AGAINST THE PROUD SCHOLARS OF THE DEVIL: ANTI-INTELLECTUAL RHETORIC IN THE CLOUD OF UNKNOWING

The anonymous author of the fourteenth-century mystical handbook *The Cloud of Unknowing* offers the reader a programme for attaining union with God through a “blynde steryng of loue” (Hodgson 1944, 22/19). In doing so, he clearly and graphically sets himself against the methods advocated by his contemporaries, people he brands “proude scolers of he deuel & maysters of vanite & of falsheed” (30/14-15). These scolers, also referred to as clerkes, can be identified as those teachers found in the medieval university who were enamored by the writings of the Greek philosophers. Perceived as enemies by the Cloud author, the intellectual contemplatives are the target of numerous abusive slurs and charges of impropriety throughout the text. As early as the prologue the author strikes at his rivals by including them in a list of shameful characters — “fleschely ianglers, opyn preisers & blamers of hem-self or of any oþer, tijng tellers, rouners and tutilers of tales, and alle maner of pinchers” (2/19-21) — who are not even to see the book. But this is not all. At the height of his inflammatory attack the Cloud author writes that his adversaries are “properly clepid Antecriste discyples” (104/3-105/1) on the path to damnation.

Given such open animosity toward the university clerics, it is hardly surprising that the Cloud author has often been labeled anti-intellectual; yet he is just as often quickly vindicated of the charge. Modern Cloud scholarship is certainly justified in refuting the accusation, for there are signs in the text that the author is himself a formidable scholar. But if this is so, then the author’s abusive bravado should be examined more closely, not dismissed out of hand. When such an examination is performed The Cloud takes on a markedly different appearance. Behind the invectives and accusations may be found an attempt at seduction, an effort to use all the powers of language to persuade readers to adopt the author’s preferred form of devotion. In the course of the argument, intellectuals and their supporters are branded devils and condemned to hell, while true
contemplatives are offered great rewards and placed in the company of angels and saints. Read in this light, *The Cloud of Unknowing* appears less as a manual of instruction than an exercise in persuasion, less as a letter of personal spiritual counsel than an open call for new, church — approved contemplatives.

I

The surprising lack of scholarship on the *Cloud*'s seemingly anti-intellectualist position may be due to the ease with which such rhetoric can be dismissed. Though it is immediately apparent even from a cursory reading of the text that the author decries attempts at “knowing” God in favour of his own “loving” method, he does concede that the *soler’s* skills can be profitable in other pursuits. In a rejection of traditional forms of devotion, such as the use of *menes* (71/6-10), flagellations and deprivations (38/16-39/3), and the contemplation of one’s own sins, the Passion, or the graces of God (27/16-20), the author maintains that there is but one route to union with God. Essentially, this route involves an exercise with two elements. The first involves “lift[ing] up þin herte vnto God” (16/3) until such time that one discovers “a derknes, & as it were a cloude of vnknowyng... bitwix þee & þi God” (16/20-17/3). This cloud, of course, is merely figurative: it is not as “any cloud congelid of þe humours þat fleen in þe ayre” (23/14), the author writes, but a darkness signifying “a lackyng of knowyng” (23/20). It is a barrier impenetrable to all powers but the love of God, and it is here that the contemplative must remain, crying out to God hoping he will then step in and reach out to the would-be contemplative (62/14-15). The second element, integral to the operation of the first, entails the placing of “a cloude of forgetyng bineþ þee, bitwix þee & alle þe cretures þat euer ben maad” (24/3-4) thereby isolating the initiate from all outside stimuli, all distractions. Now alone, the contemplative is able to “lat God drawe þi loue up” to the cloud of unknowing (34/20-21). Two things are made clear in the description of this exercise: that one cannot attain union with God without his intervention, and that only by loving God, not trying to “know” him, can one draw near to him. Only the soul’s “louyng miȝt”, the author claims, is capable of comprehending God (19/1-4). All techniques, then, that involve the “knowable miȝt” must necessarily be ruled out as viable methods of attaining this union. So it would seem that *The Cloud* does not consider intellectual techniques evil or ineffectual per se but only in the working of this exercise. Thus the initiate is instructed, “Be blynde in þis
tyme, & schere awhey couetys of knowyng, for it wil more let þee þan help þee”
(70/17-18).

Though the Cloud author is intent on keeping scolers out of the contemplative life, he does allow them their autonomy in the active life. Both spheres, he writes, form the stages leading toward greater devotion to God. To become a contemplative, one must ascend each of the steps — from the performance of “good & honeste bodily werkes of mercy & of charite” (31/21-22) in the lower, active sphere, through a middle stage devoted to “goodly goostly meditacions” (31/23) on the fallen state of humanity and the praise of God and Jesus, to the final step as a full contemplative dwelling in the cloud of unknowing (32/6-8). Like many Christian authors before him, the Cloud author discusses the life-stages by applying to them the story of Mary and Martha from the Gospel of Luke. In doing so, he is bound by the tale to accord each of the callings value. Martha represents those in the active life and, though “hir busines was good & profitable to þe helpe of hir soule” (52/9-10), it is Mary, representing the contemplative, who “had chosen þe best partye” (52/20-21). Concerned that this assessment may be perceived as a diminishing of Martha’s role, the Cloud author is careful to add: “God forbede þat I schuld in þis werk sey anyþing þat miȝt be taken in reprouyng of any of þe servauantes of God in any degré” (50/3-5), for all those who are called are worthy servants, whether their calling is for the contemplative life or the active life. It is the nature of the exercise that bars “corious lettered... men” (2/23-24) from the topmost state, and, as the example of Mary and Martha illustrates, their relegation to the lower state does not mean that their form of devotion is without value. Indeed, the author even extols the virtues of the scolers, writing: “þouȝ al þat þei be ful good men of actiue leuyng, giȝ þis mater acordeþ noþing to hem” (2/24-3/1). This being true, The Cloud’s apparent contempt for the scolers, which at times seems unnecessarily extreme, may be attributed merely to the workings of an over-zealous literary imagination.

