

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-40164-7 - Robert South (1634-1716): An Introduction to His Life
and Sermons

Gerard Reedy

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

This study proposes to provide introductions to the reading of at least four sermons of the seventeenth-century Anglican divine, Robert South (1634–1716). A great writer and preacher in an age of great preachers, South spoke about the political upheavals of his time. His talent earned him stalls at Christ Church, Oxford, and Westminster Abbey, as the talents of his contemporaries such as Edward Stillingfleet (1635–99), Bishop of Worcester, and John Tillotson (1630–94), Archbishop of Canterbury, earned them equal and higher rewards. In late seventeenth-century England the powers of church and state were interdependent; the establishment of this interdependence was one of the principal effects of the restoration of Charles II to the English throne in 1660. South strongly supported the mutual claims of church and monarchy. How he reacted to changes in civil and ecclesiastical polity over the course of his active, public life, from 1660 to about 1700, is a principal theme of the following introduction to his life and thought.

South matched his intensity as a public man with an artistic intensity. The depth and complexity of an individual sermon of South are both my premise and conclusion. The more one gives oneself to South's sermons, I have found, the more their complexity as literary and historical documents is revealed. No single sermon of South is as literarily sophisticated as a major poem by John Dryden or play by William Wycherley, texts which vied for public attention during the years of South's great popularity; nevertheless, the best sermons of South easily bear the weight of careful literary and historical analysis.

In my original plans for this work, I had intended to organize chapters around themes: South's politics, religion, relationship with John Locke, and so on. In the process of research, I became convinced that a better approach lay in singling out specific sermons of South for critical discussion. South worked hard to make his sermons lively and internally resonant wholes; paying close attention to those wholes is, I think, the best way to begin to understand him. I have, moreover, chosen sermons in which major issues in any discussion of South must recur: his changing politics, for example; or his complex sympathies with the thought of latitudinarian

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-40164-7 - Robert South (1634-1716): An Introduction to His Life and Sermons

Gerard Reedy

Excerpt

[More information](#)

divines, who assumed the major sees of England as the seventeenth century closed; or his high church bias; or his glosses on the changing linguistic theory of his age; or his approach to the church's sacramental life.

In the late seventeenth century up until the present time, a preacher must give the appearance of being, in Richard A. Lanham's phrase, *homo seriosus*. Preachers were and are expected to deal in real things and problems, to enunciate their meanings, and to speak as integrated selves to a community of serious listeners, whose moral responsibility is assumed. Developments in the theory of prose in the late seventeenth century underlined the seriousness of anyone, including a preacher, who used expository prose: the age encouraged and felt it had created a newly objective and scientifically based relationship between words and things. The age placed great emphasis on the plain style of writing and preaching. Even scriptural revelation was thought to be most divine when it spoke in clear prose; a passion for the plain style was demanded even from God. At least in expository prose, figures of speech were, on the whole, suspect; among the objects of suspicion metaphor ranked high.

Homo rhetoricus, the other model that Lanham extensively develops, is, nevertheless, not foreign to South's work. More than occasionally South's prose involves a sense of play, a self-conscious pride in the repetition of imagery, and a dialectic between rhetorical pose and moral instruction. South's recurrent anger at the regicides of 1649 and their post-1660 followers (as South interpreted the lineage) is one of his more notable and well-known characteristics. Yet often in these angry passages a stylized definition of attitude accompanies moral outrage; like Hamlet, in Lanham's memorable phrase, South may be observed "dining off his own fury, relishing his sublime passion."¹ One can also observe the rhetorical impulse in South's preoccupation with setting up categories at the start of his sermons, fulfilling them, and then, on occasion, reminding his audience that he has done so. The guidelines for these categories are not South's own; they originate in manuals designed to facilitate moral and theological teaching. Though devised with didactic intent, these serious, elaborate categories may seem now to be the rules of a rhetorical game whose point is also to publicize the wit of the speaker.

My starting-point is, then, that at least some of South's sermons richly repay contemplation of their inner workings; they exist as play and reflexive structure as well as social and moral commentary. In the following I devote equal attention to outer and inner; I try to establish historical contexts for the sermons I have chosen for analysis, as well as to discuss their individual artistry and, at times, their internal inconsistencies.

