



FEMALE AUTHORSHIP: THE CLOUD OF UNKNOWING

AUTORÍA FEMENINA: THE CLOUD OF UNKNOWING

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Abstract: This paper raises the possibility of a female author for the anonymous 14th century work *The Cloud of Unknowing*, which academics generally attribute to a man. It presents four postulates: firstly the erroneous attribution of male authorship to *The Mirror of Simple Souls* (13th-14th centuries) which was maintained until the 20th century; secondly, the view of women in the English mystical male writers (Rolle and Hilton: 14th century), which is not found in the writings attributed to the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*; thirdly, the literary, theological and mystical proficiency of an English woman writer (14th century), Julian of Norwich, which makes it untenable to exclude possible female authorship at this time in England; finally, the views of scholars about the author (assumed to be a man by them) of *The Cloud of Unknowing* and its related treatises, which, notwithstanding, could equally be attributed to a woman of the fourteenth century in England. So, the conclusion will query the male authorship of this masterpiece, perhaps, for the first time.

Key words: Female authorship; *The Cloud of Unknowing*; Marguerite Porete; Julian of Norwich; Mysticism; Women's Studies

Resumen: Este artículo plantea la posibilidad de una autora para la obra anónima del

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siglo XIV *La nube del no saber*, que los académicos generalmente atribuyen a un hombre. Presenta cuatro postulados: en primer lugar, la atribución errónea de la autoría masculina a *El espejo de las almas simples* (siglos XIII-XIV) que se mantuvo hasta el siglo XX; en segundo lugar, la visión de la mujer en los escritores masculinos de la mística inglesa (Rolle y Hilton: siglo XIV), que no se encuentra en los escritos atribuidos al autor de *The Cloud of Unknowing*; en tercer lugar, la competencia literaria, teológica y mística de una escritora inglesa (siglo XIV), Julian de Norwich, que hace insostenible excluir una posible autoría femenina en este momento en Inglaterra; finalmente, las opiniones de los eruditos sobre el autor (asumido por ellos como un hombre) de *The Cloud of Unknowing* y sus tratados relacionados, que, no obstante, podrían igualmente atribuirse a una mujer del siglo XIV en Inglaterra. Por tanto, la conclusión cuestionará la autoría masculina de esta obra maestra, quizás, por primera vez.

Palabras clave: Autoría femenina; *The Cloud of Unknowing*; Marguerite Porete; Julian of Norwich; Misticismo; Estudios de la mujer

I. THE FEMALE AUTHOR WHO WAS SUPPOSED A MAN: MARGUERITE PORETE († 1310)

The Mirror of Simple Souls was “transmitted anonymously, and the author was unquestioningly assumed to have been a man” (Riehle, 2014, 135) until Romana Guarnieri announced the name of her anonymous author in 1946: Marguerite Porete, executed in Paris on June 1, 1310. She “was the first female Christian mystic burned at the stake after authoring a book –and the book’s survival makes the case absolutely unique” (Field, 2012, 3).

The original French was translated into Middle English and Latin. The British Library Amherst Manuscript of the mid-fifteenth century (Additional 3779) has among its contents the Short Version of Julian’s *Revelations of Divine Love* and also *The Mirror of Simple Souls* presented as an anonymous book. The Carthusian Richard Methley translated *The Mirror of Simple Souls* and *The Cloud of Unknowing* from English to Latin (Ms Premboke 221 from the late fifteen century).

The bishop of Cambrai had condemned and burned Marguerite’s book “between 1296 and 1306” (Field, 2012, 5). Nevertheless, she did not follow the bishop’s order and circulated her book among other people.

The Latin version translated from French was probably written “du vivant de Marguerite et en vue du procès de l’inquisition” (Porete, 1986, v). The English and the Latin versions show the approbation of the work by three men, a Franciscan, a Cistercian and a Master of Theology, Godfrey of Fontaines. The Master of Theology “did not counsel that many

should see it [...] for it is made by a spirit so strong and perceptive that there are but few such or none” (Field, 2012, 52). And the Franciscan said:

[T]his book is made by the Holy Ghost, and even if all the clerks of the world were to hear it, unless they understood it, that is to say, unless they have high spiritual feelings and this same working, they would not understand what it meant (Field, 2012, 51).

The brave woman remained silent at her own trial, and after the inquisitorial procedure was finished, Marguerite was burned with her book on supremacy of love. The Inquisitor, William of Paris ordered all the copies to be confiscated.

William of Paris, the inquisitor by papal authority of Clemente V, “gathered together twenty-one masters of Theology” (Field, 2012, 125) but he did not show them his complete copy but only “fifteen extracts” (Field, 2012, 127). That is what the *The Cloud of Unknowing’s* author wanted to prevent in the Prologue:

[T]hat you should command them, as I do you, to take time to read it, speak of it, copy it, or hear it, all through. [...] So, if someone saw one part of the material and not another, he might perhaps be easily led into error; and therefore, so that you and all others may avoid this error, I beg you for love’s sake to do as I say (Spearing, 2001, 12).

