I don’t want to make a shopping list of publications from the last twenty years: I have created a short bibliography for anyone who would find that useful.¹

Instead, I want to ask two questions. Firstly, how has early modern studies changed (with respect to the study of sermons) in the last twenty years.

Secondly, how best can we use sermon texts to address our current research questions: what can these texts help us do that other early modern texts cannot.

Twenty years ago, I wrote an article about the ways in which sermons straddled a disciplinary division between historians, who looked for ‘documents’ as sources on events, and literary critics, who looked for texts that would explain a particular author’s attitude to events.² At the time ‘interdisciplinarity’ was

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¹ https://drive.google.com/file/d/1xBDLbcw_mQVc8UeessYezrSPnJJeYQKD/view
² ‘Interdisciplinarity in early modern sermon studies’, The Historical Journal, 42.4 (1999), pp. 1111-1123: ISSN: 0018 246X.
something of a buzzword, but I was not entirely happy about the blurring of conceptual boundaries that sometimes arose as a result. Cross-disciplinary work, however, struck me as an obviously good idea, and the study of sermons seemed to me to be an unbeatably good way of doing cross-disciplinary work on the early modern period. Far more than other bits of paper that have come down to us from the early modern period, sermons were both *documents* that served as evidence of an event (their own performance and historical moment) and as literary texts (they were, after all, rhetorically crafted occasion orations).

This kind of work seemed particularly advantageous in the late nineties. In British studies, political historians were working on the tail-end of the great ‘causes of the English Civil war’ debate, and they were looking to the religious disputes between Calvinists and Laudian for the origins of the factional divisions of the 1640s.3 The sermon literature of the late Elizabethan and Jacobean period was both a valued means of uncovering the points of dispute (between Arminians and Calvinists) and for understanding the discourses through which those disputes became politicised (Laudians and puritanism). Importantly, sermons were also the thing being argued over: from the 1570s disputes dispute over ‘prophecyings’ to James *Directions for preachers* of 1622, the number of preachers, the frequency of sermons and the authority to control

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what was said in the pulpit were central to these disputes. Much very valuable work on how politics happens came out of this debate: I am thinking particularly about Peter Lake’s work about the ways that political (or religious) ideas become factionalised and circulate beyond the ruling elite. But we have concluded the civil war in England was not a ‘war of religion’, and that puritanism did not ‘cause’ the War. And so much of the impetus behind that debate has diffused. We cannot assume that the dialogue with historians from which we have benefitted since the late 90s will continue, unless we foster it.

The late nineties also saw social history separate ever further from its erstwhile partnership with economic history: Keith Wrightson’s fantastic *Earthly Necessities* was the last great statement of that scholarly enterprise. It has been replaced by a cultural history that is more eclectic in its use of sources, and sermons are among the sources that it used. We have all been frustrated by the simplistic cherry-picking of statements from sermons that can be found in some historical work work, as if sermons delivered neutral statements of received wisdom (rather than rhetorically-shaped statements, often of aspiration). But I have been very much encouraged by some recent work that makes the sermon part of a broader research question, not merely an inert source. Histories of sermons and preaching culture, for example, are enquiring into the conditions of

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the production and consumption of sermons, and there is much they are now
telling us about everything from the soundscape in which sermons took place to
attitudes towards deafness among sermon auditors.\textsuperscript{6} We have had work on the
uses of sermons (as delivered, as re-presented in notes or manuscript or printed
form) as a way of maintaining and sustaining the identity of particular religious
groups, from the early Protestants of Henry’s reign to the embattled dissenters
of the 1660s and 70s.\textsuperscript{7} There has been a step-change, I think, in the ways that
sermons are investigated by historians. They are increasingly a phenomenon to
be studied, not merely documentary sources mined for quotations.

