

University of Theatre and Film Arts, Doctoral School

The Theatrical Features of the Minstrels' Art

**The Content-related and Technical Elements in the Performances of Medieval Irish
Entertainers**

Doctoral Thesis

Gábor Kovács

2017

Supervisor: György Karsai, Professor

In this dissertation, I concern myself with the pursuits of medieval Irish minstrels, focussing primarily on the extent of their contribution to the evolution of European theatrical culture, the main area of my research into the surviving textual and pictorial material being to find answers to the following questions:

Did the filis perform entertaining or ritual activity and when this or that way? How is it possible to set apart the sacral from the non-sacral during their performance. Were there situations making his lyrics non-mythical? When did his job serve as an art-in-the-background and, as of what time had it become a distinctive production of its own?

What rules governed the duration of their performance? When did the filis put on their lyrics, i.e. what time during the weekdays or holidays did a demand arise for their performances and, what events on specific occasions, like feasts were followed by the filis' productions?

In what manner did the performing practices change during religious or social celebrations? How did presentative expectations from the filis on festive occasions hallowed by the christian church and those preserved by tribal tradition deviate from each other?

Were there specially appointed places for the filis to perform at, e.g. in the middle of feasting edifices as indicated in mythical narratives or as per architectural evidence, the central space of the feasting hall, or later, during the renaissance, the balcony for the fili, or as an early theatrical space, a purpose-built platform? Were these locations supposed to meet special, sacral demands or were they defined by local conditions?

What were the characteristic forms of entertainment during the period under scrutiny in Ireland? What environment did the filis perform in, and who did they have to share the job of entertaining with? What was his status like as compared to other entertainers in terms of hierachy? Did other entertainers' exploits satisfy requirements vis-a- vis the accepted world view of the time?

Is it possible to identify references to mimicry, gestures, poses, tones of voice, movements in texts and in scant pictorial materials? What characteristics can be inferred from the prosodic, dramaturgical analyses of the lyrics performed?

The filis' role and activity can be investigated through contemporary sources. Following the carefully vetted writings dating back to antiquity and the documentary evidence of gossellers' confrontations, it was only after the 12th century that lyrical works and epical narratives

started to crop up, on the basis of which tentative conclusions can be drawn, knowing that the differences in recording oral and written culture were significant with the manner of performance conveyed by these writings only very metathetically.

Similarly careful conclusions can be drawn from the technical elements of better and better documented oral performances (especially story tellings) towards the end of the 20th century. Changing times are to alter audience demands as well. Therefore, these changing concepts of time and space, as well as the continually changing demands for elements of matter and manner had to be considered in our explorations.

The period investigated in this research is the one from the 12th to the 17th centuries, i.e. the time between the golden age and decline of medieval culture. As compared to general European experience, tribal institutions were to survive longer and more vigorously. Due to the early development of literacy there, sources were to record much more attentively than in other parts of Europe the cultural progress in society during the period surveyed. As a result, the activity of the group of filis (poets and minstrels) perpetuating shared societal memory in a scholarly fashion is far better documented than with other nations.

After the 8th century AD during the prosperity of Irish christianity, the filis were the sole representatives of the sciences within the learned classes (and the oral arts therein), acting as counsellors for the leading circles of the aristocracy, as guardians, carers, teachers and performers of tribal textual tradition. It appears that in Ireland the official representatives (priests and monks) of christianity having gained ground by that time, did not only tolerate, but also worked together with them. This is the period for putting down the Irish mythical tradition in writing.

A most inextricable riddle of Irish cultural history is why the monastic order recorded a large number of the texts of the Irish regarded as pagan, and how they collaborated with the filis cultivating the textual tradition in theory unacceptable for the cloth. How did the filis preserve the texts of the oral tradition, and how were they to be perpetuated in writing? Another question is what image can be gained from the oral culture of the period.

