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# SPEAKING IN HANDS: EARLY MODERN PREACHING AND SIGNED LANGUAGES FOR THE DEAF

Historians of early modern England frequently encounter Protestant reformers lamenting ‘dumb’ preachers and ‘deaf’ congregations. St Paul’s maxim that ‘faith comes by hearing’ was a constant refrain of preachers, particularly those who saw sermons as ‘the ordinary means of salvation’ and who worried about people who would not properly listen to sermons, whether through wilfulness, ignorance or ‘dullness’ of spirit. But what about those who *could* not hear: namely the prelingually deaf (called deaf and dumb by contemporaries), the deafened and the hard of hearing?<sup>1</sup> There was a popular belief in early modern Europe that Paul’s maxim effectively damned deaf people. As one contemporary put it: ‘If faith comes by hearing . . . there can be no saving knowledge’ for deaf people, and ‘the consequence is undeniable, since no man can be saved without faith’. As a result, deafness and hearing loss were often presented as the most crippling of physical impairments. Preaching in Elizabethan England, Henry Smith argued that while blindness or muteness was a divine punishment, deafness came from the devil. These assumptions have fed into histories of deafness, with one historian arguing that Paul’s maxim was ‘disastrous’ for

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this article I have used ‘deaf’ with a lower case ‘d’ to refer to people with hearing loss, including prelingually deaf people, whether or not they signed. Traditionally ‘deaf’ has referred to a medical model of hearing loss, while ‘Deaf’ refers to those who are culturally Deaf, part of a community with a shared language (British Sign Language in the UK) who do not see themselves as disabled. Following Harlan Lane, I use the terms ‘deaf’ and ‘deafness’ to reflect early modern debates and understanding. Harlan Lane, *When the Mind Hears: A History of the Deaf* (New York, 1984); Paddy Ladd, *Understanding Deaf Culture: In Search of Deafhood* (Clevedon, 2003), pp. xvii–xviii.

deaf people in pre-modern Europe.<sup>2</sup> In reality, however, the situation was more nuanced, with Protestants and Catholics reluctant to exclude all deaf people from heaven. The seventeenth-century Dutch writer Anton Deusing attacked Paul's assertion that 'faith comes by hearing', writing that 'this is indeed a very hard saying that dismays the soul . . . [since] those that are born deaf are no more guilty of neglecting their salvation than infants'.<sup>3</sup> Deusing's views were shared by many, prompting clergy from different confessions across Europe to explore how to accommodate prelingually deaf people in collective worship. The question of how deaf people could be saved was, however, a particularly urgent problem in Reformed Churches, which put sermons at the heart of worship, including the Church of England. And those discussions about listening to sermons did not focus solely on auditory impairment, but raised larger questions about sensory knowledge, preaching and salvation that had relevance for everyone: hearing and deaf. As a result, English preachers in the pulpit used standardized rhetorical gestures of the hands, body and sometimes face, to make their sermons more accessible and more effective. Not only did this help people with hearing loss to follow the sermon; it also promoted manual sign language as an articulate form of communication.

People with impairments rarely feature in histories of the Reformation, but they were a common and visible part of congregations across Europe.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, religious beliefs and practices were central to changing perceptions of bodily and mental impairments, with the Protestant reformations ushering in new ideas about embodiment that had implications for impaired people across Europe. Drawing on the work of

<sup>2</sup> Henry Smith, *The Sermons of Master Henrie Smith* (London, 1592, STC 22718), 640–1; George Sibscota, *The Deaf and Dumb Man's Discourse* (London, 1670), 36; Susan Plann, *Silent Minority: Deaf Education in Spain, 1550–1835* (Berkeley, 1997), 18. Arnold Hunt also suggests that Protestant ministers took Paul's maxim literally: Arnold Hunt, *The Art of Hearing: English Preachers and Their Audiences, 1590–1640* (Cambridge, 2010), 24–5, 55.

<sup>3</sup> 'Dura perfecto sententia haec est, quae animum percellit! Sane dum surdi ab ortu non magis sua culpa media amplectendae salutis negligunt quam & ipsi infantes'. Anton Deusing, 'De Surdis ab Ortu: Mustique', in his *Fasciculus Dissertationum Selectarum* (Groningen, 1660), 177.

<sup>4</sup> Henri-Jacques Stiker, *A History of Disability*, trans. William Sayers (Ann Arbor, 1999), 66; Jacques Le Goff, *Medieval Civilisation, 400–1500*, trans. Julia Barrow (Oxford, 1988), 240.

disability activists in the 1970s, historians distinguish between impairment — a physical or anatomical phenomenon — and disability — described as ‘the social construct loaded upon’ physical and mental impairments. In cultural and social models of disability, it is not the impairment but society that disables, and therefore changing experiences of disability illuminate past societies’ deep-rooted beliefs about the body, the individual and their communities.<sup>5</sup> This study of deafness and preaching in post-Reformation England, therefore, sheds light on Protestant ideas about worship and salvation, as well as extending the historical gaze to include people with impairments. Historians like Irina Metzler, Patricia Skinner and Edward Wheatley have shown the centrality of Christianity in shaping medieval attitudes towards bodily-different men and women, but very little work has been done on how the reformations of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries disrupted and reconfigured that nexus of practice and belief.<sup>6</sup> Studying deafness offers one route into that topic, and is a particularly fruitful way to explore some of these changing beliefs, because hearing came to play such a dominant role in Reformed Churches. While the discussions outlined below were not limited to the Church in England, the English Church offers one, particularly explicit, example of attempts to understand the pastoral implications of Paul’s maxim that ‘faith comes by hearing’.

This article also inserts the experiences and relationships of deaf men and women into the ground-breaking work of literature specialists who have explored representations of physical impairment in early modern England. Their research has shown how physical difference was portrayed on ‘stage and page’, and they have convincingly argued that this shaped early

<sup>5</sup> Michael Oliver, *The Politics of Disablement* (London, 1990); Tom Shakespeare, ‘The Social Model of Disability’, in Lennard J. Davis (ed.), *The Disability Studies Reader*, 5<sup>th</sup> edn (London, 2017); Irina Metzler, *A Social History of Disability in the Middle Ages: Cultural Considerations of Physical Impairment* (London, 2015), 5. On the importance of embodiment in Christian historical thought, see Deborah Beth Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology: Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities* (Oxford, 2008); Brian Brock and John Swinton (eds.), *Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader* (Grand Rapids, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Irina Metzler, *Disability in Medieval Europe: Thinking about Physical Impairment during the High Middle Ages, c.1100–1400* (London, 2006); Patricia Skinner, *Living with Disfigurement in Early Medieval Europe* (New York, 2017); Edward Wheatley, *Stumbling Blocks Before the Blind: Medieval Constructions of a Disability* (Ann Arbor, 2010).

modern perceptions of disability. Allison P. Hobgood and David Houston Wood have demonstrated the extent to which ‘literary discourses participated in the standardisation of human bodies’, while Elizabeth Bearden has drawn on ‘monstrous’ texts to highlight contemporary perceptions of the abnormal or ‘unnatural’ body.<sup>7</sup> Their work has demonstrated that not only was there an ideal body in this period, but that meanings were often ascribed to disability. Again, this was particularly apparent on the stage, where disability often stood as a sort of ‘narrative prosthesis’ to portray a character trait, and is most famously seen in the disability of Shakespeare’s Richard III.<sup>8</sup> Literary sources, therefore, provide important insights into how bodily difference was understood in this period: as Cory James Rushton has argued in his account of Henry VI’s paralysis, examples of disability that may be ‘rendered socially invisible’ were often explored explicitly in contemporary literature and visual representations.<sup>9</sup> Representation, however, was only part of the story, and the experiences of deaf and deafened people captured in archival sources suggest a more nuanced picture than is sometimes portrayed in literary works. Prelingually deaf men and women in early modern England attended church, got married and had children: they were less different and less excluded than some contemporary texts suggest. Using sermons and preaching manuals alongside archival sources, this article demonstrates how deaf and hard-of-hearing people were integrated into their communities and what this process tells us about early modern parish worship.

Early modern historians have shown the importance of rhetorical texts in shaping Protestant sermons (and theatrical performances) but no one has, as yet, examined how this use of rhetorical texts — particularly those dealing with *actio* (or

<sup>7</sup> Allison P. Hobgood and David Houston Wood, ‘Early Modern Literature and Disability Studies’, in Clare Barker and Stuart Murray (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Disability* (Cambridge, 2018), 34; Elizabeth B. Bearden, *Monstrous Kinds: Body, Space, and Narrative in Renaissance Representations of Disability* (Ann Arbor, 2019), 5; Allison P. Hobgood and David Houston Wood (eds.), *Recovering Disability in Early Modern England* (Columbus, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor, 2001), 95–118.

<sup>9</sup> Cory James Rushton, ‘The King’s Stupor: Dealing with Royal Paralysis in Late Medieval England’, in Wendy J. Turner (ed.), *Madness in Medieval Law and Custom* (Leiden, 2010), 148.

delivery) — affected the experiences of deaf people in early modern England.<sup>10</sup> Mary Morrissey and Arnold Hunt are among those who have shown the importance of rhetorical gestures in early modern preaching, and although this was primarily intended to make the sermon more effective for the ‘spiritually’ deaf, this article demonstrates that it also benefitted people in the congregation who were hard of hearing, helping them to ‘read’ the sermon.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, I suggest that manual pulpit rhetoric helped to validate sign language as a legally valid alternative to oral speech. This was a huge step in facilitating the integration of prelingually deaf people into early modern society, offering them a legal identity while recognizing the value of their native language, sign. And this experience of deaf signers in early modern England is particularly notable in the context of current attempts by the Deaf community to ensure that British Sign Language is given legal status in the UK — a battle that in 2021 is still ongoing.<sup>12</sup> Preachers in early modern England did not create sign languages for the deaf — deaf people had used physical signs to communicate for centuries, but their work codifying a manual language helped hearing and deaf people to communicate. This account of preaching, deafness and sign language contributes to an emerging field of the history of disability in early modern England, but it also speaks more generally to accounts of Protestant spirituality in the period, foregrounding the importance of hearing and listening in the early modern English church.

