MY LOVER, MY GOD:
THE ROLE OF GENDER IN THE MYSTICAL THEOLOGY
OF THE CLOUD OF UNKNOWING

by

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(ABSTRACT)

The fourteenth-century mystical text, The Cloud of Unknowing, has received much scholarly attention through the years, yet scholars rarely take notice of the role of gender in the Cloud-author's theology. The text may be written by a male priest to a presumably male novice, but we can in no way infer from these details that the text is thereby masculine. Quite the contrary, it is the purpose of this thesis to demonstrate that the Cloud-author rather openly locates his text on the feminine pole of the masculine/feminine binary system, and that he does so in order to define his approach to contemplation over and against those approaches considered dominant at the time.

Rather than emphasizing reason and intellect as the primary means of achieving knowledge of the divine, the Cloud-author stresses the superiority of the will as the faculty in and through which divine union occurs, and he teaches that love alone makes this union possible. Because
the faculty of will has long been associated with the feminine end of the binary, and reason, language, and intellect with the masculine end, the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* thus not only privileges a feminine position but actively discounts traditionally masculine ways of knowing.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part I: The Free Gift of Contemplation</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part II: The Feminine Soul</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part III: An Anti-Masculine Text?</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part IV: Alone in the Crowd</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
My Lover, My God:  
The Role of Gender in the Mystical Theology  
of The Cloud of Unknowing

Introduction

Much of the scholarship on the fourteenth-century mystical text, The Cloud of Unknowing, focuses either on uncovering the sources and background of the anonymous author's theology, or on situating the author within the context of contemporary mystical writers, both English and continental. 1 Rarely do scholars have anything to say about the issue of gender in the text, either in terms of the gender of those for whom the approach is intended or the way the approach works on a metaphysical level. In fact, because the text is so often treated as a representative of the dominant approach to contemplative experience in fourteenth-century England, it seems implicit in much scholarship that the text is thereby masculine -- the author is, after all, a presumably male priest writing to a presumably male novice contemplative. Clifton Wolters, in his introduction to a modern English translation of the text, has gone so far as to remark that "a sense of masculinity pervades the whole" (12), though he does not explain what exactly he means by this. 2

Elizabeth Robertson goes one step further by pointing to the Cloud as typical of "most male mystical literature" (162), primarily because it "follows the male mystic's
hierarchical ascent to union with God," a "progressive ascent" which she finds "conspicuously absent" from several twelfth-century texts for a female audience (47). Thus the Cloud is offered as the antithesis to feminine spirituality, or rather as the premier example of masculine spirituality. But what Robertson doesn't take into consideration is the Cloud-author's repeated warnings not to take physically what is meant spiritually -- in other words, not to interpret a spiritually abstract or transcendent approach to mysticism as an approach which requires actual, physical transcendence.

According to Robertson, women were considered unable to escape an awareness of their own bodies and of the physical existence to which they were tied by their biological function. As a result, she argues, texts written for the spiritual instruction of women emphasized a non-linear, non-hierarchical, concrete and pragmatic approach to the spiritual life, as opposed to the more abstract and teleological approach supposedly advocated by the more dominant "male" texts. While I have no quarrel with her assumptions up to this point, I do question the inclusion of the Cloud among these "dominant" texts, especially since I believe it is possible to see the Cloud, in context, as an openly anti-dominant text.
Not only is there no indication in the text itself that the approach is intended only for a males, but the Cloud-author goes to great lengths to insist that his approach is available to all who are called, regardless of innate capacity, and that any attempt to read his approach in literal terms (i.e., as literally hierarchical or linear) is ultimately misleading. So how, then, can the Cloud be said to be masculine? Can we even assign a gender label to this text, which seems to resist any attempt to categorize it in worldly terms? If we think of the word "feminine" as referring only to the physical characteristics associated with femaleness -- bodily, physical, natural, emotional, earthy -- then the Cloud certainly does not seem feminine, though the author does not actively denigrate the flesh or the world. If, however, we think of the text in light of the typically "masculine" characteristics of reason, intellect, abstract thought, control, power, etc., then we find that it does not fit this label either, as the Cloud-author insists on the superiority of love over intellect in contemplation.

This leaves us with two possibilities for speaking of the text in terms of gender: perhaps the approach is feminine in the non-physical sense of the term, and perhaps it is so in order to define itself against the dominant approaches to spirituality at the time. In other words, if
we think of the masculine/feminine dynamic constructed by society, in which masculine equals rational, dominant, and intellectual, and feminine equals everything "other" than or outside this realm (passive, submissive, willful, loving, metaphoric, irrational, patient, etc.), then it becomes possible to see the extent to which the Cloud locates itself quite plainly on the feminine pole of this binary system. This is not, however, because it emphasizes emotional or physical experience (the usual ingredients of a "feminine" approach), but because of its insistence on the futility of the intellect in contemplation -- an act which must be thoroughly driven by a love which defies human comprehension, even articulation.

What I am suggesting, then, is that we use the masculine/feminine dynamic as a way of recovering the extent to which the Cloud-author stands over and against the dominant masculine tradition of his time. While I do not mean to ascribe to either gender any essentialist traits, I do think that this dynamic, this polarizing tendency so encoded in Western thought, is a useful tool for this purpose, so long as we remain aware that every tool has its limitations. With that in mind, let us now turn our attention to the text itself, starting with the Cloud-author's assumptions about gender-related versus general human capacities for the contemplative life.
Part I: The Free Gift of Contemplation

One of the most difficult concepts for the twentieth-century mind to grasp is that, despite what would appear to be an obsession with works, the fourteenth-century was not without an understanding of divine grace as the freely given but wholly underserved gift of God which makes the spiritual life possible. Without this gift, according to the author of The Cloud of Unknowing, we would not even be aware of God’s existence, much less desire to know and love God. If grace could be earned or deserved, it would no longer be grace, and thus even those who are called out of the "common" life and into the "special," "solitary," or even "perfect" life should not think of themselves as especially deserving of favor. In fact, the Cloud-author takes pains to explain that each state of life is necessary to earthly existence, and each is therefore dear to God, but that some are chosen to move towards perfection in this life, while for others this state will be possible only in heaven. The call to the contemplative life, then, is freely given without regard to merit, or innate capacity, as the capacity for this life is one with the calling.

Thus it is impossible for one person to determine whether or not any other person has the capacity for or is suited to the life of contemplation, but it is possible to offer those who think they have been so called ways of
verifying their calling and tips for following up on it. That is the purpose which the author of the Cloud of Unknowing sets out for himself in this work, which is intended for a young novice contemplative whom the author describes as his "Goostly freende in God" (13). He does not, however, limit his audience to this one novice, nor to any one group of people over another. In both the prologue (written to the general reader) and the last two of his seventy-five chapters he seems to be aware of the likelihood that others will read his work, and he warns only that those who are "purposed ... to be a parfite folower of Criste" (2) should read it. Those who are merely curious, notably "lettred men" (2), are asked to stay away from the book, as are "Fleschely iangelers, opyn preisers & blamers of hemself or of any other, tithing tellers, rouners & tutilers of tales, & alle maner of pinchers" (2).

