

ANSWERS

If I had hoped to learn about Shakespeare's life and the world in which he lived, my time researching and exploring during the Sir Stanley Wells Shakespeare Studentship proved very fruitful. Because I investigate the English Reformation and how its impacts played out in the pulpit and on the stage, I spent as much time visiting various churches in the area as I did in the Reading Room of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust.

These visits were astounding. I gazed on the angels of Holy Trinity Church, where Shakespeare attended and is buried, during a Sunday Evensong. The angels precede the Reformation, but a few were newer additions, replacing those either destroyed during the purges of iconoclasts or the victims of gradual decay. In another church visit in Lower Quinton, I gasped when I noticed the large seal of Elizabeth I hovering over the altar. These seals often replaced religious ones following the Reformation, and I had only ever read about them. The church being empty, I ascended the pulpit and looked out over the pews. I was struck by a large effigy to an unknown knight to the left of my gaze. Even when prayers for the dead ceased, the dead themselves remained among sermongers.

From these experiences, I gained a stronger sense of the stakes of my own research. Visiting these churches convinced me that if the social and personal impact of the Reformation had been as extreme as some historians report, something had to reshape people's worlds in a way that was both compelling and coherent. Stephen Greenblatt, in his book, *Hamlet in Purgatory*, posits that as the Reformation abolished or reduced widely-held beliefs in entities like ghosts, the theater, specifically Shakespeare's plays, found ways "to fashion realities, to call realities into question, to tell compelling stories, to puncture the illusions that these stories generate, and to salvage something on the other side of disillusionment."

As I ran my fingers along brass etchings or wondered at the Saxon jamb figures, I wondered if Greenblatt's thesis could be extended to include not only Shakespeare's plays, but also sermons themselves. Like Shakespeare's plays, sermons offered new realities for their congregants, many of whom knew someone who could recall or themselves remembered when the building in which they worshipped was Catholic. That uncomfortable existence with such a space needed not only a physical refashioning of the space itself, as iconoclasts sought to do, but a spiritual refashioning of how people understood themselves in the world.

Perhaps the supernatural qualities that ministers ascribed to preaching helped their audiences with this refashioning. John Stockwood, a London minister who preached at the famous Paul's Cross pulpit, believed ministers could act as a force of revelation similar to the way God used prophets, dreams, and angels in the Bible. Through the minister, Stockwood claimed, God "speaketh vnto vs in the person of man." It's a fascinating proposition, and Stockwood wasn't alone in believing it. His assumption underlies the fact that preachers felt their performances in the pulpit could shape new realities and call old ones into question, just in the ways that plays did.

And it appeared that people cared about preaching as well. On a research day at the Birthplace Trust, I read the humorous account of Richard Baker. In 1622, Baker, a Stratford resident, was summoned before the ecclesiastical court for smacking the son of John Rogers of Shottery upside the head during a sermon. Court records report that Richard claimed "the boy was playing and keeping a noise, and that the said Richard could not hear what the preacher said; and the said Richard did give the said boy a little tap upon the head. The Judge admonished him 'that from henceforth he strike no more; but if such offence be in the church,

he shall complain to the magistrate that such boys may be whipped.” The complier of these accounts attributes Baker’s reaction to a hot day and the long sermon, but it’s just as possible that he cared about what was being said, as did others in the congregation.

My time in Stratford-upon-Avon thus yielded an interesting insight into the importance of the pulpit and the many facets it shared with the stage. Inasmuch as Shakespeare, as my earlier post suggested, possessed the “art to enchant,” so too did ministers like Stockwood. And the worlds they created continue to come down to us through the power of performance.