<sup>10</sup> On rhetoric and early modern preaching, see John W. O’Malley, *Religious Culture in the Sixteenth Century: Preaching, Rhetoric, Spirituality and Reform* (Aldershot, 1993); Greg Kneidel, ‘*Ars Praedicandi*: Theories and Practice’, in Peter McCullough, Hugh Adlington and Emma Rhatigan (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Early Modern Sermon* (Oxford, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> Hunt, *Art of Hearing*, 84–7; Mary Morrissey, *Politics and the Paul’s Cross Sermons, 1558–1642* (Oxford, 2011), 61–4.

<sup>12</sup> BSL was given legal status in Scotland in 2015 through the BSL (Scotland) Bill 2015. Maartje De Meulder, ‘A Barking Dog That Never Bites? The British Sign Language (Scotland) Bill’, *Sign Language Studies*, xv, no. 4 (2015). Along with Irish Sign Language (ISL), BSL was recognized as a ‘minority’ language in Northern Ireland in 2004, and in 2004 the Welsh Assembly recognized BSL as a language although BSL and ISL still do not have legal status in England, Wales or Ireland. S. C. E. Batterbury Magill, ‘Report on the Legal Status for BSL and ISL’, Mar. 2014, *British Deaf Association*, available at <[https://bda.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/BDA\\_Legal-status-of-BSL-ISL\\_11-Mar-2014.pdf](https://bda.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/BDA_Legal-status-of-BSL-ISL_11-Mar-2014.pdf)> (accessed 6 June 2020).

# I

## DEAFNESS IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND

Hearing was important in the primarily oral world of early modern England; however, hearing loss and deafness were relatively common. Although the numbers of prelingually deaf people were fairly small, many more people suffered hearing loss through illness, accident and old age.<sup>13</sup> Sometimes this deafness was permanent, and sometimes it was temporary, but it meant that some form of impaired hearing was a common experience in early modern England, and significantly for the purposes of this article, among the men, women and children who attended sermons.

Those men and women who were born deaf, or who lost their hearing before learning to speak, had few legal rights. There was a legal tradition across Europe that effectively barred prelingually deaf men and women from inheriting property, getting married and from fully participating in church services. It was believed that since prelingually deaf people could not hear, they could not understand, and more practically, they could not express understanding. Successive editions of Bracton's *De Legibus* explained that since a prelingually deaf person could neither 'hear or speak at all, he cannot express his will and consent'. John Bulwer, a seventeenth-century author connected to the Inns of Court, noted that as a result, 'in Civil law' a deaf person was 'compared to an infant', and prelingually deaf men and women were 'looked upon as misprisons in nature, and wanting *speech*, are reckoned little better than *dumb animals*'.<sup>14</sup> In Michael Dalton's *The Country Justice*, Dalton noted that if 'a man born deaf and dumb killeth another, that is no felony, for he cannot know whether he did evil or no'. Instead, Dalton argued that 'such acts happen by involuntary ignorance'.<sup>15</sup> As Elizabeth Bearden argues: 'linguistic capacity

<sup>13</sup> Emily J. Cockayne, 'Cultural History of Sound in England, 1560–1760' (Univ. of Cambridge Ph.D. thesis, 2000), 56–71.

<sup>14</sup> Henri de Bracton, *De Legibus et Consuetudinibus Angliae*, trans. Samuel E. Thorne, ed. George E. Woodbine (Selden Society, 1968–76), iv, 309. Bulwer's italics. John Bulwer, *Philocophus: or, The Deafe and Dumb Mans Friend* (London, 1648), 102, 109.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Dalton, *The Countrey Justice* (London, 1618, STC 6205), 215–16.

was a benchmark for personhood' in much of Western law in the period, and England was no exception.<sup>16</sup>

Deafness and mutism were recognized as being related and a lack of speech was often used as evidence that deaf people were both mentally and physically impaired. Galenic theory held that since speech and hearing came from the same source in the brain, deafness inevitably led to a lack of speech. Contemporaries highlighted the physical communion between the ear and the mouth; the anatomist, Helikiah Crooke noted that 'if you goad the Tympani of the ear with a Penknife, it will presently cause a dry cough'. A lack of speech was, however, seen as more than just a physical consequence of deafness, it was also thought to be evidence that deafness caused intellectual impairment. Aristotle suggested that since hearing was the chief sense of learning, deaf people lacked understanding, and therefore, he claimed, blind people were more intelligent than those who were deaf. Some writers believed that since prelingually deaf people lacked vocal speech, they lacked the prerequisite for abstract thought. It was a widely held idea whose influence continued into the early modern period.<sup>17</sup> Richard Brathwaite argued that 'hearing is the organ of understanding' and the minister Elnathan Parr claimed that since 'hearing was a sense of learning', deaf people could only have a limited understanding of the world. 'We have seen blind men learned', he wrote, 'but never deaf men so borne'. Even John Bulwer, who became the champion of prelingually deaf people, admitted that deaf people might suffer memory loss, 'hearing being the sense of memory', but insisted that they still retained 'the usual capacity and understanding'.<sup>18</sup>

These theories did not go unchallenged. In the *Mikrokosmographia* (1615), Helikiah Crooke rejected the 'common position' that 'deaf men be therefore dumb

<sup>16</sup> Bearden, *Monstrous Kinds*, 91–2.

<sup>17</sup> Helkiah Crooke, *Mikrokosmographia: A Description of the Body of Man* (London, 1615, STC 6062), 701; Penelope Gouk, 'Some English Theories of Hearing in the Seventeenth Century: Before and after Descartes', in Charles Burnett, Michel Fend and Penelope Gouk (eds.), *The Second Sense: Studies in Hearing and Musical Judgement from Antiquity to the Seventeenth Century* (London, 1991); Josef Fulka, *Deafness, Gesture and Sign Language in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century French Philosophy* (Gesture Studies, viii, Amsterdam, 2020), 10–14.

<sup>18</sup> Bulwer, *Philocophus*, 124; Elnathan Parr, *The Workes of that Faithfull and Painefull Preacher* (London, 1632, STC 19311), 136; Richard Brathwaite, *Essaies Upon the Five Senses* (London, 1620, STC 3566), 6.



because they cannot learn no language, and because hearing is the sense of knowledge'. Instead, he argued that prelingually deaf people *were* capable of both emotion and thought, pointing out that deaf people 'sigh and mourn' when faced with hardship. As Crooke concluded, 'nature hath armed a Man, although he be deaf, with Reason and Understanding for Invention'. Crooke's work reflected a growing movement across Europe that saw prelingually deaf people as intellectually able. In works published in the sixteenth century, both Rudolf Agricola and Girolamo Cardano argued that although deaf people may lack speech, this was not evidence of intellectual or emotional impairment, and as a result they promoted the education of deaf children.<sup>19</sup> And while the legal position of prelingually deaf people remained limited, in practice there were a number of efforts to integrate and include them in day-to-day life. Churches, mindful of salvation, were at the forefront of many of these efforts, reflecting many contemporaries' beliefs that prelingually deaf people were indeed as capable and rational as Agricola, Cardano and later Crooke argued. As the seventeenth-century English author George Sibscota noted, despite the apparent implications of Paul's maxim that 'faith comes by hearing', it was hard to believe that God had denied salvation to all deaf people and had 'strictly registered all those that are born deaf in the number of those that are Vessels of wrath'.<sup>20</sup>

The problems of including deaf men and women in sacraments and collective worship absorbed clergy across Europe, from both Catholic and Protestant traditions. In 1585 and again in 1615, the national synod of the Lutheran Church in Transylvania explored how to allow prelingually deaf men and women to take the Eucharist. In the seventeenth century, prelingually deaf people were admitted to Eucharistic services in churches in Ulster, England and Massachusetts, and in 1618, missionary Jesuits asked superiors in Europe if they could admit

<sup>19</sup> Crooke, *Mikrokosmographia*, 700–1; Rudolf Agricola, *De Inventione Dialectica* (Strasbourg, 1521), 137–8; Jacomien Prins, 'Girolamo Cardano and Julius Caesar Scaliger in Debate about Nature's Musical Secrets', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, lxxviii (2017), 175–6.

<sup>20</sup> Sibscota, *Deaf and Dumb Man's Discourse*, 37.

a prelingually deaf Native American to the Church.<sup>21</sup> There were, authors wrote, other ‘extraordinary’ ways to know God than through hearing, although Protestant writers found it hard to reconcile this with their own belief in the value of preaching. Elnathan Parr reassured his readers that ‘such deaf which are elected, will be saved’ but imagined it was a less sweet experience: he sadly noted that ‘yet great is the comfort of hearing’. As William Worship cried in 1616, he would rather lose limbs than his hearing because ‘when the sense of hearing is gone, then farewell the sound of the word preached, the most delicate and heavenly music that ever was’.<sup>22</sup> These discussions of deafness and preaching had ramifications beyond the relatively small numbers of prelingually deaf people in early modern England. In congregations throughout the country, men, women and children struggled to hear preachers — whether because of temporary deafness, hearing loss or ambient noise. Furthermore, as the metaphor of spiritual deafness illustrates, those debates raised wider questions about the role of the senses in the post-Reformation church, with implications for hearing and deaf members of the congregation.

