

**Christopher Reid, *Imprison'd Wranglers: The Rhetorical Culture of the House of Commons 1760-1800*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. £60. Pp. 288. ISBN 9780199581096.**

*Imprison'd Wranglers* argues that in the late eighteenth century the contexts and registers of British parliamentary debate were altered in profound ways by developments in metropolitan print culture, in particular the expansion of the daily press and the concomitant increase in parliamentary reporting. By the 1780s restrictions on the reporting of speeches from the Strangers' Gallery of the Commons were relaxed – at least in *de facto* terms – and for the first time politicians' words were carried to an audience well beyond the confines of St. Stephen's Chapel. Christopher Reid traces the various ways in which this rhetorical transmission took place; he argues that print, far from displacing the culture of speech, in fact generated far greater public interest in the debates of the House of Commons, and that the nature and function of parliamentary rhetoric was necessarily reshaped by orators' consciousness that they now addressed not only their colleagues but also a mass of newspaper readers. Of course, as Reid is keen to emphasize, these developments were subtended by anxieties about the difference between event and report, and a widespread awareness (not least within the Commons itself) of the transformations, elisions, and inaccuracies that inevitably inhere in the textual record of an oratorical act.

One of the chief virtues of Reid's study, indeed perhaps the reason it works so well, is that its structure gives equal attention to the speeches and speakers themselves – their strategies and imperatives – and to the manifold dimensions of the wider rhetorical culture that emerged in relation to, and served to inflect, political oratory of the late eighteenth century. In the second half of *Imprison'd Wranglers* Reid offers chapters on the education and character of the orator, discussions that both note the ways in which schools and universities trained upper-class students in the art of declamation as part of a pedagogy of public life and also consider the pressures negotiated by a speaker in the Commons as he sought to present and preserve the integrity of his gentlemanly character in the face of internecine party-political rivalries. There is also an especially compelling chapter on the practice of quotation; the invocation of literary texts, and of classical works in particular, Reid contends, was a crucial means by which cultural community and political alliance were created, reinforced, or contested in the Commons.

These chapters offer a much-needed examination of the period's political oratory. They effectively balance close reading and history and combine deep knowledge of classical and Enlightenment theories of eloquence with a sense of the long view (as references to twentieth-century speakers such as Thatcher and Enoch Powell evidence). And they are crucially informed and enlivened by the conceptual and contextual groundwork laid in the first half of the book. Here Reid considers the spatial qualities of the Commons – the way a speaker's position within the House gave meaning to his words, the use of gesture to mark or control location, the 'haunting' of the Commons by past speeches and orators – and looks in considerable detail at the publication of parliamentary debates. He tracks the various means by which speeches became printed texts, showing how the very politicians who complained openly in parliament about the reporting of proceedings were often themselves quietly furnishing publishers and editors with copies of their speeches; describing the practices by which reporters in the Strangers' Gallery recorded and 'constructed' texts of speeches at an historical moment when verbatim reporting was not possible; and revealing the cultural codings of the different printed venues – pamphlets, journals, newspapers – in which a speech might (simultaneously) appear. Reid's innovative chapter on the ways that James Gillray's caricatures register and relay parliamentary speech in a way that 'restores a visual dimension to rhetorical performance that is otherwise lost' (103) is especially welcome.

The potential peril of Reid's subject matter – as anyone who has spent time wading through the *Parliamentary Register* will know – is that it might so easily make for a dry-as-dust account unhelpfully encumbered by the dense minutiae of its archive. Perhaps the greatest of the many achievements of *Imprison'd Wranglers* is that it not only avoids this pitfall but succeeds in reanimating the rhetorical acts and contexts it examines. Reid's critically adroit history of speechmaking in the House of Commons returns us to the liveliness, theatricality, and excitement of the period's oratorical occasions. *Imprison'd Wranglers* will surely serve as the definitive study of late eighteenth-century parliamentary oratory for some time to come.

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