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978-0-521-89676-4 - The Art of Hearing: English Preachers and their Audiences, 1590-1640

Arnold Hunt

Excerpt

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‘His work in Bodley consisted in reading all the sermons that were ever published.’

‘And have a lot been published? I don’t think I’ve ever seen any.’

Jane laughed a little desperately. ‘Far more of them than of anything else in the whole world.’

Michael Innes, *Operation Pax* (1951)

When I first began work on this book, the history of early modern preaching was a neglected and unpopular field of study, around which there hung an air of dusty antiquarianism. The standard textbooks on the subject, including W.F. Mitchell’s *English Pulpit Oratory from Andrewes to Tillotson* (1932) and J.W. Blench’s *Preaching in England in the Late Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries* (1964), though still useful, now seemed decidedly out of date. Nor did their authors show much enthusiasm for the history of preaching; indeed, far from seeking to attract other scholars into the field, they seemed more anxious to turn them away. G. R. Owst, whose *Preaching in Medieval England* (1926) was for many years the standard treatment of its subject, wrote disparagingly of the ‘stagnation’ of pulpit rhetoric in the later Middle Ages: ‘The landscape is barren and monotonous to a degree. He who boldly sets out to follow the dust-laden tracks of the ancient preachers will pass by these dry bones, that whiten the road still further with their testimony to a decaying art, not without some sign of relief.’¹ Mitchell’s *English Pulpit Oratory* was advertised as the ‘last word’ on its subject, ‘for it is unlikely that such a study will ever be made again’.² And Millar MacLure’s monograph, *The Paul’s Cross Sermons 1534–1642* (1958), made scarcely any greater effort to render the subject inviting: ‘Indeed if the student reads much in the sermon-literature of the period . . . he faces a great mass of repetitious bad rhetoric and must

¹ G. R. Owst, *Preaching in Medieval England* (Cambridge, 1926), pp. 238–9.

² These words appear in the publisher’s catalogue (SPCK, January 1932), though not in the book itself.

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grow inured to a singularly dull humourless pedestrian thought and expression.³

With friends like these, who needs enemies? It is hardly surprising that scholars attempting to rehabilitate the history of preaching as an academically worthwhile subject have tended to adopt a somewhat defensive tone. The editors of a recent essay collection entitled *The English Sermon Revised* (2000) begin their introduction by remarking that sermons have ‘suffered an indulgent, even condescending neglect’, widely regarded ‘as one of the most lifeless, ancillary aspects of Renaissance literary culture’.⁴ Another recent essay collection, *Irish Preaching 700–1700* (2001), opens with a similar complaint. ‘Students of history and of literature have seldom been drawn to sermons or been known to take them seriously. For historians, sermons have often been regarded as stock expressions, and tedious ones, of the piety of their age, short on the kind of historically pertinent detail that otherwise might justify their study and make them interesting . . . For historians and literary critics alike, as measured by the lack of secondary analytical work on the subject, the study of sermons has tended to remain with Cinderella in the ashes.’⁵ If sermons are a Cinderella subject, then poetry and drama are presumably the ugly sisters, forever hogging the limelight – or so it might appear from another study of pulpit oratory, which modestly suggests that ‘the genre can demand (potentially at least) a critical consideration of the same order as poetry and drama . . . although that notion rings strangely in twentieth-century ears’.⁶ Or if we are looking for fairy-tale analogies, perhaps a better one would be Sleeping Beauty, still awaiting her scholar-prince to rouse her from the long sleep of critical obscurity.

The last few years, however, have seen a remarkable flowering of new scholarship devoted to preaching, making it more and more difficult to sustain the claim that sermons are languishing in critical disfavour. The study of late medieval preaching has begun to open up, and it has recently been argued that a sympathetic reading of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century sermons reveals ‘an astonishing degree of variety and individuality’, a far cry from Owst’s landscape of barren monotony.⁷ In the early

³ Millar MacLure, *The Paul’s Cross Sermons 1534–1642* (Toronto, 1958), p. 143.

⁴ Lori Anne Ferrell and Peter McCullough, eds., *The English Sermon Revised: Religion, Literature and History 1600–1750* (Manchester, 2000), p. 3.

⁵ Alan J. Fletcher and Raymond Gillespie, eds., *Irish Preaching 700–1700* (Dublin, 2001), p. 11.

⁶ Peter Bayley, *French Pulpit Oratory 1598–1650: A Study in Themes and Styles* (Cambridge, 1980), p. 3.

