have utilized is creating unconventional metaphors for God (Rilke was big on upending conventions). These metaphors draw attention to their own incompleteness, causing the audience to re-examine all previous descriptions of God for similar gaps (National Gallery). Rilke in his *Book of Hours* subverts three Platonic binaries usually used in descriptions of God: God as light, as opposed to darkness; God as masculine father, as opposed to feminine mother; and God as the object of *agape* (or platonic love), as opposed to the object of *eros* (or sensual love). By transgressing these usual divisions, Rilke frees God from our attempts to comprehend[25] Her. His poems, both erotic and devotional, thus bridge dualist division.

Rilke was well aware of the effect the Enlightenment and Cartesian dualism had on Christian tradition. He writes of his contemporary Christian academics and practitioners: "They are so zealous they cannot stop making the Here and Now, which we should take pleasure and have trust in, base and worthless...they deliver the earth into the hands of those who are prepared to turn it, the failed, suspect earth which is good for nothing better, to temporal, quick profit" (*Letters* 74). Rilke, before postmodernism, was a postmodernist. He felt the capitalist impulse of rationality and resisted its way of devaluing life. Instead, he dedicated his poetry to loving and observing the natural world and to subverting expectations and easy categorizations. Like the later postmodern theorist Jacques Derrida[26], Rilke aims to affirm the incomprehensible: "If we surrendered / to earth's intelligence / we could rise up rooted, like trees. // Instead we entangle ourselves / in knots of our own making" (II, 16). By combing through three usual binaries (light/dark, masculine/feminine, and *agape*/*eros*), Rilke unknots the impositions that distance us from God.

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[24] Many Unitarian Universalist churches will read and teach from Rilke, but other denominations still mine his work for spiritual guidance as well. It should also be noted, though, that Rilke does not advocate for communal art so much as each voice embracing its own solitude and presenting a unique perspective from the subsequent alienation. Individual works then together function to form a fuller picture.

[25] I use "comprehension" here in the sense that Emmanuel Levinas elaborates on in his piece "Ethics and the Face": to "comprehend" is a Western, domineering way of knowing, of being able to completely wrap your head around and "master" a subject. This colonial language is always problematic, but especially in regard to any attempt to know God.

[26] "Differánce" is an essay by Derrida that goes into more detail on the value of the incomprehensible.

THE DARK SIDE

You, darkness, of whom I am born—

I love you more than the flame
that limits the world
to the circle it illuminates
and excludes all the rest.

But the dark embraces everything:
shapes and shadows, creatures and me,
people, nations—just as they are… (I, 11)

God said "Let there be light," but They spoke from the darkness. First born was the light, but it was birthed by the darkness: "You, darkness, of whom I am born." Rilke's description of God as darkness, in this light, should not catch us off guard, but it does because Western culture equates darkness with evil and the unreasonable or unknown. While watching *Star Wars*, viewers know without explanation that "the Dark Side of the Force" is unquestionably the evil one (though all that may change in Episode IX...). Darkness is seen as something to fear since it hides beings within it that we cannot understand. Darkness is the realm of the Other. Alternately, the Age of Reason was a taxonomic[27] escape from darkness: it began with the En*light*enment. Yet Rilke calls God darkness, and he sets a significant number of poems in his *Book of Hours*, especially from the first section, "Book of a Monastic Life," in the nighttime.

Rilke does not posit this space as pure mystery or unknowingness, though. He does not define it merely as the opposite of something else. Rilke's God of darkness is dark like soil. Like mulch, like nourishment. Darkness is not always emptiness or unknowingness or mystery—though it may be construed that way—it is also rich, and life giving, and full. The place a seed germinates is dark. The womb is dark. The tomb is dark. Departing from the Neoplatonic trend in spirituality that values light over darkness, which paints light as rationality and transcendence, Rilke describes God as "the one whose darkness / is darker than night, the only one / who keeps vigil with no candle, / and is not afraid" (II, 3). A God in darkness is one unbounded by human concerns or fears—They, an omnipotent, omniscient presence, do not need light to know what lies next.

This sort of darkness is a deepening to match light's "elevation." God posited as a grounding being—one who embraces all without discrimination—is a radical stance coming from someone so entrenched in

[27] Enlightenment philosophers emphasized the value of categorizing all knowable facts. Everything in this model of knowing could be sorted into *taxonomies*.

