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"O that I did truly love! For by love only my soul shall become capable of understanding truth": Dame Gertrude More's *The Spiritual Exercises* (1658) from a feminist perspective on religious women's agency and on mysticism and gender*

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Abstract English Catholic nuns from the early-modern period were marginalised voices for several reasons: firstly, they were women, in a historical context where their voices were usually not expressed and not heard; secondly, they were Catholic under the penal laws; finally, they were exiled on the continent. The seventeenth-century English Benedictine nun, Gertrude More, a founder of "Our Lady of Consolation" in Cambrai (France), has received scholarly attention mainly for her religious poetry and for her analysis of obedience to superiors in *The Spiritual Exercises* (1658), a collection of her writings assembled by her spiritual director. Building on feminist theories on religious women's agency and on mysticism and gender, this contribution aims to reveal how More's agentic capacity was realised through her religion: she employed the language conventions of religious women's speech to criticise the abuse of male clerical control and she appropriated her spiritual director's contemplative life teachings to develop her own mysticism.

Keywords early modern England; Dame Gertrude More OSB; gender; agency; mysticism.

In *Writing Habits: Historicism, Philosophy, and English Benedictine Convents, 1600–1800* (2021), Jaime Goodrich, a renowned scholar of English religious women's writings from the early-modern period, issues a call for further research in early-modern studies through the lens of a feminist philosophical perspective. The latter "can offer precious insight into the ways that early modern believers understood and sought to engage with God, on both a

* **Author's note**: when possible, the quotations in this paper keep the original early-modern English spelling. Translations into modern English have been provided in square brackets next to each word only when the original spelling could impede the understanding.

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personal and a collective level" (Goodrich 2021: 164). This could also be of relevance to the contemporary readers who, despite their religious positionality, confront the need to find an answer to the philosophical question of God's existence (Goodrich 2021: 164). Moreover, although the strive for locating and analysing women's writings is already grounded in feminist theory, the latter could also "generate new critical theories that alter our understanding of early modern textual production" (Goodrich 2021: 165).

This essay attempts to answer Goodrich's call by examining the religious writings of the seventeenth-century English Benedictine nun, Gertrude More, through feminist theories on religious women's agency and on mysticism and gender. Starting with Simone de Beauvoir (*Le Deuxième Sexe*, 1949) and Luce Irigaray ("La Mystérique", in *Speculum of the Other Woman*, 1985), feminist theory over the last forty years has "moved from approaching mysticism as a peculiarly female malady to considering whether mystical practices offered women paths of resistance and self-actualization" (Weber 2012: 327). This paper aims to offer an original contribution to this debate and to demonstrate how More's agentic capacity was exercised through her religion: on the one hand, she managed to change certain forms of male cleric control, not by subverting the clerical hierarchy of the convent, but by wittingly "conforming to stereotypes of female speech and submissive behaviour" (Weber 2013: 48). On the other hand, by building on her spiritual director's contemplative life teachings, she affirmed her personal way of uniting with God; in other words, she developed her own mysticism, which ultimately led to her spiritual and human self-realisation.

Helen More (1606-33), in religion Dame Gertrude and great-great granddaughter of Sir Thomas More, was among the founding members of the Cambrai convent "Our Lady of Consolation", one of the seven English Benedictine cloisters founded in France and Flanders in the aftermath of the Dissolution.[1] Very little is known about her unfortunately short life – she died

[1] In the history of Catholicism in England in the early-modern period, the years between 1536 and 1540 are also known as the dissolution of the monasteries and religious orders realised by the King Henry VIII. About eight hundred monasteries and religious houses were dissolved and all their furniture, libraries and other artistic objects were sold, destroyed, or burnt. The first house for women religious on the continent was the Benedictine Monastery of the Glorious Assumption founded in Brussels in 1598. Also due to fallouts at the original Brussels convent, several other Benedictine communities were launched: at Ghent in 1624, at Boulogne in 1652, then relocated to Pontoise in 1658, at Dunkirk in 1662 and at Ypres in 1665. The convent of Our Lady of Consolation founded in Cambrai in 1623 was the only Benedictine monastery in exile under the direct authority of the English Benedictine

at only twenty-seven – and the main source for reconstructing her life, both before and after her monastic vows, is her biography written by her spiritual director, Augustine Baker: *Life and Death of Dame Gertrude More* (2002 [1635 or 1636]).

This paper examines More's understanding of Baker's teachings, hence the latter will not be discussed here. However, given their importance in More's spirituality, something must be said about these teachings and about the office of a male spiritual guide for women in general.