## II HEARING CHURCH SERVICES

Some form of hearing loss — whether temporary or permanent — was a common experience, and therefore a concern of many who attended church services. Illness was the most frequent cause of hearing loss, and household manuals and recipe books from this period are full of remedies for blocked ears, tinnitus and temporary deafness. Everyday illnesses and afflictions caused deafness, a common cold, for example, could produce congestion in the ears. Rheum also led to problems with hearing: a medical lecture from the seventeenth century described how excessive mucus ‘runs into the ear ... [and] makes an almighty noise like the falling of Great

<sup>21</sup> Georg Daniel Teutsch (ed.), *Urkundenbuch der Evangelischen Landeskirche A. B. in Siebenbürgen* (Sibiu, 1883), ii, 150, 228. Many thanks to Maria Craciun for this reference. John Hackett, *Scrinia Reserata: A Memorial Offer'd to the Great Deservings of John Williams, D.D.* (London, 1693), ii, 61; Harry G. Lang, ‘Genesis of a Community: The American Deaf Experience in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries’, in John Vickrey Van Cleve (ed.), *The Deaf History Reader* (Washington, 2007), 3; Alec Ryrie, *Being Protestant in Reformation Britain* (Oxford, 2013), 362.

<sup>22</sup> William Worship, *Patterne of an Invincible Faith* (London, 1616, STC 25995), 3–4; Parr, *Workes of that Faithfull and Painefull Preacher*, 109.

Waters'. The Jacobean archbishop, Tobie Matthew often suffered from rheum, noting in his diary when blocked ears and difficulty hearing forced him to cancel preaching engagements. Tinnitus was another common problem: in 1646, Ralph Josselin recorded that one evening he 'had such a noise at my ear, which I supposed had been a great night dorre [a dung beetle]' before he 'presently perceived it was an exceeding noise in my head'.<sup>23</sup> Deafness could also be a side effect of many other illnesses. The physician Felix Platter noted that often 'hearing is wholly abolished' by disease or vapours, and that common illnesses like measles, mumps and smallpox could all cause deafness. Platter warned that another frequent cause of deafness were blockages in the ear — either insects or wax. To help with this, early modern barbers offered to clean out ears, with ear-picks (or ear scoops) one of the barber-surgeon's most 'basic tools-in-trade'.<sup>24</sup>

Old age, of course, was a major cause of hearing loss. Few could afford hearing trumpets — named by Francis Bacon as 'hearing spectacles' — and so many elderly parishioners must have struggled to hear sermons in their parish churches. In some instances, special provisions were made for old people. In 1606 in Chesham in Buckinghamshire, for example, a pew was reserved at the front of the church for six 'ancient men that cannot hear well'.<sup>25</sup> Some professions were particularly susceptible to hearing loss in old age, the French visitor to London, La Primaudaye, thought blacksmiths were most liable to be 'thick of hearing' because of the 'noise and sound of their hammers and anvils'. Another frequent cause of deafness were accidents or indeed violence: in 1607, a Puritan libel from Northamptonshire accused a judge of beating his wife 'til she

<sup>23</sup> Wellcome Library, London, MS.4054, fos. 103<sup>r</sup>, 106<sup>r</sup>; Wellcome Lib., MS.MSL.5, p. 102; Rosamund Oates, *Moderate Radical: Tobie Matthew and the English Reformation* (Oxford, 2018), 235; Alan Macfarlane (ed.), *The Diary of Ralph Josselin, 1616–1683* (London, 1976), 59.

<sup>24</sup> Felix Platter, Abdiah Cle and Nicholas Culpeper, *Platerus Golden Practice of Physick* (London, 1664), 80–1; Eleanor Decamp, 'Thou Art Like a Punie-Barber (New Come to the Trade) Thou Pick'st our Eares too Deep: Barbery, Ear Wax and Snip-Snaps', in Simon Smith, Jackie Watson and Amy Kenny (eds.), *The Senses in Early Modern England, 1558–1660* (Manchester, 2015).

<sup>25</sup> Emily Cockayne, 'Experiences of the Deaf in Early Modern England', *Historical Journal*, xlvii, no. 3 (2003), 489–90; Christopher Marsh, 'Sacred Space in England, 1560–1640: The View from the Pew', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, liii (2002), 308.

was deaf with blows around the head'.<sup>26</sup> Hearing loss, difficulty hearing and deafness were, therefore, common problems in early modern England, posing a problem for many preachers and their congregations.

Even for those who had excellent hearing, there were frequent complaints about the challenges of listening to sermons. Congregations complained about ministers who were too quiet or audiences that were too loud. The volume and tone of a preacher's voice was often commented on, with criticisms of those who were hard to hear. John Manningham, Samuel Pepys and John Evelyn all complained about preachers they came across who had low and inaudible voices. Sometimes there were deliberate attempts to prevent people from hearing the preacher. In Waterford in Ireland, for example, Catholics walked up and down the aisle during the sermon, talking loudly to drown out the preacher. In Coggeshall, in Essex, a young carpenter set up his tools in the churchyard one Sunday, and despite the pleas of the congregation 'continued his knocking until the end of the sermon'.<sup>27</sup> The authorities were aware of this type of sabotage, and tried to control the auditory space, with successive Elizabethan and Jacobean visitation articles asking about people deliberately making noise to disrupt the sermon. More usual, however, were unintentional interruptions and a low level of disorder from a restless congregation, leading to the appointment of dog whippers to maintain order. Of course, in some of the most enthusiastic congregations, noise came from the groans and prayers of the audience, which could also drown out the preacher's carefully constructed sermon.<sup>28</sup> All these

<sup>26</sup> Pierre de La Primaudaye, *The French Academie* (London, 1618, STC 15241), 375; Bruce R. Smith, *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England: Attending to the O-Factor* (Chicago, 1999) 54–5; Andrew Cambers, 'Reading Libels in Seventeenth-Century Northamptonshire', in Nadine Lewycky and Adam Morton (eds.), *Getting Along: Religious Identities and Confessional Relations in Early Modern England* (Farnham, 2012), 121.

<sup>27</sup> Essex Record Office, Chelmsford, MS Q/SR 158/40; Raymond Gillespie, 'Preaching the Reformation in Early Modern Ireland', in McCullough, Adlington and Rhatigan (eds.), *Oxford Handbook of the Early Modern Sermon*, 291; Cockayne, 'Cultural History of Sound', 31–2; Jennifer Richards, *Voices and Books in the English Renaissance: A New History of Reading* (Oxford, 2019), 137.

<sup>28</sup> Borthwick Institute for Archives, York, MS V.1615/CB, fos. 5<sup>v</sup>–6<sup>r</sup>; John Craig, 'Psalms, Groans and Dogwhippers: The Soundscape of Worship in the English Parish Church, 1547–1642', in Will Coster and Andrew Spicer (eds.), *Sacred Space in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 2005).

efforts to limit the ambient noise demonstrate just how difficult many different people found it to hear the preacher in the pulpit.

### III SPIRITUAL DEAFNESS

Preachers worried about audience members who had trouble hearing, but they were also concerned about congregations who failed to listen properly: listening was a spiritual as well as physical activity. The frequent use of ‘deafness’ as a metaphor reflected widespread anxieties about spiritual attentiveness, but it also helped to elide the distinction between hearing members of the congregation and those experiencing hearing loss. A number of guides were produced in the period to help congregations improve their listening skills (or the ‘art of hearing’), with authors arguing that spiritual hearing — digesting the sermon and its message — was as important as physical hearing. In *The Difference of Hearers* (1614), William Harrison identified three types of ‘unprofitable’ hearers, particularly warning readers about those who ‘imagine that by *any* kind of hearing they might be saved’. Poor listening could render sermons ineffective. Robert Wilkinson noted that ‘there is no Word of God but hath his profit’, before adding an important qualifier: ‘but set this art of hearing aside, and all will be unprofitable’.<sup>29</sup> In this context, hearing was an active process that went beyond the physical ears, suggesting that hearing loss may not be as devastating as Paul’s maxim that ‘faith comes by hearing’ implied.

Writers distinguished between physical and spiritual listening, between an external sensory perception and the internal sanctification it prompted. Deafness was employed as a metaphor to explain why some people responded to sermons and others did not. In 1599, an English translation was published of *The Art or Skil, Well and Fruitfullie to Heare* by the German minister, William Zepper. Zepper argued that ‘many excellent duties are required also in hearing sermons’, outlining some of the principles necessary to avoid being a ‘deaf’ listener. He urged his readers to avoid the kind of listening that ensured that a preacher’s ‘speech or sayings only swim in the upper part

<sup>29</sup> William Harrison, *The Difference of Hearers: or, An Exposition of the Parable of the Sower* (London, 1614, STC 12870), 2–6; Robert Wilkinson, *A Sermon of Hearing: or, Jewell for the Eare* (London, 1593, STC 25652.5), A3<sup>r</sup>–A3<sup>v</sup>.

of the ears, but [do] not smite nor wound the heart'. In other works, Protestant ministers worried about people 'hearing amiss', warning congregations to be alert to 'the deafness of thy ears'. And of course, some Protestant writers also worried about the other side of process, attacking 'dumb' ministers who relied on homilies rather than writing their own sermons.<sup>30</sup> The metaphor of deafness implied that an inability to truly hear the Word preached could be an inescapable part of the human condition. In a tract on the importance of good listening, John Abernethy noted 'the deafness of the ear is either bodily or spiritual', concluding that 'this spiritual deafness, and unwillingness to hear' was often '*natural* and common to our corruption'.<sup>31</sup> As a result the distinction between the impaired body and the 'normal' body may have been less clear-cut in this period than has been suggested. For some, deafness was connected to the Fall and no one was immune. Preaching in Oxford, Tobie Matthew argued that Adam's ability to hear changed after his expulsion from the Garden of Eden. 'Whereas before, man took joy and comfort in his creator, and delighted to hear his maker's sweet voice, now his ears were so changed, and his faculties so corrupted that he could not hear the voice of God in the garden'.<sup>32</sup> As a result, discussions about hearing sermons had implications for both deaf and hearing people and were part of a larger conversation about the role and efficacy of sermons and sacraments in Protestant Churches.