It is on precisely these grounds that writers have attempted to excuse the Cloud author’s apparent anti-intellectualism; yet, their very efforts to do so are indicative of some anxiety over the possibility of readers misunderstanding the author’s intentions. This is not merely a modern concern; the discussion reaches as far back as the first century after the text’s composition. Richard Methley, a late-fifteenth century copyist of The Cloud, was evidently surprised at its tone. It is to his remarks that Walsh appeals when he writes:
To accuse him of anti-intellectualism is to miss his point: namely that in the unitive prayer that is the "work of his book," theological erudition has of itself nothing, or worse than nothing to offer. As R. M. [= Richard Methley] frequently remarks, he is a master of hyperbole, and probably overemphasizes the spiritual dangers of academic learning (1981, 136).

A similar view is shared by Simon Tugwell. Recognizing in the Cloud author's intelligence and learning a respect for the intellectual arts, Tugwell maintains that he could not be anti-intellectual as "he expects any contemplative of the kind he is writing about to be sensible and clear-headed in the extreme" (1981, xiv). Any criticism of the clerkes is thus attributed to the same explanation as that of Walsh, namely that "in the particular contemplative exercise he is describing, he does not see that learning or mental proficiency has any direct part to play" (xiv). And Nieva shares the same view. In discussing The Cloud's "mi3tes of be soule," he maintains that the author is concerned only with avoiding the error that arises from misunderstanding the right knowledge of these powers, and so "he is not against learning and natural reason as such. But when they are wrongly used they lead men astray" (1971, 130).

An examination of The Cloud's literary predecessors yields similar results, suggesting further that the dichotomy between love and knowledge in mystical literature as a whole is often overstated. Set in context by Bernard McGinn, The Cloud follows in a line of mystical treatises "based upon the twin premises of the unknowability of God on the one hand and God's accessibility to love on the other" (1987, 12). But for many of these mystical theologians, the two avenues to union are not mutually exclusive. McGinn describes the views of writers from Augustine through Pseudo-Dionysius to Bonaventure who see the path to union with God as a combination of love and knowledge. The work of Bernard of Clairvaux, highly influential in medieval theology, is indicative of this mix. Though he believed that the image of marital love best expressed the relationship between humans and God, Bernard also maintained that "love itself is a form of knowing." Therefore, both the power of knowing and that of loving were a part of the marital embrace (9). McGinn goes on to describe other writers like William of St. Thierry, Bonaventure, and Thomas Gallus who describe a contemplative experience that involves a successive mix of knowledge and love, where all the intellectual powers of the soul are employed in the ascent but, for union to take place, these powers must give way to affectivity (10-13). And Thomas Aquinas,
in his struggle with the rising forces of secularism, insisted that prayer, as the expression and interpretation of the reaching out to God, is an intellectual act (13). Each of these authors struggled with the meaning and method of "knowing" God, and each solved the problem by integrating the two powers in their descriptions of the experience of union.

Upon reaching *The Cloud's* place in this literature, McGinn concedes that "a rapid reading of [the text] might lead to the conclusion that the author is distinctly anti-intellectual;" however, "a close reading of this text, as well as of the other treatises of this great English mystical theologian, shows this to be a mistaken view" (13). He looks for support for this claim in William Johnston who sees in *The Cloud* a description of the consummation of mystical union as the acquisition of supraintellectual knowledge. "The author, grounded as he is in Scholasticism," Johnston writes, "knows that strictly speaking the loving power does not know; when he says that love 'knows' he means that in its intensity it enlightens the intelligence which is then filled with a wisdom not coming 'from without' through the senses but from within from 'abundance of love'" (1975, 124; see also Hodgson 1944, lxi). So in a sense the cloud of unknowing is misnamed or may at least equally be called "the cloud of knowing" for, though the exercise involves the abandonment of conceptual knowledge, it is also intended as a means of attaining a knowledge of God that is beyond human means (Johnston 1975, 137-38). McGinn concludes his discussion by saying that all Christian mystics discuss love to some degree — indeed, loving God is essential to the faith — but they differ "in their varying conceptions of the roles that intellect and love play in the path to and enjoyment of union" (1987, 23). And though the Cloud author's fear of interference from conceptual thinking results in a clear division between the lower and higher *magtes*, McGinn still sees *The Cloud* as an expression of the "subsuming" tradition of mysticism that, contrary to appearances, is not an anti-intellectual nor a purely emotional phenomenon (24).