The Masters of Theology condemned the book, which contained those extracts, and the Canonists condemned its female author. The authorship of the surviving anonymous book has been ascribed to male authors (Carthusians, Theologians, etc.) across the centuries, until Romana Guarnieri discovered the relationship between the extracts, the book, and Marguerite Porete.

This was the first time “such a large group of masters of theology” were formally consulted “in the case of a layperson’s writings” (Field, 2012, 130). The Latin trial documents (Field, 2012, 222-224) only give the first and the fifteenth excerpts in Latin. It is possible that the Theologians did not know that the book was written in French (Field, 2012, 127-128). The “Continuer of William of Nangis”, the anonymous continuer of the historical writer at the Abbey of Saint Denis, has preserved the third article written in Latin (Field, 2012, 128, 222-224). The identification of the three extracts as passages from *The Mirror* “were the means by which Guarnieri first attributed *The Mirror* to Marguerite” (Field, 2012, 322, n. 16). Romana Guarnieri announced her discovery in the *Osservatore Romano*, on June 16, 1946, in a paper titled “Lo specchio delle anime semplici e Margherita Porette” (Porete, 1986, vi).

The author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* chose to remain anonymous and still remains so, but the scholars also reason and conclude that the author is a man. For example, in the foreword presentation of Spearing's edition, we can read: "he was an English priest, and probably a Carthusian monk" (2001). But if we started to read this work as if the author were a woman or if we did textual analysis, which included gender perspective, we would find that there is not a sign of male authorship in the text, nor in the book of Marguerite Porete.

II. THE MIDDLE ENGLISH MYSTICS RICHARD ROLLE AND WALTER HILTON

Concerning the *Cloud*-author and its related treatises, Hodgson concludes: "without external evidence all clues discoverable are in the treatises themselves" (1944, lxxxviii), written between the works of Rolle (d. 1349) and those of Hilton (d. 1396). But I wonder why all the scholars assume male authorship. We can see the possibility of female authorship if we compare the view of women in the three authors.

II. 1. Richard Rolle (died 1349)

The *Cloud*-author not only abundantly includes both genders in what is written (even more than Julian of Norwich), but a woman is seen as the model of pure love:

The love between our Lord and Mary was sweet. She had much love for him; he had much more for her. Anyone desiring to see plainly all the relations between him and her [...] would find that she was so deeply committed to loving him that nothing beneath him could please her (Spearing, 2001, 47, Ch. 22).

In contrast with *The Cloud*, we read about women in *The fire of Love* by Rolle that "on the other hand there are many who, because they care nothing for feminine beauty [...], reckon therefore that they will be sure of salvation" (1972, 49). The feminine beauty is a matter that hinders the man's salvation: "Further, we know this –and there is no doubt about it– that no young man who is surrounded by feminine beauty [...] can possibly be holy" (1972, 67). Therefore, the counsel to men is that: "Remember that you are to discipline your hands, your tongue [...], and not be enticed by women" (1972, 68).

Men are seen as the very example of sainthood: "Then in the day of temptation they stand up to their enemies like men" (Rolle, 1972, 65).

Rolle addresses men as “my brothers” (1972, 89), and chapter twelve is “about avoiding the company of women” (1972, 80). For this writer, “there is nothing more dangerous, degrading, more disgusting than a man should exhaust his mind in love for a woman” (1972, 118). He explains that women, when “they sense they are loved by men [...] lead them on those things which their most wicked minds suggest” (1972, 119).

Rolle claims that women are “poor things, so wicked” (1972, 156), so for him, it is necessary to avoid them: “Loving women upsets the balance, disturbs the reason, changes wisdom to folly, estranges the heart from God, takes the soul captive, and subjects it to demons!” (1972, 136).

Rolle also writes in chapter 39 about the friendship between men and women and about the female condition:

Friendship between men and women can be a tricky business [...]. Familiarity between women and men is apt to turn virtue's disadvantage. [...] [Women] they feel themselves lost if they do not get advice and help from men [...]. They are in much need of the counsel of good men. They are attracted to evil [...] because they are much more disposed to the pleasures of lust than to the radiance of sanctity. [...] God wants women to be instructed by men (1972, 175-176).

