

Feeling Pleasures: The Sense of Touch in Renaissance England. Joe Moshenska. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. xii + 390 pp. \$99.

Joe Moshenska opens *Feeling Pleasures* with an arresting anecdote. On the afternoon of Easter Day 1538 in Salisbury Cathedral, John Goodall ordered a servant to confiscate an image of Christ that worshippers were kissing and licking. Goodall condemned their behavior as idolatrous, but his servant was ultimately charged with a crime, because the confiscated image contained a piece of the consecrated Host. The controversy captures in microcosm the tensions linked with touch in this period: for some congregants, kissing, licking, and fondling were proper forms of passionate devotion, while for others they were heretical. Strikingly, the line between licit and illicit worship settled not on a particular behavior, but on an hour of the day. Before noon, kisses were acceptably pious; after, they were scandalously transgressive.

This scene, and its attendant crises of incommensurable interpretations, offers an apt entry into Moshenska's beautifully observed study of Renaissance conceptions of touch.

Touch, as he demonstrates, served as a lightning rod for a series of urgent debates in the period. Simultaneously “denounced and retained, anxiously proscribed and tenaciously defended,” it acquired a special status “precisely because it attracted such wildly contrasting interpretations and valuations” (2, 3). Linked to the body’s most direct form of contact with the surrounding world, “the problems raised by touch epitomized the deepest and most productive ambivalences of the age” (3). The particular questions with which the book begins are explicitly rooted in Reformation theology: “what was the proper role for the body in worship? Could there be bodily or sensory access to God? . . . Could the senses offer reliable access to the physical world?” (4). Yet religion recedes from centrality after the book’s first three chapters. For Moshenska, the period’s interrogations of touch focus primarily on “the extent to which language is able to capture bodily experience” (287). Ranging across theological, philosophical, medical, and literary texts, as well as paintings and sculptures, *Feeling Pleasures* offers an ambitious exploration of the period’s approaches to this question and many others.

Moshenska’s first two chapters examine English and European ambivalence toward the role of touch in worship, through readings of treatises, sermons, and letters. The third chapter bridges the theological and the literary by tracing poetic depictions of mortals trying (and typically failing) to touch gods, from Lucretius and Virgil to Montaigne and finally Shakespeare. The interactions between human and divine become allegorized in the tensions between pious and erotic forms of touch in Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, which Moshenska juxtaposes with the politically charged language of Petrarchan love in the court of Elizabeth I. Later chapters explore the centrality of touch in Continental European paintings and sculptures; theories of tickling from antiquity through the seventeenth century; medical and philosophical inquiries into the physiological consequences of touch; Milton’s representation of distinctions between human, angelic, and satanic models of touch; and English scientists’ responses to Chinese medicine in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

As this brief overview suggests, the book’s terrain is broad and variegated, at times at the expense of cohesiveness. Despite a stated focus on the distinctive historical and linguistic conditions of Renaissance England, texts range from antiquity to the eighteenth century, and the chapters on visual arts and tickling leave England almost entirely behind. Moshenska’s productive interest in the nexus between the bodily and the linguistic also comes in and out of focus. Yet across this wide-ranging material, Moshenska consistently animates the past, opening up strange and unfamiliar worlds through philologically informed close readings in multiple languages. The link between tact and tactility frames inquiries into the politics of touch, and related etymologies highlight invisible conversations between words such as *tangible*, *contamination*, *contact*, *integrity*, and *intact*. Attention to the elided *volo* in *nolite tangere* expands a prohibition of touch beyond the physical: “the desire to touch and the act of touch cannot be separated — both are themselves ways of touching” (61). Moshenska’s exploration of an understudied and incendiary sense across many texts, languages, and aesthetic forms makes an impressive scholarly achievement. This thoughtfully observed and beautifully

written book is a pleasure to read, and a moving reminder that the instinct toward intimate contact lies at the heart of all of our inquiries into the lost worlds of the past.

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