

## Review of...Arnold Hunt, *The Art of Hearing: English Preachers and their Audiences, 1590-1640*

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Arnold Hunt, *The Art of Hearing: English Preachers and their Audiences, 1590-1640*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. viii + 414, hb. £60.00/\$99.00, ISBN: 978-0-521-89676-4

Sermons in the seventeenth century, then as now, were all things to all men. Typically an hour in length, though sometimes longer, sermons could put you to sleep, wake you up, or worse. Thomas Goodwin was so overcome after hearing a sermon by ‘Roaring’ John Rogers that he was ‘fain to hang a quarter of an hour upon the neck of his horse weeping, before he had power to mount’; at a sermon by James Glendinning, a dozen of his hearers were ‘stricken into a swoon with the word...[and] carried out of doors as dead; so marvellous was the power of God, smiting their hearts for sin’.

Arnold Hunt’s absorbing book draws on a wealth of archival evidence to provide a vivid account of the expectations and responses of English audiences – from sleeping to weeping to swooning – to Protestant preaching in the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries. Along the way, the book considers theories and practices of hearing, preaching, and reading; the transmission of sermon texts from oral delivery to printed page; the varieties and classes of people who made up sermon audiences in the period; and the political and theological significance of early modern preaching more widely. Many commonly held assumptions about early modern Protestant sermons are put to the test. Preaching, the book argues, was as much an aural event as an oral one; the interpretation and appropriation of sermons by hearers, often in unexpected ways, can reveal much about the extent to which Reformation thought and practice penetrated popular lay culture in England the period. In particular, the book finds that Protestant preaching, to a greater degree than might be expected, addressed the emotions as well as the intellect; that sermon rhetoric was characterised by its flexibility and was acutely sensitive to the specific demands of

each preaching occasion and audience; that readers and note-takers of sermons often engaged with them in a non-linear way, mining them for proverbial expressions and elegant or striking similes; that sermon texts, like early modern play texts, are inherently unstable and contingent due to the manner of their transmission from pulpit to page; that, to a far greater extent than has generally been realised, the composition of audiences varied greatly between different routine preaching occasions (viz. Sunday mornings and afternoons, and weekday lectures); that local pride, in the learnedness of a parish's minister, or pleasure in his neighbourliness, were crucial factors, often overlooked by historians, in the popular reception of Protestant preaching in the period; and that rhetorical commonplaces played a vital role in making sermons a means both of persuasion (political and religious) and protection (from prosecution for touching on controversial matters).

The book's exploration of the role of preaching in early modern culture also sheds fresh light on a number of live debates in intellectual history: about the transmission of religious and political ideas in the post-Reformation period, and about changing attitudes to the relationships between speech and writing, and between hearing and seeing in the seventeenth century and beyond. Stimulating parallels are drawn between early modern and modern thinking on such topics. Hunt shows, for example, how Protestant emphasis on the primacy and salvific value of the spoken word was rooted, to some extent, in a repudiation of the written word as a form of pictorial, and hence idolatrous, image. Such notions intriguingly foreshadow the theories of modern semioticians like W. J. T. Mitchell, who argue that mental, verbal and pictorial images all belong, as equally arbitrary forms of representation, in the same category. Thus, Hunt concludes, there is nothing naïve about early modern Protestant theories of language; indeed, taking them seriously enables us to reconsider

received ideas about the relationship between oral and literate culture in the period.

Similarly, the book compares modern historiographical interest in the Protestant doctrine of predestination to the beliefs and arguments of early modern scholars and clergy. How could a doctrine that once mattered so much, now matter so little? By understanding the ways in which predestination was preached, we can begin to grasp the ways in which the doctrine was received more widely, beyond the circles of the educated élite. Perhaps surprisingly, preachers' and hearers' notes reveal relatively little evidence of popular opposition to the general idea of predestination, but instead register objections to the specific doctrine of limited atonement (that Christ died for the elect alone). The difficulty facing Protestant preachers, then, was not that predestinarian teaching *per se* alienated them from their parishioners, but rather that such teaching, by seeming to limit the number of the elect to a small group of godly brethren, could be made to appear schismatic and uncharitable. Such refinements of broader historiographical views characterise the method and manner of the book. As Hunt suggests, justifying his study of the preaching of predestination, and citing Robert Darnton, ‘the best points of entry in an attempt to penetrate an alien culture [here, the religious world of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England] can be those where it seems to be most opaque’.

In short, this excellent book may not have you weeping on the neck of your horse, but it should certainly stimulate debate and further study in a host of related areas of inquiry.