The *Cloud*-author is supposed to have read Rolle's works when he/she is writing to a “friend in God”. We can understand why women writers, teachers of mysticism, choose anonymity. Two centuries after that, Teresa de Jesús seems not to want to contradict Rolle:

[...] lo que he dicho hasta aquí de mi ruin vida y pecados, lo publiquen (desde ahora doy licencia, y a todos mis confesores, que así lo es a quien esto va) [...]. Para lo que de aquí adelante dijere, no se la doy; ni quiero si a alguien lo mostraren, digan quién es por quién pasó, ni quién lo escribió, que por esto no me nombro ni a nadie, sino escribirlo he todo lo mejor que pueda por no ser conocida [...]. Bastan personas tan letradas y graves para autorizar alguna cosa buena [...]; que si lo fuere será suya y no mía, por ser yo sin letras y buena vida, ni ser informada de letrado ni de persona ninguna; [...] basta ser mujer para caérseme las alas, cuantimás mujer y ruin (Teresa de Jesús, 1993, 187-88, Ch. X, 7).

The main recipient of Teresa de Jesús's work is García de Toledo. This spiritual Father also ends up, by the force of Teresa's word, converted into a spiritual son, just as her biological father himself had become. But she goes further, and turns the learned Fathers, Domingo Báñez, Gaspar Daza, Baltasar Álvarez, and even the Bishop of Ávila, Don Álvaro de Mendoza, into disciples-recipients (Vid. Salto Sánchez del Corral, 2015, 91-92).

In contrast with the humility of the *Cloud*-author, we can see the pride in Rolle: “When I had attained this high degree [...]. And here that blessed state has remained [...] and so it will continue to the end” (1972, 94). Notwithstanding its sincerity, the humility in the *Cloud*-writer, as in Julian of Norwich and in Teresa de Jesús, could also be a form of rhetorical *Captatio benevolentiae* practised by women writers.

II. 2. *Walter Hilton (died 1396)*

Obviously, this lettered theologian was a member of the ecclesiastical hierarchy: “God and Holy Church are so united and accorded together that whoso doth against the one doth against both” (1995, *The Scale*, 98). Hilton, as Rolle, teaches female anchorites. The women receipts are included frequently in his sentences (men or women), but this moral teacher instructs about the inferiority of women, an idea that can never be found in the *Cloud*-author:

For thou must understand that a soul hath two parts. The one is called sensuality [...]. The other part is called reason; and that is parted also into two, into the superior and inferior part. The superior part is likened to a man, for it should be master and sovereign, and that is properly the image of God, for by that only the soul knoweth God, and loveth Him. And the inferior is likened to a woman, for it should be obedient to the other part of reason, as woman is subject to man. And this consisteth in the knowing and ruling of earthly things, for to use them discreetly according as we have need of them, and to refuse them when we have no need of them, and to have ever with it an eye upwards towards the superior part of reason with dread and reverence, to follow and be guided by it (1995, *The Scale*, 154).

Hilton’s anthropology degrades the dignity of women and imposes on them submission to men. The *Cloud*-author writes to a “friend in God”, while Rolle and Hilton to their brothers. The *Treatise Written to a Devout Man*, who intends to become a spiritual man, starts as a dialogue between men:

Dear Brother in Christ, –There be in the holy Church two kinds of life [...]. The one is corporal, the other spiritual. Corporal working appertaineth principally to the men and women of the world [...]; and this life is to dispose and enable such persons for spiritual working [...]; for as St Paul saith, that woman was made for man, and not man for woman. Even so corporal working was ordained for spiritual, and not spiritual working for corporal (Hilton, 1995, *The Treatise*, 4).

For the *Cloud*-author, a woman is the model of contemplation and perfect love. Moreover, every Scriptural reference in the *Cloud*-author to women agrees with Christ’s appreciative view of women and his defence of their dignity. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the sinner woman who loved so much (Luke 7:36-48), Mary of Betania (John 11:1-2) and Mary Magdeleine were considered the same person.

In the house of Martha and Mary (Luke 10:38-42), Hilton says that Jesus told Mary “that she had chosen the better part” (Hilton, 1995, *The Scale*, 83). The *Cloud*-author explains that Mary had chosen the best part: she “attended only to the supreme wisdom of his Godhead [...] with all the love of her heart”. Mary, in “contemplation and love of the Godhead” was busy “in the best and holiest part of contemplation that can be achieved in this life” (Spearing, 2001, 41-42, Ch. 17).

When Mary sought Jesus at the sepulchre, Hilton explains the meaning of “Noli me tangere” (John 20:17), the words that Jesus told her: “Mary Magdalen loved our Lord Jesus well before the time of His Passion, but her love was much bodily and little spiritual. She understood well that He was God, but she loved Him but little as God” (Hilton, 1995, *The Scale*, 198). Nevertheless, The Cloud-author, who explains that Mary, “weeping, would not be comforted by an angel” (Spearing, 2001, 47, Ch. 22), by nothing beneath Him, seems to respond to Hilton:

Certainly, anyone who carefully studies the Gospel history will find many marvellous details about her perfect love written as a model for us, and exactly corresponding to what is taught in this book, as if they had been arranged and written down for that purpose – and indeed so they were, if rightly understood (Spearing, 2001, 47, Ch. 22).