The theme of the separation of loving and knowing is also taken up by writers interested in studying the language and literary style of *The Cloud*. As Maika J. Will points out language presents a contradiction of sorts for mystical theology — it is simply an inappropriate method for describing mystical experience. Yet not only is language the single method of communication available to the mystics, they are also masters of the craft. The *Cloud* author, too, has been praised for his literary genius, and he certainly does not hesitate to exploit the power of language to its fullest — sensory and physical images play an important part in
the exercise and metaphors abound throughout the text — indeed so much, J. A. Burrow writes, “that a modern reader may well be struck by the positively unspiritual manner of the book” (1977, 293). But the author may have more subtle reasons for using metaphors. Appealing to New Testament scholar Rudolf Bultmann’s views on demythologizing scripture, Paul R. Rovang claims that the Cloud author’s use of metaphors is specifically intended to steer the initiate away from using mythologized conceptions of God as a “crutch;” the exercise is presented “in mythologizing language which the novice can grasp, in order to bring him up to more rarefied heights where he can throw away his crutches” (1992, 133-34). Furthermore, the metaphors he employs are specially selected to accomplish this task — he “purposefully avoids any human or animal imagery that could be labeled lurid or manipulative” — and strives to nullify the metaphors’ effects by ensuring the initiate does not take the imagery literally (135). The ultimate aim, then, is to transcend mythology and metaphor and thereby avoid the dangers of confusing the physical and the spiritual (135-36).

This idea is developed further by Burrow who sees in The Cloud’s use of language the key to understanding the author’s hostility toward knowledge. The chapter devoted to the imagination (chapter 65) “asserts that the disordered imagination feeds the mind with ‘fantasies’” (1977, 284) — that is, either “a bodely conseyte of a goostly þing, or elles a goostly conseyte of a bodely þing” (117/15-16). Describing the hazards of confusing the two spheres, the Cloud author strives to clearly separate the goostly from the bodely in the performance of his exercise (106/11-15). Yet he is also careful not to lapse into the heresy of declaring the body base or evil. “God forbede þat I schuld departe þat God haþ couplid, þe body & þe spirit;” the Cloud author writes, “for God will be seruid wiþ body & wiþ soule, boþe to-geders, as seemly is, & rewarde man his mede in blis boþe in body & in soule” (90/15-19). The language studies of Rovang and Burrow lead back to The Cloud’s penchant for making divisions. On the one side stand the contemplatives who use spiritual means to deal with spiritual concerns, and on the other stand the actives who describe physical matters with physical words. Again, intellectual techniques have their place, but it is not in this exercise; more than that, any cross-application of the two methods invites peril.

The few writers who have struggled with the anti-intellectual tendencies of The Cloud all do so by cleverly explaining them away. They maintain that the text’s author is himself a scholar, one who values the power of knowledge but who sets it aside for this exercise; indeed, the writer clearly refuses to strictly forbid
"letterly" devotional techniques — he even uses them to some extent in his own exercise? And, if McGinn is correct, the powers of love and knowledge in mystical literature may not be quite as opposed as they appear. But where does that leave the Cloud author's barbed pen? Why attack the cleric with such ferocity? And, benign literary rivalry or no, what effect might such rhetoric have on The Cloud's audience? Certainly, the Cloud author is the "master of hyperbole" of Methley's characterization, but the reasons behind his antagonism toward the clerkes have to be more adequately addressed, even if that antagonism is only feigned.

II

Many of the answers to these questions may be found within The Cloud itself. The author describes the practice of his enemies so vividly and is so transparent about his own sensibilities that the intentions behind his negative portrayal of intellectuals seem clear: not strictly the promotion of his own contemplative method, but chiefly the denigration of what he considers heretical forms of the exercise while at the same time pushing for another method to take their place. The Cloud's anti-intellectualism then, is an expression of a conflict between rival groups within the church over the allegiance of would-be contemplatives.

If a battle is to be sought, opposing combatants must be in evidence. The first of these, the Cloud author himself, is shrouded in mystery; though there have been many attempts to establish his identity "a secular priest, a cloistered monk, a Carthusian, not a Carthusian, a hermit, a recluse" (Hodgson 1944, lxxxiii) — it is a puzzle that remains unsolved. Fortunately, his work offers a number of clues to his background and interests. The Cloud author is believed to be responsible for seven surviving works: The Book of Privy Counselling, The Epistle of Prayer, and The Epistle of Discretion in Stirrings continue the discussion of The Cloud's spiritual exercise, while Of Discerning of Spirits, Denis Hid Divinity, and Benjamin Minor are translations and paraphrasings of works by other mystical theologians. These latter texts also form part of The Cloud's extensive list of literary influences. Bernard of Clairvaux, Thomas Gallus, Richard of St Victor, Augustine, and De Adhaerendo Deo are among the book's definite sources (Hodgson 1944, lxii-v) while Hugh of St Victor's De Institutione Novitiorum, and Scala Claustralium by Guigo II remain possibilities (lxvii-iii). But most of all, The Cloud betrays contact with the work of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, a fifth-century Christian
Neoplatonist in vogue among fourteenth-century mystics. The connection is obvious; not only did the Cloud author translate the ancient writer’s De Mystica Theologia (under the title Denis Hid Divinity) but The Cloud as a whole is indebted to Pseudo-Dionysius for the concept of the via negativa — it acknowledges this dependence (125/13-15), and directly quotes from his works (154/13-18; 125/11-12). Of course, Pseudo-Dionysius was neither the first nor the only writer to discuss this concept; Clement of Alexandria, Augustine and Gregory the Great may also join the list of possible sources for the Cloud author’s thought. And the writer’s use of the Mary and Martha story, a traditional interpretation found also in the works of Origen, Augustine and “countless others” (Hodgson 1944, lxii), betrays his “wide knowledge of patristic writings” (lxxii-iii). Far from dwelling in the creative isolation expected of an anti-intellectual, the Cloud author is steeped in the literature of the mystical tradition. The breadth of the Cloud author’s knowledge suggests that he was trained in a religious setting, and the text contains further indications in support of this view. Three of his treatises, including The Cloud, begin with a blessing (133/4-7), the author portrays himself as a spiritual director, and he is careful to assert his orthodoxy — particularly in his compliance with “the dome of Holi Chirche” (131/8-9; 65/10-13) and his condemnation of heresy. It appears from the evidence that the Cloud author was well educated, a gifted writer and thinker, perhaps a priest or monk, and certainly deeply concerned about promoting his favored form of religious exercise.