During the Counter-Reformation, and more precisely since the Council of Trent (1545–63), the Catholic Church recommended strict control over spiritual life, especially for women, so as to avoid the spread of heresies. Women religious lost part of the spiritual freedom they had enjoyed until then as they could no longer choose an eremitic life or an independent life in the world as consecrated virgins. On the contrary, they had to be affiliated to a convent and to be surveyed by men. The office of male spiritual guides hence acquired a pivotal role for women religious, since they acted as mediators of God's will for the nuns, who followed their guidance as part of their obedience vow to superiors. It is in this context that the position of Baker at Cambrai must be interpreted.

David Baker, in religion Augustine (1575 – 1641), was a Benedictine monk best known for his writings on mystical spiritual contemplation, who was appointed spiritual guide at Cambrai for nine years, from 1624 to 1633. Once there, he did not support the Jesuit spiritual exercises and meditational regime, in use after the Council of Trent in most of the English communities in France and the Low Countries,[2] but rather he provided general guidance and encouraged the nuns under his supervision to find the "devotional path which best suited their ability and temperament" (Walker 2004: 240). According to Baker, central to advancement in spiritual life was the observance of the interior call, or divine inspiration, and this alone would bring peace to the soul and lead it to a state of perfection. Baker therefore approached spiritual direction as a general guidance to "spiritual self-sufficiency" (Van Hyning 2013: 144) and not

Congregation; its daughter house was our Blessed Lady of Good Hope opened in Paris in 1651.

[2] Jesuit missionaries were often responsible for recruiting potential postulants among the English gentry for the founding of religious houses on the continent and they therefore spread their spirituality (Van Hyning 2013: 150). Jesuits played a significant role, for example, in the foundation of the first English convent on exile, that is the Brussels Benedictines (Kelly 2020: 24).

as a strict control over spiritual life, as the Catholic Church recommended from the Council of Trent onwards, especially for women. He therefore "discouraged dependence on spiritual directors" (Beacham et al. n.d.: para. 2) and believed in "individualized connections with God without confessors as the middlemen, ultimately giving nuns more autonomy in their spiritual lives" (Beacham et al. n.d.: para. 2). As for prayer practice, Baker encouraged the nuns to employ "personalized forms of prayer such as spontaneous affective aspirations (or short ejaculatory prayers) in order to reach a state of passive contemplation of God" (Goodrich 2019: 606).

When More visited Baker for the first time, she was experiencing a spiritual crisis because she could find no profit in the prayer and meditational regime of Cambrai. This led her to a state of desolation and restlessness. According to Baker, "she needed […] to be brought into a simplicity of soul which is the immediate disposition to union with God" (Holloway 2004). "Immediate disposition" meant she could access God herself, without a male, patriarchal confessor. Baker called this simply the "way of love", i.e., following her internal call (Plante n.d.: para. 4). More found great profit in following Baker's spiritual guidance and she soon became an advocate of his spirituality: when Baker was accused of anti-authoritarian and heterodox doctrine for leaving too much freedom and spiritual independence to the nuns, More wrote a text called *An Apology for Herself and Her Spiritual Guide and Director, the Venerable Augustine Baker* (hereafter the Apology). Baker, on his side, collected More's personal papers after her death and he prepared them for publication, which occurred in 1658 under the title *Confessiones Amantis: The Spiritual Exercises of the Most Vertuous and Religious Dame Gertrude More* (hereafter *The Spiritual Exercises*).[3] The text is written in English and it contains the Apology, fifty-three Confessions to God and other sentences, prayers, sayings and poems found in some of More's papers and in her breviary. These texts originate from More's reflections on the Office and they have a collaborative nature as she describes her contemplative prayer life, directed by Baker, and the latter finds in More a perfect example to prove the validity of his teachings (Walker 2004).

In 2009, Arthur Marotti produced a facsimile edition of the 1658 edition as part of the Ashgate series *The Early Modern Englishwoman: A Facsimile Library of Essential Works*. The latter was chosen as the base text for this article

[3] The publication of *The Spiritual Exercises* was finalized in Paris in 1658 by a priest called Fr Francis Gascoigne (1605-76) since Baker was removed from Cambrai in 1633.

as it is the most recently edited of More's writings, which contains the Apology, the Confessions and her poems.