In 1519, Martin Luther addressed the problem of how deaf people could be saved, turning to St Jerome for inspiration. Jerome had explored the implications for deaf people of the Pauline maxim that 'faith comes by hearing', asking 'If faith comes by hearing, how can people born deaf become Christians?' The answer for Jerome (and later Martin Luther) lay in the figurative ears of the soul: 'Whosoever has these,' Jerome wrote, 'will not need physical ears to apprehend the

<sup>30</sup> Wilhelm Zepper, *The Art or Skil, Well and Fruitfullie to Heare the Holy Sermons of the Church written first in Latin ... Translated into English by T. W.* (London, 1599, STC 26124.5), 3, 26, 46; Lewis Bayly, *The Practice of Piety* (London, 1613, STC 1602), 275.

<sup>31</sup> Abernethy's italics. James Abernethy, *A Christian and Heavenly Treatise: Containing Physicke for the Soule* (London, 1622, STC 74), 487.

<sup>32</sup> Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS. Add. A. 89 fo. 8<sup>r</sup>. For ideas of natural and unnatural and the effect of passability in this period, see Bearden, *Monstrous Kinds*, 17–19.

Gospel of Christ'. In one of his sermons on Galatians, Martin Luther repeated Jerome's reasoning: 'I like this argument very much', he wrote, because 'the Word of God is not heard even among adults and those who hear, unless the Spirit promotes growth inwardly'. This had consequences for the hearing as well as the deaf. As Luther wrote: 'If preaching does not infuse the spirit, then he who hears does not differ at all from one who is deaf'.<sup>33</sup> Over the following century, the Lutheran Church in Germany and beyond found ways to allow prelingually deaf people to take the Eucharist and participate in services, and Luther's distinction between physical and spiritual ears became a frequent refrain in Protestant works about both good listening and good delivery throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

#### IV RHETORIC AND DELIVERY

Elizabeth Bearden has suggested that the 'tradition of rhetorical education . . . excluded deaf people' because of its emphasis on verbal communication.<sup>34</sup> However, early modern Protestant clerics anxious about effective preaching, used an element of rhetorical education — gesture — which actually led to the inclusion of deaf people. A slew of preaching manuals published in post-Reformation England counselled against relying on hearing alone. Instead, authors encouraged preachers to use a range of physical gestures from rhetoric manuals, to bring their sermons to life, addressing both eyes and ears. Contemporary sensory theory suggested that relying only on one sense — hearing — was not effective. Although hearing was the sense of learning, it did not operate alone: as William Holder argued both 'hearing and seeing were usually and most properly called the senses of learning', with the 'proper advantages mutually supplying the defects of either'. Contemporaries believed that sight could change the perceiver permanently, reflecting Augustine's belief that 'seeing is perceiving and perceiving being

<sup>33</sup> Romans 1:19–20; Jerome, *Commentary on Galatians*, trans. Andrew Cain (Washington, 2010), 121–2; Martin Luther, 'Lectures on Galatians, 1519', trans. R. Jungkuntz, in *Luther's Works: American Edition*, xxvii, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, repr. in Brock and Swinton, *Disability in the Christian Tradition*, 205–6.

<sup>34</sup> Elizabeth B. Bearden, 'Before Normal, There Was Natural: John Bulwer, Disability, and Natural Signing in Early Modern England and Beyond', *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, cxxxii (2017), 43.

acted upon'. As a result, sight was often held to be a superior sense to hearing, with rhetoric manuals encouraging the use of gestures as a way of adding visual clout to a vocal performance: as Francis Bacon wrote, 'as the tongue speaketh to the Eare, so the gesture speaketh to the Eye'.<sup>35</sup> The physical gestures and movements of the minister became a powerful tool in a preacher's armoury, helping to ensure that his sermon effected lasting change in members of the congregation. In *The Arte of Rhetoric*, Thomas Wilson argued that sight was the 'most quick' of all senses because it 'printeth things in a man's memory as a seal doth print a man's name in wax'. It was an idea that continued throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: the author of *Digiti-Lingua* (1698) agreed, encouraging the use of manual gestures rather than oral speech he wrote, 'to me nothing seems to affect the memory more than sight'.<sup>36</sup> In addition, as we shall see, physical gestures could convey elements of the sermon that were beyond mere words, transmitting a powerful truth directly to the congregation. As a result, sermons were increasingly celebrated as visual as well as aural events, with guides and manuals on how to physically perform in the pulpit.

Preachers drew on the rhetorical training that was a mainstay of grammar school (see [Plate 1](#)) and university education when they delivered their sermons. Early modern authors understood classical rhetoric as consisting of several elements, including *actio*, which was also known as pronunciation, action or utterance and referred to the delivery of a speech or sermon. In his influential tract on preaching, Hyperius of Marburg noted that 'many things are common to the preacher with the orator', writing that, 'Invention, Disposition, Elocution, Memory and Pronunciation may rightfully be classed [as] also the parts of a preacher . . . to Teach, to Delight, to Turn'. While he may have disregarded many of the conventional rules of rhetoric, Hyperius had a keen interest in the voice and gestures of preachers,

<sup>35</sup> William Holder, *Elements of Speech* (London, 1669), 1, 4. Augustine, 'The Magnitude of the Soul', trans. John J. McMahon, in Ludwig Schopp *et al.* (eds.), *The Fathers of the Church: Saint Augustine* (The Fathers of the Church, iv, Washington, DC, 1947), 107; Francis Bacon, *Of the Proficiencie and Advancement of Learning* (London, 1605, STC 1164), bk 2, p. 37.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas Wilson, *The Arte of Rhetorique* (London, 1553, STC 25799), sig. ff. 4<sup>v</sup>; Anon., *Digiti-Lingua* (London, 1698), 3; Matthew Milner, *The Senses and the English Reformation* (Farnham, 2011), 299–307.





1. John Bulwer, 'Alphabet of Natural Gestures of the Hand', *Chirologia: or, The Naturall Language of the Hand* (London, 1644), 155. Image © Folger Shakespeare Library.

devoting a section of his work to it.<sup>37</sup> Pronunciation was an essential part of effective delivery, and included formalized gestures as well as the tone and volume of speech. As Thomas Wilson wrote in *The Arte of Rhetoric*, pronunciation consisted of ‘the apt ordering both of the voice, countenance and all the whole body’. Guidance on pronunciation could be found in many rhetorical texts, but perhaps the most important in early modern Europe were Cicero’s *De Oratore*, Quintilian’s *Institutio Oratoria* and *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (mistakenly attributed to Cicero). Preachers mined these texts for guidance on how to make their sermons as effective as possible, learning how to use their bodies to express emotions and to stir up their congregations. Hyperius of Marburg warned his readers that although preachers may be ‘imbued with learning’ unless they learned good delivery, ‘let them never look to accomplish anything worthy of praise or commendation’.<sup>38</sup>

This emphasis on non-verbal performance illustrates how far contemporaries believed that physical gestures animated sermons. William Zepper told his readers that a good preacher ‘do not use speech only’, but used ‘his countenance, habit or action or gesture of the whole body to cloath and deck his speech and to cause it to become more lively that the hearers may be affected therewith’. In part this was because gestures were thought to express complex emotions that were beyond the power of words, particularly those mysteries of faith that were embodied in the human form. In *Institutio Oratoria*, Quintilian argued that gestures expressed the non-rational elements of language and should be used to manipulate the audience’s emotions. In *L’arte de’ cenni* (1616), Giovanni Bonifacio argued that the reason that gestures were more powerful than speech was because of a clear correlation between soul and body. In post-Reformation England this translated to the pulpit, as preachers were encouraged to recreate emotions through physical gestures. Zepper argued that a minister’s physical gestures were a ‘demonstration of spiritual power and might ... straight from the heart’, which caused ‘a

<sup>37</sup> Andreas Hyperius, *The Practise of Preaching*, trans. John Ludham (London, 1577, STC 11758.5), sigs. C1<sup>r</sup>, Aa1<sup>r</sup>–Aa2<sup>r</sup>; Susan C. Karant-Nunn, *The Reformation of Feeling: Shaping the Religious Emotions in Early Modern Germany* (Oxford, 2010), 77; Peter Mack, *Elizabethan Rhetoric: Theory and Practice* (Cambridge, 2002), ch. 1.

<sup>38</sup> Wilson, *Arte of Rhetorique*, ff. 4<sup>v</sup>; Hyperius, *Practise of Preaching*, B6<sup>r</sup>.

certain kind of spiritual alteration and change' in the hearts of the congregation. Preachers were advised to imagine an emotion before projecting it to their audience.<sup>39</sup> Hyperius of Marburg told his readers to imagine 'forms and similitudes' in their minds before presenting those feelings to the audience through 'voice, countenance and apt gesture'. William Perkins also instructed preachers to experience emotions before conveying them in gestures, and his dislike of memorizing sermons came from a sense that it prevented this powerful embodiment of the spiritual. Perkins argued that, 'wood that is capable of fire doth not burn unless fire is put to it, and he must first be godly affected himself who would stir up godly affections in other men'. And like Hyperius, Perkins told preachers to use physical movements to stir up the congregation, arguing that the 'arm, the hand, the face and eyes have such motions' necessary to 'utter the godly affections of the heart'. The emphasis on gesture was one of the reasons that preachers worried about the limitations of printed sermons. When Anthony Anderson published a sermon that he had first preached at the prestigious London pulpit, Paul's Cross, in 1581, he apologized to any readers who were disappointed by the printed version of the sermon. 'If therefore it now seem to obtain less', he wrote, 'here is the same matter, but wanting the voice, gesture and person of him who spake it'. John Bulwer reported that Elizabeth I had so enjoyed listening to one particular sermon that she asked for a written copy of it, only to be deeply disappointed. Bulwer wrote that without the 'insinuation of elocution and gesture' the Queen considered the sermon dry and dull, reporting that while 'it was one of the best sermons she ever heard' it was the 'worst she had ever read'.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Zepper, *Art or Skil, Well and Fruitfullie to Heare the Holy Sermons of the Church*, 91, 131; Fritz Graf, 'Gestures and Conventions: The Gestures of Roman Actors and Orators', in Jan Bremmer and Herman Roodenburg (eds.), *A Cultural History of Gesture* (Oxford, 1993), 37–8, 40–1; Dilwyn Knox, 'Late Medieval and Renaissance Ideas on Gesture', in Volker Kapp (ed.), *Die Sprache der Zeichen und Bilder: Rhetorik und nonverbale Kommunikation in der frühen Neuzeit* (Marburg, 1990), 24–6.

