Teresia Sampsonia Shirley (c.1589–1668)

Teresia Sampsonia Shirley, daughter of a Circassian ruler, wife of the English ambassador to Persia, and self-proclaimed Amazon, was born around 1589. Her natal faith is unclear: later writers claim her family were Eastern Orthodox, but other sources refer to them as Muslim, and there is no definitive evidence for either. At some point before February 1608 she was brought to the court of Shah Abbas I (1571–1629) in Persia. One of his wives is thought to have been her aunt, which facilitated this connection.[1] On 2 February 1608 at the age of around eighteen or nineteen, she was baptised into the Roman Catholic church by Carmelite missionaries and married to Robert Shirley, the English Persian ambassador, who features elsewhere in this volume. It was at this point she was given the name 'Teresa' or 'Teresia' after the founder of the Discalced Carmelite order, St Teresa of Ávila. For the rest of her life she was known by some form of this name but for ease of understanding, she will be referred to here as 'Teresia' to distinguish her from the saint.

Her choice of name was undoubtedly influenced by the Carmelite missionaries, and it created a point of connection between the two women through which this essay will explore her identity as a transcultural agent. There were a number of other connections between them. The apparent need to baptise Shirley makes it likely that she was converting to Christianity, and Teresa of Ávila was the granddaughter of a Spanish *converso*, making both women Catholic through an act of conversion.[2] As well as this shared spiritual history, both women came from families with noble connections. Born a noblewoman in 1515, Teresa of Ávila entered a Carmelite convent at the age of eighteen. After a serious illness she started experiencing instances of religious ecstasy. Following these experiences, she began to disagree with the perceived laxity of her order and in 1562 established a new reformed Carmelite convent following the principles of absolute poverty and discalceation (going without shoes). Over the following two decades Teresa travelled across Spain establishing these new Discalced Carmelite convents, and it was while on one of these

1 Bernadette Andrea, 'Sherley, Lady Teresa Sampsonia (c.1589–1668)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* <https://doi.org/10.1093/odnb/9780198614128.013.112767> [accessed 23 May 2019].

2 The term *converso* refers to individuals who converted from Judaism to Christianity in Spain or Portugal, usually as a result of the Inquisition. For analysis of the theological implications of Teresa of Ávila's role as a *converso* and further biographical details, see Rowan Williams, *Teresa of Avila* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), pp. 19–36.

journeys that she died at Alba de Tormes in 1582.[3] Initially Teresa was buried there, but the convent at Ávila wanted her body returned. She was thus disinterred after nine months and one of her hands cut off to be sent to Ávila, before being reburied at Alba – though one of the Priests there secretly removed one of her fingers and kept it for himself. Her body was exhumed again two years later and finally sent to Ávila, but as compensation an arm was removed and left in Alba. However, this second exhumation had taken place without the approval of the duke of Alba de Tormes, and he successfully petitioned the Pope for the body's return to Alba the following year.[4] The convent freely sent out relics once they had the body back, which led the nuns in Ávila to bitterly and ineffectually complain that they were 'continually raiding' it.[5] In this way her body – which, while she was alive, had never left Spain – was dispersed across the country and then the world.

The influence of Teresa of Ávila, already important within the narrative surrounding Teresia Shirley's baptism, would become increasingly significant after the Shirleys left the Persian court to tour Europe. Ten years after their wedding and her baptism, the pair travelled to Spain, where they would stay until March 1622. The Carmelite archives record that, while there, Shirley made frequent journeys to the convent of Santa Ana in Madrid, where Teresa's niece Beatriz de Jesus lived. The sisters reportedly spent hours telling her of the 'many wonders of the Reformed Carmelites, the adventures of their founder, her more than female spirit [and] her heroic virtues'.[6] Hearing this, she developed an 'ardent desire to own some relic of the blessed mother', but was declined on the grounds that though Teresa had been beatified, she had not yet been canonised. However, Beatriz did already own a relic of her aunt's flesh, which she wore in a 'curious reliquary'. At some point following this request, Beatriz heard her aunt's voice instructing her to '*Dale a la condesa la partícula de carne mía que tienes*' (give the lady the piece of my flesh you have), which she duly did. The undignified clamour for Teresa's relics reflects the widely held contemporary belief in her membership of

3 Philip Schaff and Johann Jakob Herzog, *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1911) <http://archive.org/details/newschaffherzog12haucgoog> [accessed 5 September 2019], pp. 414–415.