Western thought. But darkness can be in places where light cannot. The inside of the human body is a dark, intimate place. A place God took on in Christ.

Moreover, in Rilke's depiction of darkness, light becomes a discriminating force, a limited one that can only illuminate a few beings while all others are cast in shadow. Flame "limits the world." Light, like Platonic and Enlightenment rationality, can only account for what we already see; it cannot imagine what is beyond us. Relying only on the metaphor of God as light limits Them to the illuminated circle of our own minds. While light is a valuable metaphor for God, Rilke resists a reliance on it that "excludes all the rest."

MRS. DOUBTFIRE[28]

One metaphor for God used so often that it has come to exclude all other interpretation is that of God as father. The metaphor, like that of light, is indeed a valuable one, but the way it dominates discourse has led to an undervaluing of God's feminine representations. It has also been used to justify a hierarchy between men and women while ascribing each binary roles. The teachings of Christ do not support this hierarchy[29]; neither do the writings of Rilke. Rilke uses the traits associated with male and female bodies, which come together to form categories of gender, to subvert readers's expectations.

A quick recap of those expectations: by the 17th century, Neoplatonic binaries had solidified into Cartesian ones. As all knowledge was sorted into categories, there was an attempt to limit the categories to two baskets. Male and female were a binary, so the binary of rational and sensible had to line up with one or the other. Though prior lifestyles—especially in the realm of fashion—were allowed ambiguity before the 17th century in Europe, "enlightenment ideas put an end to such androgynous styles. [Enlightenment] philosophy emphasized rationality and practicality—but as distinctly male traits. Women, meanwhile, were seen as emotional, irrational, and distinct from men" (Goldhill).

The irrationality of women was linked to their sensuality. While men took the "mind" as their own domain, women were assigned the "body." They were supposed to operate as the Neoplatonist theologians Saint Gregory and Augustine had warned against—they were led by emotion and physical sensation. Just as the body was seen as a source of temptation, women occupied the role of seductress rather than the seduced. Thus they had to be managed and contained. Rilke engages the stereotype of woman as earthly so far as she accesses pre-rational knowledge and represents fertility. This engagement, though, brings with it a necessarily erotic

[28] For those unfamiliar with the 1993 comedy starring Robin Williams, *Mrs. Doubtfire* is the story of a father who poses in drag as a Scottish nanny in order to spend more time with his children after divorce. The main character, Daniel Hillard, is thus a feminine-presenting father acting in a maternal manner. Over the course of the movie, Hillard becomes a better parent through his experience as a woman caretaker.

[29] Christ kept the company of women (Luke 8:2-3, 23:49), and the bible advocates for equality (2 Corinthians 8:13-14). As seen in Galatians 3:28, in the body of Christ physical difference may exist, but an ontological difference and hierarchy does not.

connotation, yet Rilke does not resist the connotation. Instead he leans into it to broaden an understanding of the divine. His devotionalism is infused with eroticism. They are not exclusive of each other.

Enlightenment philosophy began the work of narrowing definitions three hundred years before Rilke attempted to broaden them again. According to post-Enlightenment sensibilities, men occupied public spheres, and women occupied private ones. The home has been associated with women since long before the Enlightenment, but the home had not been so exclusive of masculinity. The violent binary separation of men and women, male and female, makes masculine metaphors for God all the more limited as they are severed from entire spheres of human life. God as father is no longer an omnipresent deity. Therefore, Rilke's distinct hodgepodge-ish way of depicting gender and sex does important work toward simultaneously affirming femininity and un-constricting masculinity.

Take the following poem as a case study:

I am, you anxious one.