The author also makes it quite clear that not everyone who reads the book or who finds his discussion of the work of contemplation interesting and good is necessarily called to this work themselves, but at no point in his text does he specify any innate characteristic, such as gender or social standing, which would serve as an automatic disqualifier. Rather, he not only repeatedly emphasizes the necessity of having been made capable of this work by divine grace, but he also seemingly ignores what Elizabeth Robertson has
determined were the common assumptions about female spirituality in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. While it is possible to argue that the author deliberately ignores these particular assumptions, I think it is more likely that he is simply dismissing all assumptions which suggest that anyone has or lacks the innate capacity for this life. Nonetheless, since my intention is to demonstrate that the Cloud-author does not promote a gender-specific approach to contemplation, I will now turn to four of the assumptions about women's capacities that Robertson details in Early English Devotional Prose and the Female Audience.

1. Women are body-bound

The first assumption about women common in the middle ages is that women are, in Robertson's terms, "inescapably rooted" in their bodies -- that because they are essentially willful, and not rational, they are unable to fully control the desires of their flesh to the extent necessary for contemplation. In particular, women's biological functions keep them more involved in the physical/material realm than men, and thus prevent them from "escaping" an awareness of their bodies. This assumption depends, however, on two beliefs that the Cloud-author does not hold: that without the discipline of reason, the will by nature tends towards the material world, and that men are capable of escaping
awareness of their bodily existence by their own efforts. According to the Cloud-author, the faculty of the will is distinct from the lower faculty of sensuality, which is what draws the soul towards earthly pleasures unless it is "reformed" by grace. While sensuality operates in the realm of bodily understanding, the function of the will is purely spiritual; indeed, it is the faculty which first experiences God's call to contemplation, and which subsequently leads the way, so to speak. Thus, the condition of being "willful" is not gender-related.

According to the author of the Cloud, all humans are also inescapably aware of their bodily existence, but not because of any biological or physical link to the flesh. In fact, although the author acknowledges the dualism between body and soul, he refuses to define it as a tension; in other words, the body itself is not at war with the soul, hindering its progress towards God by dragging the contemplative towards the material realm. It is this kind of thinking that leads to attempts to actually "mortify" the flesh by physical penance, but the Cloud-author has this to say about such practices:

Fast thou neuer so mochel, wake thou neuer so longe, rise thou neuer so eerly, ligge thou neuer so harde, were thou neuer so scharp, ye, & yif it were leuful to do -- as it is not -- puttest thou oute thin yyen, cuttest thou oute thi tonge of thi mouth, stoppedest thou thin eren & thi nose neuer so fast, thoy thoy schere awei thi preue membres & dedest al thi pine to thi body that thou miytest think: alle this wolde
help the riyt nouyt. Yit wil stering & rising of synne be in thee. (38-39)

Thus "synne," that which stands in the way of contemplation, is not "in" the flesh nor can it be purged by an effort on the part of the contemplative -- and it exists in all, regardless of gender. Thinking about sin in this literal/physical way, as linked to the body, is but one example of a tendency the Cloud-author repeatedly warns against: interpreting physically, or by bodily understanding, what is meant spiritually.

Because he does not link the flesh itself with sinfulness, the author of the Cloud emphasizes discretion and moderation rather than rigid asceticism with regard to the contemplative's daily affairs: eating, drinking, sleeping, clothing, etc. (79-80). Clearly the body itself does not hinder the act of contemplation; as long as the soul continues in this work, the body will "behave:" "For alle bodely thing is sogette vnto goostly thing & reulid thereafter, & not ayensward" (113). Elsewhere the author speaks of the need for both body and soul to work together:

For I telle thee trewly that this werk asketh a ful greet restfulnes, & a ful hole & a cleane disposicion, as wele in body as in soule. & therfore for Godes loue gouerne thee discreetly in body & in soule, & get thee thin hele as mochel as thou mayst. (80)

But he also explains that if the contemplative is able to "gete a wakyng & a besi beholdyng to this goostly werk withinne [the] soule," then he or she can "haue a rechelesnes in
etyng & in drynkyng, in sleping & in spekyng & alle [thine] outward doynges" (81).

Thus, according to this author, not only is there no dualistic tension between body and soul, no hatred of the flesh so common during this period, but both are together being prepared for perfection by the work of contemplation:

theirre acordyng abylnes in body & in soule, in degre & compleccion, or the tyme be that thei mowe parfitely be onid vnto God in parfite charite -- soche as may be had here yif God voucheth saaf. (85)

So, even if women were considered to be somehow more tied to their bodies than men (though the Cloud-author assumes that we are all equally tied), this would not pose a problem as long as the fervent desire for contemplation never ceased.

2. Women are not educated, and thus have not been trained to think rationally.

Although the Cloud-author assumes basic knowledge of Church teaching, such as that available through sermons, he places very little value on formal education in the pursuit of contemplation. In fact, all that is necessary for this life can be taught by God alone. Those who are truly called to contemplation (that is, "hem that contynuely worchen in the werk of this book" [72-3]), as opposed to those who consciously choose to become an "apprentice in contemplation," are often given such knowledge spontaneously:
For theire meditaciones ben as thei were soodein conseites & blynde felynges of theire owne wrechidnes, or of the goodnes of God, with-outyn any menes of redyng or heryng comynge before, & with-outyn any specyal beholdyng of any thing vnder God. Thees soodeyn conseytes & thees blynde felynges ben somner lernyd of God then of man. (73)

Nevertheless, instructional texts such as The Cloud of Unknowing are useful, if for no other reason than to offer encouragement and the means by which the young contemplative can verify if his or her calling is from God, or from some other source.

If education is not necessary, then, neither is it necessary to have been trained to think rationally. In fact, the Cloud-author has this to say about such thinking: "Bot then is the vse iuel, when it is swollen with pride & with coriouse of moche clergie & letterly conning as in clerkes" (30). Thus it would seem that the contemplative is better off for not having had a formal education, and so in this regard women are especially well-suited to the contemplative life.

3. Women are unable to think in abstract terms because they must by nature conceptualize in terms of the concrete, physical world.

This assumption is related to the previous two in that women were thought to be incapable of abstract thinking primarily because they were "body-bound," but also because, even if they were capable of such thinking, they lacked the necessary training through education. As we have already
seen, the Cloud-author assumes that everyone is to some extent body-bound, but he does not find this a problem, and neither does he put much stock in the need for formal training. But on the subject of abstract versus concrete thinking, he has a great deal more to say.

First of all, he assumes that it is a human tendency to want to interpret concepts physically or literally, and that this tendency must be overcome by everyone. But the alternative is not abstract thinking, as an abstract concept is merely an attempt to apply a physical reality to a non-physical entity, which in the end is still interpreting physically what is meant spiritually. For example, if we think about the abstract concept of divine justice, we cannot help but bring an earthly understanding of justice to bear on our thinking, and this earthly understanding thus stands in the way of our truly grasping what is meant by divine justice. Because this is true of all concepts, all thoughts no matter how abstract, it is better not to entertain such thoughts at all but rather to "put them down" beneath the "thicke cloude of foryetyng" (66).