1. Obedience to superiors

Many feminist scholars tackled the issue of religious women's agency in what Kelsy Burke called "gender traditional" or "conservative religions", namely Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (Burke 2012: 122). Orit Avishai interpreted the agency of Jewish religious women as an authentic religious conduct, not meant to pursue extra-religious ends, but orthodoxy (Avishai 2008). Saba Mahmood, who studied Muslim women instead, defined agency as the "space of action that relations of subordination enable and create" (Mahmood 2001: 203). Sarah Bracke also studied young Muslim women adhering to Milli Görüs, an Islamic movement within the Turkish diaspora in Europe, and she contended that their agency consisted in a strive to achieve a higher level of spirituality through a great self-discipline (Bracke 2008).

Avishai, Mahmood and Bracke highlighted how the "turn to agency" (Bracke 2008: 62) in feminist theory since the 1990s has led to an oversimplification of the concept of agency itself, as the latter became the equivalent of resistance to patriarchal social norms and of struggle for freedom, as understood by western liberal cultures. As far as religious women are concerned, Avishai, Mahmood and Bracke called for going beyond this submission/resistance dichotomy and proposed so-called "compliant models" of agency (Burke 2012: 123), where the latter was expressed not despite, but through religion. More specifically, for them agency consisted in an authentic religious conduct.

The analyses of Avishai, Mahmood and Bracke focused on the contemporary age, where the dynamics of women's emancipation and of secularisation are certainly not comparable to those of the seventeenth century. Moreover, their studies regarded western- as well as non-western religious traditions, whereas this essay focuses on a precise religious tradition, namely the English Catholic Benedictine Order. This said, I think their models could offer an interesting perspective to interpret the religious experience of Gertrude More, as she expressed her agency not against or despite, but through her religious belonging: on the one hand, she managed to change certain forms of male cleric control, not by subverting the clerical hierarchy of the convent, but by wittingly "conforming to stereotypes of female speech and submissive behaviour" (Weber 2012: 48). On the other hand, by building on her spiritual

director's contemplative life teachings, she affirmed her personal way of uniting with God.

In *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity* (1990), Alison Weber demonstrated how this well-known seventeenth-century mystic exploited a self-depreciatory language in her writings as a rhetorical strategy which enabled her to ultimately affirm her identity and her agency. I would argue that in the case of Gertrude More's *The Spiritual Exercises*, we are facing a similar case: three times in her writings she refers to herself, and to women in general, as "silly" (*Confessions* 47, 189) and she uses the terms "vnworthy", "vnworthiest" and "vnworthines" thirty times for herself and for her speaking.[4] In addition, in the Confessions she defines herself as being "contemptible" (25, 156, 189), "poor" (253, 255, 256), "imperfect" (256), "ungrateful" (301), a "wretch" (235, 291) and, finally, "wicked" (286). This submissive and derogatory tone betrays More's religious background on the necessary "low and plain style" of female speech (Goodrich 2019), but it contrasts with the strength of her arguments, which, as we shall see in the following paragraphs, are all but weak.

In 2002, Kitty Scoular Datta revealed how, beyond the surface of the apparent modest writing of the Apology, addressing primarily herself and other nuns, More displayed an anti-authoritarian nature: she is critical of blind obedience to superiors, defends Bakers' teachings against any accusations and advocates a spiritual model where the soul can have a direct relationship with God, without the intermediary role of a male confessor (Scoular Datta 2002: 54). Jenna Lay "built upon […] Datta's scholarship to spotlight More's role in supporting the development of female agency within the context of her convent" (Bazzi & Plante n.d.: para. 5). She explored More's criticism of "blind obedience" to Superiors and stated that "her written confessions marked her not only as Sir Thomas More's descendant but also as his "intellectual successor in resisting unlawful authority" (Lay 2016: 91). More certainly recognised the necessity to obey authorities as far as earthly matters are concerned, but regarding her devotion, she criticised those who usurped God's role (Lay 2016: 102). Arthur Marotti also argued that More advocated spiritual freedom in her text, by following her "divine call or inner light", i.e. the spiritual course that best suited her, and she called for resistance or "civil disobedience" to the superior when he refuses to accept the "inner light" of the practitioner of contemplation (Marotti 2015: 157).

[4] (Apology 27); (Confessions 23, 25, 26, 58, 59, 60, 62, 81, 125, 153, 156, 169, 195, 205, 234, 235, 253, 255, 256, 259, 267, 286-287, 288, 291, 293, 296, 298, 299, 301).