<sup>40</sup> William Perkins, *The Arte of Prophecyng: or, A treatise concerning the Sacred and Onely True Manner and Methode of Preaching* (London, 1607, STC 19735.4), 130–1, 140, 143; Hyperius, *Practise of Preaching*, sigs. G3<sup>r-v</sup>; Anthony Anderson, *A Sermon Preached at Paules Crosse* (London, 1581, STC 570), A2<sup>v</sup>; John Bulwer, *Chirologia: or, The Naturall Language of the Hand. Composed of the Speaking Motions, and Discourging Gestures therof. Whereunto is added Chironomia: or, The Art of Manuall Rhetorike* (London, 1644), 6–7.

## V STANDARDIZATION OF GESTURE

Gestures used in the pulpit were standardized, part of a shared rhetorical language between preacher and his audience that was taught at school. This allowed people — including deaf and hard of hearing members of the congregation — to read the sermon: it also helped to cement the idea of manual gestures as being able to express complex ideas and emotions. Writing about the *eloquentia corporis*, Cicero argued that ‘nature hath assigned to every emotion a particular look, and tone, and bearing of its own’.<sup>41</sup> Gesture and performance were a key element of the rhetorical curriculum, John Brinsley advised students to present regularly to their teachers, to ensure a ‘great furtherance to audacity, memory, gesture [and] pronunciation’.<sup>42</sup> Performing Latin drama at school and university further encouraged and refined the use of gestures. At the Merchant Taylors’ School in London, Richard Mulcaster put on regular performances of Latin plays to help students to develop their skills of gesture and pronunciation. Across the country, Latin drama was studied for the same benefits: the children at Heighington Grammar School in County Durham, (set up under the aegis of the enthusiastic preacher, Tobie Matthew) were expected to study Terence as well as Cicero. It is well known that students were required to learn rhetorical constructions from listening to their teacher and local preacher, but there is evidence that they were also expected to note down the physical gestures as part of their rhetorical training. In *The Education of Children in Learning* (1588), William Kempe encouraged pupils to take notes while their tutors read from classical texts. Students were instructed to note ‘the rhetorical pronunciation and gesture fit for every word, sentence, and affection’ as well as identifying the grammatical and rhetorical construction of the text.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Cicero, *On the Orator: Book 3. On Fate. Stoic Paradoxes. Divisions of Oratory*, trans. H. Rackham (Loeb Classical Library No. 349, Cambridge, Mass., 1942), 172–3.

<sup>42</sup> John Brinsley, *Ludus Literarius: or, The Grammar Schoole Shewing How to Proceede from the First Entrance into Learning ... Both to Masters and Schollars* (London, 1612, STC 3768), 178, 206.

<sup>43</sup> British Library, Egerton MS 2877, fos. 72–6; William Kempe, *The Education of Children in Learning* (London, 1588, STC 14926), G3<sup>r</sup>; John Wesley, ‘Mulcaster’s Boys: Spenser, Andrewes, Kyd’ (Univ. of St Andrews Ph.D. thesis, 2008), 70–7.

Gestures were further standardized by compendiums and guides produced for students, preachers and orators throughout Europe. In *The Garden of Eloquence* (1577 and 1593), Henry Peacham outlined details of different rhetorical gestures with suggestions on how they should be performed. In 1616, Giovanni Bonifacio published *L'arte de' cenni* — the first book, he claimed, to teach ‘il parlar in silentio’ through its description of different rhetorical gestures.<sup>44</sup> Preachers from Catholic and Protestant traditions alike saw the value of learning specific gestures for different emotions, ideas and arguments. Both the English Protestant William Perkins, and the French Jesuit Ludovic Cressolius, gave details of how to perform rhetorical gestures in their preaching manuals. And in England, in 1644, one of the most comprehensive dictionaries of manual gestures was produced by John Bulwer. He published the *Chirologia*, examining the ‘natural language of the hand’ alongside the *Chironomia*, ‘the art of manual rhetoric’, including detailed pictures and descriptions of gestures taken from a range of sources including the Bible, classical authors, and contemporary writers on rhetoric like Cressolius. Bulwer’s work was designed to be used by a range of speakers including preachers, as Bulwer argued that his work was ‘not only confined to schools, theatres and the Mansions of the Muses, but do appertain to churches too’ (see [Plates 2 and 3](#)).<sup>45</sup>

A significant motivating factor behind these increasingly detailed descriptions of gestures was a desire to regulate the body of the preacher. With the declining importance of ceremony in the English Church, the minister’s body in the pulpit became the focus of efforts to impose order. Writing in Elizabethan England, William Perkins encouraged the use of gesture, but like other English Protestants he was concerned about ungoverned physical performances. Perkins was quick to stress that preachers must regulate their bodies, avoiding excessive gestures. He reminded preachers of the importance of maintaining ‘gravity’ in the pulpit, recommending that ministers only move their hands, not their whole bodies, when they

<sup>44</sup> Henry Peacham, *The Garden of Eloquence* (London, 1577, STC 19497), D2<sup>r</sup>; Henry Peacham, *The Garden of Eloquence*, 2nd edn (London, 1593, STC 19498), 145, 194; Dilwyn Knox, ‘Late Medieval and Renaissance Ideas on Gesture’, 17.

<sup>45</sup> Bulwer, *Chirologia*, A5<sup>r</sup>, B4<sup>r</sup>; John Wesley, ‘Original Gesture: Hand Eloquence on the Early Modern Stage’, *Shakespeare Bulletin*, xxxv (2017).





2. John Bulwer, *Chirologia: or, The Naturall Language of the Hand* (London, 1644), title page. Image © Folger Shakespeare Library.

preached. Attempts to control the preacher's body reflected the belief that he was the conduit for the Holy Spirit, his words an 'Echo' of *'The Word of the Lord'*.<sup>46</sup> In jeremiads, preachers sometimes even adopted the persona of God speaking directly to the audience, making it even more important to find the balance between drama and gravity. As George Abbot reminded his clergy, in the pulpit 'our carriage and behaviour should be framed to a resemblance of the immaculate Dietie'. John Wilkins cautioned new preachers 'against too much rashness and boldness', ordering them to remember 'the special presence of God and angels' and 'the weighty business of saving souls'. The visible actions of preachers in the pulpit represented a spiritual action as important, if not more so, than sacramental ceremonies, explaining why the physicality of preachers came under such close scrutiny. In Jacobean England, the godly minister, Richard Bernard, argued that preachers needed to adopt a 'modest countenance', insisting that 'a reverend gesture of body is to be observed' in the pulpit. His emphasis on the body of the minister as a conduit of the Holy Spirit also prompted him to call for a wholly unrealistic ban on 'deformed' preachers in the pulpit, particularly those with a facial disfigurement.<sup>47</sup>

By the 1640s, pulpit performances had become another area of conflict between different styles of Protestantism. In a 1641 pamphlet, *The Schismatick Stigmatized*, Richard Carter attacked preachers who 'affect an odd kind of gesture' in the pulpit, 'throwing heads, hands and shoulders this way, and that way, puffing and blowing, grinning and gurning'. Carter noted sniffily that 'hereby they astonish and amaze the poor ignorant multitude, persuading them that he is a fellow that looketh into deeper matters' when the truth was that he had 'lately rub'd over some old moth-eaten Schismaticall pamphlet'.<sup>48</sup> It may have been that by the mid seventeenth century some preachers adopted certain physical gestures to make a statement about their confessional position. Oliver Heywood, for example,

<sup>46</sup> Perkins, *Arte of Prophecyng*, 143. Andrewes' italics. Lancelot Andrewes, *XCVI Sermons* (London, 1632, STC 607.5), 601.

<sup>47</sup> George Abbot, *An Exposition upon the Prophet Jonah* (1600), cited in Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1999), 319; John Wilkins, *Ecclesiastes* (London, 1646) 107; Richard Bernard, *The Faithfull Shepherd* (London, 1607, STC 1939), 89.

<sup>48</sup> Richard Carter, *The Schismatick Stigmatized* (London, 1641), 7.



3. John Bulwer, *Chironomia: or, The Art of Manuall Rhetoricke* (London, 1644), title page. Image © Folger Shakespeare Library.



recorded that John Angier held ‘up his hands all the time of his Sermon, speaking with an even, audible voice’.<sup>49</sup> Yet, what is significant for this discussion of manual gesture and deafness, is the extent to which unease over intemperate preaching encouraged the standardization of physical gestures in the pulpit, helping to establish a visual kinetic language that could be widely read by the audience — hearing or otherwise.