The Cloud-author has a great deal more to say about the role of thought in the work of contemplation, which we will come to in Part III, but suffice it to say that the inability to conceptualize in abstract terms, if indeed this was thought to be true of women, poses no problem to the
approach detailed by this text. The only mental ability necessary is the ability to cease from all mental activity altogether, to instead "concentrate" not by knowing but by "unknowing." This kind of concentration is made possible because God "is incomprehensible to all create knowable miyt" (18). And to further underscore the point that this ability is not limited on any basis, including gender, the author goes on to write:

of the which two miytes, to the first, the whiche is a knowyng miyt, God, that is the maker of hem, is euermore incomprehensible; & to the secound, the whiche is the louyng myyt, in iche one diversly he is al comprehensible at the fulle, insomochel that o louyng soule only in it-self, by vertewe of loue, schuld comprehend in it hym that is sufficient at the fulle. (19)

Thus, all that is required of the individual contemplative is a "naked entent directe vnto God, with-outen any other cause then him-self" (28); all else, including the "scharp steryng of vnderstondyng" (33) -- which is the faculty that tends to conceptualize in physical terms -- must be "put doun" under the cloud of forgetting: "bot thou bere him doun, he wile bere thee dun!" (33).

4. Women cannot ascend the "allegorical ladder" to God; that is, they cannot follow the typical "male" pattern of "escape" from their bodies and detachment from the world.

Although this assumption is built on those already discussed, it is worth mentioning separately because it foregrounds the notion of hierarchical and linear ascent as
being a male preserve. To understand mystical union as an upward ascent, however, even in allegorical terms, is to engage in that most fruitful of errors: interpreting physically what is meant spiritually. Mystical union, according to the Cloud-author, is something that is altogether different from that which is described by this fourth assumption.

Rather than thinking of the soul as leaving the body and ascending towards God -- since "the werke ofoure spirit schal not be directe neither upwarde ne donwarde, ne on o syde ne on other, ne forward ne bacward, as it is of a bodely thing" (106) -- we should think of union as occurring "nowhere" physically, or rather, spiritually speaking, "in" the cloud of unknowing that shrouds both soul and God: "For the perfeccion of this werke is so pure & so goostly in itselfe, that & it be well & trewly conceyuid, it scal be seen fer lengthid fro any steryng & fro any stede" (110-111).

But this is not to say that the body itself is left behind in this act, even in a figurative sense, as to say this would once more plunge us into the difficulties of assuming that the soul goes anywhere. Rather, as the whole contemplative, body and soul, engages in contemplative prayer, in fervent longing to know God's love in deeper and fuller ways, God may choose to send out "a beme of goostly liyt, peersyng this cloude of vnknowyng that is bitwix thee
& hym, & schew thee sum of his priuete" (62). This has nothing to do with any kind of "allegorical ladder" or "ascent" in any sense of the term, and everything to do with a state of being, of waiting in the stillness and darkness of the cloud of unknowing, not for the soul to "leave" the body but for soul and body together to "receive" the divine.

To a twentieth-century reader, this understanding of the soul's "role" in mystical union clearly has gender related, if not overtly sexual, connotations, and exploring these and other such connotations will be the focus of Part II. But first I will wrap up the discussion in Part I by pointing to some general examples that illustrate the Cloud-author's unwillingness to restrict his approach on the basis of perceived gender-determined capacities.

Perhaps the most obvious example of the author's general attitude towards women as contemplatives is his description of Mary Magdalene as being "in persone" the representative of "alle sinners that ben clepid to contemplative liif" (44-45). While the story of Mary and Martha as "types" of the contemplative and active lives was not uncommon among spiritual writers, nowhere in his text does the Cloud-author give any indication that he is addressing types that are not also themselves fully human and fully female (i.e., not just symbols). Rather, he focuses in some detail on the biblical account of Christ's
visit to the house of Mary and Martha, and on Mary Magdalene herself -- some eight chapters to be exact.

It is perhaps especially significant that Mary Magdalene was not only female but guilty of the most "fleshly" of sins, yet even she was both forgiven of her sins and granted the gift of contemplation:

not for hir grete sorow, ne for the mynde of hir synnes, ne yit for hir meekness that sche had in beholyng of her wrecchednes only. But whi than? Sikerly for sche loued mochel. (45)

Thus, both forgiveness and the gift of contemplation are the reward not because of intrinsic merit on Mary’s part, nor because of inherent deficiencies, but because of her "naked entent" and the purity of her love for Christ. As she sat at Christ’s feet, Mary modelled the perfect contemplative behavior:

& in heryng of his worde, sche beheeld not to the besines of hir sister, ... ne yit to the preciouste of his blissid body, ne to the swete voyce & the wordes of his Manheed ... bot to the souereynst wisdom of his Godheed lappid in the derk wordes of his Manheed: theder beheeld sche with al the loue of hir hert. For fro thens list hir not remove for nothing that sche saw ne herde spoken ne done aboute hir; bot sat ful stille in hir body, with many a swete priue & a lyste loue put upon that hiye cloud of vnknowyng bitwix hir & hir God. (47)

But lest we think that there is anything gender-specific in this description, the author continues:

For o thing I telle thee: that ther was neuer yit pure creature in this liif, ne neuer yit schal be, so hiye rauishid in contemplacion & loue of the Godheed, that ther ne is euermore a hiye & wonderful cloude of vnknowyng bitwix him & his God. In this cloude it was
that Marye was ocupied with many a preue love put. & whi? For it was the best & the holiest party of contemplacion that may be in this liif. (47-48)

While Mary is put forth as the model to all contemplatives, as the type of contemplative "for thei schuld conforme here leuyng after hirs" (48), Martha is described as a representative of the active life. But as such a representative, she is still a "specyal seinte" (50) and should not be blamed for not choosing the "better part" that Mary has. Involved in the active life, Martha's concern for daily affairs "was good & profitable to the helthe of hir soule" (52), but had she known more about the contemplative life, or if she herself had been called to this life, she would not have complained to Christ about Mary.

Although the Cloud-author draws from the story of Mary and Martha "a great deal more ... than would be permitted today" (Wolters 40), what seems especially relevant to our purposes is that had his approach been somehow not suited for women, he would not have offered a woman as the model of contemplative life. Furthermore, a final point emphasized by this exemplum, which will serve to draw a close to Part I, is that it would be thoroughly at odds with his whole system of belief for the Cloud-author to assume, even unconsciously, that contemplation could be anything but the freely given gift of God, wholly independent of the capacities, abilities, training, disposition, and thereby
gender, of the individual recipient. In fact, he leaves those of us who might think otherwise with this thought:

Were thou verrely meek thou schuldest fele of this werk as I sey: that God yeuith it frely with-outen any desert. (69)
Part II: The Feminine Soul

Thus far we have seen that the Cloud-author does not teach an approach to contemplation which discriminates on the basis of gender, but this is not to say that gender plays no role in the approach itself. As the author describes the relationship between the soul and God, the twentieth-century reader cannot help but see this relationship in sexual terms, even if they are thoroughly spiritualized. However, even though it has been common since the patristic era, and even in pre-Christian times, to speak of the soul in the "feminine" position before God, the Cloud-author himself makes no such statement -- and would most likely warn against it, as doing so serves only to apply a limited physical understanding to a relationship that is ultimately beyond the scope of human comprehension. Nevertheless, as products of a culture saturated with the implications of human sexuality, we may not be able to understand the relationship between the soul and the divine in any other way. That is not to imply that we are somehow incapable of "truly" understanding this relationship, but rather to suggest that as we look at this "feminine soul" in the hands of the Cloud-author, we keep in mind where the adjective "feminine" comes from, and that, as I will be using it, it applies only on the metaphysical level.