In the Confessions, More underlines the importance for spiritual directors to command not in their power, but in God's: "What thou wouldst command, they would commend [command]" (More 2009: 206) and to seek His honour and glory and not their own. She criticises superiors when they usurp and abuse their power and claims that if a spiritual director had a humble spirit and truly sought to accompany the soul to discern God's will, he would not disdain to entrust the soul to the care of somebody else, even inferior to him, in case his guidance would procure more benefit to that soul. By referring to the Scriptures, More stresses the importance of "giuing [giving] that to God which is only Gods own, and to Ceasar that which is due to Ceasar" "for both these obediences are necessary to make a true spiritual life" (More 2009: 192). Obedience is a virtue More continuously asks to God, but it should not be interpreted as a blind exterior attitude of submission to a male minister, but rather as an interior disposition to accomplish God's will through the guidance of a spiritual director; otherwise, every sort of disorder, uneasiness and rebellion would arise. For example, she argues that "the sensual love, and friendship between the Superiors and their subjects would cease" when the superior "governs" the soul only in regard of God's will (More 2009: 207). In More's understanding, "Powre [power] was giuen by God, for edification and not for distruction" and this edification consists principally in the "Superior accommodating him-self to the interior diuine [divine] call of his subject" (More 2009*:* 106).

According to More, Baker epitomizes "the good superior" because he did not tie her to himself, but he rather guided her to find and to accomplish God's will. In the Apology she writes:

> I found my heart grown (as I may say) as hard as a stone, and nothing could haue [have] been able to haue mollified it; but by being put into a course of prayer; by which a soul tendeth towards God, and learneth of him the true lesson of humbling her-self. Which effect I finding by following Father Baker's plaine, simple, easy and sweet instructions […] (More 2009: 14).

Baker taught More not to be "daunted with […] sins" (More 2009: 24) and did not ask her to confess more than was necessary to her spiritual progress since all would turn to her good if she tended to God by prayer and renounce "al [all] inordinate affections to created things" (More 2009: 24). He provided her with general instructions in contemplative life and underlined that the "diuine [divine] spirit" is "the proper Maister [Master] of the interior" (More 2009: 52)

and God is "the only Teacher of the way of spirit" (More 2009: 53). The evening before More's death, it was reported that Baker was at Cambrai and More was asked if she wanted to meet him, but she replied: "No, nor any man" (Baker 2002: 323) and this was interpreted by Baker as the proof that she was so advanced in her spiritual life, that she did not need the guidance of any priest, not even that of her master in contemplative life.

In her writings, More reveals an actual analysis and a deep awareness, on the part of a religious woman of the early seventeenth century, of the problems related to convent life and of the issue of obedience to domineering men. She recognises that discursive prayer procured her no benefits, thus she searched for help and did not resign until she found Baker's spiritual way that she felt was the most appropriate path for her: "For liuing [living] in Religion (as I can speake by experience) if one be not in a right course between God and our soul: Ones nature growes much worse; then euer [ever] it would haue been, if they had liued in the word [world]" (More 2009: 13).

More acknowledged the diversity of everyone in spiritual matters: "For as we al [all] differ in face so do we differ in the manner of our exercises that are interior" (More 2009: 46) and she pursued what she felt was her way in contemplative life without letting anyone, male or female in a position of authority, deprive her of her comfort. She was determined to follow her interior call and divine inspiration and looked for a direct relationship with God.

2. Mystical union with God through love

It will be argued that another way in which More showed agency in her religious life was through her mysticism since, by following the "way of love", as Baker and More called it, or, in other words, by following her "interior call", she affirmed her personal way of uniting with God. The focus of the next paragraphs will be on the Confessions, as they contain religious meditations where the author reflects and comments on her contemplative life. First of all, however, the meaning of the term mysticism requires clarification.

Nelstrop writes that the word "mysticism" is a modern coinage: its first known use occurred in France in the seventeenth century and spread from there to other European vernaculars. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term "mysticism" was first used in English in 1736 (Nelstrop et al. 2009: 1). The adjectival forms like "mystic" or "mystical" instead are far more ancient. They derive from the Greek language and designate those who had devoted to secret rituals and mystery religions (Jantzen 1995: 23). As the contemporary

theologian, Mark MacIntosh comments: "Today we often use the term 'mysticism' though this is really something of an academic invention; earlier eras referred to the most intimate and transforming encounter with God as 'contemplation'" (MacIntosh 1998: 11).

The way mysticism is conceived in this research has nothing to do with extraordinary phenomena, such as ecstasies and visions, but with internal union with God by means of prayer and contemplation. As David Lunn wrote, "strictly speaking, mysticism is the union of the soul with God, or the ultimate stages in the search of it, using self-denial and the prayer of contemplation for its attainment" (Lunn 1975: 267).

