Edmund Burke and the heritage of oral culture

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Abstract:

The dissertation proposes that one of the more fruitful ways of interpreting Burke's work is to evaluate him as an oral performer rather than a literary practitioner and it argues that in his voice can be heard the modulations of the genres and conventions of oral composition of eighteenth-century Gaelic Ireland. The first chapter situates Burke in the milieu of the Gaelic landed class of eighteenth-century Ireland. The next chapter examines how the rich oral culture of the Munster Gaelic gentry, where Burke spent his childhood days, was to provide a lasting influence on the form and content of Burke's work. His speeches on the British constitution are read in the context of the historical and literary culture of the Jacobites, specifically the speculum principis, Páirlamh na mBán. The third chapter surveys the tradition of Anglo-Irish theoretical writings on oratory and discusses how Burke is aligned with this school. The focus is on how Burke's thought and practice, his 'idioms', might be understood as being mediated through the criterion of orality rather than literature. The remaining chapters discuss Burke's politics and performance in the light of Gaelic cultural practices such as the rituals of the courts of poetry, the Warrant Poems or Barántas; the performance of funeral laments and elegies, Caoineadh, the laments for the fallen nobility, Marbhna na daoine uaisle, the satires and the political vision allegories of Munster, Aislingí na Mumhan; to show how they provide us with a remarkable context for discussing Burke's poetical-political performance. In hearing Burke's voice through the body of Gaelic culture our understanding of Burke's position in the wider world of the eighteenth century (and hence his meaning) is profoundly affected.

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consideration of Burke’s political fundamentals, for he was as devout as his Tory friend Johnson.