¹ Richard A. Lanham, *The Motives of Eloquence: Literary Rhetoric in the Renaissance* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976), p. 135. See pp. 1–35 for Lanham's discussion of *homo rhetoricus* and *homo seriosus*.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-40164-7 - Robert South (1634-1716): An Introduction to His Life and Sermons

Gerard Reedy

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The knowledge one gains from any exercise in intellectual history depends on where the historian places his camera, and in the following study of Robert South, I have placed the camera fairly close to the subject. I write about his life, his background at Christ Church, Oxford, his training as a preacher, and his editorial methods. For purposes of comparison and contrast, I frequently discuss what South's contemporaries were writing about the subjects on which he preaches. Most of all, I outline and discuss the contents of South's sermons. The camera is rarely placed at a great distance, so that the reader will rarely learn, from this source, how the grand currents of English and European philosophy flow through South's work, or are abetted or twisted by it. To place the camera at such a distance from his work is, almost inevitably, to begin to ignore it; South was not a thinker of the first rank and may deserve only a footnote in the grander scheme of things. At this moment in the history of the post-Restoration Anglican sermon, a need still exists to understand the principal subjects in their fullness; to understand their role in building post-Restoration England, one must treat them as if they were great even if, by some fair measures, they were not. This is especially true for South, whose conservative view of things tends to be ignored by histories that aim to chronicle budding enlightenment. A sympathetic treatment of South may, moreover, give those histories pause.

Like many writers of an *œuvre* of magnitude, South assumes, as he writes, a number of *personae*, or partial, created selves, some consciously created and some, perhaps, not so. South rarely assumes the *persona* of self-revelation: there are no extant diaries or records of spiritual struggle. It is probable that South regarded communication with God as at best vulgar and at worst seditious if it occurred outside the liturgy of the Church of England. Almost no personal letters remain.² As I have said, preachers usually adopt the semblance of an integrated self that shares the sure meanings it has found, and South excels at creating and maintaining this kind of self. For example, even though his political opinions, especially in the late 1680s, radically changed, he enunciates this change not in the narration of what must have been painful struggles of allegiance; he successively and successfully creates the same firm persona that emphasizes, nevertheless, different ways of conceiving loyalism. South tries to exclude his personal problems from his public presentations.

Even after the intervention of many years between delivery and publication, many of South's sermons remain angry, vitriolic, satirical. One reason why I include an analysis of South's sermons on "the fatal imposture and force of words" is to give an example of how, at times, South's anger overrules his thought, and how the serious man estranges himself

² See Webster, pp. 64–67, 78–79, 82–84, 100–01, 145–46, 148–51, 301–3, 306–07, 330–31, for texts and summaries of South's letters, almost all of them about public issues.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-40164-7 - Robert South (1634-1716): An Introduction to His Life and Sermons

Gerard Reedy

Excerpt

[More information](#)

from the rhetorical. South was a careful artist and, when bursts of anger break his artistic stride, one may catch sight of an angry self, within an angry pose, that perhaps he did not fully admit to. South's epitaphist notes his emotional outbursts and tries to enclose them in an observable cause-and-effect sequence: the vice, vileness, and counterfeit nature of contemporary life caused him to react, *liberrima indignatione* (I, xcix). The reader of South may not find such closure altogether convincing. One is tempted to embark on a psychological explanation, although the absence of autobiographical material renders such a quest difficult indeed.

There are few substantial secondary materials on Robert South. Those which exist bring up some myths to be corrected and some problems that continue to invite solution. Frederick H. Forshall wrongly writes that South was married, and F. P. Wilson that he was a bishop.³ South's sharp tongue and ability thereby to make enemies principally account for his failure as an episcopal candidate. Commentators usually portray South as an opponent of the Royal Society and what it stood for, though there is evidence of a more complex attitude.⁴ Among churchmen of his time, South was not alone in being ambitious, an aspect of his life which I will discuss in detail in chapter 1. Anthony Wood, the seventeenth-century Oxford antiquarian and reporter of gossip, disliked South for personal reasons and depicted him as a man embittered by frustrated ambition. The picture of South that emerges from other historical records and also from the generosity of his art does not wholly support Wood's caricature. Lastly, South is usually understood as a spokesman for a high church view, and I will spend some time, in the following chapters, defining what this might mean.

South shares the latitudinarian preference for the plain style in prose writing, for a theology built on the literal sense of Scripture, and for the linear, compartmentalized development of homilies set out in the latitudinarian classic of John Wilkins, *Ecclesiastes, or A Discourse Concerning the Gift of Preaching, As it Falls Under the Rules of Art* (1646, and at least five more seventeenth-century editions). Wilkins (1614–72) was one of those figures whose career successfully bridged the Restoration. Although the brother-in-law of Oliver Cromwell, Wilkins was made a bishop of the reestablished church after 1660. He had close ties with the Royal Society

³ Forshall, *Westminster School: Past and Present* (London: Wyman and Sons, 1884), pp. 175–76; and Wilson, *Seventeenth Century Prose: Five Lectures* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1960), p. 105.