Liam Temple argued that the early modern period was "a key period of distrust, suspicion and derision towards mystical experience in the West" (Temple 2019: 1). Differently from the medieval period, when mysticism had a privileged position, it then declined in popularity and came to be considered "inherently esoteric, one which was unintelligible to the wider Christian community" (Temple 2019: 10). It was considered irrational and fanatical and it hence lost its place among those sources of knowledge which were considered legitimate at the time (Temple 2019: 14-15). As a consequence, writers of mysticism began to "claim authority through their relation to a long tradition of authors, identified for the first time as 'mystics'" (Temple 2019: 14-15). This is exactly what Baker did: he read and adapted "previous works of mystical experience to build a 'canon' of what he referred to as 'mystick authors'" (Temple 2019: 25). He is in fact considered "the first writer in the English language to have referred to mystical writers as 'mysticks' in this way" (Temple 2019: 25). Interestingly, spiritual authors such as Pseudo-Dionysius became a sort of "seal of quality" (Temple 2019: 15) of past mystical tradition and, as a matter of fact, he is among the authors Baker referred to in his reading lists for the Cambrai nuns. Drawing from medieval spiritual authors such as Walter Hilton and the Pseudo-Dionysius, Baker firmly discouraged visionary experiences and other extraordinary bodily manifestations. He preferred writers "who talked of contemplation not as the extraordinary experience of a privileged few but as the normal goal of every Christian" (Norman 1976: 206). Gertrude More, who came to be considered his "star pupil" (Baker 2002: xxv), believed and acted "on the principle that contemplation is the normal means of approaching God in prayer for all Christians, not the exclusive privilege of a few specially gifted souls" (Norman 1976: 208).

She "belonged to a tradition of mystical writers who believed in the value of the *via negativa*, a path to union with God through total self-abnegation and

the emptying of the mind of set ideas and images" (More 2009: 13). Abnegation consists, as the *Imitation of Christ* teaches, not only in finding joy and fulfilment in God alone and in renouncing all earthly inordinate affections for creatures, but also, for oneself. Baker himself described the spiritual path of abnegation in his *Secretum*:

> ye [the] higher ye soul is Elevated from ye Bodily Senses, & abstracted from them & from ye body [...] ye lesse subiect is She to be Caryed away wth [with] ye inordinate passions & Affections of ye body and of Sensuality, out of wch [which] springeth ye cheif or only perill & Damage of our Soules (Baker, *Secretum*, 20, in Van Hyning 2013: 149).

In More's understanding, abnegation means giving her heart, mind, body and soul entirely to God, without retaining anything for herself or for other creatures, so that God could accomplish His will in her. Moreover, abnegation implies dying to oneself and to other created things because an inordinate affection for them would distance the soul from the Creator. This may seem difficult to grasp and possibly harsh to live. However, what More means, referring here to a whole mystic tradition, namely the Flemish and Rhineland tradition, which is influenced by the women mystics Hadewijch, Mechtild of Magdeburg, and Beatrijs of Nazareth (Scoular Datta 2002: 62, 63), is not that human affection *per se* is wrong, but rather it is an inordinate affection. In other words, a love which is not rooted in God or, worse, which substitutes God, and thus becomes an idol: "[…] For if the soul do willingly retain an affection to any such thing, she is at a stop, and can go no farther. For God must be sought and loued wholy, if we desire to arriue to Perfection" (More 2009: 248).

In addition, More was instructed into the so-called apophatic tradition. In the early sixth century, Dionysius the Areopagite introduced the terms "apophatic" and "cataphatic" into Christian theology, which stem from the Hebrew scriptures and Greek philosophy. They mean, respectively, the use of negation and affirmation when talking about God (Louth 2012: 137). In his *Mystical Theology*, the Aeropagite contends that it is impossible to know what God is, He is unintelligible and inexpressible as He transcends everything which exists. Therefore, according to the Aeropagite, any intellectual concept is inadequate in theology and the language of negation, or "apophatic", is the only possible to talk about God because we can only come to understand what He is not (Jantzen 2000: 94).

In *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (1987), Caroline Walker Bynum contends that women's spirituality in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries was primarily enacted through the body. She argues for a distinctively female somatic piety, characterised by a propensity for hyperbolic suffering and erotic mysticism. Furthermore, she noticed a prominence of eucharistic devotion, food ascetism, feeding miracles and food images in late medieval female's piety. According to Bynum, women's spirituality typically belongs to the cataphatic type, since they use "natural symbols and the material world to experience and express the divine" (Scoular Datta 2002: 51).