## VI SPEAKING IN HANDS

As a result, early modern audiences, increasingly well trained in rhetorical delivery, expected to visually read sermons. Even those who had not experienced a rigorous rhetorical training at school and university became familiar with rhetorical gestures by regularly attending sermons, often delivered by the same preacher. As Alec Ryrie noted, Jacobean congregations experienced ‘more hours of sustained oratory than almost anyone alive today’.<sup>50</sup> Gesture and delivery were seen as an integral part of the sermon, and congregations were not above critiquing it: many of those who made notes on the sermons they heard in the large pulpits of London included comments on the preacher’s delivery.<sup>51</sup> Good preachers used their hands, and expected their audiences to follow. When Tobie Matthew resigned as public orator of Oxford University in 1572, he said that he had performed the office ‘with these words, and with these hands’.<sup>52</sup> And audiences expected to be able to follow sermons from the physical gestures of the preacher. Jasper Mayne, a student at Christ Church, Oxford, reported that John Donne’s style of preaching and use of rhetorical gestures was so proficient that ‘we might take notes from thy look and thy hand’. Furthermore, Mayne recorded that the powerfulness of Donne’s delivery — his ‘speaking action’ — meant that just by watching him

<sup>49</sup> Oliver Heywood, *Life of John Angier of Denton* (Chetham Society, new series, xcvi, Manchester, 1937), 71. Many thanks to John Craig for this reference. Michael Braddick explores seventeenth-century concerns about gesture and religious decency in ‘Introduction: The Politics of Gesture’, in Michael Braddick (ed.), *The Politics of Gesture: Historical Perspectives* (Past and Present Supplement no. 4, Oxford, 2009), 22–4.

<sup>50</sup> Ryrie, *Being Protestant in Reformation Britain*, 361.

<sup>51</sup> Ceri Sullivan, ‘The Art of Listening in the Seventeenth Century’, *Modern Philology*, civ (2006).

<sup>52</sup> Bodleian Lib., Rawl. MS D. 837, fo. 80; William Roper, *Vita D. Thomae Moriae* (London, 1716), 143.

perform in the pulpit, students could 'bear away more sermon than some teachers use to say'.<sup>53</sup>

From the sixteenth century onwards, it became apparent that when preachers used rhetorical gestures in the pulpit, deaf people were able to follow their sermons. Felix Platter documented a prelingually deaf man who regularly attended sermons preached by Johannes Oecalampadius 'with great zeal' and who followed Oecalampadius's sermon from 'the movement of his lips and his gestures'. In the seventeenth century, George Sibscota reported a prelingually deaf man from Groening, who 'frequent[s] public service and doth, as it were, contemplate upon the words of the preacher with his eyes fixed upon him'. The deaf man took the Eucharist, since 'he hath that knowledge of those divine things' and was able to discourse 'very nimbly, by signs, anything whatsoever'.<sup>54</sup> Edward Gostwicke, one of two prelingually deaf sons of a Bedfordshire baronet, also regularly attended sermons, relying on 'zealous signs' to follow the preacher. Gostwicke was able to express his understanding of these sermons, when he described the mysteries of faith to his minister and local bishop.<sup>55</sup>

It is clear that deaf members of the congregation were following the minister's manual gestures, rather than lip-reading. For people who were born deaf, lip-reading was very hard and so it was only recommended for those who had lost their hearing later in life and, even then, certain languages (notably English) are very hard to lip-read.<sup>56</sup> As Bulwer noted, it was usually only those who were 'accidentally deaf' (deafened after learning to speak) who could 'speak and perceive anything by the motion of men's lips'. Lip-reading was most useful for those who could partially hear; sometimes people at particularly large outdoor sermons used a 'prospective glass' to try and follow an indistinct preacher.<sup>57</sup> But, for prelingually deaf people, lip-reading was of limited use. In 1680, the Oxford linguist, George Dalgarno dismissed earlier accounts of lip-reading, writing that although

<sup>53</sup> John Donne, *Poems, By J. D. With Elegies on the Authors Death* (London, 1633, STC 7046), Dd4<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>54</sup> Sibscota, *Deaf and Dumb Man's Discourse*, 44–5.

<sup>55</sup> Hacket, *Scrinia Reserata*, ii, 61.

<sup>56</sup> Helen Margellos-Anast *et al.*, 'Developing a Standardized Comprehensive Health Survey for Use with Deaf Adults, *American Annals of the Deaf*, cl, no. 4 (2005).

<sup>57</sup> Bulwer, *Philocophus*, 15.

prelingually deaf people might appear to be able to lip-read, it was rather that they understood the gist of someone's speech 'from a concurrence of circumstances' including the speaker's 'eyes, countenance, time, place, persons & c.'. <sup>58</sup> People who could read lips were reported as exotic curiosities: Richard Carew described an old man from Cornwall who had been deafened later in life and could 'understand what you say by marking the moving of your lips'. Carew noted this as 'a strange quality . . . contrary to the rules of nature'. <sup>59</sup> George Dalgarno thought that his deaf readers would only be able to use lip-reading to take part in church services if they could follow the minister in the service book. He instructed his readers to sit 'conveniently opposite the minister' alongside a friend, with 'a book before him, and one to direct him'. <sup>60</sup> Gestures and rhetorical signs were the best way for deaf people to 'hear', and rhetoric guides and compendiums of signs produced in the period helped to standardize a shared language of manual gestures.

Pulpit rhetoric promoted gesture as an eloquent form of communication distinct from oral speech; the gestures found in rhetorical texts were not merely mimes of the spoken word, but expressed complex ideas and emotions. In *The Arcadian Rhetorike* (1588), Abraham Fraunce echoed Quintilian when he argued that oratorical gestures should 'rather follow the sentence than express every particular word' and warned against miming 'parasitically, as stage players use'. <sup>61</sup> Furthermore, this emphasis on the eloquence of gesture explains why it was pulpit rhetoric that was such an important source for early modern sign language, rather than the existing (if by then dated) tradition of monastic sign language. Although monastic sign languages had been used widely throughout Europe from the tenth century onwards to communicate during periods of silence, unlike the pulpit rhetoric of early modern England, these signs do not seem to have played a significant role in the development of deaf sign

<sup>58</sup> George Dalgarno, *Didascalocophus: or, The Deaf and Dumb Mans Tutor* (Oxford, 1680), 36–8.

<sup>59</sup> Richard Carew, *The Survey of Cornwall* (London, 1602, STC 4615), Gg1<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>60</sup> Dalgarno, *Didascalocophus*, 71.

<sup>61</sup> Abraham Fraunce, *The Arcadian Rhetorike: or, The Præcepts of Rhetorike Made Plaine by Examples* (London, 1588, STC 11338), I7<sup>v</sup>.

language.<sup>62</sup> In contrast to the rhetorical gestures employed by preachers, monastic sign was mainly iconic mime (with vocabulary focused on nouns like fish, books, candles), and concentrated on expressing practical necessities ('Please pass the bread') rather than exploring complex ideas and emotions.<sup>63</sup> And of course, monastic sign had a very different function to either rhetoric or signed languages for the deaf: it was meant to prevent, not aid, communication. Although medieval satirists attacked monks 'chattering' with each other in sign language, Scott G. Bruce has shown that the most widespread of these monastic sign lexicons, that of the Cluniacs, was designed specifically to inhibit expressive communication.<sup>64</sup> Instead, it was the compendium of gestures and rhetorical manuals produced in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that fed into the development and recognition of deaf sign languages.

Of these, John Bulwer's works the *Chirologia* and the *Chironomia* (published together) were the most well known in early modern England, collecting together manual gestures already in use in mid seventeenth-century England. Prelingually deaf readers soon saw the benefit of Bulwer's work in formalizing a shared language of signs. Shortly after the *Chirologia* was published, Bulwer was contacted by a friend of two deaf brothers, Edward and William Gostwicke, who pointed out how useful this compendium of signs could be to help deaf and hearing people communicate. Bulwer did not create sign language for the deaf, deaf people (including the Gostwickses) were already communicating in signs, and his celebration of gesture as a powerful and articulate form of speech was already an established concept by 1644. The *Chirologia* (and its companion the *Chironomia*), however, demonstrate the significance of those rhetorical compendiums, which catalogued manual gestures, in the development of sign language. By

<sup>62</sup> Scott G. Bruce, *Silence and Sign Language in Medieval Monasticism: The Cluniac Tradition, c.900–1200* (Cambridge, 2007).

<sup>63</sup> For examples of different medieval sign lexicons (Cluniac, Fleury and Canterbury), see Bruce, *Silence and Sign Language in Medieval Monasticism*, 74–6, 125–42; Nigel Barley, 'Two Anglo-Saxon Sign Systems Compared', in Jean Umiker-Sebeok and Thomas A. Sebeok (eds.), *Monastic Sign Languages* (Berlin, 1987).

<sup>64</sup> Bruce, *Silence and Sign Language in Medieval Monasticism*, 70–2; Lois Bragg, 'Visual-Kinetic Communication in Europe before 1600: A Survey of Sign Lexicons and Finger Alphabets Prior to the Rise of Deaf Education', *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education*, ii (1997).

presenting a standardized lexicon of manual signs that could be universally adopted, Bulwer's works played an important part in the evolution of a formal sign language. Indeed, some of the signs in *Chirologia* and *Chironomia* form part of British Sign Language (BSL) today: as leading scholars of Deaf culture have commented, 'We may have in *Chirologia* the first description of BSL signs'.<sup>65</sup>