⁷ Siegfried Wenzel, *Latin Sermon Collections from Later Medieval England: Orthodox Preaching in the Age of Wyclif* (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 354, 400. Other recent work on medieval preaching includes Helen Leith Spencer, *English Preaching in the Late Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1993); Anne Hudson, “Springing

modern period, one critical hotspot has been the study of John Donne's sermons, once studied chiefly for the light they could shed on the poems, but now increasingly coming to be the focus of interest in their own right, and regarded as crucial for an understanding of Donne's politics.⁸ Another has been the study of the 'public sphere', with preaching now seen as having played an important part in the transmission of news and the formation of public opinion in the early modern period.⁹ More generally, there has been a new wave of interest in the role of religion in early seventeenth-century England, and also in the role of rhetoric in early modern culture, both of which have served to draw attention towards the sermon, now perceived not as a static literary artefact but as a dynamic exercise in religious controversy and rhetorical persuasion.¹⁰ One of the pleasures of pursuing my own research over the last ten years or so has been to watch this new generation of scholarship take shape around me, and to feel myself part of it.¹¹ It has been an exciting time to be studying

cockle in our clene corn": Lollard preaching in England around 1400', in Scott L. Waugh and Peter D. Diehl, eds., *Christendom and Its Discontents: Exclusion, Persecution and Rebellion 1000–1500* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 132–47; David D'Avray, *Medieval Marriage Sermons: Mass Communication in a Culture Without Print* (Oxford, 2001); and Carolyn Muessig, ed., *Preacher, Sermon and Audience in the Middle Ages* (Leiden, 2002).

⁸ The work of Jeanne Shami has been particularly important in fostering a more historicised reading of Donne's sermons: see her 'Introduction: Reading Donne's Sermons', *John Donne Journal*, 11 (Raleigh, NC, 1992), pp. 1–20, and *John Donne and Conformity in Crisis in the Late Jacobean Pulpit* (Woodbridge, 2003). In Peter McCullough's edition of Lancelot Andrewes, *Selected Sermons and Lectures* (Oxford, 2005), we now have a model edition of sermons by one of Donne's most important contemporaries, and the forthcoming Oxford Edition of the Sermons of John Donne, under McCullough's general editorship, promises to bring Donne's sermons further into the critical mainstream.

⁹ For a stimulating and provocative study of preaching and the public sphere, see Peter Lake and Michael Questier, *The Antichrist's Lewd Hat: Protestants, Papists and Players in Post-Reformation England* (New Haven and London, 2002), esp. pp. 335–76, 'Protestant appropriation: from pamphlet to pulpit and back again'. See also Tony Claydon, 'The sermon, the "public sphere" and the political culture of late seventeenth-century England', in Ferrell and McCullough, eds., *The English Sermon Revised*, pp. 208–34, and, more generally, Peter Lake and Steven Pincus, eds., *The Politics of the Public Sphere in Early Modern England* (Manchester, 2007).

¹⁰ See, among others, Mary Morrissey, 'Scripture, style and persuasion in seventeenth-century English theories of preaching', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 53: 4 (2002), pp. 686–706; Peter Mack, *Elizabethan Rhetoric: Theory and Practice* (Cambridge, 2002), esp. ch. 8, 'Religious discourse' (pp. 253–92); and Andrew Pettegree, *Reformation and the Culture of Persuasion* (Cambridge, 2005), esp. ch. 2, 'Preaching' (pp. 10–39).

¹¹ Other important studies of early modern English preaching, besides those already mentioned, include Peter McCullough, *Sermons at Court: Politics and Religion in Elizabethan and Jacobean Preaching* (Cambridge, 1998); Lori Anne Ferrell, *Government by Polemic: James I, the King's Preachers, and the Rhetorics of Conformity 1603–1625* (Stanford, 1998); Mary Morrissey, 'Interdisciplinarity and the study of early modern sermons', *Historical Journal*, 42 (1999), pp. 1111–23; Eric Josef Carlson, 'The boring of the ear: shaping the pastoral vision of preaching in England, 1540–1640', in Larissa Taylor, ed., *Preachers and People in the Reformations and Early Modern Period* (Leiden, 2001), pp. 249–96; Margo Todd, *The Culture of Protestantism in Early Modern Scotland* (New Haven and London, 2002), esp. chapter 2, 'The Word and the people' (pp. 24–83); Susan Wabuda, *Preaching during the English*

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early modern preaching, and there is, thankfully, no longer any need to begin with an apology for working on such an unfashionable topic.