Don't you sense me, ready to break
into being at your touch?
My murmurings surround you like shadowy wings.
Can't you see me standing before you
cloaked in stillness?
Hasn't my longing ripened in you
from the beginning
as a fruit ripens on a branch? (I, 19)

Before examining the role of gender in this poem, first we must answer: What about this writing classifies it as an *erotic* devotional poem? It is devotional, certainly, in its consideration of a relationship with the divine and in the context of Rilke's monk persona that he assumes in *Book of Hours*, but erotic? Ironically, that aspect is the subtle one. The first section of Rilke's *Book of Hours*, "The Book of a Monastic Life," is set primarily in the darkness, the time of intimate acts but also, as revealed in the previous section, the place of God. Rilke, as is exemplified in I, 11, sees darkness as less limiting than light, for it is pregnant with divine possibility and "embraces everything." The darkness, the immediacy, the touch, the fruit...they all lend the poem an erotic tone exaggerated by feminine presence.

The God of this particular poem speaks of longing (a term coded both erotic and feminine), and that aforementioned longing "ripens" in the monk. God here is animated with immediacy, the barrier between Him and man ready to rupture. Both speaker and audience yearn toward this connection, and that yearning is built with intention. That yearning is constructed in this manner: Rilke often genders God masculine. Unlike Donne

who would woo God with his Holy Sonnets much the way he would woo a woman, Rilke is assuming a different role in the relationship. Maybe the only time I will say this, but *thanks to heteronormativity*, we readers can assume that his masculine God becomes a pursuer of the therefore feminine human being, as demonstrated in the poem above. The poem selected for this case study is a gendered love poem. And yet, this same masculine God still takes on the traditional "mothering" metaphors of the poem. The gender is no sooner divined than it is destabilized[30].

The monk, feminized by their role—and by a German declension that doesn't translate into English—is described as pregnant with God's longing. It ripens inside them like a fruit. As all male saints are queered by their role as a "bride of Christ," so, too, the pregnant monk is feminized. But the metaphors for his God are feminized, too. They are pre-rational, based on "sense" and "touch." Sensuality, throughout history, has often been ascribed to the "female" as a foil to male rationality, but here it's ascribed to the usually paternal God.

This usually paternal God takes on maternal metaphors. "My murmurings surround you like shadowy wings," says I am. The murmurings' embrace is reminiscent of biblical depictions of God where She is compared to a hen: *hide me in the shadow of your wings* (Psa. 17:8); *I will take refuge in the shadow of your wings* (Psa. 57:1); *I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings* (Matthew 23:37; Luke 13:34)... The particular use of the phrase "shadowy wings" in Rilke's poem makes the biblical allusion even more apparent. Even the first line of the poem, with its comforting assurance, "I am, you anxious one," has a scripturally feminine ring to it. Recall the promise in Isaiah: "As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you; and you will be comforted over Jerusalem" (Isa. 66:13).

The impregnating Father of longing is also a mother figure to the monk, who, in turn, is a man both pursued and pregnant. This mind-bending transcendence of gender and biological sex—which are, in post-Victorian Western culture, traditionally painted as binaries—is more than a *Mrs. Doubtfire* situation. The Father is not merely posing as a woman and taking on her caring role for His children, He *is* Her. In this poem, the masculine and feminine, the male and female, exist not as opposites, or even as a gradient so much as a both/and. The poem's God is thus nonbinary and intersex[31].

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[30] There's much more to say about the way that erotic devotional poems complicate both gender and gender norms, as well as the way those complications feed into and off of Queer Theology, but for the purpose of this chapter, I'm going to let a reference to *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* by Patrick Cheng suffice.

[31] Recently, there has been speculation about Jesus' biological sex. While Christ's literal body was phenotypically male, and he used masculine pronouns, he lived an androgynous lifestyle. He also exhibited a more complex understanding of sex than was usual in the bible's teaching. In a discussion about marriage, Jesus said, with little prompting on the subject of eunuchs: "For there are eunuchs who have been eunuchs from birth. And there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by other people" (Mat 19:11). It would make sense for the Incarnate God to encompass more than one sex. It also makes more sense in terms of a virgin birth (Hay).

"JUST FRIENDS"

The speaker, the "I am," of I, 19 does not condemn desire to the realm of the seductress figure; He *is* desire, sown into the beloved at creation and ripening into this moment. His relationship to humanity is not based solely on one half of a division between *eros* and *agape*. This division of *eros* and *agape* is detrimental to an encompassing vision of love. It is also a difficult distinction to maintain in languages that have only one word for love or to maintain practically in art, especially in the art form of poetry—one that thrives on ambiguity. In Rilke's work, the earthly is an appropriate realm in which to approach God and to be approached by Him since Rilke believed that "the holy can be rooted in the body" (*Book of Hours* 17). Rilke writes that "creativity of the spirit has its origin in the physical kind, is of one nature with it and only a more delicate, more rapt and less fleeting version of the carnal sort of sex" (*Letters* 26). The *eros* or desire of God is not reduced to sex but rather elevates that same erotic tension toward creation and mysticism's trademark ecstatic love.