If we consider the relationship of the soul with God in gendered terms, one obvious way of understanding this
relationship as the *Cloud*-author describes it opens itself up to us: contemplation as the courtship of the soul. Again, although this concept is hardly new, the *Cloud*-author himself never makes it explicit (whether intentionally or not we will never know). But consider the evidence: the soul itself was made for continual union with God, but as a consequence of original sin, what was once possible by nature can now only be made possible through grace. Without grace, the soul isn’t even aware of the separation from its "true love," but once it has been made aware, it is filled with a longing to return to its source. For some this means a calling from the common life to the special life of the "believer," but for those so chosen (for whatever reason) the calling is to a life dedicated to the kind of contemplation that others will only be able to enjoy in the afterlife. This calling, then, represents the ultimate courtship of the soul, offering the possibility in this life of the "spiritual marriage" which awaits all souls in heaven.

At first glance, this courtship might appear to fall out according to traditional gender roles, with God as the male lover wooing his beloved, but in the divine romance the roles are less clearly defined. While God makes the "first move," so to speak, the *Cloud*-author is careful to insist that God will not force a relationship on a soul that is not
willing -- although he also explains that the soul granted this gift is thereby made both willing and able (68-71). The point is that the relationship, beyond the fact that God initiates and enables it, is best described as interdependent -- the more the soul longs to know and to love God, the more grace it is given to reach this end. But the extent to which this relationship actually depends on the level of the soul's participation in it is never quite explained by the Cloud-author. He does, however, describe in some detail both what the contemplative should do as "preparation," and what he or she can expect from the divine.

When the contemplative first experiences the call to this special life, the author recommends that he or she respond by clearing the mind of all other thoughts but God, and praising and thanking him.

& mene God that maad thee, & bouyt thee, & that graciously hath clepid thee to this werk: & resseiue none other thoyt of God. & yit not alle theese, bot thee list; for it suffiseth inouy a naked entent directe vnto God, with-outen any other cause then him-self. (28).

This "naked entent," then, is the first move on the part of the soul in response to the invitation of its "goostly spouse" (15). But God is also a "gelous louver" (15), so the soul's next move must be longing for its beloved to the exclusion of all else: "bete euermore on this cloude of vnknowing that is bitwix thee & thi God with a scharpe darte
of longing loue. & lothe for to think on ouyt vnnder God" (38).

Despite all this longing, however, the contemplative is urged not to give in to excessive displays of devotion, either physically (bodily trances, for example) or spiritually. Rather, as in the "game" of courtly love in the secular world, it is more "proper" for the contemplative not to outwardly acknowledge the depth of its desire but instead to "leerne thee to loue listely with a softe & a demure contennaunce, as wel in body as in soule" (87). The author continues his lesson in devotional etiquette thus: abide curtesly & meekly the wil of oure Lorde, & lache not ouer hastely, as it were a greedy hounde, hungre thee neuer so sore" (87).

In order to prevent the contemplative from making a breach of etiquette, the Cloud-author actually suggests a kind of spiritual "hide and seek" game in which the desire of the soul is "hidden" from God. He offers two reasons for this game:

& o skyle is this, whi that I bid thee hide it fro God; the desire of thine hert: for I hope it schuld more cleerly com to his knowynge, to thi profite & in fulfyllyng of this desire, by soche an hidynge, than it scholde by any other maner of schewynge that I trowe thou coudest yit schewe. & another skyle is: for I wolde by soche a hid schewynge bryng thee oute of the boistoute of bodely felyng into the purete & depnes of goostly felyng; & so furthermore at the last to help thee to knit the goostly knot of brennyng loue bitwix thee and thi God, in goostly onheed & acordyng of wille. (88)
Ultimately the contemplative is urged to get past the stage of "falling in love," when the desires of the soul long for expression, because the author "wote wel that euer the more that thi spirit hath goostliness, the lesse it hath of bodeliness & the nerer it is God" (89). And this more spiritual state, of being less emotional but nearer to God, is that of being in love -- peaceful, quiet, but continually growing stronger and deeper.

As the soul is making its way towards this state of being, divine grace never ceases to make the way possible, often surprising the contemplative with "sodeyn steryngs" that come "vnauisid, speedly springing unto God as sparcle fro the cole" (22). Meditations and prayers also "risen sodenly with-outyn any menes" (73), and even "that deoute steryng of loue that is contynuely wrouyt" in the soul is produced "not by him-self bot by the hande of Almiyty God" (61).

Though it is the workings of grace, then, which ultimately make this love relationship possible, the role of the soul cannot be discounted. Whether it is pursuer or pursued the soul remains actively involved, either by the "action" of "naked entent" or by the willingness to be receptive to the sudden impulses of divine love. Although this love has been placed in the soul by God, the Cloud-author admonishes the contemplative to "lene listely to this
meek steryng of loue in thin herte, & folow ther-after; for it wil be thi gyde in this liif, & bring thee to blisse in the tother" (92). Here, it would seem, love plays the dual role of masculine "movement" in the soul in response to the beloved and feminine "guide" leading the soul to heavenly bliss.11 The "guidance" of love can also be seen as "masculine" (as the active pole on the active/passive binary), and thus the contemplative must let love "be the worcher, & thou bot the sufferer" (70). As the soul progresses beyond the courtship period and towards what we might call the "consummation" of union, its role becomes increasingly more feminine.

From time to time, as the contemplative dwells in the cloud of unknowing, absorbed with love for the divine, God may choose to penetrate the darkness with "a beme of goostly liyt, peersyng this cloure of vnknowyng that is bitwix thee & hym, & schew thee sum of his priuete, the whiche man may not, ne kan not, speke" (62). In these moments of illumination, the soul is in a sense "impregnated" by the divine light, which engenders further devotion and more fervent longing in the soul. But along with this increased desire comes the awareness of the one thing that stands in the way of total union: the contemplative himself or herself. This awareness of self must (and presumably can), however, be altogether "forgotten," for "it is the condicion
of a parfite louer, not only to loue that thing that he
loueth more then him-self; bot also in maner for to hate
him-self for that thing that he louith" (82). This "self-
hatred" is more than just "trampling" all memories and
thoughts beneath the cloud of forgetting, for even when

alle other creatures & alle theire werkes, ye, &
thero alle thin owne werkes, that ther schal leue
yit after, bitwix thee & thi God, a nakid weting & a
felyng of thin owne beyng; the whiche wetyng & felyng
behouith alweis be dstroied, er the tyme be that thou
fele sothfastly the perfeccyon of this werk. (83)

But despite the Cloud-author’s insistence on stamping out an
awareness of self, he does not in any way condone the kind
of self-deprecation that leads to bodily punishment, or to
suicidal thoughts, as it is not the body that he means by
"self" but the very fact that the soul has existence over
and against God, and that the separateness of body and soul
is the result of the disobedience of original sin. Thus
there is only one way that the "nakid wetyng & felyng of
thin owen beyng" can be destroyed, and that is by "a ful
specyal grace ful frely youen of God, & therto a ful
acordyng abilnes to resseyue this grace on this partye"
(83).