III. THE LATE-FOURTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLISH WOMAN WRITER JULIAN OF NORWICH

Men teach that woman is synonymous with frailty, so they write in third person: “Thou soul, fair by nature, made after the likeness of God, frail in thy body as a woman, by reason of the first sin” (Hilton, 1995, *The Scale*, 120). Usually, we can find such attributes as feeble and frail in first person in women’s writings, either as assumption of it, or as a means of *captatio benevolentiae*.

Julian of Norwich writes her book about her own understanding of God as Love with didactic purpose. There are extracts from the Short Version (SV ca. 1373) that are not found in the Long Version (LV) written between 1393 and 1398. For example, about the prohibition to teach for women: “Botte god for bede that [...] I am a techere [...] for I am a womann, leued, febille and freylle. [...] Botte sothelye charyte styrres me [...] I sawe in that same tyme that is his wille, that it be knawenn” (Colledge, 1978, 222). She shows here her fear about the reception of her writing, because it may “be impugned as a silly woman’s vapourings” (Colledge, 1978, 197). The Short Version survives with the English version of Marguerite Porete’s book in the British Library: Additional Manuscript No 377790.

It is remarkable that the word Love, in a book, which is a Lesson of Love for Julian (Colledge, 1978, 58; 309, Ch. 6; 733-734, Ch. 86), does not appear in the title of the superb edition of the two versions by Colledge and Walsh: *A Book of Showings to the anchoress Julian of Norwich* (Short Tex: pp. 201-278 and Long Tex: pp. 281-734) For these magnificent editors, Margery Kempe “shows us Julian as skilled in Scripture, in spiritual theology and in the literature of discernment” (1978, 38).

The account of Margery Kempe's visit to Julian and several legacies are the external evidences of her existence (John-Julian, 2009, 34). The book of Margery Kempe (the "creature") is reported in third person:

And then she was bidden by our lord to go to an anchoress in the same city [Norwich] who was called Dame Julian [...] for the anchoress was expert in such things [meditation and high contemplation] and good counsel could give. The anchoress hearing [...] counselling this creature [...]. "The Holy Spirit moves never a thing against love [...] for he is all love. [...] Saint Paul says [...], for Jerome says [...]. Holy Writ says that the soul of a rightful man is the seat of God " (John-Julian, 2009, 33).

Colledge and Walsh affirm that Margery Kempe attests "that she was active as a spiritual counsellor at the age of sixty or thereabouts, and most significantly, had a reputation for discerning truth from falsehood" (1978, 67), and also point to that the Long Text confirms "Margery Kempe's testimony about Julian's expertise in spiritual guidance" (1978, 91).

There were several anchoresses in Norwich (John-Julian, 2009, 29). Dame Julian of Norwich could take her name from the patron of the Church where she had her cell. Although she shows (as Teresa de Jesús did) "the lack of formal education such as would have been available to men" (John-Julian, 2009, 28), she learned Latin. Kempe's account shows Julian as a counsellor who can easily use references from Holy Writ and Fathers of Church. Margery refers to Julian of Norwich as "Dame Jelyan", whose writings "have secured her recognition nowadays as the greatest woman writer in English before the novelists", according to Windeat, Professor of English at Cambridge University (Kempe, 2004, 12).

John-Julian, who considers that, "as a noblewoman, Julian may have become truly literate" (2009, 29), adds important information:

Across Southgate from St. Julian's Church in the fourteenth century stood the huge Augustine Friary that was known throughout England for its outstanding library. [...] it is also possible that the Friary Library may have loaned books to the anchoress. [...] St. Julian's Church was part of a large beneficence given to the nuns of the nearby Benedictine Carrow Priory by King Stephen in 1135 (2009, 47).

We can find numerous affirmations that "she was a learned woman" (Colledge, 1978,41), who could make "her own translations direct from the Vulgate" (Colledge 1978, 45):

What is however beyond any doubt is that when young Julian had received an exceptionally good grounding in Latin, in Scripture and in liberal arts, and thereafter she was able and permitted to read widely in Latin and vernacular spiritual classics. [...] She shows knowledge of such great masters as Augustine and Gregory; [...] she was a highly accomplished rhetorician who could employ with ease the terms and concepts of the philosophers (Colledge, 1978, 44-45).

Her influence is also noted in works known only in learned circles in addition to the congruity with contemporary writings such as *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Colledge and Walsh showed us Julian of Norwich as a “woman of deep learning” (1978, 196), a great scholar, who learned Latin and studied Scripture (1978, 198) with a wide “experience as a spiritual director” (1978, 185).

We conclude with a quote that could possibly substantiate the female authorship of *The Cloud of Unknowing*:

[F]or the fourteenth century the *Revelations* are proof that it was possible for one woman to master the learning of past ages, and to acquire their skills, to present her thought in modes traditionally acceptable and comprehensible (Colledge, 1978, 47).