Most important of all, the last few years have seen the rise and general acceptance of the new historiographical movement described by Olwen Hufton in a recent article, ‘What is religious history now?’ – a ‘new kind of religious history’ in which the focus of attention has shifted from the producer to the consumer. Hufton makes the bold but convincing claim that this precipitated an entirely new understanding of the role of religion in Western culture:

This widening of the framework of reference, if not the only change, I would suggest was the dominant one, transforming the writing of the religious history of Western civilization in the twentieth century. It moved the writing of religious history away from the subject of the establishment, clerical, lay and male, down-market. It also interfaced with other historical concerns which marked the period and from which it became indistinguishable in some cases. Religion by the 1980s was interpreted as an intrinsic part of culture and a producer of culture. Women and men were seen as made, not born, and in that shaping process in the West, religious belief lay at the centre of this process of manufacture.¹²

Preaching – as one of the crucial means by which religious ideas were transmitted from the clerical producer to the lay consumer – clearly has an important part to play here. For a long time, historians of the German Reformation tended to assume that the rapid spread of Reformation ideas was largely the result of printing; and as R. W. Scribner noted in 1989, the role of oral transmission, including preaching, had been ‘relatively ignored till recently’. But as Scribner went on to argue, preaching actually had significant advantages over printing in terms of its popularity, its ability to reach the illiterate and its scope for active audience participation and rapid dissemination of the preacher’s message.¹³

Yet the chief problem with the earlier generation of religious history, I would suggest, is not that it neglected preaching but that it made some

Reformation (Cambridge, 2002); Juliet Ingram, ‘The conscience of the community: the character and development of clerical complaint in early modern England’, (PhD diss., University of Warwick 2004); David J. Appleby, *Black Bartholomew’s Day: Preaching, Polemic and Restoration Nonconformity* (Manchester, 2007); and Ian Green, *Continuity and Change in Protestant Preaching in Early Modern England* (Friends of Dr Williams’s Library, 2009).

¹² Olwen Hufton, ‘What is religious history now?’, in David Cannadine, ed., *What Is History Now?* (Basingstoke, 2002), p. 59.

¹³ R. W. Scribner, ‘Oral culture and the transmission of Reformation ideas’, in Helga Robinson-Hammerstein, ed., *The Transmission of Ideas in the Lutheran Reformation* (Dublin, 1989), pp. 83–104. For other recent work on preaching and oral culture, see Adam Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture in England 1500–1700* (Oxford, 2000), and Donald Meek, ‘The pulpit and the pen: clergy, orality and print in the Scottish Gaelic world’, in Adam Fox and Daniel Woolf, ed., *The Spoken Word: Oral Culture in Britain, 1500–1800* (Manchester, 2002), pp. 84–118.

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large and untested assumptions about its effect. For example, historians have often sought to measure the impact and success of the English Reformation in terms of the provision of educated preaching ministers. In part, this is simply a matter of convenience; as Patrick Collinson has pointed out, ‘while preaching was not the only or even necessarily the most effective means by which the new religion was disseminated, it is the only one whose progress [the historian] can hope to map and tabulate’.¹⁴ Yet it also reflects an assumption that the laity were wholly passive in their response to sermons – so that, just as a Protestant preacher must inevitably have created a Protestant parish, so a Protestant preaching ministry must inevitably have created a Protestant nation. This assumption now seems highly questionable, and it is for this reason that we need to look again at early modern preaching, focusing this time on the problem of audience response. As Jim Sharpe has astutely remarked, it is natural to assume that popular awareness of topics such as witchcraft or anti-Catholicism must have been sharpened by the experience of listening to sermons in which those topics featured prominently; yet ‘the degree to which sermons were attended, how much attention to their content was given by those who did attend, and how much of that content was internalised and affected subsequent behaviour or subsequent patterns of belief, remains unclear’.¹⁵ We know all too little about the ways in which sermons may have influenced popular action and opinion.

