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Review of Christoph Ketterer, *To Meddle with Matters of State: Political Sermons in England, c.1660–c.1700*

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CHRISTOPH KETTERER, *To Meddle with Matters of State: Political Sermons in England, c.1660–c.1700*, The Early Modern World: Texts and Studies, 2 (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2020), 400 pp. ISBN 978 3 847 11077 4. €55.00

We are living in a golden age of sermon studies. Since the late 1980s, Lori Anne Ferrell, Peter McCullough, Mary Morrissey, Arnold Hunt, and many other scholars have added enormously to our understanding of the variety, subtlety, and prominence of sermons in early modern England. What used to be studied primarily as a branch of English literature concerned with issues of prose style has blossomed into a highly diverse field. We are much more sensitive than we were to issues of context, tropes, emotional overtones, divergences between spoken and printed sermons, and encoded political messages and counsel. Historians of print have noted how central sermons were to the economy of the early modern publishing world. Significant studies have been devoted to sermons preached to mark particular events, dates in the liturgical calendar, and significant aspects of socio-political life—whether ‘Black Bartholomew’s Day’ (1662), the anniversary of the regicide, or sermons at court, Paul’s Cross, or the assizes. Much has been learned since what in retrospect we can see was a major turning point: the publication in 2000 of Ferrell and McCullough’s edited collection *The English Sermon Revised*. Interested students now benefit from an Oxford Handbook devoted to the early modern sermon. Specialist scholars can rummage in major editions of the sermons of Lancelot Andrewes and John Donne. Nevertheless, some eras have fared better than others when it comes to dedicated studies. The Jacobethan years have tended to predominate; the later Stuart period—in keeping with its wider relative neglect—has received much less attention, at least until the Williamite invasion and the 1690s, when Tony Claydon and others have illuminated the ‘godly revolution’ and the reformation of manners that was so much invoked thereafter. Christoph Ketterer’s volume should therefore receive a warm welcome, adding, as it does, significant heft to the relatively limited prior coverage of the reigns of Charles II and James II.

*To Meddle with Matters of State* is a very detailed and extensive work, as might be expected from a revised doctoral thesis. The first

130 pages are taken up with problem statements, ‘conceptual approaches’, and various aspects of ‘experiencing sermons’ across the period. For newcomers to the burgeoning field of sermon studies, Ketterer’s account valuably summarizes and synthesizes a great deal of scholarship, very clearly delineating the current state of play. Thereafter, the discussion is organized into two chapters covering the early and later parts of Charles II’s reign, and then a long chapter on the highly contested world of James II’s regime. Although the book’s title suggests an end point of *c.*1700, in reality the Revolution of 1688/9 marks the terminus for discussion. A fifty-page bibliography testifies to Ketterer’s diligence – although this may be supplemented with the excellent developing online resource *Gateway to Early Modern Manuscript Sermons (GEMMS)*.<sup>1</sup>

Ketterer positions himself within the mainstream of current studies. He approaches sermons ‘as sources *sui generis* requiring due attention not only to the preacher’s words but also to the material surroundings, the reactions of audiences, and in general those aspects that may be called the “performative” dimension of sermons’ (p. 14). He acknowledges that ‘political sermon’ is a partly tautological phrase, bearing in mind the close links between the temporal and the spiritual in an early modern ‘confessional state’. And he is at pains for his particular period to stress the ‘multiconfessional environment’ (p. 26) within which preachers’ political contributions need to be assessed. Slightly more problematic are his choices of source base. Ketterer acknowledges that most of the sermons he uses are printed ones and that this could cause some methodological problems, but is rather blithe about their extent. In some ways more seriously, he also chooses to pursue a relatively narrow sense of which sermons matter for his politically focused study: ‘The royal court with the Chapel Royal, the Houses of Parliament, and the capital constituted the national nexus of political power’ (p. 43). An intensely London-centric account ensues. This is not to deny the merits of what *is* covered; it is particularly helpful to have serious space devoted to Catholic court preaching.

