

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Aers, David. Versions of Election: From Langland and Aquinas to Calvin and Milton

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Volume 45, numéro 3, été 2022

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1099743ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v45i3.40445>

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Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)

2293-7374 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Hart, J. (2022). Compte rendu de [Aers, David. Versions of Election: From Langland and Aquinas to Calvin and Milton]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 45(3), 285–287. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v45i3.40445>

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Book Reviews / Comptes rendus

Aers, David.

Versions of Election: From Langland and Aquinas to Calvin and Milton.

Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020. Pp. xvii, 310. ISBN 978-0-268-10866-3 (paperback) US\$45.

David Aers has written a fascinating book, engaging “in a diachronic inquiry” across disciplines and not producing a work of a given guild (xvi). He examines predestination and reprobation, important to the Reformation and central to Calvinist churches, and extends his analysis to a longer view of Christian theology. Aers pays close attention to the works of writers, theologians, and poets in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Moreover, Aers looks at election historically and takes into account various fields—for instance, literature, theology, ethics, and politics, intellectual and literary history—seeing how predestination and reprobation vary from the Middle Ages into the 1700s. He provides readings of works of William Langland, Thomas Aquinas, Robert Holcot, John Calvin, Arthur Dent, William Twisse, John Milton, and others. Aers considers different genres in terms of changes to the Christian tradition.

The body of the study begins with William Langland’s *Piers Plowman* (C-text) (c. 1382) that ranges in its visions, guides, and modes and explores topics in the ethics, politics, and theology “of Christian discipleship in relation to his contemporary church” and notes its “dialectical modes” (1–2). Langland’s Wille searches for virtues telescoped into the figure of Dowel and this search for virtue and salvation becomes ever stranger in an intricate world (2–3). Kynde counsels Wille to seek unity, conscience, and love, freeing Wille from this “language of the many and the few, the predestinate and the reprobate” (52). Aers takes the occasion of Wille going to school to study theology and scripture in the final version of Langland’s poem as a way into examining teaching on predestination and reprobation in the Middle Ages (53). Part of this chapter is an analysis of John Bromyard’s *Summa Praedicatorum* (1614 edition), which makes theology accessible to confessors and preachers beyond the university (87). At the time of Langland’s work, as James Halverson and Aers maintain, the scholastic agreement on predestination and divine election had turned to a many-sided debate, something that the Reformation inherited (107, 109).

In regard to this topic, Aers moves from Gregory of Rimini to Jean Calvin (Cauvin), whose preface to his *Institutes* (1559 edition) echoes, reworks, and displaces, consciously or not, the *Summa Theologiae* (1266–73) of Thomas Aquinas and, in the third chapter of the final version, examines predestination and reprobation (112–13). These ideas have many sides in the medieval and reformed churches and medieval traces occur in the later views, such as concepts of general election in Samuel Hoard, Samuel Harsnett, and John Milton; moreover, Aers muses on the role of centralization and violence in the unity of practice and doctrine (162). Next Aers analyzes conversion in *The Plaine Man's Path-way to Heaven* (1601) by Arthur Dent, a minister in Essex, a dialogue, a representation of a particular model of conversion (163). This work is part of what Aers calls a crossing from Langland to Calvinism, one that is theological, cultural, and social, a revolution of paradigms (180). There was a restoration against the dominant Calvinism of the 1620s and 1630s and a return to medieval models, even if they were read or unread sources, “an illustration of the complex ways in which Christian tradition is woven: continually breaking, continually forgetting, continually remaking and recalling” (181). The repetition of “continually” emphasizes the erasing and uncovering.

Aers is trying to cross the divide between the study of the Middle Ages and the early modern period in universities, and in chapter 5 discusses “Milton’s reflections in the topics and traditions” (183). To give the reader a sense of the kind of detail Aers goes into throughout the book, I focus more on chapter 5. Aers concentrates on Milton’s articulation of his theology, *De Doctrina Christiana* (DDC, c. 1660) (183). Furthermore, Aers argues that Milton has “unexamined contradictions” and “hermeneutic troubles” (184). In the prefatory epistle to this work, Aers examines Milton’s claim of “continual corruption” in Christianity for thirteen hundred years before the Reformation as Milton sets out a Christian doctrine related to his faith (185–86). Aers calls into question Milton’s view that his theology is scriptural, but Aers analyzes a passage from *De Doctrina* (“And since the majority [...] the weaving together of these passages” [DDC, 9]) and asserts: “This is a clear example of the Protestant fantasy of tradition-free exegesis, tradition-free theology, and tradition-free rationality” (186). For stress, Aers repeats “tradition-free” to underscore what he considers to be Milton’s part in a fantastical Protestant tradition. Milton, quite sensibly, considers it important to be an expert in language for a correct interpretation of the Bible “(*ratio recte interpretadi scriptoris*)” as well as

having knowledge of biblical texts, grammar, and rhetoric (187). Aers sees a contradiction between Milton's insistence on an elite education and his view that Christians had access to the Spirit (188). Thus, *sola scriptura* creates problems for Milton, who was concerned about the corruption of the scriptural texts. The texts and the texts written in the heart collide and Aers questions "Milton's piling up of proof texts from the external scripture" (189). In discussing *Paradise Lost*, among other Miltonic texts, Aers says that God justifies himself before the catastrophic fall; God's foreknowledge having no effect on events. Moreover, Aers also states that Milton, here and in *De Doctrina*, is not being as subtle as late medieval discussions in logic and metaphysics of the connections between contingency and divine omnipotence, while also sharing the "field of inquiry" with theologians of the fourteenth century, such as Robert Holcot (219). Aers analyzes lines 183 to 202 of Book Three of *Paradise Lost* and observes: "These twenty lines are a compressed but lucid account of election, predestination, and reprobation account in *DDC*" (220).

For Aers, *Versions of Election* has "attempted to develop a diachronic approach to an important cluster of Christian teachings" across different genres and across the divide between the study of the Middle Ages and Reformation in universities, paying close attention to "particular texts," which I always find helpful (221–22). Aers examines "some of the ways in which Christian traditions unfold" and observes that, despite "revolutionary changes," there are "unpredictable continuities," that even rupture is part of tradition (222). Aers's study is admirable, ranging, and probing.

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<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v45i3.40445>