So what does this book aim to contribute to the existing literature? As the title suggests, it is essentially a study of *hearing* rather than preaching, focused not on the lone figure of the preacher but on the two-way relationship between the preacher and his audience. Preaching, it has been well said, is ‘commonly assumed to be a non-interactive performance in which one dominant speaker’s discourse is passively attended to by a silent congregation’.¹⁶ But we should beware of reading this assumption back into the early modern period, for there is ample evidence to suggest that seventeenth-century preachers were very sensitive to the reactions of their audiences, and that audiences in their turn were very far from passive. There is a well-known passage in one of Richard Bancroft’s anti-puritan tracts, describing

¹⁴ Patrick Collinson, ‘The Elizabethan Church and the new religion’, in C. Haigh, ed., *The Reign of Elizabeth I* (London, 1984), pp. 169–94 (quotation p. 183).

¹⁵ Jim Sharpe, ‘The Devil in East Anglia: the Matthew Hopkins trials reconsidered’, in Jonathan Barry, Marianne Hester and Gareth Roberts, eds., *Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe: Studies in Culture and Belief* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 237–54 (quotation p. 250).

¹⁶ Christine Callender and Deborah Cameron, ‘Responsive listening as part of religious rhetoric: the case of Black Pentecostal preaching’, in Graham McGregor and R. S. White, eds., *Reception and Response: Hearer Creativity and the Analysis of Spoken and Written Texts* (London, 1990), pp. 160–78.

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the audience response at a ‘precisian’ sermon: the opening prayer, writes Bancroft, is followed by an ‘*applaudite*’ from the congregation, and whenever the preacher includes a prayer in his sermon, ‘the cheif gentleman in the place begynnyng with a gronyng, but yet with a lowde voyce crieth most religiously, *Amen*. And then the whole companie of that sect followe. *Amen. Amen.*’¹⁷ Margo Todd quotes a Scottish sermon which ends in precisely this way, with a rapid sequence of ‘amens’ clearly designed to elicit an answering response from the congregation:

Let all the congregation say amen
Let all the saints in heaven and earth praise him,
And let all the congregation say amen . . .
Let men and women praise him,
And let all the congregation say amen.

As Todd remarks, ‘it is impossible to read these notes without hearing the parishioners calling out their amens’, very much in the manner of modern Pentecostal preaching, where it is common for members of the audience to interrupt with cries of ‘Amen’, ‘Hallelujah’, ‘Praise the Lord’, in response to verbal cues from the preacher.¹⁸

Nor should we assume that these forms of audience response were limited to approving cries of ‘Amen’. In a sermon at Paul’s Cross, John Donne made some interesting remarks on the audience reaction that a preacher at the Cross might expect, observing that ‘when the Preacher concludeth any point’, he would commonly be interrupted by a buzz of conversation, taking up as much as ‘one quarter of his hour’. Donne was not wholly opposed to this, as he felt it resembled the custom of the early Church, where ‘the manner was, that when the people were satisfied in any point which the Preacher handled, they would almost tell him so, by an acclamation, and give him leave to passe to another point’. However, he feared that modern audiences were not merely indicating their approval of the sermon, as the early Christians had done, but were taking the opportunity to criticise it as well – and as if that were not enough, ‘many that were not within distance of hearing the Sermon, will give a censure upon it, according to the frequencie, or paucitie of these acclamations’.¹⁹ There is a

¹⁷ *Tracts Ascribed to Richard Bancroft*, ed. Albert Peel (Cambridge, 1953), pp. 72–3. Patrick Collinson draws attention to this passage in *The Religion of Protestants: The Church in English Society 1559–1625* (Oxford, 1982), p. 157. For further examples of ‘amen’ as an audience response, see my ‘Preaching the Elizabethan settlement’ in Hugh Adlington, Peter McCullough and Emma Rhatigan, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of the Early Modern Sermon* (Oxford, forthcoming 2010).

¹⁸ Todd, *The Culture of Protestantism in Early Modern Scotland*, p. 53.

¹⁹ John Donne, *Sermons*, ed. G. R. Potter and E. M. Simpson (Berkeley, 1953–62), vol. x, pp. 132–3.