On the literary critical side, I think significant gains have also been made. For
scholars entering the field, more guide books are available, explaining where to
go for sources addressing specific questions; publications like the \textit{Oxford
Handbook to John Donne} and the \textit{Oxford Handbook to the Early modern
sermon} have helped enormously with this.\textsuperscript{8} We have a far more finely-grained
understanding of sermon genres: the importance of thinking about place and
audience means that we have a better sense of what to expect in particular texts.

I remember trying to explain to a friend that much of my thesis was the

\textsuperscript{6} Recent papers by Rob Daniel, University of Warwick, ‘God’s house is not the house of talking, of
walking, or brawling, of minstrelsy’ and Rosemond Oates, ‘Preaching and the senses’ at Early
Modern Sermons: Performances and Afterlives, University of Sheffield, November 2nd 2018.

\textsuperscript{7} Alexandra Walsham, ‘Preaching without speaking: script, print and religious dissent’, in \textit{The Uses of
Script and Print, 1300-1700}, eds. Julia Crick and Alexandra Walsham (Cambridge University Press,
2004); also the work of Alison Searle and Thomas Charlton, from the Baxter edition project.

\textsuperscript{8} \textit{The Oxford Handbook of the Early Modern Sermon}, eds. Peter McCullough, Hugh Adlington and
Emma Rhatigan (Oxford University Press, 2011); \textit{The Oxford Handbook of John Donne}, eds Jeanne
Shami, Dennis Flynn and M Thomas Hester (Oxford University Press, 2011).
sermons-studies equivalent of explaining that sonnets usually had 14 lines and a regular rhyme scheme. Over the last twenty years we have recovered much of the fundamental concepts governing sermon composition and how they developed over the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. We know to look to the biblical text and its division for a sense of how the argument will develop. We know to consider whether statements are made as part of doctrinal exposition or as more rhetorically vehement exhortations. And we know to check how closely a preacher ties any argument to his biblical authority. As with all literary texts, how something is said is a large element of what is being said, and I think we can judge this better; that makes us better readers of sermons.9

What has been a surprise to me is how far the most recent work on early modern preaching is not on the rhetorical analysis of particular sermons per se, but on the ways in which the peculiarity of the sermon as a series of cultural and literary practices. We are far more aware of the variousness of the textual artefacts in which a sermon can survive: as notes, as manuscript sermon-books, as printed sermon books, as texts created by the preacher, by his hearers, by amanuensis and scribes. The ‘material turn’ in early modern studies has helped bring these questions into focus. But sermons have also raised questions for those studying material culture, because it challenges our conflation of

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composition and medium: a composition is invariably described as a ‘text’, and that text is ‘composed’ when it is ‘written’, as if the two verbs were synonymous. But sermons existed as speeches before they were written down, and the writing out of the full text of a sermon might not be by the preacher: hearers’ versions complicate our notion of a unified ‘work’ written by one author. We have seen work on the ways in which members of a congregation (particularly women) might create and re-purpose sermons from notes they made, or extract from printed sermons, as Vicky Burke has shown Elizabeth Hastings did, for example. GEMMS is giving us a fuller picture of all extant sermons, not merely the small percentage in print. And we have a better sense of the uses of the printed sermon: how contemporaries thought of it relative to sermons heard, and how they thought of it relative to other books. Is a printed sermon still, as the word implies, a talk, even a conversation.

I wonder if we could do still more to recover the hearer’s side of this, and recover what it meant to be part of the event. Indeed, for preachers concerned

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11 On this manuscript collection, see Victoria Burke, “‘My Poor Returns’: Devotional Manuscripts by Seventeenth-Century Women”, *Parergon* 29.2 (2012): 47-68 (esp. 50-58). Another repurposing of notes taken from a sermon is the extract from John Milward’s Gowrie plot sermon of 1607, *Jacob’s Great Day of Trouble, and Deliverance* (1610), found in BL Add. 12,515. Milward’s encomium to Elizabeth is written out in full as “A note of Queene Elizabeth and King James”, ff. 22v–23r.