Since around the last quarter of the fourteenth century in the Midlands, a woman, Julian of Norwich, taught that God is Love, why could a woman not also be the one who taught how God is reached by love in the book of contemplation named *The Cloud of Unknowing*?

IV. THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY ENGLISH MYSTICAL WRITER WHO IS SUPPOSED TO BE A MAN

I am trying to understand why scholars think the *Cloud*-author is a man; it is for this reason that my dialogue here is with them.

With regard to *The Cloud* Hodgson says that it “was written in a central district of the North-East Midlands” (1944, lxxxiv). The introduction to this edition of *The Cloud* suggests that this book and its related treatises “belong to the late fourteenth century” (1944, lxxxv).

The Cloud of Unknowing could have been written between the Short and the Long Version of the *Revelations of Divine Love* of Julian of Norwich, and it should be considered as the answer to the revelation of divine love: how to love the Lover by loving contemplation. Although the majority of academics emphasize the *Unknowing* concept and its related medieval spirituality of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (to which neither Marguerite Porete nor Julian of Norwich are alien) as Apophatic Theology, for me, the main idea of the book is what is encapsulated in the title: *A Book of Contemplation the Which is Called The Cloud of Unknowing, in the Which a Soul is Oned with God*, that is, the contemplation and union of love. The complete titles of the writings show the link between *Revelations of Divine Love*, *The Cloud* and Marguerite Porete’s book: *Le miroir des âmes simples et anéanties et qui seulement demeurent en vouloir et désir d’Amour*. The

cloud of unknowing is a means for mystical union, poetized also by Saint Juan de la Cruz:

Quanto más alto se suve / tanto menos se entendía / que es la tenebrosa nube [cloud] / que a la noche esclarecía / por eso quien la sabía / queda siempre no sabiendo [unknowing], / toda sciencia trascendiendo (Juan de la Cruz, 1992, 265, *Coplas de el mismo, hechas sobre un éstasis de harta contemplación*, 5).

IV. 1. Only the priesthood could exclude female authorship

In this paper, I analyse information presented by scholars concerning the *Cloud*-author –presumed to be a man by them–, which will be meaningful for my thesis that the author might possibly be a woman.

John-Julian refers to “This unknown monk” (2015, 9), and says: “it is extremely probable that he was a professed Carthusian monk” (2015, 22). From that, he deduces: “Since all Carthusian monks were ordained priests (or in preparation for ordination), our author, if a longtime Carthusian, was assuredly a priest” (John-Julian, 2015, 22).

From this consideration, this academic finds some aspects that may surprise him, but that would be understandable as attributable to a female writing. *Febeli/feble* (ME) is translated as “delicately” by John-Julian (2015, 66, Ch. 8), but Walsh reflects more accurately the sense of the *Cloud*-author: “I must reflect in order to answer it as well as my feebleness permits” (1981, 135, Ch. 8). Again John-Julian, where the ME has feebly “literally feebly”, translated “precisely” because it “makes no sense” (2015, 167, Ch. 60) for him, from his perspective. Walsh also translates: “I answer you as well as my feebleness permits” (1981, 238, Ch. 60).

John-Julian is also surprised by an “amazing humility: the teacher asks to be taught by the student!” (2015, 112): “I believe that you will be better able to teach me than I you” (Spearing, 2001, 55, Ch. 33). Although the *Cloud*-author calls the addressee “friend in God”, John-Julian usually calls him “protégé”, but he highlights: “notice that he [Cloud-author] speaks of the director in the third person; i. e., he is not the protégé’s formal spiritual director” (John-Julian, 2015, 191, Ch. 75). In fact, he wrote in the Introduction:

All of this suggests a liaison between author and protégé that is more personal than that of merely a formal director-directee relationship. There is a “*paternal*” feeling to much of the writing in *The Cloud* [...], and while it is unlikely there is a natural father-son relationship here (John-Julian, 2015, 23).

In the first page of edition of *The Cloud* introduced and translated by Priest Clifton Wolters, we can read: “the identity of the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* is unknown, but he was undoubtedly an English priest” (1971). About the sphere in which his priesthood could be exercised, Walters repeats the possibilities offered by Hodgson and Justin MacCann: secular priest, cloistered monk, a Carthusian, a hermit, a recluse, a country parson, etc. For Wolters and Hodgson one reason to think the *Cloud*-author is a priest comes from the final paragraph (Ch. 75): “God’s blessing and mine” (Wolters, 1971, 12). Spearing argues the same reason: “the fatherly blessings at the end of the *Cloud* and the *Epistle on Prayer* indicate that the *Cloud* author was a priest (and therefore male)” (2001, x).

