

WILLIAM EXMEWE, MAURICE CHAUNCY, AND *THE CLOUD OF UNKNOWING*

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In the first volume of his *Athenae Oxonienses*, Anthony à Wood gives a short, occasionally inaccurate biographical notice of Maurice Chauncy (whom he designates Chawney, Chamney, Chancy or Channy).¹ Following a description of Chauncy's *Historia aliquot Martyrum*, Wood mentions that,

I have seen a MS. written by our author Chancaeus, bearing the title: *The divine cloud of unknowing*. The beginning of which is, 'Goostly frende in God, I pray the and besece the that thou wilt have a besy beholding to the course and manner of thy calling &c.' It containeth 75 chapters, and with it is bound his *Epistle of private Counsel*, the beginning of which is, 'Goostly frende in God, as touching thy inward occupation &c.' And at the end of the book is this written, 'Liber domus Salvatoris beatissimae virginis Mariae juxta London Ordinis Carthusiani, per M. Chawncy, quem exaravit secundum Willmum Exmeuse.'

The colophon of this manuscript, with Wood's attribution of the *Cloud* and *Privy Counselling* to Chauncy was copied in Sir Henry Chauncy's *History of the Antiquities of Hertfordshire* and Thomas Tanner's *Bibliotheca Britannico-Hibernica*;² neither Chauncy nor Tanner, however, mentioned Wood's testimony that he had himself seen the volume. Tanner's report was repeated in an article by Dom McCann dealing with the authorship of the *Cloud*; and Sir Henry Chauncy's by Margaret Thompson, in her study of *The Carthusian Order in England*.³ McCann pointed out that the form "Salvatoris" in the colophon was an error for "Salutationis", and noted that "the Carthusians at Parkminster possess a copy of the *Cloud* written by blessed William Exmew." He further suggested that the meaning of the colophon was that "the MS. belonged to the London Charterhouse and was written by Maurice Chauncey from a copy written by William Exmew." Thompson independently noted the transparent error of "Salvatoris" for "Salutationis", and suggested that Chauncy

¹ Wood, *Athenae Oxonienses* I (London: Tho. Bennet, 1691), cols. 159-60; revised and reprinted by Philip Bliss (London, 1813-20), cf. I, cols. 459-62; reprinted lithographically as *Anglistica and Americana* 22 (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1969).

² Chauncy, *History of the Antiquities of Hertfordshire* (London, 1700); Tanner, *Bibliotheca Britannico-Hibernica* (London, 1748), 165.

³ McCann, "The Cloud of Unknowing", *Ampleforth Journal* 29 (1924), 195-96; Thompson, *The Carthusian Order in England* (London: SPCK, 1930), 352, 376-77.

copied the *Cloud* and *Privy Counselling* "under Father Exmewe's direction, perhaps dictation"; or that perhaps "Father Exmewe himself composed a summary of, or a commentary on, them, which the younger monk wrote down by his direction or dictation".

In preparing her edition of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Phyllis Hodgson examined the Parkminster manuscript, more correctly transcribing the colophon:⁴

Liber domus salutacionis beatissime virginis Marie iuxta
london ordinis Chartusiensis per M. Chawncy quem exaravit sanctus
WITte Exmewe.

She commented,

This colophon has given rise to considerable misunderstanding. The error of Chauncy's authorship was adopted by Antony Wood, *Athenae Oxonienses*, and in the sale of the Bibliotheca Phillipica this manuscript was offered under Chauncy's name. Later misreading of the colophon led to the false idea that this manuscript was transcribed by Chauncy from a copy by Exmewe. It would seem certain that this manuscript was actually transcribed by the Blessed William Exmewe who suffered martyrdom at the dissolution of the London Charterhouse in 1535 and that *per M. Chawncy* is a wrong ascription of authorship.

Further, she noted that an anonymous monograph in French at Parkminster argued that Chauncy took this manuscript with him when he went into exile in 1547, and suggested that such a hypothesis might explain the false ascription to Chauncy, which must therefor have been written "near Chauncy's death in 1581".

In her recent re-edition of the *Cloud*-corpus, Prof. Hodgson seems simultaneously to entertain the possibility of all of the suggestions made by McCann and Thompson; and the hypothesis that the colophon was written *ca.* 1581 appears to have grown into fact:

If Pa's [*the Parkminster MS*] ambiguous colophon was intended to ascribe authorship to the Blessed William Exmewe, the dating of *The Cloud* shows it to be erroneous. It is possible that it signifies that Exmewe was the copyist--it has been argued that the handwriting does not exclude that possibility--or perhaps Maurice Chauncy transcribed it from Exmewe's copy, or at Exmewe's bidding. It has been suggested that Chauncy took Pa with him from the London Charterhouse when fleeing to exile first near Bruges, then Paris and Louvain. If this volume was found among his possessions at his death in 1581, the date of the colophon would support the hypothesis that his fellow monks then recorded what they could vaguely remember having been told about Pa's associations.

In fact, we seem to be confronted with a classical scholarly Gordian knot: a small mis-transcription so compounded in repetition and explication over the years that the scholar who actually recognized the error was unable to unravel it. The solution to such problems is to cut through them: to return to the evidence itself.

⁴ Hodgson, ed., *The Cloud of Unknowing and the Book of Privy Counselling*, EETS os 218 (1944, for 1943; reprinted 1958), xviii.