The Cloud-author goes on the define this "abilnes" as
"not elles bot a stronge & a deep goostly sorow" and he
assures the contemplative that "wel were hym that miyt wynne
to this sorow" (83). Once again, even though the awareness
of self can only be destroyed by God, the contemplative must
participate in this "act" by producing the appropriate response of sorrow, or lament, which has long been associated with the feminine. In this case, however, the sorrow is produced not by loss, or by an inherent lack or deficiency of any kind, but rather by a presence which by its very existence hinders the soul from entering into "union" with its beloved -- yet it can only be vanquished by the beloved. As in the perfect romance, full and willing participation on both parts is necessary.

If the gender distinctions are once again appearing to blur, this is to be expected not only because of the "gender" of both soul and divine are being read into a situation which itself transcends the limitations of gender roles, but also because even at the peak of human sexual union, gender roles frequently lose their definition. While the soul has been patient, passive, receptive, and fervent in devotion, it has also participated in its "journey" nearly every step of the way, not only by its complete and total consent to the workings of divine grace, but also by struggling to overcome the obstacles of memory, thought, and self. In the end, however, the soul surrenders even the awareness of self and yields fully to the embrace of the divine -- an embrace which takes place in the womb-like darkness of the cloud of unknowing.
Likewise, the divine role has been somewhat mixed: although God actively sought out the soul and "planted" the seed of grace within it, and subsequently enabled the seed to grow into the fruit of contemplative devotion, the love thus planted also played the role of the "eternal feminine" which guides men's souls beyond themselves and towards the true good. As guide, the divine led the soul towards itself, that very self or "being" then becoming the object of the soul's desire, its "intended." And then, finally, the "spiritual marriage" takes place, in which the soul is "in grace, onyd with him in spirit with-outen departhyng, bothe there & in blis of heuen withouten any eende" (120). But at this point any attempt to read gender roles into this marriage becomes futile, because God, though he is thought of as the spiritual husband, perfectly contains both masculine and feminine and yet transcends these roles altogether.

Even though many a spiritual writer has tried to establish the union of husband with wife as a "type" of mystical union, defining the male role as that which "completes" the deficient female, in the context of The Cloud of Unknowing this typology loses credence. All humans, regardless of gender, are by nature lacking what can be given to them only by grace, but God is by nature whole and perfect; therefore no man can accurately represent in
physical marriage God's role in spiritual marriage, but rather both male and female are in equal need of "completion" by grace. To suggest otherwise would be to imply that any one person has more intrinsic worth or merit than another -- an implication that, as we have seen in Part I, the Cloud-author takes great pains to avoid.¹³

So then, what are we to make of the seemingly feminine role of the soul in the Cloud's mystical theology? If we insist on pushing these terms to their literal limits, we will only fall victim to that error of interpretation that the Cloud-author so often warns against. If, however, we use these "earthly" terms, masculine and feminine, to help us better understand the dynamics of the relationship between the soul and the divine, then they have served their purpose and we can effectively leave them behind. But before we can leave the issue of gender altogether, there is a rather large question which demands attention: is The Cloud of Unknowing, in its emphasis on love rather than knowledge, and on will rather than reason, an anti-masculine text? This is the subject of Part III.
Part III: An Anti-Masculine Text?

Is The Cloud of Unknowing an anti-masculine text? So far I have been asking some rather non-traditional questions of this text, but this one goes well beyond the scope of traditional Cloud scholarship -- yet it is the question that interests me most, perhaps because I originally expected the answer to be no. The Cloud has so often been called an "elitist" text, or "highly specialized" in its approach, that I felt sure that it would turn out to be very masculine, in the sense that it would conform to what the theological "authorities" defined as the "highest" and "best" way to achieve mystical knowledge of God. But even without putting the text into its contemporary context, which will be the goal of Part IV, a close examination of the Cloud's teaching yields some surprising results.

If we use the terms masculine and feminine not in any essentialist sense but as a way of talking about the relationship between dominant ways of thinking -- rational, ordered, active, masculine -- and all the modes of knowledge subordinated by the dominant -- defined as feminine, or "other" -- then what becomes clear is that the author of the Cloud is actively positioning himself in opposition to dominant ways of thinking, and thus might be considered anti-masculine. In fact, it would seem that he openly campaigns against ways of thinking typically associated with the masculine impulse in his assault on the use of intellect.
in contemplation, but it must be made clear (once again) that the author himself never labels these modes of thought in gendered terms. Rather, the terms as I am using them are more the product of the twentieth-century than the fourteenth, and thus they enable us to read this text in ways that may not have even been possible to earlier readers. As a result, we can read two of the Cloud-author's main concerns -- the futility of the intellect and the inadequacy of language in the pursuit of contemplation -- which were clearly anti-dominant, as also being anti-masculine.

The Futility of the Intellect

The Cloud-author's insistence on the futility of the intellect in achieving knowledge of the divine is repeated often enough in the text, and with sufficient intensity, to suggest that the tendency to elevate the intellect was rather popular among his contemporaries. Throughout his text the author rings changes on this theme, emphasizing in some places the ineffectiveness of intellectual knowing, and in others its inherent dangers, and he also offers a variety of methods for subduing the intellect. The foremost reason that intellectual activity is ineffective is simply that God "is incomprehensible to alle create knowable miyt" (18). As the author explains later, God "may wel be loued, not not
thouyt. By loue may he be getyn & hodem; bot bi thouyt
neither" (26). Love, then, is the only means by which God
can be known, for "loue may reche to God in this liif, bot
not knowing" (33). If God himself is "unknowable" to the
intellect, then clearly it is futile to attempt to know him
by these means -- and it is also dangerous.

In the fourth chapter of this text, the Cloud-author
begins to warn against the dangers of an intellectual
approach to contemplation:

For who-so herith this werke uther be red or spoken, &
weneth that it may or schuld be comen to by trauayle in
theire wittes (& therfore thei sitte & sechin in theire
wittes how that it may be, & in this coriousthe thei
trauayle theire ymaginacion parauenture ayens cours of
kynde, & thei feyne a maner of worching, the whiche is
neither bodily ne goostly): trewly this man, what so-
euer he be, is perilously disseyuid; in so-mochel that,
bot yif God of his grete goodnes schewe his mercyful
myracle & make hym sone to leue werk & meek hym to
counsel of prouid worchers, he schal falle uther into
frensies, or elles into other grete mischeues of
goostly sinnes & deuels disseites; thorow the whiche he
may liylty be lorne, both liif & soule, with-outen any
eende. & therfore Goddes loue beware in this werke, &
trauayle not in thi wittes ne in thin ymaginacion on no
wise. For I telle thee trewly, it may not be comen to
by trauail in thin; & therfore leue theim & worche not
with them. (22-23)

And he continues in chapter five by explaining that while
"it be ful profitable sumtyme to think of certeyne
condicions & dedes of sum certein special creatures,
neuertheles yit in this werke it profiteth lityl or nouyt"
(24). In this case, the special type of contemplation the
author is describing, thought serves only to interfere in the true work of the soul:

For why mynde or thinkynge on any creature that euer God maad, or of any of thiere dedes uther, it is a maner of goostly liyt; for the iye of thi soule is openid on it & euen ficchid ther-apon, as the iye of a schoter is apon the prik that he schoteth to. & o thing I telle thee, that alle thing that thou thinkest apon it is abouen thee for the tyme, & bitwix thee & thi God. & in so mochel thou arte the fether fro God, that ouyt is in thi mynde bot only God. (24-25)

Thus the very activity that is typically associated with the "highest" powers of the human mind is thoroughly discounted by the Cloud-author, not only because it suggests that contemplation is possible as a result of human effort but also because as "work," thought lies outside the natural state of the soul, and thus interferes with its loving attention, its "naked entent," towards God, which occurs only in the darkness of the cloud of unknowing.