More's mysticism, however, cannot be defined as sensory only, as Bynum understood it, namely based on the somatization of the mystical experience and/or on self-inflicted suffering; she did not experience any extraordinary bodily manifestation or "parapsychic phenomena", such as "visions, voices, ecstasies, stigmata, localized bleeding, exudations, levitation, or inedia" (Bruneau 1998: 16). The latter were discouraged in the apophatic tradition and medieval spiritual literature was cautious about them; Walter Hilton, for example, affirmed that these kinds of mystical phenomena could come from the devil and the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* contended that they could often be the product of brain diseases (Jantzen 2000: 59). Baker himself firmly discouraged visionary experiences. Datta underlined how More's spirituality has a more "apophatic" character (Scoular Datta 2002: 51) since she stresses God's unintelligibility and inexpressibility: "To speak with him it is impossible, the distance of place is so great […]" (More 2009: 101, 102). "My God, whom none can see and live […]" (More 2009: 103).

According to the apophatic tradition, God is a reality beyond any human intellectual category and the only way to approach Him is through a personal relationship. The author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* also contrasted reason and love when talking about God, saying that it is impossible to understand God, but He can be loved: "It is my wish to leave everything that I can think of and choose for my love the thing that I cannot think. Because he can certainly be loved, but not thought. He can be taken and held by love but not by thought" (*The Cloud of Unknowing* VI, in Jantzen 2000: 95).

More followed Baker's contemplative path leading to a passive contemplation of God through simple affective prayer (Goodrich 2021: 75). She rejected intellectual forms of devotion, in favour of a devotion based on feeling (Meyerhoff n.d.: para. 3). As a matter of fact, she practiced prayer of sensible affection, that is a type of prayer that involved her feelings, more than

her understanding. In other words, she did not aim at knowing God through rationality or discourse, but she rather hoped to experience him as a "spiritual lover" (Lux-Sterritt 2017: location no. 3760). She writes: "Lett our harts [hearts] study nothing ells, but how to love thee […] we cannot learn but by conversing with thee" (More 2009: 38).

More suggests that prayer, understood not only as a discourse, but as affective union with God, also elevated her mind to the understanding of the divine mystery, more than reading and studying could do:

> […] Thou art not to be seene in this life as thou art, yet, an humble soul is not ignorant of thee […] by loue obtaineth the heavenly wisedome of thee […] (More 2009: 82).
> […] Yea to shew thy power thou hast been pleased many times to bring a silly woman, louing thee, to that wisedom that no creature by wit or industry could attain to the same […] (More 2009: 189).

Interestingly, in the above quotations More uses the terms "humble soul" and "silly woman", to refer to herself. She again seems to wittingly use her religious language conventions as far as women's speaking is concerned, to state exactly the opposite: she says that women are silly and they can only access God by means of love, but at the same time she affirms that the relation of love with God greatly surpasses the rational knowledge of him. She continues:

> Those that loue thee, and seek only to please thee, are those which haue a sight in part, of what in heaven we shall enioy cleerely for all eternity (More 2009: 90).
> O that I did truly love! For by love only my soul shall becom capable of vnderstanding truth (More 2009: 95).
> For one learneth more in Prayer of thee in one hower [hour], then all creatures in the world could teach (More 2009: 10).

Going back to Bynum's theory of women's sensory mysticism, she contended that somatic piety was a creative response of women to the loss of sacerdotal and temporal powers that occurred with the Gregorian Reform of the twelfth century. Therefore, it became a strategy for women to achieve subjectivity and transcendence (Bruneau 1998: 216). Marie-Florine Bruneau, a French historian and literary scholar, agreed with Bynum insomuch that "sensory mysticism allowed female mystics a charismatic power and access to transcendence otherwise denied to them" (Bruneau 1998: 222). Yet she questioned Bynum's idea that female somatic piety is a natural female disposition (Bruneau 1998:

10) and a source of empowerment, as it reiterates an identification of women with the "weak flesh". Therefore, instead of contrasting misogyny and patriarchy, it seems to reinforce it (Bruneau 1998: 222). In *The Soul as Virgin Wife* (1995), Amy Hollywood also underlined the limits of Bynum's approach and contended that women may have felt compelled to describe their spirituality in embodied terms as the intellectual language was precluded to them. For example, she proved how Marguerite Porete's spirituality, just to mention one, was far from embodied but rather speculative and anti-visionary. Hollywood then proposed a variety of perspectives to approach women's spirituality, not just the embodied one. Grace Jantzen later added another important element to the analysis of Christian women's mysticism and argued that it was a "social construction" (Jantzen 1995: 12) related to issues of power, authority, and gender. She reconstructed (or deconstructed) the traditional history of Christian mysticism and demonstrated how women came to be considered "naturally more spiritual than men" (Jantzen 1995: 17, 18). This led to a confinement of "both the "feminine" and the "spiritual" to "a context in which they are rendered thoroughly ineffectual" (Jantzen 1995: 17, 18), starting with the scientific revolution and especially during the Enlightenment and the Post-Enlightenment, when religion in general was reduced to a philosophy's binary opposite and mysticism was increasingly subjectivised, depoliticised and described in terms of an ineffable experience.