The sensual language of fruit on a branch in I, 19 evokes garden, and garden in poetry isn't the place where some kids tripped up major. No, it's the place of lovers, like the two lovers of *Song of Songs*. It's the place of relationship unbroken. God's love in Rilke's poetry is not broken down or limited to platonic love[32]; instead, it rejoices in reciprocal desire. Rilke's God murmurs with humanity in a garden. He desires relationship with each in particular, and He uses a diction of material spirituality to express this desire for closeness.

The poem brings God closer by depicting the Neoplatonic hierarchy and barrier between earth and spirit (coded feminine and masculine) as something easily broken, thinner than imagined. Rilke imagines God to be as present as the next door neighbor. Just as God may break into being at mere touch, the wall between speaker and God "is very thin. Why couldn't a cry / from one of us," writes Rilke, "break it down? It would crumble / easily, // it would barely make a sound" (I, 16). Each neighbor—God *and* monk—is equally capable of collapsing the wall with their cry.

In *The Book of Hours*, God is both desirous[33] and desirable. Much like Saint Teresa of Ávila does in her poetry, Rilke takes God as his lover. "Because once someone dared / to want you," says the monk, "I know that we, too, may want you" (I, 16). God is not approached in an impersonal, rational manner. She is approached in a highly personal, intimate one. Rilke, however, does not elevate *eros* to the primary place from which to approach God but rather works to de-stigmatize it. He writes that "[p]hysical desire is a sensual experience, no different from pure contemplation or the pure sensation with which a fine fruit sates the tongue" (*Letters* 25).

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[32] "Platonic love" is a term that Plato never used. It has come to mean an abiding, non-sexual love, much like Luther's vision of *agape*. Its association with a "chaste" form of *caritas* negates the use of erotic language to describe a relationship with God.

[33] A desirous God is one that Neoplatonist theologian Saint Gregory of Nyssa would dismiss since he believed that God does not experience human emotion.

To Rilke, there is nothing wrong with *agape* besides a blinder-like focus on it. The idea of universal priesthood[34], derived from Luther's theology, was meant to displace papal supremacy[35] in Christianity and is one of the markers of Protestantism. An intuitive outcome of this displacement would be a closer personal relationship with God, and Rilke works to ensure that this relationship is not bound to only one form.

Though the Protestant definition of *caritas* is embodied by a charitable love for humanity as a whole (a "common good" perspective), Rilke's God takes a special interest in the individual. They are a lover who yearns for and would miss humanity:

What will you do, God, when I die?

I am your pitcher (when I shatter?)
I am your drink (when I go bitter?)
I, your garment; I, your craft.
Without me what reason have you?

Without me what house
where intimate words await you?…

What will you do, God? It troubles me. (I, 36)

God may be a self-sufficient being who don't need no man, but this fact does not reduce Her lovers. A person's relationship with God—when driven by *eros* alongside, and not only by, *agape*—becomes a "house / where intimate words await" Her. The human is validated. And the divine is not banished to the public sphere with masculine metaphors. She does not flee with the light each evening. Once again, by bridging a binary and upsetting convention, Rilke undoes limitation. His erotic devotional poems affirm difference by uplifting darkness, femininity, and eroticism as non-exclusive yet valuable traits.

This affirmation provides a good model for healing the Neoplatonist and Cartesian division which has made a home in Protestant Christianity. The tradition could look toward the way that Rilke's poems resist binaries and dismantle hierarchies. Rilke's erotic devotional poetry continues the work of Christ in acknowledging bodied realities, and it encourages love for God by loving, truly loving, in every manner, the world and its people.

[34] Luther wrote in his *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church* that "we are all equally priests, as many of us as are baptized."
[35] Papal supremacy is a doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church by which the Pope exercises universal power over the whole church.

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