

Maria Giuseppina Muzzarelli, ed. *From Words to Deeds: The Effectiveness of Preaching in the Late Middle Ages*. Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2014. 252 pages. \$98.

In recent decades the guild of homiletics has done more to recognize the importance of cultural contexts for understanding preaching. It has become a commonplace that no preaching—and no talk about preaching—hovers above cultural particularity. Cultural contexts may be hybrid, plural, porous, contested, and complex. “Context” might not even be the right category under which to consider the importance of culture for preaching. But it is clear that culture matters.

The turn to culture gives descriptive studies of preaching new importance for the guild of homiletics. Fields like ethnography, sociology, anthropology, and historical studies all take on new significance as conversation partners. Scholars of minoritized groups have led the way in recognizing this significance. Breakthrough works from scholars like Henry Mitchell, Teresa Fry Brown, and Anna Carter Florence have expanded prevailing understandings of preaching in part by offering descriptions of the work of actual preachers. Postliberal scholars looking to Alasdair MacIntyre (on traditions) or George Lindbeck (on cultural-linguistic systems) also have reason to attend to historical and cultural studies. Homileticians of many different schools should be interested in reading and producing excellent anthropologies, ethnographies, and historical studies of preaching.

These developments give homileticians from many schools reason to be interested in *From Words to Deeds*, edited by Maria Giuseppina Muzzarelli. The book collects thirteen essays on late medieval and early modern preaching in Europe. The essays grew out of a 2010 conference at the Università di Bologna on the ways in which preaching was and was not “effective” in these eras. While the list of contributors is international—with authors working in Finland, Italy, Japan, and the Netherlands—the essays are mostly in English. They focus especially on preaching by mendicant orders on the Italian peninsula.

The essays work to a high standard of historical scholarship and make some important contributions to our understanding of preaching in this time. Bert Roest’s essay on “Franciscan Preaching in Germany and the Low Countries,” for instance, corrects a caricature of mendicant preaching as neglecting doctrine that was passed down from Protestant and humanist sources to contemporary scholars. And Elisa Tosi Brandi does remarkable work in sifting through hagiographical accounts to give readers a better understanding of Chiara [Clare] of Rimini in relation to civil and ecclesial powers.

The significance of these essays reaches beyond historical understandings of the particular times and places on which they focus. They could also add historical depth to many conversations among homileticians with more contemporary interests. Muzzarelli’s introduction gives an interesting study of preaching and social change. Shunji Oguro’s essay on *reportationes* (written reports of sermons) and the process of internalization has implications both for pedagogy and for studies of listeners. Pietro Delcorno’s essay tracks back and forth between preaching and sacred drama in ways that could inform those interested in similar migrations today. Maria Ioriatti’s essay describes the use of images in the sermons of one Franciscan preacher. And Brandi’s analysis of the way that Chiara of Rimini clipped pincers to her tongue in an act of mortification that also authorized her preaching should enter the canon of stories that we tell in order to understand the ways women have found to preach even in the face of violent acts of repression.

The collection would make an even greater contribution if more of the essays focused in more sustained and sophisticated ways on “the nexus between words and deeds in the field of homiletics” (1), which is the stated topic of the volume. Some of the essays relate to this topic only indirectly. Those that do consider the topic tend to approach it with flat accounts of preachers’ intentions and what it would mean to be “effective.” Yoko Kimura, for instance, fills out a table of “The Results of Bernardino de Feltre’s Peace-Preaching” with numerous entries that describe the result as “Tranquility replaces social unrest” (174–75). But this description raises more questions than it answers. What was the nature of this tranquility? For whom did it count as tranquil? How did this kind of tranquility relate to the peace that the preacher was seeking? In the introduction to the book Muzzarelli invokes Ann Swidler’s notion of a cultural “tool kit” (11), and work by Swidler or any number of others could have sharpened the essays’ contributions to our understandings of preaching and social change. But the essays as they stand are already worthy of attention—even the attention of homileticians who do not have a specialist’s interest in mendicant preaching in the late medieval and early modern periods.

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