4 Bernadette Andrea, 'The Global Travels of Teresa Sampsonia Shirley's Carmelite Relic', in *Travel and Travail: Early Modern Women, English Drama, and the Wider World*, eds. Patricia Akhimie and Bernadette Andrea (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2019), pp. 102–117.

5 *Ibid*, p. 110.

6 Del Niño Jesús Florencio, *Biblioteca Carmelitano – Teresiana de Misiones* (Pamplona: Raom de Bengary, 1930), 3: En Perse, p. 29.

Figure 8 Teresia Sampsonia, Lady Shirley by Sir Anthony Van Dyck (c.1622). National Trust Images/ Derrick E. Witty.

the metaphysical body of saints, a belief which had been confirmed by her beatification in 1614, three years before Shirley visited Santa Ana.[7] The stripping down of her physical body by the communities in Alba and Ávila had enacted a process whereby Teresa was metaphysically re-incorporated into the church: both physically as relics, and spiritually as an intercessory figure. The record of Teresa's words to her niece utilises both senses of this bodily reformation on behalf of her namesake, interceding from within the body of Saints to confirm Teresia Shirley's worthiness.

The Carmelite archives record that the relic was jealously kept and worn by Shirley for the rest of her life. From this point onwards she wore it on her breast at all times, visually proclaiming her acceptance as a *teresiano* and committed Catholic. The two portraits of her painted after her stay in Madrid, one by Anthony van Dyck and one by an unknown painter, both depict her wearing a large and ornate pendant, and it is possible that this is the relic she received from the nuns at Santa Ana. If this is the case, the size and prominence of the reliquary further highlights its importance and focality within her fashioned self-presentation. It can be seen even in the sketches for van Dyck's painting, suggesting that it was a focal point for his conception of the work.[8]

The identity-confirming properties of the relic would later be used by Teresia Shirley during one of the most dangerous moments of her life. While at Qazvin, she and her husband were rewarded by the shah for their service with 'great dignities and gifts of high value'. The 'grandees of the Court' apparently took exception to this and accused Teresia Shirley of apostasy from Islam, claiming that she had been born into a Muslim family and that her conversion to Catholicism indicated her rejection of their faith.[9] Shortly afterwards Robert Shirley died and Teresia Shirley, still under the capital charge of apostasy, had most of her property confiscated and became a fugitive, hiding in churches and convents.

When eventually interrogated she initially remained silent, refusing to either give up her faith or spiritually condemn those interrogating her. Upon being threatened with being 'burnt alive' or 'thrown from a tower' if she refused to give up her faith, however, she replied that such a death would only bring her to 'glory' faster, and upbraided the chief judge or *Mulla*,

7 Herzog, *Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*.

8 Anthony Van Dyck, Seated Portrait of Lady Shirley, 1622, The British Museum, ME 1957,1214.207.60v.

9 H. Chick, *A Chronicle of the Carmelites in Persia and the Papal Mission of the XVIIth and XVIIIth Centuries*, 3 vols (Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1939), I, pp. 290–294 (291).

arguing that this ill-treatment of her was not 'the reward deserved by [her husband's] … service to the Shah'.[10] During this impassioned rejoinder, the relic was 'observed … to be wet with tiny spots of blood', noted in some accounts to be '*sangre fresca*' (fresh blood).[11] This blood confirmed both the relic's divine properties, and her spiritual connection to the metaphysical body it represented. This miraculous act of a devotional and supernatural object visibly confirming her faith could be understood across cultural registers, and soon after the event she was allowed to leave, eventually returning to Rome where she settled in the Santa Maria della Scala.[12] The relic thus served as both a physical representation of both Teresa's sainthood and Teresia Shirley's identity as the Catholic Amazon, able to speak across cultural boundaries to confirm and support her transculturality – and, when needed, her life.

As well as the physical item of the relic and the shared heritage which connected the two women, the representational frameworks which were used to present them in the early seventeenth century shared a common theme. Both before and after Teresa's beatification in 1614, the Discalced Carmelites were working on promoting her as a patron saint of Spain alongside the well-established figure of Sant Iago. In order to make her a viable candidate, this campaign needed to present her as a saint capable of martial and spiritual protection. A military victory for the Spanish in 1624, fought to defend their colonial expansion, was attributed to her intercession; a significant moment in the development of her *cultus*.[13] This innovation of Teresa as a military figure drew on classical conceptions to recreate her as a Spanish Minerva. There was an established iconographical connection between Spain and Minerva: Titian's 1570s painting 'Religion succoured by Spain' depicted the personified nation wearing a Minervan sword, shield, and breastplate while coming to the defence of religion, also portrayed as a woman. Many pro-patronage preachers drew on this classical idea of the manly woman, connecting the classical idea to a theological model using popular and renaissance imagery.[14] Jerónimo de Pancorbo used

10 *Ibid*., p. 294.