In the seventh chapter, the author describes thought almost as if it had a life of its own, and could deliberately intrude on the soul’s devotion. He instructs the contemplative that if "any thoyt rise & wil prees algates abouen thee, bitwix thee & that darknes, & asche the seeing ‘What sekist thou, & what woldest thou have?’ Sey thou that it is God that thou woldest haue;" otherwise the thought will do its best to bring the mind to "diuerese ful feire & wonderful pointes of [God’s] kyndnes" which will ultimately lead the contemplative to thoughts of Christ’s
passion, and then to his or her own state of wretchedness (26-27). Presumably because these types of thoughts or meditations, especially on Christ's passion, were so popular at the time, the Cloud-author is especially careful to explain that these thoughts are not intrinsically bad:

& yit, neuertheles, the thing that he seide was both good & holy; ye, & so holy, that what man or woman that wenith to come to contemplacion without many soche swete meditatios of theire owne wrechidnes, the Passion, the kyndenes & the grete goodnes & the worthines of God comyng before, sekirly he schal erre & faile of his purpos. & yit, neuertheles, it behoueth a man or a woman, that hath longe tyme ben usid in theese meditatios, algates leue hem, & put hem & hoide hem fer doun vnder the cloude of foryetyn, yif euer schal he peerse the cloude of vnknowyng bitwix him & his God. (27-28)

Thus, in this special life, those "that hath longe tyme ben usid in theese meditatios" must learn to "smite doun al maner thouyt vnder the cloude of foryetting" in order to avoid being thoroughly distracted from his or her calling (28).

But how exactly is one to go about suppressing these thoughts? The Cloud-author offers several "plans of attack," which range from using a "litil worde of o silable," like "God" or "loue," as a "scheeld & spere" (28) to actually "step[ping] abouen it with a feruent steryng of lue" (66). Despite his repeated warnings against thinking in literal or physical terms about spiritual matters, these "methods" offered by the Cloud-author are remarkably vivid and physical.14 With the one-syllable word which is both
"scheeld & spere," the contemplative is to "bete on this cloude & this derknes" above him or her, which will thereby "smite doun" the thought and drive it away (28). And, in addition to stepping over thoughts, "treed[ing] hem down vnder thi fete" (66), the author describes two more ways to "dodge" an attack by thoughts. One is to

Do that in thee is to lat as thou wist not that thei prees so fast apon thee, bitwix thee & thi God. & fonde to loke as it were ouer their schulders, sechng another thing: the which thing is God, enclosid in a cloude of vnknowyng. (66)

Not only are these thoughts capable of independent action, then, they even have "schuldres!" The other dodge is this:

When thou felist that thou maist on no wise put hem doun, koure doun under hem as a chitif & a coward overcomen in batayle, & think that it is bot a foly to thee to stryue any lenger with hem; & therfore thou yeeldest to God in the handes of thin enmyes. (66-67)

Thus, it is clear according to the teaching of the Cloud-author that thought, which is ultimately a function of the intellect, is the enemy of the true contemplative, to be fought against at all costs. But there will come a time when the "thi bodely wittes kon fynde ther nothing to fede hem on" (121), and thus it will remain still and quiet so that the will can "feel" what the mind is unable to "see" (122). This time will only come, however, when all manner of masculine knowing and seeing has ceased.

It would seem, then, that the approach to contemplation advocated by the Cloud-author is rather anti-intellectual,
and thereby anti-masculine. But we have yet to consider the implications of the author's particular concern with the inadequacies of the intellect's primary means of knowing: language.

The Inadequacy of Language

If we think of language as an attempt to capture thought in a form which renders it intelligible to the human mind, which thus imposes order and control on the way we understand the world, we can begin to see language as the logical offspring of the masculine impulse described earlier. Language does not exist in nature -- it is not only the product of the human mind, but also a seemingly arbitrary system of signs and signifieds which attempts to impose relationships where none by nature exist. But because this system has become so thoroughly integrated into our understanding of what it means to be human, we cannot escape involvement in it, though throughout history poets in particular have lamented the inadequacy of language to fully convey human thoughts and desires.

According to the author of The Cloud of Unknowing, however, this inadequacy is nowhere more profoundly felt than in the relationship between the soul and divine. What works with limited efficiency as a means of human communication is of no use in this transcendent
relationship, which itself defies all explanation. But does this then mean that language plays no role in the contemplative life? To address this question we must again turn to the text itself, which is, after all, a monument to the power of language to communicate fundamental truths -- and a very well-wrought one at that!

The first problem with the use of language is that any attempt to speak of the divine (or anything for that matter) requires the use of terms which operate primarily in the physical realm; hence the need for repeated warnings to "conseyue not bodily that that is seyde goostly" (94). But words by their nature carry with them physical connotations, which we in our humanness are unable to escape. Even when such words are raised to the infinite power in the attempt to speak of the divine, we are still reducing the divine to the level of human understanding rather than reaching beyond it, which according to the Cloud-author should be our goal. And since nothing is more reductive than submitting content to the shackles of grammar, the author recommends that if we must use language, choose only one word, such as "God" or "loue," but take care not to "brekyng ne expounyng thees wordes with coryouste of witte, in beholdyng after the qualities of thees wordes, as thou woldest by that behodyng encrees thi deuocion" (73). Rather, the purpose of this "litil word" is similar to the cry of "fire!":

36
& riyt as this lityl worde FIIR sterith rather & peerseth more hastely the eren of the herers, so doth a lityl worde of o sylable, whan it is not only spoken or thouyt, bot priuely ment in the depnes of spirit.... & rather it peerseth the eres of Almyty God that doth any longe sauter vnmyndfuly mumlyd in the teeth. & herfore it is wretyn that schort preier peersith heuen. (75)

Thus it is not even the word itself, but the intention behind it, that enables communication with the divine; if the word itself can be left behind, the soul will be that much closer to its goal.

One of the real dangers in any attempt to speak about God in human language is the tendency to "rewrite" God in our own image, the image our language system makes possible, thereby rendering him no longer divine. The Cloud-author describes this danger in some detail, saying of those who insist on understanding God in such literal terms that they "make a God as hem lyst, & clothen hym ful richely in clothes, & set hym in a trone, fer more curiously than euer was he depeynted in this erthe" (105). Although this passage reminds us of the author's sense of humor (frequently felt throughout the text), it also points to the potential for deception and idolatry opened up by describing God in human terms. Not only is the anthropomorphic God limited by the availability of terms to describe him, he also becomes subject to the rigors of logic, grammar, definition, and propositional content -- and as "subject" is at the will of the masculine impulse, which seeks to conquer, claim, and illuminate, to know that which is by
nature hidden. But it is, of course, only the words for the
divine that are thus "colonized," as the distance between
these signs and what they signify is ultimately too wide to
be bridged by any human effort.