For Evelyn Underhill, the *Cloud*-author “was a cloistered monk devoted to the contemplative life” (1922, 2). Nevertheless, the *Cloud*-author might also be a cloistered nun who writes to a man; for example, Teresa de Jesús was a cloistered nun who wrote to a man: “¡Oh hijo mío! (que es tan humilde que así se quiere nombrar a quien esto va dirigido y me lo mandó escribir)” (Teresa de Jesús, 1993, 237, Ch. XVI, 6).

I researched parental blessings and found a very interesting paper, which could be of help here to imagine the real possibility of a woman being a spiritual mother, as Teresa de Jesús and Julian of Norwich were, to a young disciple:

Moreover, the parental blessing was not exclusively or primarily an expression of “patriarcal power”, at least if that phrase is understood as referring only to men. Mothers and fathers both gave blessings. Both had what Houlbrooke calls “quasi-sacerdotal” authority. Nowhere have I found evidence that blessings by fathers were deliberately privileged over those given by mothers (Young, 1992, 181).

In the chapter about the parental blessing in History, Young relates: “Parents in their families teach their children to say, Father, I pray you bless me, Mother I pray you bless me” (1992, 183). He also registers other wording: “I beseech you Mother pray to God to blesse me and give me your blessing, if it pleaseth you”(Young, 1992, 184).

At the end of *The Cloud*, the author is pleased to give the blessing:

Farewell, friend in the spirit, in God’s blessing and mine. And I beseech almighty God that true peace, sound advice, and spiritual comfort in God with abundance of grace, may evermore be with you and all God’s lovers on earth (Spearing, 2001, 101).

Alice Thornton (1626-1707) relates the final blessing of her mother:

After which praier she imbraced us all severally in her armes, and kissed us, powring out many prayers and blessings for us all; like good old Jacob, when he gave his last blessing to his children,

she begged of God Almighty for us all. After which I tooke the sadest last leave of my deare and honored mother as ever childe did to part with so great and excelent a parent and infinitt comfort (Thornton, 1875, 112-113).

The youths also asked for blessing, not only the children, and while they were separated, “blessings might be requested and bestowed by letter” (Young, 1992, 186). The practice of giving parental blessings is attested in fourteenth century England (Young, 1992, 188), and “by Shakespeare’s day, England seems to have been the only nation of Western Europe in which the formal practice of requesting and giving parental blessings was part of daily life” (Young, 1992, 191). Young cites the blessing the Countess of Rosillion gives her son in *All’s Well That Ends Well*. This blessing takes place in the first scene: “Be thou Blest, Bertram” (192, 197). Young also cites the blessing of Marina’s mother in *Pericles*: “Blest, and mine own” (192, 203).

The conclusion of the study of “Parental Blessings in Shakespeare’s Plays” is also of interest for the purposes of this paper:

[I]n several plays –especially *Richard III*, *All’s Well that Ends Well*, and *The Winter’s Tale*– the blessing is associated with the power of women. [...] the deliberate foregrounding of a mother’s blessing has unavoidable implications for issues of gender. The emphasis on a mother’s blessing [...] helps strengthen women’s association with generosity and sacred power. [...] And in several plays it serves as an instrument women use to instruct and influence men (Young, 1992, 209).

James Walsh offers two arguments for the Cloud-author being a priest: firstly, “the blessing he imparts to his addressee at the very end of the treatise”; and secondly, the mention in chapter 37 of “the rubrics ordained by holy fathers who have gone before us” (1981, 3). With regard to the first argument, Englert remembers that Constantino Nieva “holds that the blessings given by the author of *The Cloud* might just as well been given by a lay person, and do not necessarily imply a priestly author” (1983, 15; Nieva, 1971, 35). Regarding the second argument, Hodgson notes another expression instead of “holy fathers”: the Holy “Chirche” (Hodgson, 1944, 74. 5). If the young addressee is not a “father”, “before us” is a logical reference to the common past, to the Church Tradition, as the source of authority.

Wolfgang Riehle offers some interesting information about women, which we also know to be true about Julian of Norwich:

Lay people –and in England predominantly aristocratic women– bought their way into such cells by means of gifts, and dedicated themselves to religious activity under the patronage of the monastery, but without losing touch with the lay world outside. There is a surprising spread of cells in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, scattered throughout the medieval countryside and mainly occupied by women (Riehle, 2014, 9).

Riehle associates the intense influence exerted by “the anchoritic idea” with the production of works as *The Cloud of Unknowing* (2014, 114). Nevertheless, this scholar does not associate this book with a possible female authorship.

About the *Cloud*-author, Elwin mentions two functions (director of souls and mystic writer), which Julian of Norwich performed as well:

But he was probably chiefly occupied as a *guru* (director of souls) and a writer of spiritual books. For one of his followers, a young *chela* (disciple) of twenty-four years, who was, it has been conjectured, about to become a hermit, he wrote his most famous work, *The Cloud of Unknowing* (Elwin, 1930, 2).

