

BOOK REVIEW

## David J. Davis. *Experiencing God in Late Medieval and Early Modern England*

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Kerilyn Harkaway-Krieger 

Gordon College

Email: [k.harkaway-krieger@gordon.edu](mailto:k.harkaway-krieger@gordon.edu)

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In *Experiencing God in Late Medieval and Early Modern England*, David Davis has done something that many scholars (historians and literary critics alike) think should happen, but less frequently undertake—a study of religion, and in particular religious experience, that spans the artificial divide between the Middle Ages and the Early Modern period, between Catholic England and Protestant England. Davis sets out to explore how a shared discourse on religious experiences—focused on the recurrence of *raptus*, *rapture*, and *rapt* in descriptions of such experiences—reveals shared assumptions about divine revelation and God’s interaction with finite, embodied human beings. Divine encounters “involved the communion between God and human beings” and were “also an epistemic experience that expanded human understanding, giving insight that could not have been gained otherwise” (2).

*Experiencing God* is capacious in its chronological and generic scope. Davis considers mainly popular religious texts from the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries, sticking with these examples because they most likely capture what the widest swath of people thought about religious experience. He also considers a range of genres, beginning with devotional treatises and visionary accounts from the later Middle Ages (including English translations of continental sources), sermons, biblical commentaries, and works of Protestant theology, religious poetry, images from the Book of Common Prayer, and philosophical treatments of revelation. The breadth of these sources, and the integrated nature of Davis’s ensuing claims, make *Experiencing God* a multifaceted and stimulating study of interest to scholars in several fields.

*Experiencing God* is divided into three parts. In part one, “The Discourse of Experiencing God,” Davis attempts to survey efficiently and comprehensively the various loci where experiences of God appeared, devoting chapters to contemplation in late medieval treatises and visionary accounts, discussions of revelation in Protestant doctrine and homiletics, and, finally, prayer-book images. Davis convincingly shows how *raptus* as an identifying descriptor of revelation spans the artificial designations of “later Middle Ages” and “early modern England.” Chapter 1, “*Raptus* in Contemplative Devotion,” considers examples from the explosion of vernacular materials in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (including Walter Hilton, Julian of Norwich, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and *The Prick of Conscience*), connecting these Middle English texts’ representations of rapture and revelation with Reformers’ discussions in chapter 2. But the discussion of images in chapter 3 only considers sixteenth-century images (drawn mostly from editions of *The Book of Common Prayer*). This analysis is welcome, as few scholars other than Davis himself have seriously examined Protestant pictorial representations. But images played a substantial role in medieval devotion, including

in the materials laity were purchasing and using privately (as well as public images in churches and civic spaces), and there are certainly many representations of *raptus*—biblical characters or saints communing with God. While chapters 1 and 2 tightly connect late medieval and early Protestant sources, chapter 3 does not.

Part two, “*Raptus* as Prayer and Poetry,” considers descriptions of rapture experiences in first-person accounts of devotion and in the effusion of devotional poetry from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Chapter 4, “Prayer and Devotion after the Reformation,” helpfully gathers first-person narratives of religious experience by Anglican and Puritan writers; this gathering reveals some surprising consistency among later medieval and post-Reformation accounts. Intense encounters with the divine are consistently described as ineffable and as full of divine “favors” (described metaphorically in various sensory terms, such as “sweetness”). The chapter 5 on “Language of Angels: The Poetics of Divine Ravishment” discusses the expected names (John Donne and, to a lesser extent, George Herbert), but Davis cites a broad range of poets (Quarles, Spenser, Vaughn, Traherne)—testament to the popularity and reach of religious verse.

Part three surveys “Challenges to the Culture of Divine Revelation”; in these final two chapters, Davis examines how the seventeenth century saw increasing suspicion regarding first-person accounts of divine revelation. While the depth and specificity of this suspicion did vary, there is a marked increase in English resistance to such intense, first-person encounters, at least insofar as they are encouraged or shared with the broader public. This resistance came from both within the church, as churchmen responded to more radical Protestant sects (such as the Quakers), and from philosophical treatments of miracles and religious experience.

Davis’s attention to the discourse of *raptus* following the Reformation helps construct a more nuanced story about devotion and devotional language, attending to the shared ground found in both Catholic and Protestant (medieval and early modern) descriptions of what it is like to experience God—one is taken out of oneself, one loses track of time, one experiences ineffable delights. But the medieval texts, and the “mystical” texts of the Counter-Reformation (I’m thinking particularly of Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, and the works of other Carmelite nuns following Teresa’s reform) do embrace and even perform this ineffable, apophatic discourse in ways that the Reformed texts do not. Based on Davis’s examples, Protestant accounts of *raptus* in England seem quite directly to relate instances of being ineffably “drawn out of oneself,” even as these accounts rely overtly on analogy to record such experiences. But those texts loosely called “mystical” in the Middle Ages and on into the Counter Reformation often *perform* this ineffability in curious and creative ways, as scholars of mysticism from Michel de Certeau on have pointed out. Davis’s work helps us to see both through lines (of continuity), but also implicitly allows us to note how Reformation discourses of divine encounter do differ.

*Experiencing God* contains breadth in its chronological and generic range and depth in Davis’s excellent and concise analysis in each chapter. Scholars of history, English literature, and religious studies working in both the late medieval and early modern periods will find his interpretations worth their time and attention.