11 See Andrea, 'The Global Travels of Teresa Sampsonia Shirley's Carmelite Relic', pp. 110–112 for a detailed description of this event.

12 For more discussion of the work of relics acting as agents across religious boundaries, see Alexandra Walsham, *Relics and Remains* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

13 Erin Kathleen Rowe, *Saint and Nation: Santiago, Teresa of Avila and Plural Identities in Early Modern Spain* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011), p. 116.

14 The established popularity of classical sources allowed female Roman Catholic saints to be easily compared to classical figures such as Minerva and the Amazons — for example,

this Minervan model to bolster the *teresiano* claim that invoking Teresa in war was the continuation of an established tradition, while Royal Preacher Diego del Escurial insisted that Teresa 'ought to [be painted] with a sword in her hand, shield on her arm, helmet with a crest and plume on her head … because she fights our battles, defends our side, and crowns our victories' – a description very similar to Titian's Spain.[15] Another writer, Sebastián de San Agustín, pointed to stories of women leaving behind their 'more proper' arms of distaff and needle to take up swords: he included Amazons, princesses, and the biblical figures of Judith and Deborah as evidence of this.[16]

Teresia's self-presentation echoes the Amazonite connections contemporaries were linking to her namesake, and which she must have seen during her time in Spain in the 1620s, the period when many of these pro-patronage sermons were first heard. Thanks to her birth in Circassia she was able to easily describe herself as an 'Amazon', a people connected to the region. The *Biblioteca Carmelitano*, in its description of her youth, emphasised this connection:

> She was known as Sampsonia as … she handled the bow and arrows with such aim that there was no arrow shot from her bow that did not hit the target … the little fruits of the trees, like birds in their flight, fell to the ground wounded by the arrows of the amazon.[17]

The centrality of this connection to Shirley's self-presentation is reinforced by her demonstrations of martial prowess later in life: she would save her husband's life twice, first after they set off on their first journey, and secondly when they encountered hostile Portuguese traders on their way to Goa.[18] Such incidents found their way into pamphlets and bulletins, spreading the tale of Shirley's 'Amazon' wife. That she supported this mode of representation is supported by her depiction in the anonymous portrait, where she was depicted holding a gun, resting her wrist on the back of a red chair to display the barrel clearly. Martial activity was not her only form of rebellion. While living in England, the Archbishop of Canterbury discovered Robert Shirley openly passing around Catholic 'Indulgences, Medals and

Saint Geneviève, the warrior-maid, was often associated with Amazons by her Parisian cult. See Moshe Sluhovsky, *Patroness of Rituals: Rituals of Devotion in Early Modern France* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), p. 50 for more detail.

15 All references from Rowe, *Saint and Nation*, pp. 115–118.

16 *Ibid*., p. 118.

17 *Biblioteca Carmelitano*, p. 26.

18 Andrea, 'Sherley, Lady Teresa Sampsonia (c.1589–1668)'.

Agnus Dei … among them one [with] … a power to legitimate bastards'. When confronted, Robert Shirley claimed that the 'faultes for dispersing … [them were] upon his wife'.[19] What his wife made of this blame shifting is, unsurprisingly, unrecorded. Within a Protestant country this would have been a dangerous act: a particularly fitting battle for a Catholic Amazon named after a prime counter-reformist.

Teresia Shirley's rhetorical constructions of her dual identity of 'Catholic Amazon' were continued in the design of her death. Her self-penned epitaph at Santa Maria della Scala reads 'Theresia Sampsonia, native of the region of the Amazons, daughter of Sampsuff, Prince of Circassia'.[20] Her property, which assumedly included goods from her travels across Europe and Persia, was sold in order to fund 'masses … [and] lamps … [to be] kept burning before the altar of Saint Teresa'.[21] This act formed the final and lasting link between the two women, dispersing her worldly goods to ensure that the connection to her patroness, so important in life, would continue in death, cementing her as the Carmelite Amazon.

Emily Stevenson

Further Reading

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