What all these theorists seem to have in common is their search for a specific form of religious women's mysticism. They ask themselves if there is a female spiritual language and what the female way of relating with God is. As Patricia Ranft demonstrated in *Women and the Religious Life in Premodern Europe* (1998), the history of Catholicism teaches that women have been extremely creative in following their interior call: alongside women whose mysticism was somatic, like Catherine of Siena and Teresa of Avila, there were others who, on the contrary, practiced a negative or apophatic mysticism. In particular this applies to the Beguines of the thirteenth century, and to others who, like Mary Ward, were devoted to active or apostolic service instead, when the latter was not precluded to them. I therefore believe that Bruneau only addressed one side of the problem as somatic piety was not the only spiritual life type of women religious, hence it cannot be considered as the only existing female disposition in religious life.

Moreover, somatization and affective piety drew from a long tradition in Western Christianity of erotic and nuptial mysticism which were also experienced by men. Erotic metaphors, together with the idea of a mystical

marriage with God were frequently used in the thirteenth century Rhineland and in the Low Countries, especially among Dominican nuns influenced by Eckhart, and his followers, Tauler and Suso. These authors were well known by Baker, and they were among his suggested readings to the Cambrai nuns alongside "Gregory of Nyssa, Blosius, Bernard of Clairvaux, Hugh and Rich of St Victor, St Bonaventure, Ruysbroeck, the author of The Cloud of Unknowing, Walter Hilton, Julian of Norwich, St John of the Cross, St Teresa of Àvila and many others besides" (Lux-Sterritt 2017: location no. 4024). It can thus be argued that it is not a matter of an intellective more-elevated spirituality or an affective less-elevated spirituality, where the former is typically associated with the male and the latter with the female, but rather a diversity of calls that women felt and in which they found fulfilment. In More's case, it was a devotion based on feeling and affection, which also emerges in her language, and can be defined a "language of love".

To follow is an examination of this language of the Confessions in order to reveal how More wittingly appropriates Biblical references and the tradition of affective piety to build her own contemplative path. The focus will be on two recurring aspects: the sensual and erotic imagery and the food imagery.

2.1 The language of love in the Confessions

More's prose in the Confessions is amorous, her language echoes the Song of Songs[5] and her register is highly emotive and sensual, like that used by a romantic lover (Lux-Sterritt 2017: location no. 3965-4020). She calls God her only beloved (More 2009: 4) and only desire (More 2009: 16) and wishes to be united to Him forever by "a knott of Love" (More 2009: 8). Her heart is consumed by this love for her Creator, as if by a "flame" (More 2009: 13) and her heart sings "songs of Love to Him" (More 2009: 16). Nothing in this world can satisfy her soul, but God who is her "only love, light, hope, comfort, refuge, delight, and whatsoever else can be desired, or imagined" (More 2009: 16, 17). He is More's friend, comforter and true lover and More flies into Him to seek peace and to satisfy her unquiet heart:

[5] The Song of Songs (also Song of Solomon, Canticle of Canticles, or Canticles) is the most erotic book placed right at the heart of the Bible. Its author is unknown. Images taken from the Song of Songs often appear in texts from male and female mystics alike as this book celebrates the erotic love between a bridegroom and his bride, who represent Christ and His church respectively, and in mystic union the soul is elevated to be united with God, as if in marriage.

> Let me be drowned, and swallowed vp in that of Diuine loue, in which my soul may swim for all eternity (More 2009: 126).
> Neuer was there euer such acquaintance, loue, and friendship, between any in this world, as there is between thy Goodnes and an humble soul (More 2009: 188).