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documented example of this, also from Paul's Cross, in September 1579, when the preacher was deputed to justify the punishment inflicted on John Stubbes for his tract attacking the Anjou marriage, *The Discoverie of a Gaping Gulf*. Bishop John Aylmer sent a report of the sermon to Sir Christopher Hatton, noting with satisfaction that when the preacher praised the Queen's devotion to true religion, 'the people seemed, even as it were with a shout to give God thanks'. When the preacher turned his attention to Stubbes, however, the audience response was not so favourable, and according to Aylmer, 'they utterly bent their brows at the sharp and bitter speeches which he gave against the author of the book'.²⁰

This level of audience interaction remained the norm until relatively recent times. Lawrence W. Levine, writing of theatre and concert performance in nineteenth-century America, has commented that they attracted 'a knowledgeable, participatory audience exerting important degrees of control' and argued that it was only in the late nineteenth century, with the imposition of new standards of public decorum, that audiences began to be transformed from active participants into passive spectators.²¹ And in the case of African-American sermons, the interaction between preacher and audience can still be observed today. Bruce Rosenberg, in studying the genre he labels 'folk preaching' or 'spiritual preaching', has shown that the audience plays a crucial role and, to borrow Levine's phrase, exerts an important degree of control, not just by responding to the preacher's cues but by encouraging the preacher if he appears to be flagging or even, through its muted response, signalling its disappointment with a poor sermon. He argues that no judgement of whether a sermon is good or bad can be made without reference to the audience: 'The congregation will intuitively judge; they will know infallibly because in a sense they are the ultimate arbiters. If the congregation is not moved, the sermon has failed. It is almost as simple as that.'²² Studying preaching as a form of ritual or performance thus requires us to shift our focus from the preacher to the audience and, in the words of another scholar of African-American preaching, to 'the performed sermon as event'.²³

²⁰ Aylmer to Hatton, 28 September 1579: *Memoirs of the Life and Times of Sir Christopher Hatton*, ed. Sir Harris Nicolas (London, 1847), pp. 132–4. My thanks to Peter Lake for drawing my attention to this reference.

²¹ Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA, and London, 1988), p. 30.

²² Bruce A. Rosenberg, *Can These Bones Live? The Art of the American Folk Preacher* (Oxford, 1970; revised edition, Urbana and Chicago, 1988), p. 151.

²³ Gerald L. Davis, *I Got the Word in Me and I Can Sing It, You Know: A Study of the Performed African-American Sermon* (Philadelphia, 1985), p. 34. On preaching considered as a form of ritual, see also Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Holy Fairs: Scotland and the Making of American Revivalism* (Princeton, 1989, repr. Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2001), esp. p. 74.

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Some pioneering work on audience response has already been done in the field of Renaissance music, where research has been driven by an interest in the practical aspects of performance and a desire to reconstruct historical performance styles as accurately as possible. The current direction of research is well illustrated by the following list of questions, mentioned at a recent seminar on 'Music as heard' as topics in need of further investigation:

How was music thought to act upon the sense of hearing, the mind, the heart, the body and the soul?

Were music's powers and effects thought to depend on conscious acts of listening and understanding?

What concepts and metaphors did contemporaries use to evaluate and account for their musical experiences?

Were there 'correct' and 'incorrect' modes of listening?

What role and status were accorded to the listener or the audience in theoretical writings on music, and to what extent were their abilities, needs and demands recognised in technical discussion?

What was the perceived relationship between the written and sounding dimensions of music?

In what respects was music listening thought to be a private, communal and/or public activity? Did it involve response, interaction, participation and gesturing, or, conversely, privacy, silence and concentration?

What historical evidence do we possess concerning actual listeners or groups of listeners and their musical 'horizons of expectation'?²⁴

For 'music' read 'preaching', and these questions could serve, with only minor alteration, as an agenda for the book you are now holding in your hands.

But how can these questions be answered? As early modern preachers liked to point out, *vox audita perit, litera scripta manet* – the spoken voice perishes, and only the written word remains. It is a relatively straightforward matter to use written and printed sermons as a quarry of primary source-material – and indeed, many of the most influential historical works of the last forty years have done precisely that, as a glance at the footnotes to Christopher Hill's *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England* (1964) or Keith Thomas's *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971) will show. It is far less easy to see how the interactive and performative aspects of preaching can be reconstructed. We have no sound recordings of early modern sermons, no archive films of preachers in their pulpits and no time-machines in which to travel back to the early seventeenth century and mingle unobtrusively with the crowd assembled to hear the sermon at Paul's Cross. The speech and gesture of the preacher, the reaction of the audience, and in some cases even

²⁴ 'Music as heard', *Musical Quarterly*, 82: 3/4 (1998), p. 432.

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the very words of the sermon, which are not always accurately reported in printed editions, remain largely or wholly irrecoverable.