To avoid this obviously sinful tendency, then, the
Cloud-author encourages the contemplative to break free from
the world of signs altogether, or as much as is possible,
and to instead think about and communicate with the divine
"with a fulle spirite, in the heiyt & in the depnes, in the
lengthe & in the breed of his spirit that preith it" (75).
Because God himself stands beyond the reach of human
language, he can only be found in places where words cannot
go. Words are inextricably linked to bodily understanding,
and if something "neuer so goostly in itself" is to be
spoken of, it must be "wroyt with the tonge, the whiche is
an instrument of the body," and thus "alweis be spoken in
bodely wordes" (114). But since God is a spirit, "who-so
schuld be onid vnto hym, it behouith to be in sothfastness &
depnes of spirit, ful fer from any feynid bodely thing"
(88). Therefore, the prayer of the contemplative ultimately
takes place in a kind of non-language, which is in fact
better able to communicate with the divine:

But more aperte is that thing knowyn & schewid vnto
him, the whiche is hid in depnes of spirit, sith it so
is that he is a spirit, than is any thing is fether
fro God bi the cours of kynde then any goostly thing.
(89)
However, despite the Cloud-author's insistence on abandoning language as a means of communication with the divine, he does not express outright disgust with or hatred for language, just as he does not for the physical body. In fact, he is careful to explain that he does not want the contemplative to "lewe any tyme, if thou be stirid to preie with thi mouth," nor does he want to prevent him from "brest[ing] out, for habundaunce of deuocion in thi spirit" (90). These involuntary expressions, such as "swete Ihesu," are the body's way or participating in contemplation, which is important because "God wil be seruid with body & with soule, both to-gederes, as seemly is" (90). Nevertheless, even this vocal communication transcends the rational order of language, as it arises from the depths of the spirit and from a desire to love, not to name or classify, analyze or comprehend.

Ultimately, in the most intimate moments of contemplation, everything that is not pure love for the divine is so well suppressed beneath the cloud of forgetting that the silence must be "deafening." With language no longer in the way, human spirit and divine can commune in ways neither intelligible nor expressible. Thus, at this stage, the soul has finally broken free from the confines of a language system constructed by the masculine impulse and has returned to its essence, to the purpose for which it was
made. In a sense, then, both soul and divine are "feminine," because both stand outside the realm of "knowing," naming, thinking, and seeing. But this is not to suggest that such gender labels work on any literal, figurative, or even spiritual level, since contemplative union ultimately transcends all such distinctions; however, it does provide us with a way of emphasizing the contrast between dominant ways of thinking, typically considered masculine, and the approach described in The Cloud of Unknowing. In this way, it becomes possible to see the Cloud as an anti-masculine text — but this brings us to our next question: is it unique as such in the context of late fourteenth-century English spirituality? It is the aim of Part IV to address this question.
Part IV: Alone in the Crowd

In order to place The Cloud of Unknowing in its fourteenth-century context, I will need to cover some ground already covered in the Introduction, starting with the tendency to classify highly emotional and physical mysticism as feminine. Because women have been historically and mythologically associated with the desires of the flesh, and with the emotional and irrational side of human nature, it comes as no surprise that female mystics who were able to conquer their worldly/fleshly desires were often rewarded with acutely emotional spiritual desires, culminating in a "bodily" experience of the divine. Frequently these experiences came in the form of actual sensory perception, tastes of "heavenly sweetness" or visions of the infant Jesus nursing at Mary’s breast, and they were sometimes accompanied by outwardly visible "signs" such as ecstatic prostration. But despite the fact that this type of mystical experience was considered "verifiable," as an outward expression of an inward reality, it could also lead to dangerous excesses. Consequently, those who sought such experiences were constantly reminded to purge themselves of any desire which was not spiritual -- often by means of severe bodily discipline.

Against this tradition, characterized by the discipline of the outer body -- which is associated with women though it was popular with both sexes -- stands the tradition of
the inner rule, which appears to be a more mind-centered, and therefore a more rational, orderly, linear, and "masculine" approach to spirituality.\textsuperscript{17} Along these lines, then, of body versus mind, are the distinctions of masculine and feminine usually drawn, although both sexes participated with equal "success" in each of these approaches. But, I would argue, these distinctions are ultimately too broad and over-simplified to yield any significant insight into the subtle variations among medieval mystics. Rather, it seems more useful to loosely categorize these methods along the lines of theological underpinning behind both mystical practice and experience -- and to then ask which approach is typically considered "dominant," and thereby "masculine." In his History of Christian Spirituality, Urban Holmes discusses four such categories, which are the four possible combinations of two sets of terms which describe method of meditation (cataphatic or apophatic) and means of subsequent illumination (speculative or affective).\textsuperscript{18} If we look closely at the assumptions that lie behind each of these types, we will see how the combination which fits the teaching of the Cloud-author -- apophatic/affective -- is not only fairly atypical, but also privileges the traditionally feminine power of the will.

Cataphatic describes the kind of meditation that focuses the mind on concepts that have a positive content,
that describe God in terms of what he is rather than what he is not. These terms, however, such as loving or forgiving, come from within the context of human language, and thus carry with them connotations from the realm of human existence. Knowledge of sacred texts and of other authorities is thus prerequisite to cataphatic meditation, although such knowledge may be acquired second-hand, through reading the meditations of those who have enjoyed such study, and by listening to sermons. This approach is frequently called the *via positiva*, and it is the predominant approach of Western Christendom.

The alternative to cataphatic meditation is apophatic, which tends to deny the possibility of describing God in concrete terms, especially since such terms seem to reduce the divine to the level of human understanding rather than elevating the soul to a transcendent understanding of the divine. Thus, it is characteristic of the apophatic method, known also as the *via negativa*, to describe the divine by negating the typical terms used by cataphatic meditation. Rather than saying that God is love, for example, one would say that he is not-love, because he is ultimately so much more than what this term can convey that it would be better to say that he is not that term at all. Hence the use of the term "negative content" to describe the focus of
apophatic meditation, as opposed to describing it as an absence of content.

But how, exactly, does one focus on negative content? Herein lies perhaps one of the most fundamental differences in apophatic and cataphatic methods: while in cataphatic meditation the mind focuses on grasping and comprehending as much as possible via the powers of reason, apophatic meditation takes the opposite extreme in requiring the contemplative to "empty" his or her mind of all content, and to as much as possible still the powers of reason altogether.\footnote{19} Since the concept of God as "not-love" is not rational, it requires the power of another faculty, higher than reason -- but how one defines this faculty depends on the presumed means of illumination.