The relationship with God is described by More as intimate and erotic like that of a bride and bridegroom: "[…] faithfull soul, who seeketh nothing but to imitate her beloued, […] to become an initimate, and inward friend of this our heavenly Bridegroome" (More 2009: 80). What is also interesting about More's amorous language is the concept of "wounding" to describe her personal experience of God's love:

> […] neither can they take any content, but hearing thy name, speaking to thee, and longing after thee, after thou hast wounded their soul with thy Divine Charity (More 2009: 30).
> […] and some times thou speakest to vs; so that it pearceth, and woundeth with desire of thee, the very bottome of our soules […] (More 2009: 40, 41).
> O who wil giue me the wings of a Doue that I may fly into the open wounds of my beloued? (More 2009: 261).

It can be noticed in the above quotations that on the one hand it is "us" to have been wounded by the Divine Charity and on the other hand the "open wounds" are those of God, the beloved/bridegroom. Moreover, the image of the dove is a clear resonance of the Song of Songs, where the beloved (2:14; 5:2; 6:9) and/or the eyes of the beloved (1:15; 4:1; 5:12) are compared to this bird.

Another feature which characterises More's mystic language is the use of food imagery. God's presence in her soul is a "heavenly repast" (More 2009: 33) which "satiates" (More 2009: 25) her heart. Moreover, God's words are compared to honey: "The words of thy Royall Prophet […] they are more sweet to a loving soul then the honny, or the honny combe" (More 2009: 64). God's presence thus become concrete and flesh-like in More's words, like food and drink, and has the capacity to nourish the soul and to fortify it:

> […] let thy name […] aboue all earthly things delight, […] refresh me amidst the stormes of temptations which daily assault me (More 2009: 88).
> Giue her to drink who withers away for want of thee the fountain of al sweetnes. I will power out my soul before thee […] (More 2009: 111).

> […] with the sweet dew of thy Grace refreshest them (More 2009: 144).

Finally, being in God's presence is compared to being invited to a dinner: "[…] tast of thy supper […] Religion, which is the place where we may most abundantly tast and see, how sweet our Lord is […]" (More 2009: 176).

Food analogies are also employed in the Bible to describe eternal life, which is compared to a wedding banquet where we would unite forever to our Creator:

> Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying: "The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come. Then he sent some more servants and said, 'Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner: My oxen and fattened cattle have been butchered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet […] (Matthew 22:1-14).

Moreover, Jesus compared Himself and His words to food: "[…] Then Jesus declared, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty' […]" (John 6:35).

In the dedicatory epistle of *The Spiritual Exercises* written by the priest Francis Gascoigne to More's sister, Bridget More, he states: "the whole Book hath nothing in it almost but Scripture" (More 2009: 4). As we have seen, in the Confessions More writes her meditations on the Office, thus the Scripture and its language necessarily pervades her text. However, although this imagery originated from the Sacred Texts and from the tradition of affective piety, in which More was well read, I would argue that she is not merely repeating models here, but she rather takes an active role: she could have taken from the Bible an emphasis on hyperbolic suffering and self-sacrifice, but she chooses to focus on love and nourishment instead, living a testimony of her joy and satisfaction in following the way of affection. It can be argued that by doing so More again expresses her agentic capacity through her religion, because on the one hand she uses the literary genres peculiar to the mystic tradition, in this case the commentary on the Song of Songs and on Scriptures, and she infuses them with the contemplative teachings received by Baker and with Biblical language. While, on the other hand, she manipulates this language to stress her personal fulfilment, both spiritual and human, in following a spiritual path based on love.

Conclusions

To sum up, Gertrude More was instructed into the apophatic tradition and negative theology through the reading lists, mainly provided by Baker, in the convent of Cambrai. At the same time however, she combined this tradition with a personal devotion based on love and feeling, more than on doctrine or rationality. Baker identified an inclination in her disciple towards affective devotion and he suggested this spiritual path to her, but at the same time, he encouraged each nun under his supervision to follow the way best suited to them since no spiritual director, but God alone, could inspire a soul to find her proper spiritual way. As this brief analysis of More's writings from a feminist perspective has attempted to show, More exercised her agentic capacity not despite her religion, but through it: on the one hand she called for spiritual independence from male superiors, not by subverting her religious conventions, but by wittingly conforming to them. More specifically by employing a humble and submissive language which contrasts with the strength of her anti-authoritarian arguments. On the other hand, in building on Baker's teachings on contemplative life, she develops her own mysticism based on love and appropriates the Biblical language in a personal way, leaving a written testimony of her spiritual and human fulfilment in her contemplative life. Finally, it can be argued that the discussion about a specific form of religious women's mysticism started by Bynum should be enriched with the recognition of the diversity of women's calls to religious life. Further research on the writings of religious women from the early-modern period from a feminist perspective, could contribute to this debate and lead to further promising outcomes.

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