⁴ See I, 390, where in 1664 South refers to that "great philosopher the Lord Verulam," a figure esteemed by the Royal Society; and *Animadversions upon Dr. Sherlock's Book Entituled A Vindication of the Holy and Ever Blessed Trinity* (London, 1693), p. 13, where he praises Robert Boyle and other authors of scientific works.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-40164-7 - Robert South (1634-1716): An Introduction to His Life and Sermons

Gerard Reedy

Excerpt

[More information](#)

of London, and especially approved of its efforts to reform the language; his own work includes an essay on language reform, which I shall advert to later, and *Ecclesiastes*, a very popular work. In his use of the kind of preaching Wilkins represents, South showed himself a theological modern. He also shared with the latitudinarians a predilection for mixed or alternating proofs for any given thesis, from Scripture, necessary reason, common sense and probability, experience, and historical (usually Greek and Latin) example. Such proofs were standard in theological discourse since at least the middle ages and achieve new life in seventeenth-century England.

My research compels me to stress, moreover, that, in the late seventeenth century, one only understands the uniqueness of an individual theological enterprise by closely examining theological proofs. The difference between, for example, a high church and a latitudinarian frame of mind can be understood only by carefully assessing the tension between and interplay of especially Scripture and reason in individual theological proofs. High, broad, low, rationalist, deist – these labels easily obscure understanding of what an individual's theology is about.

South likes to unite disparate aspects of his experience by means of analogies. He is probably one of the last great Anglican preachers with a lively sense of a hierarchic universe full of correspondences, and in this he is not a modern. He writes in 1676:

Order is the great rule or art by which God made the world, and by which he still governs it: nay, the world itself is nothing else; and all this glorious system of things is but the chaos put into order. (I, 423)

And in an undated sermon on covetousness, he writes:

All parts of the universe, as they borrow off one another, so they still pay what they borrow, and that by so just and well-balanced an equality, that their payments always keep pace with their receipts. (III, 298)

Kingship, which South understood as God's regency on earth, plays an important part in his analogous view of things. Political changes in the late 1680s forced him to revise his views, although his search for a sublunary entity analogous to divine rule continued.

In the following analyses, I accept as the canon of South only the seventy-two sermons that he edited and that were published between the 1660s and 1717; I have almost completely ignored the further sermons published from manuscript between 1737 and 1744. In accepting only the first seventy-two as a basis for discussion, I follow the bibliographical work of Irène Simon, which is definitive.⁵ Besides her work, the only other major contribution to the modern study of South is G. M. Webster's

⁵ Simon, II, i, 17–28.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-40164-7 - Robert South (1634-1716): An Introduction to His Life
and Sermons

Gerard Reedy

Excerpt

[More information](#)

unpublished dissertation “The Life and Opinions of Robert South, D.D.” (Oxford, 1957), which I have cited as needed. Although I would, at times, disagree with Webster’s interpretation of data, his amassing of texts and secondary sources has helped me greatly in what follows.

1

Westminster and Christ Church

The will

When Robert South died in 1716, at the age of 82, he was a famous man. He had fixed his place in his generation and in the history of Anglican homiletics and controversy by overseeing the publication, from 1692 on, of six volumes of sermons which he had been writing, delivering, and rewriting since the late 1650s. In the decade of his death, another publishing event helped perpetuate his memory in the minds of book-buyers and readers. Edmund Curll, a bookseller just coming into his own at the time, had decided that there was a profit to be made in publishing the wills of the prominent recently deceased, especially of deceased divines. Curll's advertisements in this period announce the publication and sale of the last wills and testaments of Gilbert Burnet, Bishop of Salisbury (*d.* 1715), George Hickes, Dean of Worcester (*d.* 1715), Anthony Radcliffe, Canon of Christ Church (*d.* 1703), Thomas Sprat, Bishop of Rochester and Dean of Westminster (*d.* 1713), Thomas Tenison, Archbishop of Canterbury (*d.* 1715), Daniel Williams, a learned, nonconforming divine (*d.* 1716), and Robert South, Canon of Westminster Abbey and Christ Church, and Rector of Islip in Oxfordshire.

