# Two Wills, Thomas Cranmer and the Musicality of Words in the Sixteenth Century

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[0:00] Well, thank you, and thank you very much for getting out of bed so early. A couple of disclaimers. I am not a scholar of Shakespeare, I am not a scholar of Cramner, and I'm not a scholar of Tyndale.

I am a historian, and I've been trained to look at puzzles and try to put pieces together. And this is very much one of those putting pieces together talks.
Harvey, can you hear me fine? Perfectly. Good. There are two reasons for this talk. One is I've had concussion for a year.
It was severe. And this is really my coming-out party. And the second reason was just before I got my concussion, I was sitting in church listening.
And we use a revised version of the Book of Common Prayer. And one of the things that struck me as a writer is that the congregation paid zero attention to the punctuation.
[1:18] It punctuated where it thought it should be punctuated. And it made me think, why? Why is this happening?

Because we have punctuation, and yet we ignore it. And that was the beginning thought, which, as I went through a concussion and couldn't use my computer and couldn't do this and couldn't do this, wriggled and wriggled and wriggled away in my brain.
Now, when Marco Polo came back from China, he brought with him all manner of things. Silks, porcelain, gunpowder, etc.
The most important thing he brought back was ideas. Mathematicians learned how to write algebra. This sparked a movement we know as the Renaissance.
A Renaissance. The rebirth of certain ideas. And in Italy, this is most seen, or most easily seen, through art.
[2:32] Italian art exploded with the emphasis on the individual. No longer were artists confined to the beauty of stained glass windows or images of the Virgin Mary.

They exploded into pictures of their patrons. In Germany, I think it's fair to say, the Renaissance was erupted into theological ideas.
In Germany, in the Lowcountry, we have this idea that the individual is responsible for his or her own salvation.
And when we get to England, it's pretty hard at first glance to see the effects of the Renaissance. And we have to look at the 15th century to understand why. In England, in the 15th century, war was a dominant thing.
[3:37] That's a dominant thing always. But back in the 15th century, it's war against France. And we get, we few, we happy few, we band of brothers, etc.

From Shakespeare's Henry V. We get the War of the Roses, which brings the Tudors as the royal family. The language of the nobility was French.
The language of the church was Latin. And yet, in the 15th century, we have a movement, which is English, which is patterned on the translations of John Wycliffe, and which goes from pigsty to barn to the occasional manor house, preaching what would become known as the Reformation.
That it's the individual who can access God. The individual can understand the Bible if it's written into English. So the ordinary people of England, in the 15th century, through these people called the Lollots, heard about the responsibility of individual salvation long before the Reformation became popular.

So therefore, I argue that in England, the Renaissance is not art, it's language. And from it, we get the magnificent, magnificent fluency of what we have today.
[5:12] But how did we get there? We begin with William Tyndale. I've spoken about him before. Some of you will know what I'm going to talk about.

Tyndale was born in 1494 into a family whose wealth was in the wool trade. That meant the family traveled into Europe because the wool trade was England's prime industry at the time.
They would have brought back the latest ideas with them from the continent. And maybe this explains why young William learned seven languages in his early years.
But it's his dangerous life work that I want to talk about. And that dangerous life work was his decision to translate the Bible from the Hebrew and the Greek into ordinary language.
His boast was he wanted the plow boy to understand the Bible. And the result would be the first English Bible to go directly from Hebrew and Greek, the first English translation to use Jehovah as God's name, the first English translation to take advantage of the printing press, and the first of the new English Bibles printed during the Reformation period.
[6:47] Today, translating the Bible into English sounds innocuous. In the 16th century, it meant death by burning at the stake.

It was heresy. Because it assumed that ordinary people didn't need the hierarchy of the church to access good God. It didn't mean, it meant you didn't have to pay lavish sums to have your soul prayed for hereafter.
It meant, and it meant the idea that an ordinary person could understand the word of God was deeply, deeply offensive.
Tyndale was exiled to Belgium. His printed copies, though, were smuggled back via the wool trade in packets of wool and circulated throughout England.
And you can imagine somebody saying, Hey, have you got the latest, John? I'll trade you a Genesis. You can... Tyndale died in Belgium in 1536 at the stake.
[8:00] Tyndale died in 1536 at the stake. But without his courage and conviction, our language today would be entirely different.

And why? Well, first of all, you all quote him, whether you will know it or not. The powers that be, let there be light, the spirit is willing, and the famous, there were shepherds abiding in the fields, et cetera, et cetera.
Tyndale gave structure to our language. The noun of the noun. The fish of the sea. And today, if you follow sports, you'll see that there's a huge debate rating about the word goat.
Goat. Goat in today's terminology means noun of the noun. The greatest of all time.
Is Federer the greatest of all time? Is LeBron the greatest of time? Tyndale. More importantly, Tyndale gave us our basic sentence structure.
[9:16] Subject, verb, object. The cat sat on the mat. Latin is a very convoluted language.