Unlike cataphatic meditation, the prerequisite for apophatic is not so much knowledge of sacred texts and traditions as it is a willingness to know God fully and deeply in ways that transcend the ordinary powers of the intellect. The approach thus presupposes familiarity with the basics of church teaching, as well as knowledge of the methods and aims of this approach; this is where texts like The Cloud of Unknowing come in, as instruction in the methods of the via negativa rather than providing the actual "content" for the via positiva.
Thus far I have described two methods for achieving divine illumination, but have not yet discussed the means by which such illumination takes place -- or what might be better understood as the faculty in and through which illumination occurs. Because cataphatic meditation focuses on the recognizable qualities of God, and thus his seemingly "human" (or "super-human") attributes, such a method is typically paired with an affective end, which is to say that illumination occurs in and through the affectus, or will. One of the assumptions behind this pairing, however, is that the will is by nature corrupt, tending to stray towards earthly delights, and so can be "reformed" when its attention is captured instead by the prospect of heavenly delights. The will presumably trades its love for the world, which frustrates reason’s capacity for spiritual pursuits, with a love for the divine, so that the will cooperates with reason in the pursuit of divine knowledge. This pairing -- cataphatic/affective -- is among the most popular "type" in Western mysticism, and the English mystics Richard Rolle and Julian of Norwich fall into this rather broad category.

At the opposite end of the spectrum is the pairing of apophatic and speculative, which is typically considered the most "intellectual" approach to contemplation, despite its emphasis on the "emptied" state of the intellect. Although
the mind itself is empty, occupied only by the "darkness of unknowing," in its consciously receptive mode divine illumination is made possible. But instead of reforming the will, or having really anything to do with love, this illumination yields knowledge of the divine not possible through the ordinary processes of human thought. Perhaps it is considered intellectual because it defines love of the divine as desire for knowledge of the divine -- the Anselmian notion of "faith seeking understanding" -- which ultimately privileges the intellectus as the "highest" human faculty, even though its powers are purely the gift of divine grace.²¹

Apophatic/speculative is also the category in which the pseudo-Dionysius falls, whose De mystica theologia had perhaps the greatest influence on the Cloud-author. But not everyone who read pseudo-Dionysius came to the same conclusions about the role of the intellectus. In fact, Thomas Gallus wrote a commentary on De mystica theologia in which he advanced the superiority of affectus over intellectus as the means by which the soul is united with the divine, while Albert the Great and several other thirteenth-century commentators on the same text defined intellectus as the highest power.²² These commentators, then, are in keeping with the pairing of an apophatic method with a speculative end, but with Gallus' different reading
of pseudo-Dionysius, a new pairing becomes possible: apophatic and affective.23

Although this pairing is far less common in Western mysticism than the other two, it is nonetheless the one that most influences the Cloud-author, and which shapes his teaching on contemplation. Thus, while others are emphasizing meditations on Christ's passion, devotion to the Eucharist, and sensory perception of the divine, the Cloud-author urges his followers to take an entirely different route -- to forgo all attempts to communicate with the divine by any human means: reason, emotion, language, etc. The ultimate aim of this communication is not to be intellectual illumination but a sort of ecstasy of the will. But as the Cloud-author himself would add, the concept of ecstasy can be very misleading, as this experience bears no real resemblance to sexual ecstasy, and whatever abandonment occurs takes place in the quiet, "secret" stillness of the cloud of unknowing.

I have so far demonstrated that the Cloud-author's approach follows different theological premises than many of his most well-known contemporaries, but often the differences are quite subtle. In fact, it would be a mistake to define the mystical teaching of the Cloud as the "opposite" of any other teaching, or to consider it unique in all regards. Comparative analysis of medieval mysticism
illustrates both the uniqueness of each individual's approach as well as each one's common ancestry. Rather, what I intended to call attention to was the uniqueness of those aspects of the Cloud that allow us to see its teaching not only as anti-masculine, but also somehow feminine, though in a transcendent way. Without an understanding of the dominant teaching on the means of mystical union, which emphasized intellectual knowledge of God and/or a physical/emotional response to this knowledge, then it might be all too easy to label The Cloud of Unknowing as dominant, and thereby masculine.

But if we look at particular aspects of the text, such as the prerequisites for contemplation, the use of language, and the role of the soul in union, in terms of the male/female dynamic constructed by society, it becomes clear that this particular text has a vested interest in defining itself against the norm. But then, there is a sense in which all mysticism can be said to define itself against the norm; after all, the mystical experience is one which takes place outside the boundaries of the Church, and in fact gives the mystic access to divine knowledge which is frequently at odds with institutionalized doctrine, and with this knowledge comes a power which the Church no doubt felt as a threat. That could even be the reason that English mysticism often seems "tame" compared to the wildly
emotional and expressive mysticism reported on the continent. Margery Kempe was influenced by accounts of such experience, and was continually in danger of being labelled a heretic; indeed, the fear of being so labelled might well have quieted others who wished to follow in Margery's footsteps. But the approach to mystical union advocated by *The Cloud of Unknowing*, while equally as subversive of ecclesial authority as continental mysticism, was far less likely to get the contemplative into trouble, as it did not openly challenge the Church but rather quietly sidestepped it. Nonetheless, the text still defined itself in opposition with dominant ways of thinking, thus positioning itself on the feminine end of the cultural binary.

But a final word should be offered on the use of this adjective "feminine." If it helps us as twentieth-century readers to define this particular approach as feminine, in terms of the masculine/feminine dynamic, then this construction can be considered useful. If it only confuses our understanding of the transcendent nature of the mystical theology of the *Cloud*-author, then perhaps we should leave it behind -- as the *Cloud*-author himself would undoubtedly suggest.
NOTES

1. See especially the studies by Caldwell, Emery, Englert, Forman, Knowles, Minnis, Nieva, and Sitwell.


3. Elizabeth Robertson, Early English Devotional Prose and the Female Audience.

4. See Robertson, passim

5. The Cloud-author describes the four "degres & fourmes of Cristen mens leuyng" in his first chapter (13-14).

6. As the Cloud-author explains: "The condicion of this werk is soche, that the presence therof abilith a soule for to haue it for to fele it. & that abilnes may no soule haue with-ouytyn it. The abilnes to this work is onyd to the selue werk, with-ouytyn departyng; so that who-so felith this werk is abil therto, & elles none" (69-70).

7. All references to the text are from the EETS edition, edited and introduced by Phyllis Hodgson. Although thorns and yoghs are used in the original text, I have replaced them in the paper with "th" and "y," respectively.

8. See Riehle, pp.15-16. Riehle goes so far as to suggest that the Cloud could possibly have been written for a female audience (p.19).

9. Four of the common medieval assumptions about women's innate capacities are presented in the following discussion; these and others are detailed in Robertson, especially in chapter 2.

10. See Robertson, chapter 2.

11. For an interesting discussion of medieval attitudes towards the feminine "guide," see Joan Ferrante, Woman as Image in Medieval Literature.

12. Again, see Ferrante, especially p.38.

13. The Cloud-author also has this to say: "Bewar now, wreche, in this while with thin enemye; & holde thee neuer the holier ne the beter for the worthines of this cleping" (14).

15. See Caroline Bynum, Holy Feast and Holy Fast and Fragmentation and Redemption.

16. Again, see Bynum; see also Petroff, pp.5-7 and passim.


18. Holmes, pp.54-61 and passim.

19. Riehle, p.68.


23. The fourth possible pairing, cataphatic and speculative, is possible, but extremely rare.
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