Curll's motives seem to have been commercial and not political. For the divines whose wills he chose to publish were, politically, a mixed lot of high churchmen, latitudinarians, and dissenters. The collected wills testify to different political loyalties which lasted to death; each of the wills speaks, as it were, from the grave, about the strength and even bitterness of ecclesiastical politics at the close of the seventeenth and beginning of the eighteenth centuries.

Both generic and idiosyncratic, generous and egotistical, the collected wills reveal the divided selves that ecclesiastical existence promoted in this era. A will is, of its nature, a worldly document, and the divines' wills are no exception to the rule. Their careers had often brought them worldly riches, and these are carefully meted out to wives, children, and servants. For these followers of Jesus Christ, the hundredfold had occurred in this life. Yet a thoughtful charity also informs many bequests. South, for

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-40164-7 - Robert South (1634-1716): An Introduction to His Life and Sermons

Gerard Reedy

Excerpt

[More information](#)

example, who was not married, left almost £1,000 to various needy individuals, many connected with Westminster Abbey or Christ Church. He also specified how the income from various other properties should be spent *in perpetuum* for clergy working in the livings of Christ Church. Holders of these livings benefit to this day from his generosity.

High or broad church, these divines were a distinguished, hard-working group. This is shown especially in the voluminous writings they left to posterity, and their wills fussily worry over a proper handling of manuscripts and future reprintings of books, tracts, and sermons. Bishop Burnet directs his oldest son to publish his *History of His Own Time*, but to wait for six years after his death (8–10). Dean Hicke worries about future integration of his writings with those written in accord with principles antithetical to his own; his works are to be “sold by themselves, pure and unmixed with any other books whatsoever” (18).¹ This injunction is promptly ignored by Curll’s collection. A codicil of South’s will discusses the copyrights of the first three volumes of sermons that he has recently purchased for £107.10s (i, cxi–cxii). On the one hand, these directions from the grave seem to be the vanity of vanities, especially from those who were committed to teaching that we have not here a lasting city. On the other, in complex ways, these divines worked hard to create a religion for rational believers in the world. Their theology spoke not to eremites but to active Christian men and women, and their writings, quite understandably, were important to them, not only for their own reputations but for their lasting effect on believers.

The religious history of England from 1650 to 1714 was turbulent, and the wills reflect the controversies in which their authors took part, and the options and compromises they made. From the 1640s onward, holders of office, especially religious office, had to prove their allegiances in public, swear oaths, and live with the consequences (see appendix 3). South’s life, for example, was punctuated by external demands for conflicting oaths of allegiance. He was fortunate to have avoided the rigors of the parliamentary visitation of Oxford in 1647 and 1648, for he was still a youth at Westminster School. Anthony Wood writes of this time:

The generality of the heads of houses, professors and lecturers, doctors and batchelors of divinity, masters and batchelors of arts, undergraduates, beadles, college-servants, and sometimes bedmakers, and scrapers of trenchers, to the number of several hundreds, were thrown out of their respective places, and soon after banished the university by the visitors, for not submitting to their power from parliament and acknowledging their *covenant*.²

¹ *The Lives and Last Wills and Testaments of the Following Eminent Persons* (London, 1728). Often without title pages, the wills are separately paginated; reference to individual wills, in the text, is made by giving the name of the author and page numbers.

² Wood, *Athenae Oxonienses, An Exact History of All the Writers and Bishops Who Have Had Their Education in the University of Oxford*, ed. Philip Bliss, 4 vols. (London, 1820), IV, 118.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-40164-7 - Robert South (1634-1716): An Introduction to His Life and Sermons

Gerard Reedy

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Though escaping the full rigor of the Presbyterian crusade, South must have presented some testimony of allegiance to it or to the Engagement oath of the Independents in 1650 when he accepted his Christ Church Studentship in 1651. As South was slowly climbing the ladder of Oxford honors in the 1660s, Wood and others attacked him for his less than wholehearted allegiance to the principle of academic martyrdom.

In 1660 and after, office-holders had to present alternate credentials to another group of visitors, sent by Charles II to purge Oxford of opposition. In 1662 there was the Act of Uniformity; various acts of Parliament in Charles's reign restrained Roman Catholics and dissenters from office, and edicts of James II, in 1687 and 1688, attempted to remove those restraints. The oaths of allegiance to William III in 1689 reversed much that had gone before, and there was, subsequently, parliamentary legislation that some, like South, felt was destroying the integrity of the Church of England. A highly principled churchman had to draw the line somewhere, to refuse allegiance, and to face deprivation of office. The majority of churchmen, for complex reasons, were not so highly principled. One reason was simply to hold on, at whatever the cost to one's integrity, to one's office. Another was obdurate refusal to allow the church to fall into the hands of one's ideological enemies. If the late seventeenth century offers examples of ecclesiastical ambition, it also shows the pain of realistic compromise.

