



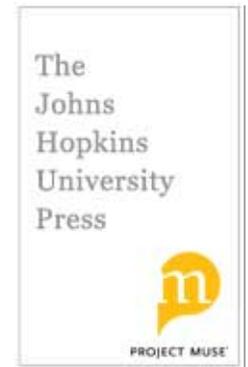
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The Oxford Handbook of The Early Modern Sermon ed. by Peter McCullough, Hugh Adlington, and Emma Rhatigan (review)

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What can stabilize the circumstantial nature of an argument is an overriding sense of “mutual obligation,” which paradoxically arises from Donne’s insistence on “the occasional and contextual situatedness” of a sermon’s interpretive discourse (181). Active deliberation from the pulpit models homiletic engagement in the political arena, which also serves Donne to “shore up his own authority” (183).

Particularly in the detailed analysis of the sermons in the final three chapters, *Donne’s Augustine* provides contextual information that will prove helpful to future interpreters. Seeking consolation for the “cognitive fragmentation” of our exegetical efforts, Donne parallels his role as preacher to the office of the Holy Ghost, thereby discovering the eternal within the temporal (191-94). The hope advanced in the sermons lies in their model of “interpretive regeneration, as it draws out the spiritual meanings of the key terms it has established” (197). If Donne’s “vision of glory,” as Ettenhuber argues, “remains interpersonal to the last,” so much so that “he is in dialogue with Augustine even as he prepares to meet his maker” (223), we should be thankful for having been allowed through this specialized study to listen in on at least one side of that conversation.

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The Oxford Handbook of The Early Modern Sermon. Edited by Peter McCullough, Hugh Adlington, and Emma Rhatigan. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. ISBN 9780199237531. Pp. xxvi + 608. \$150.00.

In one iconic novel of Western literature, *Madame Bovary*, a young student is introduced to a lazy group of boys who are apparently studying. Unlike them, he is said to be so attentive that he might as well be listening to a sermon. This is the first time that any word referring to discourse is mentioned in the novel and, with the boys’ laziness, it is the first comment about behavior. And so it is that the religious word should command respect and a good listener, and it is significant that it should serve as an opener for this novel. This handbook of essays explains why the sermon is so important to one’s culture in the Western world, be it in the fictional creation of Gustave Flaubert or in the modern world of English civilization and beyond.

This collection of essays on the early modern sermon in England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland easily receives the attention of a reader. Divided into five parts of varying lengths and covering the time from 1500 to 1720, the book ends with appendixes of about one hundred pages, some regarding governmental regulations, others relating observations of a few who heard sermons, and yet others

reproducing texts of different preachers. A bibliography follows each chapter; a select bibliography and index close the book. Part I, "Composition, Reception, and Delivery," garners a good half of the volume. Its first chapter is devoted to the art, "*Ars Praedicandi: Theories and Practice*" and the section ends with the analysis of a sermon which John Donne delivered at the funeral of Sir William Cokayne. In this chapter, "Preaching and Context: John Donne's Sermon at the Funerals of Sir William Cokayne," Peter McCullough, one editor of the volume, explicates the composition and development of the poet's performance for the burial rites of this wealthy and well-known figure of the time. McCullough shows how Donne respects the set order of the sermon and how he takes liberties with the form. Not only is the text of the sermon reviewed but the very ritual in which it took place, the funeral procession, those who attended and those who were excluded. Donne's task, McCullough recalls, was to use "every rhetorical muscle to reinscribe the private upon the public" (231), indeed how the testament and will of the deceased is related to the New Testament and will of the Lord. In Donne's sermon, as in all good sermons, if not in all reviews, we read that "criticism coexisted with consolation" (251). The poet's sermon was based on a Gospel quotation, and yet Donne superbly let "allusion remain allusion. It takes a superior orator, indeed a superior preacher, to have the strategic confidence to raise associations and possible interpretations of his text, but not to articulate them" (233). Not all preachers are poets, unfortunately; not all, like Donne, could depart from a Gospel text and arrive at another text, the corpus, the body of Sir William Cokayne, and finally to the body, resurrected, of Christ. The printed version of this sermon with its italicized words offers the reader's eye helpful links in the play of associations that he sets up and develops. McCullough's treatment of Donne's performance and text reveal an enjoyable analysis of this heraldic funeral that is passed on to a reader.

In the opening chapter of this part of the collection, Greg Kneidel reminds the reader that the question of the development of the sermon is not of recent origin but one that stretches back to the time of Jesus. Kneidel begins his essay, and the book, with these words: "At several points in the Christian Scriptures, Jesus's disciples are told to go out and preach [...]. But they are never told explicitly how to do it" (3). Kneidel reviews the contributions of classical antiquity to the form as well as those of Augustine and John Chrysostom and, later, in the Renaissance, those of Erasmus, Melancthon and Peter Ramus, who was to influence William Perkins in the composition of his book on preaching, *The Arte of Prophecyng* (1592). In that manual emphasis is placed on method rather than on the use of images, which might not have the best influence on listeners. "So, by the beginning of the seventeenth century," Kneidel writes, "four basic sermon forms—the homily, the thematic sermon, the classical oration, and the doctrine-use scheme—had been theorized, taught to, and practiced by English preachers" (17). Despite the ideal offered by a given manual, a preacher, and reader, can be found in the person of Gilbert Burnet (1692) who was sensitive to style and who did not eschew the recommendations of John Chrysostom, Cicero or Quintilian in the matter of speaking.