His opponents, however, are somewhat more difficult to identify, for there are many; again, his book is as much an attempt to counter the myriad critics of the contemplative life as it is a description of the exercise. Over the course of the text, the author faces off against those who charge contemplatives with idleness (14/18-20), against those who question mysticism for its participants’ neglect of their own health and physical needs (57/3-16), and against any who would make judgements on the life of the contemplative (57/7-9). All of these criticisms seem to be natural, inevitable reactions to the arduous exercise and may be attributable to common concerns of those outside the author’s fold. As such, they probably do not come from a specific, identifiable group. Of a quite different sort, however, are The Cloud’s virulent objections to those practising other forms of the exercise. The text’s frequent warnings against interpreting contemplative instructions too literally are likely veiled references to others who advocate just such practices. From the Cloud author’s descriptions it is possible to identify
loosely his “heretics” with groups censured by the church which were operating in or just prior to his day. The cathars, beguins and beghars, disciples of Meister Eckhart, and members of the Free Spirit movement all had a strong interest in the mystical experience but, for one reason or other, came into conflict with the religious authorities. Perhaps fearing a similar fate, the Cloud author is careful not to be associated with these other movements; this fear may have even contributed to the intensity of the negative characterizations of their practices.

Critics and heretics would be natural foes for the Cloud author; the clerkes, however, are a curious addition to the ranks of his opponents, particularly since they receive what seems an inordinately harsh reproof. After several chapters of warnings against the methods of heretical contemplatives, The Cloud then has a section devoted to the particular errors of the clerkes. These are people who “luny ouer moche to peire owne knowyny” (104/7-8) and as a result fall victim to their “pride & corioust of kyndely witte & letterly kunnyng” (104/5-6). The description is hardly flattering: “conning” or “kunnyng,” meaning knowledge or skill, was in early times also associated with the occult (OED), and “corious,” in its frequent Middle English pejorative sense, denotes undue care or attention carried to excess (OED) and “is just about the dirtiest word in [the author’s] whole vocabulary” (Hussey 1989, 114). Worse still, however, is that their error leads them to greater pernicious acts: blasphemy against the saints, the sacraments, and the ordinances of the Holy Church (104/10-12). Ultimately, the clerkes are placed among the ranks of the church-censured groups — they are even said to support the heretics and use their methods (104/19-20). So all those, it seems, who use the power of the intellect to reach God are considered enemies in The Cloud and are thus together, heretic and cleric, branded disciples of the Anti-Christ (104/24-105/1). The Cloud author’s assessment of the clerks is not without historical basis. Certainly, by his time, there was much animosity between the church and these breakaway university teachers. The increasing secularization of the clerks’ vocation represented a clear threat to the authority of the church. And where there were efforts toward independence, accusations of heresy even followed close behind.

The hostility between the church and the universities is observable in the works of the mystics, The Cloud among them. There was a natural conflict “between the simple, direct knowledge and experience of the mystic, and the subtleties of the schoolman” (Pantin 1955, 132). At times this conflict led to open argument. The early fourteenth-century mystic Richard Rolle complained of the contempt
that the intellectuals, trained in the schools, displayed toward those whose learning was derived from mystical experience:

But those who are taught by means of wisdom which is acquired, not infused, and are puffed up with complicated argumentations, are disdainful towards [the mystic], saying: 'Where did he learn? What doctor did he attend?' They do not believe that the lovers of eternity can be taught by the doctor within, to speak more eloquently than those who are taught by men, who all the time study for the sake of vain honours (quoted Pantin 1955, 251).

The Cloud author too launches an attack against the learning of the clerics. Not only does he warn his readers against the contemplative techniques of intellectuals but he also ostentatiously avoids using their academic methods in the writing of his book. Refusing to quote directly from any "doctour," the author offers as his defense: "for somtyme men þouȝt it meeknes to sey nouȝt of þeire owne hedes, bot ȝif þei afermid it by Scripture & doctours wordes; & now it is turnid into corioustee & schewyng of kunnyng" (125/17-19). Still, as Cloud scholars have long maintained, such statements do not make the writer anti-intellectual. For one, he does not react with the typical weapons of the enemies of Scholasticism. This was a battle played out on a literary field, with the anti-intellectualists often choosing as their weapon the deliberate, literal use of scripture over the scholastic arguments of their opponents (Pantin 1955, 133-34). The Cloud author, however, earnestly decry's the literal reading of scripture (85/15-21, etc.). He is not an empty-headed Spiritual but a gifted theologian, one whose work reflects a lifetime of learning. Again, The Cloud is a reaction to intellectual methods of contemplation, to the perceived errors of those like the clerics, not to the intellect or reason in and of themselves.

