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"For Love of Grace": Evolving Evocations of Grace in the Literature of Renaissance England

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“FOR LOVE OF GRACE”:
EVOLVING EVOCATIONS OF GRACE
IN THE LITERATURE OF RENAISSANCE ENGLAND

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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During the Reformation, grace occupied a new spotlight in the people's religion, and their understanding of it took on new dimensions in several areas. Grace offered salvation as a gift, out of which good works would proceed as a natural outcropping. Grace, in other words, became the means by which man linked up with God and, as a powerful team, moved forward.

Overtly religious writers tackled grace head-on, but all of them encounter grace differently. John Bunyan, for example, relies on his emotions to discern whether he is one of the elect. George Herbert writes of succumbing to God's grace rather than qualifying it with legalistic restrictions. John Donne engages grace intellectually to come to an understanding of Christ's sacrifice. William Shakespeare dramatizes the struggle for ascendancy of the enlightened Reformed conscience against the “ancestral voice” of Catholicism and tyranny. These permutations of grace are critical to understanding resultant aspects of grace as revealed in other writings.

The internal, emotional impact of salvation by grace has a direct external corollary in the people's worship. The artificial homogeneity of the middle ages is overthrown, and people finally have some legitimate choice in worship. Rather than being required to participate in the highly liturgical Catholic mass, they have options in new denominations. Worship becomes volitional, personal, and edifying. Similarly, the intellectual wrestlings

with grace find their outlet in the tumultuous politics of the day, from the dethroning and execution of Charles I to the trans-Atlantic ventures in the name of religious freedom and the enlightened conscience.

This study of the permutations of grace as portrayed in the variant writings of the English Renaissance reveals the importance of grace to the Renaissance spirit. It examines the evidence of grace, explicit and implicit, in representative poetry, prose, and plays of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to discern the depth of grace's agency in empowering English writers to make their dreams reality, to view a personal God in a more endearing light, to engage the incrementally emerging critical mind, and to agitate about political and governmental structures.