Lori Anne Ferrell states that, for preachers, the Bible was necessary, but it was even more urgent to know which one to use. William Tyndale's Bible was to have much influence and its publication in 1534, without authority and approval, put an end to his own life and placed the matter of obedience and interpretation in the forefront as Old and New Testament could be read by others than preachers. Ferrell observes that the English Bible finally "settled down: cue for the English sermon to do the same" (32). Since the translation of the King James Version, the Bible has remained in the pews with the Book of Common Prayer, and both texts have made their way into the pews and homes of a variety of confessions.

The essayists indicate the role that education had for preachers, men and women, and their sense of a tradition in preaching connected to the Church Fathers. Katrin Ettenhuber relates the case of bishop-elect John Jewel who, in order to confound the Catholic position of the time, showed that the Church Fathers based themselves on Scripture. Indeed, as Noam Reisner points out with the support of Augustine, even the works of profane writers would be good leaven in a sermon. Such "Egyptian gold" could be as valuable as the gold that the Hebrews took with them when they left the land of slavery. Yet the knowledge and culture that a preacher might acquire should not be openly presented in the sermon, a directive that could not always be easily accomplished even though the preacher was to choose his words and know those whom he addressed.

The contributors review the influence of linguistics and rabbinic exegesis on the study of the Bible and the role that Catholic polemicists, even Jesuits, played in parallel arguments taking place in England. The reading of official and approved sermons, the publication of sermons and thus the possibility of not controlling interpretation and consequently weakening official and established authority are topics that come under examination. Texts of the preachers are used to substantiate opinion of the contributors and there is a marked critical detachment in reporting the polemic that existed between Protestant writers and Catholic authors in their respective interactions between England and Louvain.

Emma Rhatigan shows, with the help of illustrations, how the pulpit assumed an important role and how it was to be cared for with offerings and donations and what accoutrements it might have to effect the performance of a sermon: "[...] whatever preaching style clergy chose to adopt, it was from the pulpit, raised up and exposed before their congregations, that all preachers [...] had to forge a pastoral relationship with their flock" (93). And these flocks, Rhatigan notes well, were not only to be found in the traditional church but at outdoor pulpits, preaching crosses, at court and at the Inns of Court, at Parliament and at the University. Some pulpits attracted preachers such as Donne, and others gathered different audiences, from King Henry to Queen Elisabeth and King James, the powerful whose authority could be criticized and yet one that might be sought after.

In other parts of the English-speaking world, the sermon, however significant, encountered obstacles. Crawford Gribben indicates that little is known about the

style of preaching in Scotland and that, whatever the context, sermons continued to “exhort the values and perspectives of scripture” (283). In Ireland, Catholic ritual still had a strong influence on daily life. While the founding of Trinity College in Dublin helped to form preachers, this did not apparently encourage them to go into the country to announce the gospel to different audiences. In general, the sermon aimed at preaching the Old Testament, the Law, and at reminding listeners of God’s grace, as seen in the New Testament, all this in an effort to bring about conversion. Raymond Gillespie recalls how Cromwell’s regime attempted to control access to pulpits in an effort to limit the influence of Quakers and Baptists. Preaching was thus an important instrument in the formation of community. Yet, in listening and by taking notes, people began to compose a new social hierarchy, whether sermons were veiled or not.

The writers of this organic collection paint in detail—religious, political, and scriptural—the life of the modern sermon as it is performed and received in various areas of English culture and beyond, a culture which, as the writers recall, reaches back in time to the Church Fathers and earlier, and over the Channel into the Continent. And these essays remind us that the sermon is frequently a retelling of the Book of Books, and one’s reading or misreading of it can elicit various reactions. Flaubert’s parish priest affirms that the Protestants recommend the Bible. Unfortunately he does not realize how much of his own ritual, the Mass, restages it in some fashion. Homais believes that, since the Bible contains too many spicy details, it should not fall into the hands of young women, and he holds this opinion even though he has named one daughter Athalia. This fictional example of religious culture tells us as readers and listeners how attentive one should be to the word, the *sermo*, the sermon, in whatever discourse we may find it, and how inattention can have humorous, or worse, grave consequences.

The Oxford Handbook of The Early Modern Sermon also recalls that sermons, whether composed for the educated or simple folk, instruct or bore churchgoers and have them fall into possibly quiet slumber. At other times, if published, they might provide times for reflection, prayer, and even criticism. That said, this volume is a welcome document and solid resource for all who would like to know something about the sermon as a significant form of modern discourse and as a foundational element which intimately connects culture and Christianity.

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