It is hardly surprising, then, that some scholars have simply rejected the whole exercise as next to impossible. Peter Bayley, for example, comments in his study of French pulpit oratory that ‘it is difficult and hazardous to attempt a reconstruction of the living sermon, and I am not convinced that the effort is worth making’.²⁵ More recently, Colin Haydon – commenting, as it happens, on an article of mine – has pinpointed the reception history of preaching as a methodological problem in need of further investigation. ‘What can be said about congregations’ reception of, and responses to, sermons?’, he asks. ‘The sources present many difficulties . . . Probably no methodology can satisfactorily overcome this problem, so, usually, one must be content with the view from the pulpit rather than the pews.’²⁶ I would be the last person to dismiss these concerns as unimportant. The present book is written out of the conviction that the source-mining of printed sermons is not enough – that, in order to reconstruct the way that sermons were heard and understood by their audiences, one must be prepared to engage with a wide range of material, including manuscript and archival as well as printed sources, and to interrogate it in some imaginative and methodologically sophisticated ways. How well it succeeds in these aims must be left for the reader to judge.

In studying the religious writings of this period, it is hard not to be struck by the enormous importance that early modern Protestants attached to preaching, almost to the exclusion of other pastoral activities. ‘This is our worke’, declared the Devonshire preacher Richard Carpenter in a sermon before the Bishop of Exeter in 1616, ‘as conduit pipes of grace to convey to the thirsty soules of our hearers, the living water of Gods word, and to be as the mesaraicall veynes in the body naturall, through which the spirituall foode must passe, whereby the members of Christs body mysticall are to be nourished up unto everlasting life. This is our worke.’²⁷ The work that Carpenter had in mind was, of course, preaching – and the implication of his metaphor was that a regular supply of preaching was as basic and necessary, and as essential to the good health of the Christian community, as the supply of food and drink to the body. In attaching such critical importance to it, he and other preachers seemed to make it, if not

²⁵ Bayley, *French Pulpit Oratory*, p. 16.

²⁶ Colin Haydon, reviewing Ferrell and McCullough, *The English Sermon Revised*, in *Literature and History*, 3rd ser. 11: 1 (2001), p. 104.

²⁷ Richard Carpenter, *A Pastoral Charge, Faithfully Given and Discharged at the Triennial Visitation of the Lord Bishop of Exon* (1616), D5v.

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their sole duty, certainly far superior to other clerical duties such as public prayer and the administration of the sacraments. Why was this? In Chapter 1, 'The theory of preaching', I argue that it rested on a distinction which may seem profoundly counter-intuitive to us, between the word read and the word preached, the one seen as passively resting on the page, the other as actively communicated in speech. This distinction not only explains why many English Protestants were so desperately anxious to get educated preaching ministers, as opposed to 'mere readers', into the parishes; it also underlines the extent to which preaching was felt to be a fundamentally oral activity. A sermon on the printed page was arguably not a sermon at all: it could not save souls, because it lacked the converting power of the spoken voice.

What made the sermon special, however, was not simply its orality but its unique and unrepeatable nature, as a discourse addressed and applied to a particular congregation at a particular time and place. In Chapter 2, 'The art of hearing', I try to reconstruct some aspects of the audience response to preaching, by looking at the contemporary handbooks which offered guidance on the best way to listen to sermons, and also at surviving sermon notebooks which tell us something about the way that preaching was filtered through the expectations of individual hearers. This is a subject of wider application than may at first appear. Frank Kermode has recently made the intriguing suggestion that, by studying the ways that early modern congregations listened to sermons, we may be able to learn something about the ways that theatre audiences listened to plays. Shakespeare's language seems difficult and complex to us, and must surely have seemed difficult and complex to many people in the seventeenth century, because of his extraordinary skill and originality in the use of words; but, as Kermode points out, it might have made fewer demands on audiences who were already practised at listening to sermons. They 'were trained, as we are not, to listen to long, structured discourses, and must have been rather good at it, with better memories and more patience than we can boast. If you could follow a sermon by John Donne, which might mean standing in St Paul's Churchyard and concentrating intensely for at least a couple of hours, you might not consider even *Coriolanus* impossibly strenuous. And although Donne wasn't talking down to them, much of his language was familiar to his congregation.'²⁸

²⁸ Frank Kermode, *Shakespeare's Language* (New York, NY, 2000), p. 4. Kermode is picking up a suggestion first made by Andrew Gurr: 'If we were habituated to hearing sermons, if we were used to standing in a muddy yard or even sitting on wooden benches by candlelight, we might perhaps be more alert to many features that Elizabethans would have taken for granted.' Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London* (3rd edn, 2004), p. 13.