Let me give you an example. England, with its independent roots, does not, in its native form, have, wherever possible, what Latin, which can be seen when the need arises, brief, but being still, as so often transmitted, legal in its necessity, a complexity which escalates from a syntax which is basically subordinating, like this ridiculous sentence.
LAUGHTER Whenever possible, Tyndale used strong, monosyllabic language and verbs, I know that many today think the greater the number of syllables, the greater the learning.
The opposite is true. The PhD student can't explain what his thesis is about in two sentences. I don't know if he understands his idea.
We see students using thesauruses to show their vocabulary without understanding the word that they're trying to replace.
[10:45] As someone born and bred in the Cotswolds area of England, it should be no surprise that Tyndale's translation have a cadence and reflects that.

Listen to his translation of Genesis 3. Straight, basic, basic, brilliant language.
After the formation of the Anglican Church, Tyndale's words were heard and repeated every Sunday. Later, authorised versions based their language on his because it reflected the ordinary speech.
And there's an equation that I want you to keep in your mind because it comes increasingly into play. Coherence, leads to understanding and repetition goes into memory.

Nobody will ever remember that stupid Latin sentence. And they heard the voice of the Lord God. Yes. Now, two other geniuses would take the foundation of Tyndale, build on it, and that brings us to Thomas Kramer.
[12:30] Kramer. Kramer is well known inside this church and seeing there's an authority or two scattered here, there's no way I'm going to touch his theological warnings.

I'll give you a praises of his work. Suffice it to say, he was forced by Mary, Queen Mary, to recant his faith, had second thoughts, and when he came to be burned at the stake, he put the hand that signed the recantation of his faith first into the fire.
Brave man. And it's impossible for us to picture such a scene. I cannot imagine myself being burned at the stake.
I just, I've tried to put my head around and I just can't. But we have to also understand the world of Kramer. Change was as rapid then as we know today, and it was infinitely more dangerous.
At the beginning of the century, people went to churches beautifully decorated. Even the local small village church would have painted scenes from the Bible on its walls.
[14:00] By the end of the century, such things were gone. The abys and cathedrals were decorated with jewels set in gold and the rich left money for shrines to be built and so the priests would be employed to pray for them and them only after they died.

But in 1536, Henry needed money and his soldiers plundered and looted and destroyed. And thereafter, parents and grandparents would tell wide-eyed children about the world that used to be. Uncertainty was certain. Plagues would appear from nowhere and the mortality rate was sometimes as high as 70%, which would mean basically everybody but Lenore's rule in this room would be dead.
It's a concept very, very difficult. And one survivor summarized it as saying those who survive, everybody thought themselves rich.
There were times when a fire might burn down half of London or when the French or Spanish might invade.
[15:33] Surviving birth was dangerous. An English queen once gave birth to 18 babies and not one lived to be an adult.

So that was Cremna's world. After the birth of the Church of England in 1534, he was tasked with the job of bringing order into the service.
And like Tindale, he was a wordsmith with extraordinary ability. Like Tindale before him and Shakespeare after him, he wrote to bring beauty into language meant for the ordinary person.
The New Yorker described his writing in the Book of Common Prayer as acute poetry with balanced sonorities and direct intimacy.
Cremna understood his world. When people left evening prayer on Sunday nights to face the uncertainty of their lives, they took with them this prayer, Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord, and by thy great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of the night for the love of thy only son, our Saviour Jesus Christ.
[16:57] And when facing political adversity, people prayed that God would give unto his servants that peace which the world could not give love.

And by thee being defended from the fear of our enemies, we may pass our time in rest and quietness, comfort and certain hope.
A few of, well, just to give a small example, a few phrases from Cremna passed into our consciousness to have and to hold.
In the midst of life, we are in death, earth to earth, ashes to ashes. It was interesting, I looked up ashes to ashes, I couldn't find one reference on Google, at least on the first page of the Book of Common Prayer, got David Bowie, no problem.
And then the sad, we have left undone those things which we might not have done. Tragic words, which we say every Sunday.
[18:14] Cremna has a legacy that we don't often think about. In English literature, he was remembered. For example, 18th century poet, essayist, moralist, literary critic, biographer, editor and dictionary maker, Samuel Johnson, used his rhythms of speech.

Jane Olsen, brought up in the vicarage, grew up with the Book of Common Prayer and its cadences.