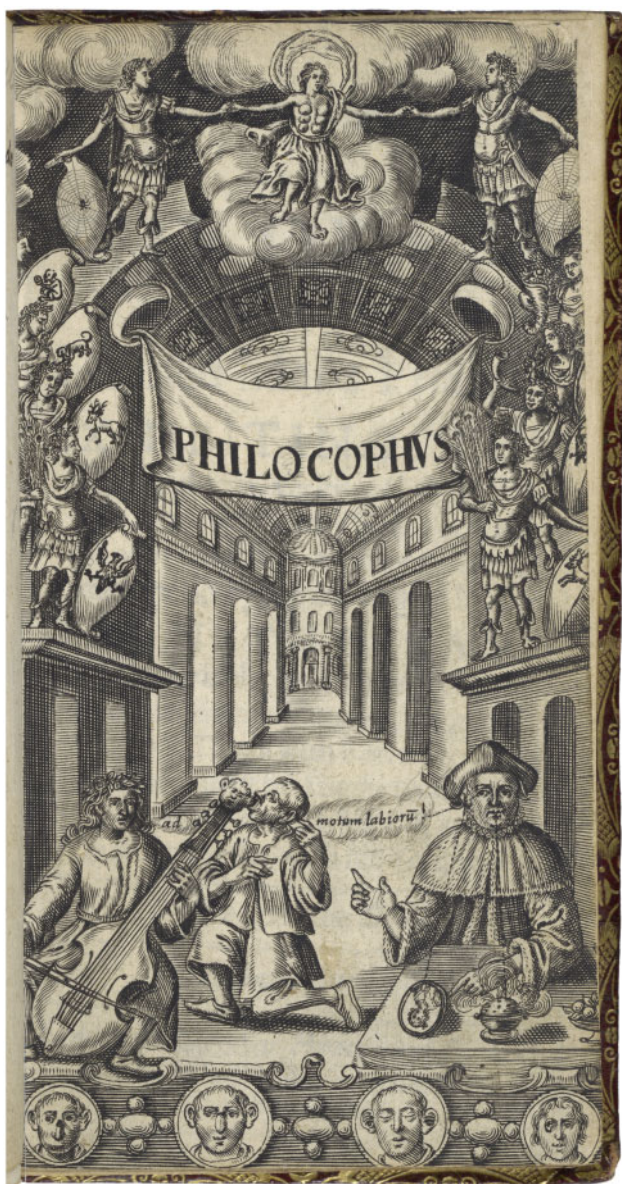
## VII SIGN LANGUAGE AS SPEECH

Bulwer explored the possibility of deaf education in his next book, *Philocophus: or, The Deafe and Dumbe Mans Friend* (1648), which proposed sign language as a way for deaf people to engage in the hearing world. Bulwer hoped that the *Philocophus* would give prelingually deaf people a voice — the 'Magna Carta of Speech and privilege of communication' — thereby giving them a legal status (see [Plate 4](#)). Bulwer's promotion of sign language was not an innovation, but reflected a process already taking place. By 1648 prelingually deaf people were using sign language to get married and take the Eucharist, and sign was increasingly recognized as an alternative to speech. Initially an ad hoc process, by the mid seventeenth century, gestures and manual signs were routinely used by prelingually deaf people to express both understanding and consent.<sup>66</sup>

Pulpit rhetoric popularized the use of manual gestures, and the development of sign language was supported further by a growing philosophical interest in the possibility of using gesture as a substitute for oral speech for hearing as well as deaf people. The spectacular collapse of political discourse in the 1630s and 1640s only intensified an interest in alternative forms of speech and the eloquence of gesture. In 1605, Francis Bacon had described gestures as 'transitory hieroglyphics', arguing that they were the prelinguistic root of language, and this encouraged later writers to look to gestures as a purer alternative to vocal speech. Philosophers and linguists suggested that gestures were rooted in a prelapsarian innocence. Giovanni Bonifacio contrasted the 'artificial' speech after the Tower of Babel with the 'truly divine'

<sup>65</sup> J. G. Kyle and B. Woll, *Sign Language: The Study of Deaf People and their Language* (Cambridge, 1988), 49–50.

<sup>66</sup> Bulwer, *Philocophus*, 102.



4. John Bulwer, *Philocophus: or, The Deafe and Dumbe Mans Friend* (London, 1648), title page. Image © Folger Shakespeare Library.

language of gestures.<sup>67</sup> George Sibscota later echoed this, comparing Adam's 'supernatural state of his innocency' with the 'confusion of tongues' following attempts to build the Tower of Babel.<sup>68</sup> Gestures, particularly those of the hands, were free of the limitations of human speech and better able to communicate divine truths. It was thought that God first spoke to Moses in the 'dialect of his divine hands', and Bulwer assured his readers that God still 'speaks to us by the signs of his hands' writing that, 'gesture is but a manual vision of the mind most conformable to express divine notions, which else would lose much of their lustre, and remain invisible to the conceit of man'.<sup>69</sup> As a result, some English authors became interested in the power of a gestural language to heal old divisions. Writing in Restoration England, George Dalgarno argued that it was impossible to lie in a gestural language, claiming that a person's 'posture, gestures, [and] actions of the whole body . . . lays open much of their inside'. These discussions of gestural languages prompted an interest in prelingually deaf people as native speakers of sign, implying that deaf people should be seen as different — rather than deficient — with a distinct language of their own, not a problem to be remedied.<sup>70</sup>

It was not, however, a straightforward path to the acceptance of sign as being a sufficient language in itself. Even John Bulwer, the champion of sign language, proposed (unsuccessfully) to set up an academy to teach prelingually deaf children to speak orally.<sup>71</sup> There was a persistent belief that deaf people who could not speak suffered a deficiency that needed to be remedied, and in the 1660s and 1670s two Oxford academics, John Wallis and William Holder, promoted oralism — teaching deaf children to lip-read and to 'speak'. It was a short-lived, and ultimately unsuccessful attempt, inspired by a tradition of oralism that had started in sixteenth-century Spain. There, Pedro Ponce de Leon and Juan Bonet claimed to have taught the prelingually deaf sons

<sup>67</sup> Dilwyn Knox, 'Giovanni Bonifacio's *L'arte de' cenni* and Renaissance Ideas of Gesture', in Mirko Tavoni (ed.), *Italy and Europe in Renaissance Linguistics* (Modena, 1996), 392–3.

<sup>68</sup> Sibscota, *Deaf and Dumb Man's Discourse*, 19.

<sup>69</sup> Bulwer, *Chirologia*, 144.

<sup>70</sup> Dalgarno, *Didascalocophus*, 5. For later expressions of this distinction, see Fulka, 'Deafness, Gesture and Sign Language in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century French Philosophy', 10–14.

<sup>71</sup> British Library, Sloane MS 1788.

of noblemen to 'speak' by using leather tongues and diagrams to train the children to form phonemes. Kenelm Digby's *On The Nature of Bodies* (1644) first publicized this work in England and although it was several more years until Bonet's work made its way to England, oralism was briefly popular among deaf educators. Many contemporaries, however, were dismissive of Bonet's claims to have taught deaf children to speak and to 'hear' via lip-reading. George Dalgarno suggested that Digby's account of Spanish lip-reading was, at best, 'credulous', and indeed there were eye-witness reports that the Spanish man in Digby's account had only appeared to lip-read, and instead that the people he was speaking to 'discourse[d] with him by Signs and Gestures, in the same manner is as usual with other Deaf persons'.<sup>72</sup> This did not stop Wallis and Holder from trying to emulate the Spanish example and in the 1670s they came to blows over who could claim responsibility for teaching a prelingually deaf boy, Alexander Popham, to 'speak'. Popham, along with another deaf boy who could talk, Daniel Whaley, were briefly a sensation, and John Wallis took both boys to perform at Charles II's court. The visit, however, was not successful. Whaley was hard to understand (and had been deafened after learning to talk) and Popham, from an important parliamentary family, was reported to be surly. Indeed, Popham's vocal skills may also have been limited since one of the key phrases he learned to say was 'I can not hear or talk'.<sup>73</sup> Increasingly, however, sign was regarded as a valid form of language, and as a result the deaf men and women who used it were considered to be capable of thought, understanding and consent. That attitude was seen in attempts to include prelingually deaf people in church services, particularly the Eucharist, and it informed the practice of allowing deaf people to marry; in both instances, sign language was used instead of speech.

The earliest recorded example of a prelingually deaf marriage took place in Elizabethan Leicester. The local bishop, Thomas

<sup>72</sup> Kenelm Digby, *Two Treatises* (Paris, 1644), 255–7; John Wallis, *A Defence of the Royal Society, and the Philosophical Transactions* (London, 1678), 20–1; Dalgarno, *Didascalocophus*, 36–8.

<sup>73</sup> Jonathan Rée, *I See a Voice: Deafness, Language and the Senses. A Philosophical History* (New York, 1999), 104–20; Peter W. Jackson, *Alexander Popham's Notebook: A 17<sup>th</sup>-Century Education of a Deaf Boy* (Feltham, 2012), 20.



Cooper, the bishop's commissary, and Leicester's mayor were all called on to judge whether a prelingually deaf man, Thomas Tilsey, could assent to marriage, since 'the form of marriage used usually amongst others which can hear and speak could not for his part be observed'. Following a consultation that included the councillors of Leicester, and 'the rest of the parish', it was agreed that Thomas could marry Ursula Russell, using sign language instead of speech. In an account of the marriage the church wardens noted that Thomas 'for expressing of his mind, instead of words, of his own accord, used these signs':

First he embraced her [Ursula] with his arms, and took her by the hand, put a ring upon her finger and laid his hand upon his heart and then upon her heart, and held up his hands towards heaven, and to show his continuance to dwell with her to his life's end, he did it by closing of his eyes with his hands and digging out the earth with his foot, and pulling as though he would ring a bell, with diverse other signs approved.<sup>74</sup>

The earliest deaf marriages were subject to close scrutiny. Not only did friends and family have to testify that the prelingually deaf person understood, those signs also had to be authorized by the authorities to be accepted as speech. A similar pattern may be seen in the marriage of Thomas Speller and Sara Earl in 1618. Sir Francis Barrington weighed in to help Speller, a prelingually deaf man, to get married at St Botolph's Aldersgate in London. The case went before Sir Edward Coke, as Lord Chief Justice, who 'allowed it to be lawful' and the couple were granted a special licence from the diocesan chancellor. As well as ensuring that both parents consented, Thomas Speller was instructed to use signs to 'show his willingness' to get married. Speller's ceremony was perhaps more sedate than that of Thomas Tilsey. Speller took Sara Earl by the hand, while holding his Book of Common Prayer and marriage licence in the other hand, and then 'made the best signs he could to show that he was willing to be married, which was then performed accordingly'. At the bottom of the entry in the register, there is a note that 'this marriage is set down at length because we never had the like before'.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>74</sup> Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland, Parish Register of St Martin's, Leicester, DE 1564/5.

