

UNSPEAKABLE JOY: REJOICING IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND

by

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An Abstract

Of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Doctor of
Philosophy degree in English
in the Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

July 2012

Thesis Supervisor: Associate Professor Alvin Snider

ABSTRACT

My dissertation, *Unspeakable Joy: Rejoicing in Early Modern England*, claims that the act of rejoicing—expressing religious joy—was a crucial rhetorical element of literary works in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century in England. The expression of religious joy in literature functioned as a sign of belief and sanctification in English Protestant theology, and became the emotive articulation of a hopeful union between earthly passion and an anticipated heavenly feeling. By taking into account the historical-theological definitions of joy in the reformed tradition, I offer new readings of late sixteenth-century and early seventeenth-century texts, including the Sidney Psalms, Donne’s sermons, Spenser’s *Epithalamion*, Richard Rogers’s spiritual diaries, and Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*. I suggest that much of early modern poetics stems from a desire, on behalf of writers, to articulate the ineffable joy so often described by sermons and tracts. By establishing Renaissance emotional expression as a source of religious epistemology and negotiating the cognitive and constructive understandings of emotion, I show that religious rejoicing in Elizabethan Protestantism consists of a series of emotive speech acts designed to imitate the hoped-for joys of heaven. Finally, these readings emphasize the ways in which rejoicing not only functions as a reaffirmation of belief in and commitment to the state church but also becomes the primary agent for spiritual affect by bestowing grace on an individual believer.

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