13 Lewis and Short’s Latin Dictionary give ‘continued speech, talk, conversation, discourse’ where the *OED* gives ‘a speech, discourse’ as the general sense of ‘sermon’ as well as the more particular sense: ‘discourse, usually delivered from a pulpit and based upon a text of Scripture, for the purpose of giving religious instruction or exhortation’.
about the pastoral effectiveness of a sermon, *active* hearers, properly disposed to make good use of what they heard were as essential to the success of the sermon as the preacher’s words and their delivery. A sermon was a performance, but not in the way a play or a masque was, because a sermon’s audience could not *consume* the sermon as passive recipients of entertainment. And various technologies arose to facilitate auditors in being active and purposeful *users* (not *consumers*) of the sermon. Nor were hearers of a sermon individual consumers either: hearers were ‘gathered in’ by preachers to form congregations. Jennifer Clement has shown how preachers create a congregation rhetorically, looking to methods developed in the History of the Emotions for a better understanding of the way the language of affect is used.  

I have learned a lot from Abram Van Engen’s *Sympathetic Puritans*: a study of how the language of affect can be examined in a historically informed way. These issues that arise from the performative nature of the sermon make distinct demands on the critic, but they also allows us to address questions of audience experience better than those working in more textually-stable genres.

The second aspect of the sermon that I think makes it uniquely helpful to the critic is its intertextuality, and particularly its relationship to the biblical text around which it is built. We are all aware of the importance of rhetoric to early

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modern theories and practice of writing. From love poems to diplomatic correspondence, the root assumptions about how to write were formed from the study of Classical and medieval rhetoric. And yet, early modern guides on rhetoric offer lists of figures and tropes and leave feeling not much the wiser about how these functioned as tools for composition and analysis. That’s exactly what sermons give us. Because the English Reformed method of sermon composition was built on the analysis of a passage from the Bible, pretty much every sermon opens with extensive passages of literary criticism, ‘close reading’ the Bible for context, for voice and narrative point of view, for metaphor, for genre, and for the ‘tropes’ and figures of rhetoric used. We see rhetorical analysis in practice. And then in the body of the sermon, we see rhetorical composition in action: the biblical text is divided to create a ‘narratio’; arguments for and against doctrinal propositions are presented and objects answered, and finally the preacher’s advice is brought home in a vehement, and often emotion-laden, exhortation. Studying sermons allows us to draw a straight line from rhetorical textbooks to debate in the public sphere.

The Bible is not the only text with which a sermon is in conversation; rather, it is the medium by which early modern texts speak to each other. The use of biblical quotations as ‘commonplaces of argument’ (prooftexts) means that these quotations link texts on the same subject to each other, be they sermons or treatises, poems or speeches. A ‘commonplace’-based approach to literary
analysis and cultural history can allow us a much clearer sense of when and how particular discourses are developing or altering in ways that can have significant political impact. The astonishing impact of Stephen Marshall’s 1642 sermon on the Irish rebellion (‘the Curse of Meroz’) that had London apprentices racing through the streets shouting ‘to your tents o Israel’) owes a great deal,\(^\text{16}\) in my opinion, to a century and a half of Jeremiads that warned of God’s collective punishment of the city for failing to help the godly. Women writers often use these biblical commonplaces, and without a sense of the way those arguments travel as discourses, it can be hard for modern scholars to show where and how female authors make subtle but definite incisions into the dominant discourse about female submission.

This, for me, was what made sermons special among the texts that a historiist critic might study in order to find a lens into the early modern past: crafted to address their hearers’ concerns, they are in one sense occasional. But because they were designed to argue a point in order to persuade, their textual afterlife preserves for us evidence of a mentalité, of what was plausible in that time and place, of what ideas and arguments worked well enough to be repeated. They are fundamentally rhetorical texts whose purpose is to change minds or to rouse hearers out of a merely passive acquiescence. This is a literature of engagement,

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political, social and religious. Unlike Marx’s philosophers, preachers did not merely interpret the world, they wanted to change it.