Having taken such a strong position against the intellectual forces, the Cloud author sets himself firmly against their heresies and works to increase the ranks of orthodox contemplatives from those interested in the mystical way of life. On the surface, the text appears to be written as a letter from a spiritual director to a young beginner — one, perhaps twenty-four years old (20/19), who is among "alle þat han forsaken þe world in a trewe wille, & þer-to þat þeuen hem not to acyue liif, bot to þat liif þat is clepid contemplatyue liif" (63/3-6). But there are indications that suggest it was meant for a wider audience. Indeed, it is no accident that The Cloud was written in the vernacular language rather than the Latin still used in academic discussions and in philosophical, theological and
other learned work (Knowles 1961, 46). However, aware that the book may fall into others’ hands and that it may be “red or spokin” (130/4-131/1; cf. 1/9-10), the author is concerned to confine its matter to a select group:

I charge p[m]e & I beseech [u]ou be [u]at þis book schalt haue in possession, ouþer bi propirte ouþer by keping, by bering as messenger or elles bi borowing, þat in as moche as in þee is by wille & ausiement, neiþer þou rede it, ne write it, ne speke it, ne gít suffre it be red, wretyn, or spokyn, of any or to any, bot ʒif it be of soche one or to soche one þat haþ (bi þi supposing) in a trewe wille & by an hole entent, purposed him to be a parftite folower of Criste, not only in actyue leuing, bot in þe souereinnest pointe of contemplatife leuing (1/8-2/3).

This wider audience, like the initiate, is expected to have advanced through the “foure degrees & fourmes of Cristen mens leuyng” (13/9-10). These stages include a period of learning, or “redyng” (71/14), a time of instruction necessary before advancing to the contemplative life for “no þinkyng may goodly be getyn in byginners & profites wiþ-outen redyng or heryng comyng before, ne preyng wiþ-outen þinkyng” (72/20-22). To be clear, this lesson comes not from clerical works; rather it is from “Godes worde,” and its objective is the acquisition of the “vnderstondyng þat a soule þat is bleendid in custom of synne schuld see þe foule spot in his concyence” (72/9-11). Yet the initiate is also expected to be a scholar in his own right.16 The Cloud author directs his audience to other works (71/12-14; 125/13-15) including those of Pseudo-Dionysius “which would certainly demand a considerable proficiency, both in the Latin language and in apophatic theology” (Walsh 1981, 10). However, the writer’s avoidance of learned terminology and steadfast refusal to confirm his statements by quotations from recognized authorities (125/15-22) may indicate that the neophyte is still merely a student. The Book of Privy Counsel, taking up where The Cloud left off and addressing the same individual, contains scriptural citations in Latin suggesting perhaps that, by this later date, the initiate’s skills had developed further (Walsh 1981, 11).

All of those immediately involved with The Cloud, it seems, are scholars: its author, its anticipated audience, even its opponents. In some ways then, the text can be considered a reflection of an argument among rivals in the educated class. But the Cloud author does appear to walk in the same circles as the scholars; the Book of Privy Counsel’s response to criticism leveled against The Cloud by
“clerkes [& men] of grete kunnyng” (137/6-11; cf. The Cloud 125/23-126/6) indicates that the two forces were in a dialogue of sorts. Also, the author’s concern over the clerkes suggests that they too move in close proximity to the book’s audience, or at least close enough to be able to exert some influence, for he has to instruct his audience not to let the clerkes see his book (2/22).17 Yet despite indications of a scholarly setting, the text is more than an academic treatise restricted to the eyes of a select, educated group. The Cloud author plainly intends his work to be widely circulated and, though he warns about not letting it fall into the hands of those who are unprepared for the contemplative life, at other times he seems to be speaking to any interested in the vocation; indeed, written in the vernacular, his book would reach a large audience, and it did quickly become widely available.18 The author may even have felt a particular message to impart to this larger readership. With the popularity of mysticism among the laity, principally in the forms advanced by heretical groups, the Church had to battle for the allegiance of the people.19 Recognizing their need for instruction in the contemplative exercise,20 The Cloud warns them about the dangers of heretical and intellectual techniques and advocates a method that, in its emphasis on love over knowledge, allows for greater participation from the uneducated. Most importantly, however, it is hoped that The Cloud’s exercise will break the hold on mysticism enjoyed by the breakaway heretical communities and universities by bringing the would-be contemplatives back under the watchful eye of the church. Only a skillful, persuasive writer could accomplish such a task; but the Cloud author is just such a writer.

III

The great energy the Cloud author expends insulting the clerkes is not without purpose or order. Behind the slander and the slurs is a carefully worded attempt to seduce readers away from objectionable mystical groups and attract them to the side of orthodoxy. The author makes this intention plain, writing “for I þink to telle þee & late þee see þe worþines of þis goostly excersise before al oþer excersise, bodili or goostly” (42/12-13). The influence of the intellectuals, however, is apparently formidable, for the Cloud author strives diligently throughout the text to encourage those who, though wishing to take up its challenge, are likely to face strong opposition. His sensitivity to his audience’s concerns is best illustrated in chapter four of the text. Here the author considers
the reader’s reaction to his discussion on time and counters the expected anxieties (20/17-21/7). But when it comes to fighting the lure of the intellectual contemplatives, the Cloud author appeals to more powerful methods of persuasion: faith and fear.