Llewelyn reaffirms: “he was a well-versed theologian and an experienced director of souls” (1983, v). Academics agree on the attribution of *The Cloud* to a man who writes not only to a young aspirant to solitary life, but “to all who are similarly called” to contemplative life (Llewelyn, 1983, vi). Five of the seven extant works related to the same author are really letters of spiritual counselling.

As in the case of the *Libro de la Vida* by Teresa de Jesús –the teacher of contemplative prayer–, in *The Cloud* there is a universal addressee across the centuries and countries, beyond the immediate addressee:

The Cloud of Unknowing and its important supplement, *The Book of Privy Counsel* [...]. Both books are written for a young disciple whom we suppose had appealed to the author for teaching on prayer. It is clear, however, that the writer intends his counsel for every reader called the same way (Llewelyn, 1989, 94).

IV. 2. A woman writer might also desire to remain anonymous

The female sex is forbidden on apostolic authority to teach in public, that is, either by word or by writing... All women’s teaching, particularly formal teaching by word and by writing, is to be held suspect [...]. The reason is clear: common law –and not any kind of common law, but that which comes from on high– forbids them. And why? Because they are easily seduced, and determined seducers; and because it is not proved that they are witnesses to divine grace (John Gerson, *De examinatione doctrinarum*, apud Colledge, 1978, 151).

John Gerson (d. 1429), Chancellor at the University of Paris, writes this a few years after Julian of Norwich completed her Long Text. In my opinion, if a woman of the fourteenth century wanted to teach men to love God, as the *Cloud*-author did, and shows in her book that a woman sinner is the model of lovers, the means for easily distributing her writings would be through anonymity. In fact, Julian of Norwich “was never, until the

twentieth century, a popular author” (Colledge, 1978, 196). The scholars recognize that the *Cloud*-author intends “to remain anonymous” (Wolters, 1961, 11).

Pokorn, in her paper about “Medieval Anonymity” and the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, concludes with this consideration: “the medieval author of the *Cloud* conceals his name because he thinks that his authority is not needed, and that the shared experience with the reader of his book will grant access to the divine transcendental authority “ (1999, 498). Again, if we thought of “her name”, instead of “his name”, we would see that it would be necessary to hide the name so that the writing would have more authority. The authority of the *Cloud*-author is “the authority of love” as the writer explains in the Prologue of *The Cloud of Unknowing* (Spearing, 2001, 11-12).

Armstrong writes in regard to the intention of the author: “He concealed his identity with such success that his desire to remain hidden was probably deliberate” (1991, 63). And Summit remembers that Richard Brathwaite wrote in 1641 that the absence of works written by women could have been voluntary because “these desired to doe well, and not to be applauded; [...] To improve goodness by humility, was their highest pitch of Glory” (Summit, 2000, 1).

For Robert William Englert, “it seems wise to infer that the author was a solitary since he remained anonymous”(1983, 15). But it is equally prudent to infer that “he” might be a solitary woman, a female anchorite. On the other hand, if an anonymous mystical manuscript is found in Carthusian hands, and if their tradition was to write anonymously, then it is not necessarily a Carthusian writing this manuscript.

In my opinion, for a woman, the desire to remain anonymous is also closely related to the intention that her contemplative teaching be widely known by men and women, as Teresa de Jesús wanted.

IV. 3. A woman writer could equally use “plain words of daily life”

It is important, taking into account the possibility of female authorship, to take note of a few sentences by preeminent experts about the work of the *Cloud*-author.

I think Hodgson’s statements would also be valid for Teresa de Jesús’s writing: the *Cloud*-author, “writing from very immediate personal experience, used simple everyday terms, deliberately avoiding all lear-

ned terminology” (1944, lvii); “his teaching is strikingly individual” (1944, lxxxii). Llewelyn also highlights “his vivid and lively style” (1989, 96).

As in the case of Teresa de Jesús, master of the rhetoric of seduction, the capacity of persuasion of the *Cloud*-author has been praised: “*The Cloud of Unknowing* appears less a manual of instruction than a exercise in persuasion” (Chartrand-Burke, 1997, 116).

The magnificent textual analysis of Underhill, in my opinion, might equally refer to a woman’s writing; in fact, her observations could also be attributed to mystic writers such as Teresa de Jesús:

Everything points rather to their being the work of an original mystical genius, of strongly marked character and great literary ability: who [...] introduced a genuinely new element into mediaeval religious literature. [...] the combination of high spiritual gifts with a vivid sense of humour, keen powers of observation, a robust common-sense: a balance of qualities not indeed rare amongst the mystics, but here presented to us in an extreme form. [...] Next, he has a great simplicity of outlook, which enables him to present the result of his highest experiences and intuitions in the most direct and homely language. So actual, and so much a part of his normal existence, are his apprehensions of spiritual reality, that he can give them to us in the plain words of daily life: and thus he is one of the most realistic of mystical writers (Underhill, 1922, 3).

