

American Society of Legal History upon awarding him the 2007 John Phillip Reid award for the best English-language book published the previous year in legal history: "Wiecek's volume is highly readable, displays a singular ability to distill and explain complex legal issues in an easily understood fashion, and has a clear interpretative focus."

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Robin Chapman Stacey, *Dark Speech: The Performance of Law in Early Ireland*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. Pp. 354. \$59.95 (ISBN 978-0-8122-3989-8).

This is the best history book I have read in a very long time. It is full of important ideas based on impressive research expressed in prose that is not dark but clear and amiable. Although its professed topic is law as spoken, performed, and written in early Ireland between the seventh and ninth centuries, the book explains how Europeans experienced laws, politics, and poetry in the period when they were still determining what it meant to be Christian, how to keep order, and how to make kingdoms.

In Ireland, unlike other parts of early medieval Europe, Christian kings had little judicial authority. Instead, a class of learned judges and jurists memorized, dispensed, and recorded the law. The texts they left were not the royally issued Latin rules of other kingdoms, but volumes of vernacular prose phrased more like musical scores: written symbols that cued meaningful performances of legal drama. Jurists, accusers, defendants, and witnesses played these scores in king's halls, on the green before churches, in farmyards, and wherever else they gathered to negotiate their daily business. In these familiar venues, legal professionals repeated the phrases and wielded gestures that temporarily transformed ordinary people into actors and normal conversation into theater, thus enabling folks to resolve their disputes and defuse potential crises.

Stacey explicates the legal dramas most prominent in Irish legal writings, such as distraint, *tellach* (the claiming of hereditary land), and sick-maintenance. For instance, when someone illegally wounded another person—that is, in circumstances other than war, duel, self-defense, or accident—the victim could claim housing, maintenance, and nursing from the offender during recovery. The victim moved to his abuser's home until healed. As Stacey explains, elaborate rules about the conditions of care turned the house into a stage for the drama of restoration witnessed by representatives of the opposing parties. A jurist governed the proceedings and, if the offender did not behave, helped the accuser prosecute a complaint. All this occurred in a tiny rural community where everyone knew everybody else—participants might be co-workers or even blood kin. But the setting and timing of the drama helped neighbors and kinfolk escape their daily identities and renegotiate the balance of property and power to everyone's satisfaction. What is more, the legal drama demanded a response from witnesses who were obliged to enforce the outcome directed by jurists.

Performance, Stacey argues, was crucial to the status of all learned and artistic classes in early medieval Ireland, including Christian clerics. Intellectuals not only had to memorize the concepts and principles of their fields of expertise, they also had to demonstrate their specialized knowledge in aesthetically pleasing ways in order to preserve their authority. While priests chanted Latin prayers and bards sang memorized rhymes and melodies, jurists rehearsed mythological legal narratives and performed in obscure judicial jargon. (One text even regulated the number of breaths an advocate might draw during his oratory, depending on the status of his client—the more noble a client, the more breaths allowed his representative while performing.) When legal scholars wrote about stolen cows or trespass, they used intentionally archaizing, difficult prose codes. (What could be more appropriate for a culture whose greatest epic was about cattle rustling?) Their clients and audiences had to work extra hard to understand this code and participate in the legal process. Thus mastery of language not only supported the mastery of jurists and helped determine the outcome of legal conflicts, but also drove the social and political hierarchies protected by laws.

Stacey's argument is more lucid and appealing than the prose of early medieval Irish jurists, but she doesn't shun the jargon of academic specialists. The book weighs in on some traditional disputes among Irish medievalists about the origins of the native legal class, the disappearance of druids, the religious transformation of the *filid* (professional poetic class), the effects of Christian conversion, the relation of oral to written culture, shifts in royal authority, the regionalism of legal schools, and the motivation for the great manuscript compilations of the eighth century. Although some of Stacey's arguments may seem like meaningless jabber to the general reader—for instance, discussions of Irish legal historiography or analysis of the prose styles of particular legal schools—nonetheless, her main points remain clear and compelling to all. Legal performances occurred everywhere in premodern Europe, she asserts, and Irish scripts can help us understand the relation of written to lived law in the premodern world. Instead of applying anachronistic analytical dichotomies to the medieval past—ritual/performance, secular/religious, written/oral—historians should examine the ways that people used, enacted, and recorded their legal words to “establish identities, assert hierarchies, engage audiences, and transform social roles” (249). In this book, Robin Stacey shows how the deep play and dark speech of the Irish can illuminate the European past even for those who lack a single word of Gaeilge.

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Michael P. Breen, *Law, City, and King: Legal Culture, Municipal Politics, and State Formation in Early Modern Dijon*, Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2007. Pp. xiii + 307. \$75 (ISBN 978-1-58046-236-5).

Using lawyers in the city of Dijon as his focal point, Michael Breen explores what the formation of the French monarchical state looked like from a local, urban, and legal perspective. Provincial capital of Burgundy and judicial center of the region,