Fourteenth-century Christians lived in a world inhabited by the forces of good and evil. Life, for many, was seen as a constant battle for one’s soul — as the Cloud author puts it, “in oo litel tyme, as litel as it is, may heuen be wonne & lost” (20/6-7). No-one would have felt the pressure more than the would-be contemplative ready to give everything to the attempt at union with God. The Cloud author knows this all too well — he claims to desire spiritual union too, though he is “ful fer þerfro” (67/17-18; also 129/5-9) — and he uses the hopes and fears of the initiate to his full advantage. In the battle for the soul, angels and devils take their sides eager to help or hinder the mystic — “alle seintes & aungelles han ioie of þis werk,” The Cloud reveals, “and hasten hem to helpe it in al here migjt. Alle feendes ben wood whan þou þus doste, & prouen for to felle it in alle þat þei kun” (16/10-13). Two options are offered the reader: “for þe defaylyng in þis worching a man falleþ deeper & deeper in synne, & ferþer & ferþer fro God. & by kepyng & contynowel worching in þis werk only, wiþ-outen mo, a man euere-more riseþ hier & hier fro synne, & nerer & nerer vnto God” (20/1-4). Choosing the former places one among cherished company, a “comoun parcener” of the angels, St. Mary, Jesus and the saints (21/15-19) and one among the author’s “speyal freendes in God” (88/8-9; 119/11), while the latter leaves one open to the influence of devils and the Antecriste (105/1). In this presentation, the author leaves little room for choice.

By portraying his adversaries as the devil’s brood, the Cloud author takes good advantage of the anxieties of his audience. Nothing could be more vile, more dangerous to the would-be contemplative concerned about the fate of his soul. Wasting little time, the Cloud author warns the reader early of “þe sotil assailinges of þi bodiþ & goostliþ enemyes” (13/5-6) that will confront the initiate. These enemies are many, but they have one origin — it is the feende, he who “wol enflaume here braynes to meinteyne Goddes lawe, & to distroie synne in alle oþer men” (102/8-9), who is “þe cheef worcher” (96/10) of bodily and goostly confusion, and who lies in the “brest” (57/17) of those who would try to deter the initiate from his chosen path. These last opponents appear to be the mightiest of the bodely enemies arrayed against the forces of good. “Rigt so þit into þis day alle actyues pleinen of contemplatyues” (48/17-18), the Cloud author writes, and they present strong opposition:
as fast þeire owne brethren & þeire sistres, & alle þeire nexte freendes, wíþ many oþer þat knowen not þeire sterynges ne þat maner of leuyng þat þei set hem to, wíþ a grete pleynyng spirite schal ryse apon hem, & sey scharply vnto hem þat it is noȝt þat þei do. & as fast þei wil reken up many fals tales, & many soþe also, of fallyng of men & wommen þat han gouen hem to soche liif before; & neuer a good tale of hem þat stonden (49/4-11).

More frightening to the initiate, however, would be his goostly adversaries: the heretical contemplatives. Among this group are found not just clerics but any who use the power of the intellect to try to reach God, for they all put aside the humility expected of scholars (30/13-14). Sparing no reproach, the Cloud author identifies all heretical contemplatives as disciples of the Anti-Christ. These “proude scolers of þe deuel & maysters of vanite & of falsheed” (30/14-15), having succumbed to the constant attacks of the enemy, lurk in wait hoping to attract new disciples to their side:

þei conceyue a fals hete wrrouȝt by þe feende, þeire goostly enmye, causid of þeire pride & of þeire fleschlinys & þeire corioust of wit...Treuly of þis discete, & of þe braunches þer-of, spryngeyn many mescheues: moche ypocrisyse, moch heresyse, & moche errour. For as fast after soche a falselyng comeþ a fals knowyng in þe feendes scole, riȝt as after a trewe feling come a trewe knowing in Gods scole. For I telle þee trewly þat þe deuil hāþ his contemplatyues, as God hāþ his (86/10-20).

The contemplative’s choice between The Cloud’s exercise and other forms of devotion thus becomes a scene in the greater struggle between the forces of good and evil. Both groups have representatives in the text, here described according to their nature: on the one side stand “Goddes trewe disciples” who “ben euermore ful semely in alle here countenaunces, bodily or goostly” (97/15-16), and on the other the “deuil’s contemplatyues,” “tokenes of vnstabelnes of herte & vnrestfulnes of mynde” (99/21-100/1) with “vnsemely & vnordeinde contenaunces” (99/17). The battle-lines are drawn, with the soul of the initiate as the victor’s ultimate prize.

Further to help the reader choose sides in this conflict, The Cloud offers great rewards for adopting its form of devotion. As the story of Mary and Martha shows, the initiate can look forward to forgiveness (45/1) and freedom from sin (43/6-7), the love (56/3-6) and protection of Jesus (56/14-15), and life “wiþ-outen
eende" (31/16-17). For the pragmatic reader, more tangible profits are offered. Perseverance in the exercise makes the contemplative “ful favorable vnto iche man or womman þat lokyd apon hym” (100/6-7), “his chere & his wordes schuld be ful of goostly wysdam, ful of fiire & of frute, spoken in sad sopfastnes, wiþ-outen any falsheed” (100/23-101/1) and, while occupied in the attempt at union, all physical needs will be met by God (57/12-15). But, in even greater benefit to the soul, the initiate enters into an activity that shares in the Passion of Christ (60/7-15) and that works for the betterment of all people, “quik & dede” (34/8): “alle men leuyng in erþe ben wonderfuli holpen in þis werk, þou wost not how. 3e, þe soules in purgatori ben esed of þeire peine by vertewe of þis werk. bi-selÞ arte clensid & maad vertewos by no werk so mochel” (16/13-16). Given the contrary of “eendles pyne” (19/12-13), the initiate surely would not refuse such valuable rewards — at least that is the Cloud author’s hope; and, if a greater incentive is needed, he is quick to remind the reader that “trewly þe feende is not fer” (97/20-21).