<sup>75</sup> London Metropolitan Archives, Parish Register of Saint Botolph Aldgate, 1558–1625, P69/BOT2/A/001/MS09220, p. 87.

Several prelingually deaf men and women got married in this period using sign language to express consent and receiving licences from the ecclesiastical authorities. In 1631, a prelingually deaf man, George Blunt of Bridgwater in Somerset, was granted a licence to marry a widow, Christobel Cox, by Bishop Walter Curle. A few years later, both of the prelingually deaf brothers, Edward and William Gostwicke, got married, with Edward marrying Mary Lytton: a 'Lady of a great and prudent family'. Bishop John Williams noted that Edward Gostwicke could express 'his understanding, speaking as much in all his motions, as if his tongue could articulately deliver his Mind'. A later writer recorded that it was Gostwicke's fluency in sign language that had 'procured and allowed him admittance to sermons, prayers, to the Lord's Supper and to the marriage'.<sup>76</sup> In New England in 1661, a deaf woman, Sarah Pratt was married using signs, and Increase Mather later reported her story to demonstrate that prelingually deaf people were 'freely received to the Lord's supper', and able to be part of the Church if 'they be able by signs (which are analogous to verbal expressions) to declare their knowledge and faith'.<sup>77</sup>

These marriages reflected an increasing acceptance that sign could be used instead of oral speech in legal, as well as ecclesiastical, settings. In Henry Swinburne's guide to matrimonial law, *A Treatise of Spousals*, written before 1624, he made it clear that signs could be a legally acceptable alternative to speech. 'That which can not be expressed in words' he wrote, 'may be declared in signs' and therefore 'they which be dumb and cannot speak, may lawfully contract matrimony by signs, which marriage is lawful, and availeth not only before God, but before the Church'. Although Swinburne's book was published posthumously in 1686, he was an active member of the church courts of York until his death in 1624 and so this may reflect standard practice from the Jacobean period onwards.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>76</sup> London Metropolitan Archives, Parish Register of St Margaret in Lothbury, p. 229; Somerset Heritage Centre, Somerset Parish Registers, Marriage Licences 1631(3), fo. 19; Hackett, *Scrinia Reserata*, ii, 61.

<sup>77</sup> Increase Mather, *An Essay for the Recording of Illustrious Providences* (Boston, Mass., 1684), 294; Susannah Macready, '“Transitory Hieroglyphiques”: Deaf People and Signed Communication in Early Modern Theories of Language', in Philippa Kelly and L. E. Semler (eds.), *Word and Self Estranged in English Texts, 1550–1660* (Farnham, 2010).

<sup>78</sup> Henry Swinburne, *A Treatise of Spousals, or Matrimonial Contracts* (London, 1686), 203–4.

However, there could still be questions over consent and understanding. The father of George Blunt tried to avoid paying maintenance for George Blunt's wife and children in 1642 by arguing that since George could not hear or speak, he had been unable to consent to the marriage several years earlier. Blunt had now left his wife and children, and his father, Giles, claimed that the marriage was invalid. A sceptical magistrate described George Blunt as 'being deaf, but full of understanding', but still enquiries were ordered to be made of the 'Minister who married them, and those who were by' to find out if Blunt 'understood what he did when he joined hands with the woman'.<sup>79</sup> There was an expectation, as in the cases above, that Blunt's gestures were readable by witnesses and the minister and, therefore, could be interrogated.

The marriage of Thomas Tilsey, earlier than most of the cases discussed here, is notable for the iconicity of his signs. In later examples deaf signers were using signs and gestures that were distinct from oral English, reflecting the development of sign as a distinct language. By 1680, George Dalgarno noted that deaf people conversed in signs that 'have no affinity to the language by which they that are about him do converse among themselves'.<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, signers were able to express abstract ideas through their gestures, demonstrating both their intellectual ability and the eloquence of a manual language. Edward Gostwicke explained the 'mysteries of faith' through his gestures, while in Massachusetts, Sarah Pratt was able to discuss 'Adam's fall', 'Man's misery by nature' and her own 'experience of a work of conversion in her own Soul' all using manual signs.<sup>81</sup> By the mid seventeenth century, signs and manual gestures were widely accepted as a complex and articulate form of communication, able to express ideas independently from spoken English. It was an important step in recognizing the personhood of prelingually deaf people and towards integration into their local congregations and communities.

<sup>79</sup> Worcester Archive and Archaeology Service, Quarter Sessions Records, MS 1/1/79/18: 'Letter from Mr Justice Heath to Mr Nanfan and Mr Townshend, 1642'; Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, MS DR98/1652/20: 'Letter from Mr Nanfan and Mr Townshend to Sir Robert Heath, 12 July 1643'.

<sup>80</sup> Dalgarno, *Didascalocophus*, 3.

<sup>81</sup> Mather, *Essay for the Recording of Illustrious Providences*, 290.

## VIII CONCLUSION

The development of sign languages for deaf people went hand in hand with the emergence of a preaching culture in post-Reformation England. Debates about the salvation of deaf people grew out of the same concerns about the senses, agency and spiritual growth that dominated discussions about the efficacy of sermons. The emergence of sign language and perceptions of deafness cannot, therefore, be separated from an influential strand of Protestant spirituality in the post-Reformation church. The increased use and standardization of gesture was the result of widespread debates about how to preach well, and while it helped people who were deaf and hard of hearing to follow the sermon it was not always intentional. As we have seen, much of the interest in standardization of pulpit gestures was about controlling the ministerial body, reflecting anxieties about the pulpit as much as a desire to codify effective rhetorical gestures. Yet, those same texts were pivotal in creating a shared language that could be used by hearing and deaf people.

Academics have rightly seen John Bulwer's *Chirologia*, *Chironomia* and the *Philocophus* as important texts in the emergence of sign language, with several gestures recorded in the *Chirologia* and *Chironomia* making their way into British Sign Language.<sup>82</sup> However, as this article shows, Bulwer was rarely an innovator. Instead, he was documenting existing practices and assumptions about the value of sign languages already seen in liturgical and legal settings. Thomas Tilsey, the prelingually deaf man from Leicestershire, married using sign language over fifty years before Bulwer's work and the ability of prelingually deaf people to express themselves through sign appears to have been an accepted practice by the Jacobean period.

The Church drove forward a reassessment both of deaf people and sign language as a form of speech. Ironically, the increased focus on preaching as 'the ordinary means of salvation' in the Reformed tradition led to a close analysis about why preaching was so significant and scrutiny of why it

<sup>82</sup> Jeffrey Wollock, 'John Bulwer's (1606–1656) Place in the History of the Deaf', *Historiographia Linguistica*, xxiii (1996).


might not work. As Arnold Hunt has shown in his magnificent study, the emphasis on preaching prompted an outpouring of works on how to listen to sermons effectively as well as how to preach well, and it was widely accepted that even those who had perfect hearing might not ‘hear’ sermons. As a result of these discussions, ministers accepted that ‘spiritual hearing’, which was not reliant on bodily ears, was more significant than physical hearing; this opened the door of salvation and spiritual growth to deaf men and women. It also removed some of the distinctions between natural and ‘unnatural’ bodies, instead placing deafness and hearing loss on the spectrum of human imperfections experienced by everyone. Hunt suggested that some Protestant ministers took St Paul’s statement that ‘faith comes by hearing’ literally, seeing the deaf as being excluded from heaven. However, although their discussions on this topic often appeared contradictory, most ministers accepted that deafness did not prevent knowledge of God, faith or salvation.<sup>83</sup> This may indicate that Protestantism prompted a re-evaluation of the relationship between impaired people and their able-bodied contemporaries, with spiritual and physical impairments coexisting on a continuum of human experience rather than a binary distinction between able and disabled, normal and ‘abnormal’.<sup>84</sup>

This is not to imply that the early modern period was a golden age for prelingually deaf people or that deafness was widely appreciated as a form of ‘biocultural diversity’ to be celebrated rather than cured or pitied. The popularity of the metaphor of ‘deafness’ (and its frequent companion, ‘dumbness’) may have helped to elide the distinction between spiritual and physical deafness, but it was almost always used as a pejorative. Furthermore, ‘oralism’ — attempts to teach prelingually deaf people to speak vocally — continued throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, within the British Isles and in continental Europe. Yet, as this article demonstrates, in the early modern period many people accepted sign language as a form of speech and as evidence that prelingually deaf people were capable and rational. Throughout the period, deaf people were

<sup>83</sup> Hunt, *Art of Hearing*, 24–5.

<sup>84</sup> Hobgood and Houston Wood, ‘Early Modern Literature and Disability Studies’, 34; Bearden, ‘Before Normal, There Was Natural’; Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (London, 1995), 24–5.

able to be part of their communities, using their natural language, sign, to express beliefs, hopes and fears, and to assert their legal and spiritual personhood.

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## ABSTRACT

This article demonstrates that deaf men and women were integrated into early modern communities through use of sign language, and that Protestant concerns about preaching and hearing promoted sign language as a legitimate form of communication. Historians have believed that the Protestant emphasis on preaching excluded deaf people from heaven. However, not only did contemporaries believe that deaf people could be saved, but debates on this topic prompted a wider assessment of the nature of hearing loss and sensory knowledge. Discussions about deafness therefore had implications for all congregations, as English preachers used well-known manual gestures from rhetorical texts to make their sermons accessible for both the 'spiritually' and the 'physically' deaf. The experiences of deaf people in early modern England demonstrate the importance of religious practices in shaping perceptions of disability and impairment. By focusing on deaf parishioners, it is possible to explore some of the impacts of the Reformation on ideas of embodiment while modifying literary accounts of the representation of disability in the period. A little-known part of early modern history, the role of preachers in the evolution of signed languages for the deaf offers new perspectives on Reformation history and the growing field of disability history.