Buoyed as they were by the experience of rediscovery, 19th century scholars, and, proving deeply and dutifully involved in the search for the roots of ancient Irish culture, 20th century experts, found striking solutions to explain situations wrapped in mystery, 21st century answers given to the questions above appear to be less and less certain. Novel modes of

investigation into the recorded texts seem more and more to suggest that the literary creativity of monks steeped in Latin and Greek culture had as much role to play in the birth of archaic Irish texts as the filis cultivating the oral tradition.

Filis being part of the tribal aristocracy through centuries, their primary duty was the preservation and cultivation of tribal traditions in a non-literate society. The perpetuation of the oral tradition appears to have been taught at schools. The age of romanticism imputed a lot into the school curricula, imagining the filis as being well versed with, and disseminators of, all sorts of clandestine and esoteric precepts, there was and there still is very little to know what was taught in those institutions. The operations, curricula and teaching methods of fili schools have been known since the 13th century, thanks to which it is easy to reconstruct all the must-know of a minstrel-poet. Judging by some authentic descriptions one can easily see that of primary emphasis was the way of (per chance ad hoc) creation and memorization of texts, which was not a negligible consideration with performers.

As from the 13-14th centuries the minstrels' class appears to be splitting into parts with specialization of their ranks getting strongly underway, dividing the roles of court and vagrant poets and, sundering too the ones of poets, performers, tale-tellers and musicians. Due to this diversification, more and more technical features can be concluded to as regards the mode of performance. By the 16th century there appeared some pictorial representations indicative and also explicative of the system of gestures used and the forms of performances given. The first musical notes were to come down to us from this period of time. From the point of view of this piece of research, more and more interesting are to become the descriptions of outside observers, like those of the English.

It is rather hard to make out which part of the tradition still extant are preserved by the fili since the pre-Christian period. Since the 12th century their creative and performative exploits can be traced better and better. More nuanced has become the picture in respect of which parts of filis' profession can be regarded as innovative or conservative. Various European cultural features, new trends and fashions get built into the spiritual sphere on account of the tribal intelligentsia' heritage-preserving activity. Whatever fits easily into the filis' sphere of activity strikes root (like e.g. the troubadour's lyrical poetry), whatever does not can be found very little trace of in Ireland (such as e.g. the genre of religious drama). Thanks to the genre-loans, filis bear a resemblance to the troubadours or sometimes to the performers of courtly poetry, both of which are however attributed to the filis by the scholarly approach built on tribal

traditions. Hand in hand with the specialization of the filis' profession, their social position is differentiating too, with more and more of them squeezed out of the aristocratic circles and getting closer and closer to the non-aristocratic layers and bringing most of their acts to bear among them. Alongside with this, the subject matter of their textual tradition, together with their mode of delivery appears to be in a state of flux. They have more and more entertainers to compete with, and also brave the general taste of the public changing as a result of the spreading written texts.

The ensuing period is that of the disintegration of traditional Irish society. Despite the completion of the English conquest by the end of the 17th century, the tribal structure and social-cultural set-up of the society had not come to an end. The hereditary transmission of the Irish language culture had not changed much, as it had not developed a school system of European character of its own with the printing of Irish books still finding itself in infancy. Literacy among the mainly catholic Irish was not spreading as fast as among the protestant English or Scots. Therefore the publishing of books would have had very little sense bringing about a situation aggravated by Irish literati forced to make a living abroad as from the 18th century.

The hereditary transmission of culture is performed by itinerant minstrels(with filis and bards reduced to the same social status) as well as non-professional story- and tale-tellers. As a consequence, Irish folklore research was to hit upon a peerless trove of epic material, as well as a good few outstanding performers availing themselves of the traditional modes.

This thesis is a summary of the knowledge corpus relating to Irish minstrels. Quite often, I have not got beyond wording only the questions, as I have failed to find reassuring answers to them. My subject appears to be far-reaching. Should I have the chance to go into further detail, I would be able to draw a more nuanced picture of the activities of medieval Irish minstrels. There appears to be a number of possibility of investigating medieval pictorial representations and contemporary stories. The Irish corpus in itself appears to be open for further research and interpretation. However comparing it to the minstrelsy and performing practices of other cultures may call attention to the opportunity of drawing interesting parallels.