Underhill also underlines our author’s critique of pride (1922, 4) and “the ingenuity of great learning and bookish knowledge, as in the case of clerics” (Spearing, 2001, 30, Ch. 8).

Related to the mention of clerks, Summit remembers Chaucer’s approach in “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue”, 692-6:

“Tradition” as derived from classical or clerical institutions by definition excludes women. The universities and clergy, grounded in patristic tradition, comprised a literate community so exclusively masculine that when Chaucer came to define the figure “woman writer” he made her the natural opponent of “clerks” (Summit, 2000, 6).

Hilditch observes that *The Cloud*-author does not write as a speculative theologian, but “*The Cloud* was written by a mystic, explaining his mysticism in practical and helpful terms” (1987, 32). Also she underlines “the warm and loving atmosphere of *The Cloud*” (1987, 111). However, for Hilditch “what has appeared very clearly is that the author was a learned man who did not parade his learning” (1987, 146).

Riehle accentuates that the *Cloud*-author “writes with great humility” (2014, 169). And if it is necessary, the *Cloud*-author “clothes his mystagogic advice deliberately in childish language” (Riehle, 2014, 168). In fact, a wise woman could certainly write the next text of *The Cloud*; it could actually be written by a wise woman more appropriately than by the priest, supposed by Riehle (2014, 169):

Friend in the spirit, in this work of contemplation, though it is childishly and ignorantly described, and though I am a wretch unworthy to teach anyone, I bear the office of Beseleel [the wise], as if making this ark for your use and explaining what it is like. But you can work far better and more worthily than I if you will be Aaron [the priest] (Spearing, 2001, 98-99, Ch. 73).

We see the high level of consideration and expectations of the writer for his addressee, who “may have approaching ordination to the priesthood” (John-Julian, 2015, 21). John Julian explains that “the author sees Aaron’s contemplative facility as related to his priestly office”, because the “ordained have an easier time of it” (John-Julian, 2015, 185).

Riehle writes about *The Mirror*: “The *Miroeur* is also a stylistically impressive masterpiece of intellectual prose, which structures abstract lines of thought concisely and persuasively” (2014, 141). In fact, I agree with Riehle when he perceives that *The Cloud* “in some ways [...] converges with *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, written by a woman” (2014, 151).

Concerning Marguerite Porete, who was “an educated woman”, Riehle says something that we could equally apply to the *Cloud*-author: “Evidently she had a wide-ranging knowledge of theology, although she never cites a single authority” (2014, 136). Englert points out that the *Cloud*-author “was an accomplished theologian, even though he characteristically refused to cite learned sources” (1983, 17). And, with regard to the creative language, he adds that the *Cloud*-author “translated the theology of the monasteries into the dialects of the East Midlands and many of his expressions appear for the very first time in the English tongue” (1983, 17, note 36).

Finally, I propose that this last scholar’s affirmation should be read as suggesting that a woman would equally be able to write this text: “The original text of *The Cloud of Unknowing* was written in the language of daily life in fourteenth-century England” (Progoff, 1959, 18).

CONCLUSION

For centuries right up until the present day, a book has become widely known if a recognized male author has written it. If a book was anonymous, this eventuality has been corrected by assigning it to a male author, in order to improve its value and knowledge, since a book written by a woman has been less valued. We have seen that a great mystical woman writer desired not to be known: Teresa de Jesús; but other ones could remain hidden in “the cloud of unknowing”.

The *Cloud*-author is a spiritual counsellor who writes in vernacular language, with perfect humility, in dialogue with the audience, as

Julian of Norwich did. The *Cloud*-author is a great mystic who writes the best mystic literature, as Marguerite Porete, Julian of Norwich and Teresa de Jesús also did.

If Marguerite Porete and Julian of Norwich teach that God is Love, the *Cloud*-author teaches a means of loving the Lover: the work of contemplation. The God-Love is reached by the pure love, the *Cloud*-author teaches. The pure love was also taught and poetized by Rābi'a of Basra, the mystical teacher of the Sufi masters (8th century).

I did not find any incontestable reason for excluding the female authorship of *The Cloud*, but a multiplicity of reasons to include this possibility. I agree with Eileen Power who says that there are texts “so sensitive of the woman’s own feelings as to suggest an authorship not only pro-feminist but also female” (1995, 23-24). From my first reading of *The Cloud* (and its related treatises *The Book of Privy Counsel* and *The Epistle on Prayer*), I suspected a female author. And after my research into the scholars’ arguments and their united opinion that the *Cloud*-author is a man, my question still stands: why could a woman not have written this book that teaches the work of loving contemplation? For this reason I humbly invite my fellow academics to contemplate the possibility of female authorship as well.

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