The Cloud offers one chance at escape from this feende: “good goostly counseile” (129/15). By demonizing all of his rivals, by promising rewards that cannot be refused, the author has placed the reader in position to accept the protection and instruction of the Church. Without such counsel, the initiate is doomed, for not only is it the “pride & corioste of kyndely witte & letterly kunnyng” (104/5-6) of the intellectuals that lead them away from the Church, but it is specifically because they “were neuer grounded in þis meek blynde felyng & vertuous leuyng” (104/8-9) — that is, The Cloud’s exercise — that they fell into blasphemy and heresy. Without the direction of someone in the author’s position, the young disciple may perform the exercise incorrectly (92/12-13) or subscribe to the clerkes’ methods, either of which could lead him to “falle ouer into frenesies, or elles into ouer grete mischeues of goostly sinnes & deuels disseites; þorow þe whiche he may liȝtly be lorne, boþe liif & soule, wiþ-outen any eende” (23/6-9; also 95/15-96/13). The reader is warned to constantly take care, to proceed slowly — “ȝif þou canst not conseuyue it, legge [it] bi þi syde tyl God come & teche þee” (69/19-20) — for “euer þe nere men touchen þe trewþ, more war men behoue þ to be of errour” (69/17-18). So concerned is the Cloud author that his audience not fail in this work that, contrary to his earlier warnings, he allows the initiate to leave the exercise if it “be not acordyng to þi disposicion in body & in soule” but only “wiþ good goostly counseile” (129/13-15). If a person proves incapable of devoting himself to the loving method, it is essential that he be prevented from trying the easier, quicker intellectual route or the hazardous path of independent
mystical experience. What is important here, then, is control; any who wish to enter the contemplative life must do so only under the guidance of the church. This has been The Cloud's message all along.

The counsel of the church is the true point of separation between God's disciples and the devil's contemplatives, not their techniques. Indeed, in practice there may not be much truly separating the exercises of the rival groups, though that does not prevent the Cloud author from mentioning every danger, whether real or imagined, that comes with using intellectual methods. These lurid anecdotes are not trustworthy, however, for they are a product of a mind determined to put distance between his foes and any interested in the contemplative life. He is a manipulative writer who knows his audience — he knows what concerns them, what scares them, and what they want: a way to reach God. And he gives them that in this exercise.

But The Cloud is much more than "a practical guide to the path of contemplation." In many ways it is a missionary text, earnestly calling out to would-be contemplatives to stay within the church. It is Catholicism's ultimate weapon, for it addresses the need of the people for the more direct forms of spirituality advocated by wayward Christian groups but gives them the opportunity to practice these without lapsing into heresy. In the end, however, it could bring harm to the unwitting clerics who are swept up in the fury of the author's polemic. The Cloud has been confirmed to be not anti-intellectual, principally because of the author's own professed scholarly background, but it is decidedly anti-clerics, if for no other reason than it seeks to fight the scholars' influence over those interested in the contemplative life. Unfortunately, the author's attempts at persuasion involve associating the clerics with heresy. No accusation or insult is to be spared, it seems, in attracting another contemplative to The Cloud's side, even if it means branding the clerics enemies of the church. Clearly then, The Cloud is not anti-intellectual; nevertheless its attack on those associated with attempts at "knowing" God could still bring harm to intellectualism.

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NOTES

1. The text is taken from the critical edition of Hodgson 1944. Reconstructions have been made here from the various witnesses only where they differ significantly from Hodgson's choice of copy text — Har, (MS Harleian 674, early 15th century) which "best represents the language of the original" (Hodgson 1944, xlix).

2. Precious little has been written about this aspect of The Cloud author's rhetoric, and nothing at all on possible reasons for its adoption if indeed The Cloud is not anti-intellectual, aside from off-hand dismissals of the claim by such authors as Walsh and Nieva, and the more careful discussion of McGinn. These writers seem to discuss the subject only in anticipation of the claim yet they make no mention of those who advocate it.

3. Knowles, however, differentiates The Cloud from other works, like that of Pseudo-Dionysius, which stress intellectual unions (1988, 74).

4. Hussey credits the Cloud author with a skill "greater than that of any Middle English prose writer I can think of, to maintain complete control of a lengthy sentence full of parentheses and subordinate clauses" (1989, 114). The author's self-deprecation is seen by Will as an admission of the ineffectuality of all language to express his message (1992, 83).

5. Particularly in the author's helpful suggestions — to "loke as it were ouer þeire schuldres, seching anoþer þing: þe whiche þing is God" (66/16-17), "koure þou doun under hem as a cheitif & a coward ouercomen in batayle" (67/1-2), and to play hide and seek (88/10-14). Tixier (1990) also looks at the author's imaginative games and considers the book itself to be a game.

6. For example: parental images (67/12-13; 88/10-14), marital imagery (15/15-21), "be þou bot þe tre, and lat it be wriȝt" (70/15-17), "schoter" (24/20-21), "kow" (57/9), a Pauline anthropomorphic metaphor (60/23-61/3), battle (124/4-10), and even the cloud itself.