And it's not surprising that it echoes throughout her books and that she had great fun with it. one of the most easily seen connections comes from Pride and Prejudice, when Mr.
Collins makes his ridiculous proposal to Elizabeth and parodies the three reasons for marriage using the wedding service.
He begins, my reasons for marrying are first, that I think it is a right thing for every clergyman in such circumstances like myself to set the example of matrimony and his parish.
[19:32] Secondly, that I am convinced it will add greatly to my happiness and thirdly, that it is the particular advice and recommendation of the very noble lady whom I have had the great honour of calling patroness.

If you remember the book of common prayer wedding service, you'll get it. When speaking about that very noble patron, Austin Eckers Cramner and G.I.
Parker's love of triplets. Cramner, for example, all holy desires, all good counsels, and all just works.
And Austin writes that Lady Catherine de Bourgh sallied forth into the village to settle their differences, silence their complaints, and silence them into harmony and plenty.
Sorry, sir, I don't have an example from you, but I could have gotten one easily. Cramner's literary influence goes further, and it shows us our world.
[20:45] We look into the works of Samuel Beckett. Jane Austin felt comfortable with the book of common prayer. She could use it, she could laugh at it, she could do things, she was comfortable with it.

Beckett isn't. He uses irony when one of his characters asks, why pray if there's no hope?
In his play, Happy Days, 50-year-old Winnie, one of his characters, is buried up to a waist in scorched earth.
With no hope of rescue, she prays with words we recognize, for Jesus Christ's sake, amen, for Jesus Christ's sake, amen, world without end, amen, world without end.
We live in a world that has exchanged Christianity with a frenetic search for recognition and certainty. We no longer go to church on Sunday to hear words of comfort.
[21:54] we have made light shine so brightly that it has dazzled us into a blindness that no longer sees our surrounding darkness.

The comfort that Thomas Cranmer gave parishioners has been replaced by an incoherent longing and the gift of his certain hope supplanted by resignation.
If we remember the words, we could truly and we should truly play, lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord.
And so on to the most quoted and beloved literary figure from the 16th century William Shakespeare. And to understand my argument here, and the reason that I requested space at Learners Exchange is to look at an idea which I think may be original.
And I need to emphasize and re-emphasize two factors about the 16th century. And the first, and it's almost unimaginable to us today, that not going to church was a criminal offense.
[23:18] everybody went to church, everyone from the king to the lowliest of his servants. So every Sunday, they read or heard the words of William Tyndale or Thomas Cranmer.

the second is that the 16th century was in many ways a flip-flop between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism.
And it left the country with a profound distaste for further religious warfare. The Spanish Armada had been defeated, people sincerely loved their queen and felt proud of the old lady who had inspired them.
But in that world there were spies everywhere. Maybe three of you in such a setting back then would have been employed by the spy master.
Words were taken seriously, which is probably why Shakespeare set so many of these plays in Italy and has Italians say them, not English people. And this is also not to say that people no longer needed the comforting words of Cremna.
[24:45] When it comes to William Shakespeare, it should be no surprise that he makes sly jabs at the establishment through his Italian characters.

The number of scholars who've studied Shakespeare as anormous and I'm not one of them. The number of books written about him and his work would fill this church many, many times over.

It seems that every generation has a need to interpret and reinterpret Shakespeare to shape him into our image. One of the current productions of The Merchant of Venice has Shylock as the absolute outsider.
Shylock's confined to a ghetto, has to do all his business in the ghetto, and when of course he is offered a chance to better himself, it's why don't you convert to Christianity, a question asking him to give up his religion.
religion. His religion was more than that, it was his soul of Jewishness. And although we have that concept today, I'm seeing a beauty in The Merchant of Venice, which Shylock probably didn't intend.
[26:19] Shakespeare's also being derided as being anti-Semitic. he can't win, it seems. People, it doesn't matter whether they're buying houses or not, we have to put our own image into our world.

When we read books, we have to view them through our lenses. When we write a review, it's what we think, what we impose. And of course, social media has only emphasised our need to put ourselves out there.
So you wouldn't think there was anything new that could be thought about or written about Shakespeare. But, one aspect of Shakespeare seems to have fallen through the crack of scholarly discourse.
And that is, of course, what his audience heard when they went to the Globe in London. To a large extent, Shakespeare used three types of writing.
Rhyming Cutlets, Prose, Iambic Pentameter in his plays. In Midsummer Night's Dream, for example, the fairy spoke in Rhyming Cutlets, the bottom and his crew used prose, and the nobles used Iambic Pentameter.
[27:45] So, Rhyming Cutlets, for example, Puck's closing lines, give us your hands if you be friends, and Robin will restore amends.