The chronological chapters afford Ketterer the opportunity to undertake sequences of close readings of particular sermons, linked

<sup>1</sup> At [<https://gemmsorig.usask.ca/>], accessed 30 June 2021.

by their preoccupation with particular issues and events. As he notes, the early Carolean regime was particularly exercised by the need to try to control prominent pulpits due to the general perception that Puritans had successfully used them to subvert order in the run-up to the civil wars. *Directions concerning Preachers* were duly issued in 1662, ordering '[t]hat no Preachers in their Sermons presume to meddle with matters of State, to mould new Governments, or take upon them to declare, limit or bound out the Power and Authority of Sovereign Princes, or to state and determine the differences between Princes and the People' (p. 134). This was, of course, easier to order than actually to achieve, and delightful ironies emerged. Ketterer argues that Bishop Gilbert Sheldon successfully organized a metropolitan preaching campaign to thwart Charles II's plans for religious indulgence. The pulpits thus continued to undermine the Supreme Governor of the Church, albeit in novel ways. Many preachers are shown offering messages that implicitly hedged in the royal supremacy, delimiting the king's authority as he was neither ordained nor consecrated. As Ketterer notes, 'The royal supremacy, at times, could almost feel conditional on it being used only as Anglicans deemed fit' (p. 199). He argues for an increasing 'moral turn' in court sermons during the 1670s, partly as a matter of ecclesiological positioning: 'In highlighting the importance of personal reformation and piety, the Church of England was attempting to portray itself as the middle ground between both Dissent and Roman Catholicism' (p. 218). Little of this will be surprising to Restoration specialists, but there is a good deal of detailed, fine-filigree material on the variety and competing nature of sermons preached and agendas outlined from the pulpit in the Chapel Royal. Substantial discussion is also devoted to particular types of sermon, particularly those preached on the anniversaries of the regicide (adding to Andrew Lacey's work) and the Gunpowder Plot.

The most interesting part of the book, though, is the discussion of preaching at the court of James II. Partly this is a matter of bulk: a previously under-discussed topic receives very full treatment (around eighty-five pages). This provides the necessary space to tease out numerous themes and influences. Ketterer makes appropriate use of Simon Thurley's work on the architecture and design of spaces

at court to emphasize James's withdrawal from the previous Chapel Royal into a lavish new Catholic equivalent in Whitehall. Here Catholic preachers 'participated in the construction of a vision of James's kingship' (p. 258). This leant heavily on Salesian ideas, channelled via the Benedictines, with a stress on the need for aristocratic elites to act piously at court. Steven Pincus is taken to task for his 'superficial' (p. 267) readings of Catholic sermons. His eagerness to position sermons within an interpretive framework dominated by Gallicanism is challenged, with Ketterer stressing the 'English' character of much of the preaching. Priests linked James to pre-Reformation models of English kingship (for instance, Edward the Confessor) and to Henry VIII as part of a wider effort to make England a *Roman Catholic* elect nation. From this point of view, Catholic preachers are shown turning the tables on their confessional opponents and drawing connections between the established Church of England and Pharisees—a self-interested, privileged caste lacking in true zeal. Ketterer also shows the extent to which Anglican preachers pushed back against such arguments. A renewed emphasis on the need to offer good counsel to the monarch allowed preachers in effect to limit a Catholic ruler's ability to provide relief for his co-religionists. Preachers rejected notions of the Church of England being an Erastian edifice, stressing instead that 'The heart and soul of the Church of England was . . . the community of the Anglican bishops' (p. 336).

After such detailed coverage of particular periods, points, and preachers, the conclusion to the book feels relatively perfunctory. More could have been done to live up to the purported date span of the volume and to link pre- and post-Glorious Revolution events and trends. Partly one suspects that this became a matter of available space: Ketterer's close readings of large numbers of sermons inevitably consume a lot of words. Such readings are often acute and valuable, but cumulatively there is a danger of repetition and of straining readers' patience (much like overlong sermons at court). The English version of the main text could have been much more rigorously proofread, with far too many strange sentence constructions surviving into print and typographical errors slipping through the net: 'speficially'; 'imponderabilia'; 'publically'; 'nonconformsadditional'; 'transsubstation'; 'reign in'; or 'in this vain', to name but a few. Anthony

Wood is consistently referred to as Abraham, whilst Vavasor Powell is twice called Valvasor. More importantly, it is a shame that the index to the book is so feeble; just four short columns for a text of this length seriously undermines its value for scholars looking to follow up on particular people or issues. Nevertheless, it is right to end on a positive note when reviewing a substantial and well-researched first book. Christoph Ketterer has produced a significant scholarly resource, and one that enriches our ever-growing sense of ‘the politics of religion’ in Restoration England.

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