7. Twice he appeals to the knowledge of the clerkes: discussing the "athomus," he writes "Loo! here líþ counforte; construe þou clerly & pike þee sum profite" (21/21-22) and, on the qualities of existence after death, he promises "alle I hope schal þan be icycle good, as clerkes seyne" (110/9).
8. For a brief discussion of the rediscovery and impact of Pseudo-Dionysius in the medieval period see Ozment 1980, 118-120.

9. Several authors have reasoned that the author’s thoughts on love and knowledge stem from a personal transformation. Hort offers a psychological view of the Cloud author based not on a knowledge of medieval times and the intellectual activities of the religious but on the experiences of a friend. Applying this to the Cloud author, she writes: “his reiterated warnings against trying to know God through discursive thinking indicate that he had tried that way himself, and had had to give it up in despair” (1936, 50). His endeavours led to a crisis: “what had been clear and definite receded, and instead he found himself in an empty, shadowy world, willing and desiring he did not know what, with no definite object for his striving. He was restless, groping about in the dark” (82). Hort claims that the author reacted by moving to the opposite, away from intellectual problems and meditations on Christ. This idea is supported, at least partially, by Knowles’ definition of mystical theology which states that the experience is recognized by the person concerned as something utterly different from and more real and adequate than all his previous knowledge and love of God. It is experienced as something at once immanent and received, something moving and filling the powers of the mind and soul. It is felt as taking place at a deeper level of the personality and soul than that on which the normal processes of thought and will take place, and the mystic is aware, both in himself and in others, of the soul, its qualities and of the divine presence and action within it, as something wholly distinct from the reasoning mind with its powers (1988, 2-3).

Similarly, Burrow finds evidence for a transforming experience that led the author to abandon conventional intellectual discourse. Believing The Cloud’s structure to be rather haphazard, Burrow writes “it is as if, having submitted himself to the prolonged discipline of meditation, he feels no call to submit to the lower scholastic discipline of consecutive argument” (1977, 297).

10. Charges of sloth were commonly levelled against contemplatives who, being consumed by the desire to attain union with God, neglected their moral and religious duties. See further Ozment (1980, 82).
11. As Swanson notes, the writings and practice of the mystics often came dangerously close to heresy, and many supporters of the contemplative life faced just such accusations (1989, 286). The Cloud was potentially particularly susceptible to such charges as its views have many affinities with the censured Rhineland mystics like Eckhart (Leff 1976, 128).

12. The Cloud author also refers to his own writing as “kunnyng” (130/16), suggesting further that, in truth, there is less separating the pursuits of the “clerkes” from those of the author than he would like to admit here.

13. See Kretzman (1982, 11-42) for a discussion of the transformation of the medieval universities. The author later describes the hostility between the faculties, the change in the task of the cleric, and the rift that occurred between these teachers and the church (82-84; see also Peters 1980, 217-18), a situation explicitly mentioned by the Cloud author: “Somme,” he writes, because of “pride & coriuste of kyndely witte & letterly kunnyng leui|>e comoun doctrine & |e counsel of Holy Chirche” (104/4-6). His words here may reflect the late-fourteenth century backlash in the universities against the outspoken intellectuals (Peters 1980, 219).


15. Morris discusses both the real and assumed audience of the text. The epistolary form of expression employed in all of the Cloud author’s original works may have been adopted because it allows for the use of certain literary features — such as a limiting of focus, the relating of personal experience to someone of common interest, and mock dialogues. Occasionally “the writer’s cognizance of the wider readership shows through, and when he digresses, he simply draws back to his original controlling rhetorical stance” (1989, 17). However Morris acknowledges from the author’s farewell, that “this stance that he assumes may not be a mere rhetorical convenience; the individuals directly addressed may have actually existed” (19).

16. Agreeing here with Walsh (1981, 10), over Hodgson (1944, lvii), who maintains that “the young disciple for whom these treatises were written was not a scholar.”
A similar introduction is found in *Mystica Theologica* by Pseudo-Dionysius perhaps indicating that the *Cloud* author is merely following literary convention: "but see to it that none of this comes to the hearing of the uninformed, that is to say, to those caught up with the things of the world, who imagine that there is nothing beyond instances of individual being and who think that by their own intellectual resources they can have a direct knowledge of him who has made the shadows his hiding place" (Luibheid 1987, 1.2).

Norquist (1994, 284) points out that *The Cloud* immediately attained a very wide popularity in religious circles — within half a century portions of it were being printed and circulated widely in book form. The medieval mystical writings as a whole, Ozment writes, appealed to a broad audience making them "the most universal literature of the Middle Ages" (1980, 115; see also Leff 1967, 1:32).

The popularity of the mystics among the laity owes itself to the church’s failure to meet this particular spiritual need of the people (Leff 1976, 120-21; 1967, 1:317). The institution’s hesitancy, it seems, stems from the belief that individual expressions of spirituality undermined the church’s authority (Swanson 1989, 286). This allowed heretical contemplative movements to attract those whose needs could not otherwise be satisfied. It would be in the church’s interest, then, to keep would-be contemplatives close.

The very reason for the writing of *The Cloud* is to counsel those interested in the contemplative life. This need is explicitly mentioned in the prologue (3/1-7).

A rather typical assessment of *The Cloud*, this one from an introductory essay by William Johnston reprinted in a recent popular edition of the text (1973, 8).
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