The times encouraged cynicism about the taking of oaths. In response to some demands, it was the easiest course simply to avoid the commissioners. Thus Richard Busby, South's headmaster at Westminster School and a lifelong friend, stayed home sick the day he was required to take the National Covenant in 1645; following his example in 1689, South suggested to a colleague, William Sherlock, that they retreat to the countryside, where the commissioners would leave them alone. This suggestion partly explains why South and Sherlock became enemies and engaged in a bitter theological controversy in the mid-1690s.³

The writers of Curl's wills try to enunciate once and for all the principles that a lifetime of compromises may have obscured. Burnet preached at the coronation of William and Mary, and his *History* shows dislike of and puzzlement at nonjurors, those clergy and laity who could not foreswear allegiance to even a Catholic king. In his will he assures us that he dies "a Protestant according to the *Church of England*, full of Affection and Brotherly Love to all who have received the *Reformed Religion*, tho' in some points *Different* from our Constitution"; popery, he writes, is more to be dreaded than all other parties (4–5). Hickes, con-

³ Lawrence Tanner, *Westminster School: A History* (London: Country Life, 1934), p. 13; see Webster, pp. 168–91. For a full description of what nonjuring meant, see John H. Overton, *The Nonjurors: Their Lives, Principles, and Writings* (London: Smith, Elder, 1902), pp. 1–22.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-40164-7 - Robert South (1634-1716): An Introduction to His Life and Sermons

Gerard Reedy

Excerpt

[More information](#)

cerned about the purity of his writing in regard to those “some Points *Different*,” and a nonjuror, was ordained bishop in 1694 by a nonjuring bishop; this was a momentous step because it threatened to widen a local dispute about the oath to William into the basis for church schism. In his will Hickes prays for nonjuring clergymen ejected from their livings and asks God “to inspire our Superiours with an effectual and speedy Resolution, to make a National Attonement for the Sacrilege of which the Nation hath long been guilty, by a Pious Restitution to the Church of all the Lands, Tythes, and Offerings which belong to her Priests” (12).

Neither a political latitudinarian like Burnet or as high a churchman as Hickes, South also used his will to show his final sympathies. After Busby died in 1695, South became a trustee of his estate and thus was familiar with the terms of his will; Busby had provided safeguards that the money he left for lectures in “practical divinity” would be so spent.⁴ In leaving property which would eventually go to Christ Church, South followed Busby’s example by setting down conditions concerning those who would profit from his property’s income. This might go only to clergymen in Christ Church livings who led moral lives and who avoided actions “against the Act of Uniformity or rule of the Church of England, for religious worship” (I, cvi). South had always preached against toleration for nonconformists, whom he, unlike Burnet, considered more dangerous than Roman Catholics. The idiosyncrasy of this clause, written late in South’s life, lies in its invocation of the Act of Uniformity of 1662. That Act required of established clergy a strict use of the Prayer Book, a declaration against taking arms against the king, and episcopal ordination. Charles II and James II had attempted to whittle away at the Act in various ways. The oath to William III in 1689 explicitly cancelled some of the Act’s provisions. A political document in the extreme, South’s will pretends that these mitigations and cancellations never occurred and demands more ecclesiastical purity than did the government itself.

South was not a nonjuror; he had taken the oaths to William on 31 July 1689, the last day when it was possible to do so. Burnet tells us that South “had taken the oaths, but with the reserve of an equivocal sense, which he put on them.”⁵ It is difficult to understand what Burnet means, other than that South felt the oaths to be a problem, and that he resolved it by saying one thing and meaning another as he took them. The ambiguity of his action helps to explain a clause in his will leaving £200 to be shared by twenty nonjurors who had been ejected from their livings because of their principles. Clearly South’s conscience dwelt on their suf-

⁴ G. F. Russell Barker, *Memoir of Richard Busby, D. D. (1606–1695) With Some Account of Westminster School in the Seventeenth Century* (London, 1895), pp. 138–39.

⁵ Gilbert Burnet, *Bishop Burnet’s History of His Own Time*, ed. M. J. Routh, 2nd edn., 6 vols. (Oxford, 1833), IV, 390.