The colophon of the Parkminster manuscript of the *Cloud*, which is written in a different hand than the book itself, reads:⁶

Liber domus salutacionis beatissime virginis Marie
iuxta london ordinis Charthusiensis per M Chawncy /
quem exarauit sanctus Will^elmus Exmewe /

There is some difficulty in transcription, occasioned by the scribe's tendency to flatten out the letters *m* and *n*, but this is manifestly the colophon mis-transcribed by Antohny à Wood; a conclusion supported also by comparison of the incipits transcribed by Wood with those of the manuscript.⁷ We may note that the first two lines of the colophon are a complete grammatical unit, and are punctuated as such. This is, in fact, a common form of *ex libris*, in which the phrase "per [name]" is an affidavit formula, stating the name of the scribe attesting to the ownership of the book. The same formula occurs, for example, in B.L. MS Royal 7 D. xvii, signed by John London of Sheen Charterhouse:

Iste liber est domus Jhu de Bethleem ordinis
Carthusiensis per Johannem London
Si quis eum alienauerit, anathema sit.

A similar formula occurs in Cambridge, Trinity College MS 354, signed "Quod Grenehalgh", and in Bodleian MS Douce 262 (also containing the *Cloud*, copied by a London Carthusian scribe), signed "Amen quod JG".⁸ The third line of the colophon of the Parkminster *Cloud*, which seems to have been added as an afterthought, must mean that William Exmewe copied the book: for where "scripsit" might have left it unclear whether authorship or copying was intended, the word "exarauit" (derived from a verb originally meaning "to plow") must here mean the physical act of writing.

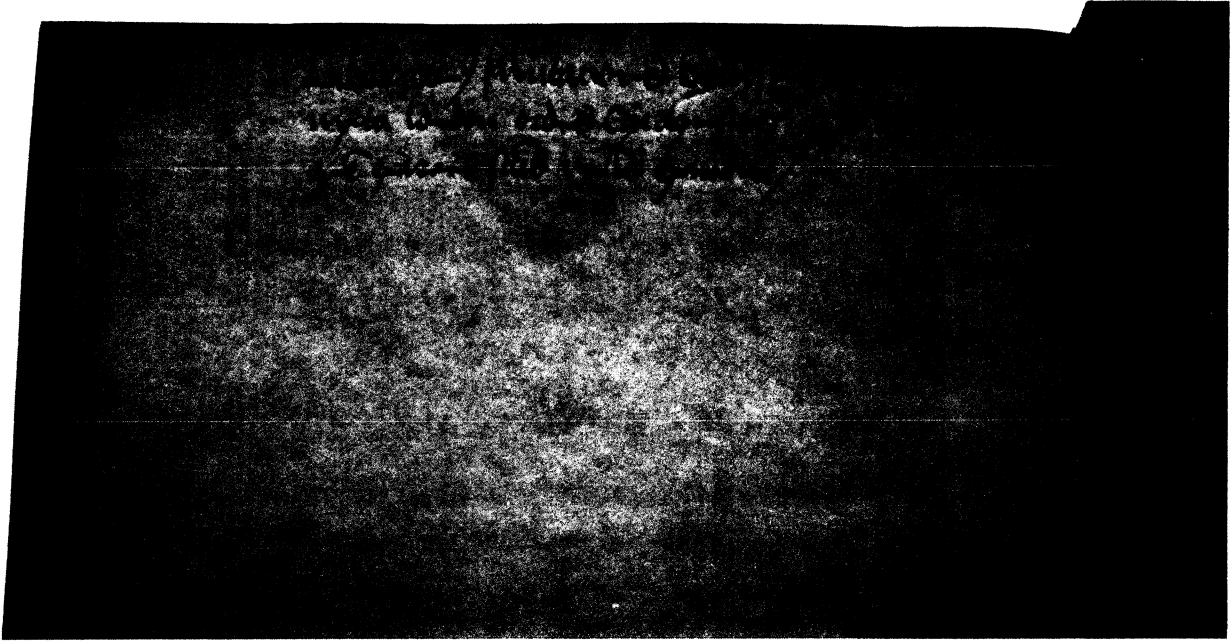
The colophon is not at all ambiguous, then: it means that this manuscript belonged to the London Charterhouse, according to Maurice Chauncy, and was written by William Exmewe. The fact that he is termed "sanctus" would imply that the colophon was written after Exmewe's death. The hand of the note is surely that of Chauncy himself; and if the manuscript was examined by Wood in the late seventeenth century, it is most probable that it never left England at all.

⁵ Hodgson, ed., *The Cloud of Unknowing and related treatises*, *Analecta Cartusiana* 3 (Salzburg, 1982), xviii.

⁶ See plate.

⁷ E.g. the incipit of the *Cloud* in Pa: "Goostly frende in god, I pray the & beseche the that thou wilt haue a besy beholding to the course & maner of thy calling." Although Wood's transcription is not exact in all details, we may note the omission of "i" before "beseche" and of "the" before "maner" (a variant found only in Pa among surviving manuscripts); and "calling" for "cleeping".

⁸ Cf. Sargent, "James Grenehalgh: the Biographical Record", in James Hogg, ed. ed., *Kartäusermystik und -mystiker*, *Analecta Cartusiana* 55:4 (Salzburg, 1982), 39, 51; plates 2, 12.



Parkminster (near Horsham, Sussex), St. Hugh's Charterhouse
MS of *The Cloud of Unknowing*: f. 95v