Or there's Oberon's order to Puck. I know a place where wild time grows, where oxlips and the nodding violet grows, quite over canopy with luscious woodbine, with sweet musk roses, and with eglantine.
there sleeps Titania, and off goes the play. Prose, as I said, was usually spoken by servants, or by the very logical, rational people.
In Joy You Seize It, for example, Shakespeare uses Brutus to convince the crowd to the necessity of having Joy You Seize or assassinated.
So, brilliant, brilliant address. But straight after it, Mark Anthony steps up. Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears.
[28:59] I come to bury Caesar not to praise him. The evil that men do live after them, etc., etc., etc. And of course, which person does the crowd respond to?

The rational Brutus or the emotional friends? Shakespeare is very, very clever in his language. Anthony's lines were, of course, written in iambic pentameter, the main form of writing for Shakespeare.
And this is where I'd like to argue the most strongly that a 16th-century theatergoer had a tremendous advantage over a person who goes to a Shakespearean play today because they knew iambic pentameter.
Chaucer, when that opera with its shoulders, sort of the draught of much, passed it to the root. iambic pentameter, they knew iambic pentameter.
They didn't have to have it hammered into their heads by a hackneyed English teacher. And for those of you who don't know, an iamb is a group of two syllables.
[30:18] Iambic pentameter is two syllables times five, giving a line of ten syllables. the most natural of these iambic pentameters echoes our heartbeat.

Okay, so, listen. You do it, and then listen to the rhythm of Macbeth when he expresses his foolish hope in a delphic prophecy.
I will not be afraid of death nor bane till Burnham Forest comes to Dunsamein.
Got it? Basic iambic. Of course, there are other rhythms. Dum, dum, dum, dum, dum, dum.
And from the play, Wretched the Third, we have, Now is the rhythm, sorry, Now is the winter of our discontent made glorious autumn in the sun of Fort York.
[31:34] Okay, so here's a line. Let's see how you can put it together. Is it the first one, the second one, or yet another one? To be or not to be?

That is the question. So, any takers? Isn't that how it begins?
To be or not to be? So what's its rhythm? Oh, uh, and we got a brand new one, actually. We got da, da, da.
That. Shakespeare but didn't invent iambic pentameter. And of course, so many poets who served after him, such as John Donne, Batter my heart, three-person gods, For you yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend.
We know that holy sonnet. So I'm not arguing that Shakespeare invented iambic pentameter, but what I'm arguing is that his mastery of it is one of the reasons people went to hear his plays.
[33:01] People go to concerts to hear Bach. Some go to hear the melodies. A lot go to hear the contrapartical harmony because they understand it.

Contrapartical harmony is a thing that's gone out of ordinary existence. Understanding iambic pentameter is something that's gone out of existence.
Shakespeare's popularity was cross-status. The men who carried bottles of beer on their shoulders stood side by side with leather workers, tinsmiths, etc.
They and their bettors would have laughed at the foolish flag stuff. It was something like church insomuch as the links or the divides between upstairs and downstairs were blurred.
And I believe that upstairs and downstairs listened to what Shakespeare was doing with words and rhythms with the same understanding because they were attuned to the cadence, the lilt, the rhythms of language in a way that's impossible for us.
[34:20] Don't forget, every Sunday, they heard the words of Tyndale and the words of Cramner. Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord, by thy great mercy defend us.

It was in their souls, it was in their bodies, it was in the way they interacted with us. We have lost those memories.
We've lost memories of cadence. Our language, if it has a lilt, it's a rap of Drake, you know, there's nothing of beauty anymore in our language.
And in closing, this picture, which I hope is one into a world we have lost, I want to quote somebody who has thought long and hard about the dangers of modernizing the Book of Common Prayer.
And this is what he says, it is worth recalling what George Orwell pointed out in 1984, that the best way of getting rid of history and the best way of getting rid of thought is to get rid of the language of history and ideas.
[35:44] And yet, we witness a concerted effort to devalue the currency of those resonance words in the Book of Common Prayer. But who was it who decided that for people who aren't very good at reading, the best things to read are written by people who aren't very good at writing?

Poetry is surely for everyone, even if it's only a few phrases. But banality is for nobody. It might be accessible for all, but so is a desert.
It's hard to escape the suspicion that changes have been made to the cadences in the belief that the Word of God is a bit over our heads.
But isn't the Word of God supposed to be a bit over our heads? And so says the man who could be head of our church any day now, any time Queen Elizabeth dies, because those are the words of Charles, Prince of Wales, soon to be head of the Anglican Church.
And with that, I close. Spread the award. ■■ ■■■■■■■■ ■■■■■■■■ ■■ ■■■■■■■■ ■■■■■■■ ■.