

Minstrels and Minstrelsy in Late Medieval England. By Richard Rastell with Andrew Taylor. Boydell, 2023. Xxix + 445 pp. £110

Up to now, academic literature on minstrels and minstrelsy in late medieval England has been less than comprehensive, and for good reason: the fragmentary nature of the evidence makes reconstructing the life and work of English minstrels difficult. Rastell's book is a strong attempt to do just that.

Social historians might bridle at the suggestion that 'the exploration of the circumstances of their lives and work concerns social history, whereas the more desirable end-product is the recovery of the minstrels' artistic achievement' (p. 228) but even so, along with his co-author, the literature scholar Andrew Taylor, Rastell combines both quite successfully. Despite his (perhaps refreshing) concession that the book offers 'no startling breakthroughs' (p. 395), Rastell is right to highlight the ways in which understanding the minstrel's day-to-day life increases not only our knowledge of their culture, careers and employment but also helps to flesh out individuals' life stories.

Rastell has completed a painstaking search of financial records in order to pull together the fragments of information which provide the basis for Parts I to III, which consider minstrelsy in elite households, urban settings and on the road. Minstrelsy was, Rastell argues, 'part of the under-lying structure of daily life' (p. 395). These chapters give us a sense of how far minstrelsy was a career with relatively secure employment prospects. Indeed, it seems that many royal and noble masters provided financial support to allow their musicians to travel to the minstrel schools that were held during Lent in the Low Countries, France and Germany.

In Part IV, the authors turn to more subjective accounts to supplement their evidence. Just how little source material remains from England is highlighted by the amount of substantiation that comes from Occitan *trouvère* sources in Taylor's chapters. Nevertheless, these sections rally the extant literary and artistic sources to consider not just what it was they sang, but how minstrels learned and performed their pieces. Rastell suggests, for example, that they might have used techniques such as playing in fifths to create music in two or three parts.

Throughout, *Minstrels and Minstrelsy* does much to debunk persistent myths, such as that of the minstrel manuscript (in which an itinerant minstrel kept his songs) or the existence of the 'wandering' minstrel. Chapter 11, for example, deconstructs the myth of the *séance épique*: originating in the late nineteenth century, Léon Gautier's claim that visiting minstrels regularly entertained households with performances of thousands of lines of poetry, reciting *chansons de gestes* (epic narrative poems) over several hours in one sitting, has proved surprisingly persistent, given the paucity of supporting evidence. Taylor convincingly shows that shorter, sung performances were more likely the norm.

This work will not only be of interest to medievalists. For those that work on early modern popular politics or popular culture, there is a tantalising description of songs of abuse being sung by the population at large (pp. 308–9), which might foreshadow the later scurrilous ballads which were the subject of repeated royal proclamations. Moreover, the examination of minstrel music in Chapter 15 might give us food for thought about the transition, if indeed

there was such a thing, from minstrelsy to balladry, and go some way to explaining the existence of some of the anomalous early printed part-songs.

There are a few caveats. In places, the text strays into (albeit well-supported) conjecture, but this is perhaps to be expected of a book which deals with such patchy source material. There is also, at times, something of an assumption that readers will understand Latin and French phrases, as well as technical musical terminology, without explanation. Probably more significantly, the structure of the book is puzzling, in that fundamental information, such as the description of musical instruments and the various roles undertaken by minstrels, does not appear until Chapter 14. This is a little frustrating as, right from the opening, it is these very instruments and roles that are central to the analysis.

Furthermore, the structure gives rise to a certain amount of repetition. Traditional co-authorship, rather than the addition of several chapters by a second author, might have brought together the sections in Chapters 10 and 13 which both describe the overlapping duties of minstrels and heralds. Nevertheless, Chapter 13 contains several fascinating accounts which demonstrate the importance of professional praise singers in preserving the details of battles or the memory of a knight's deeds long after their death.

This style of co-authorship also gives rise to some tensions. Taylor's chapter on minstrel songs frequently mentions the surviving songbooks often referred to as minstrel manuscripts. He shows that the material evidence hardly suggests that these artefacts were objects owned by penniless wandering minstrels, but as Rastell's chapters have already demonstrated, there is a difference between 'wandering' and being 'itinerant' – that is, having a regular itinerary or route which one follows. Rastell shows that liveried minstrels went on regular tours when they were not required by their households, often during the summer. Many minstrels on the road, then, were the liveried servants of nobles on pre-planned routes: hardly impoverished nomadic musicians. There is also an apparent dichotomy between Taylor's evidence of the lack of respect for minstrels as vulgar and immoral, and Rastell's evidence of their employment, and indeed status, in noble and royal households. Neither of these contradictions is fully resolved, although the second is recognized by the authors, and this is one area on which future scholars might fruitfully build.

Readers, however, should be in no doubt about the amount of work it took to bring this project to fruition. Rastell and Taylor are to be commended for the breadth and depth of this book, as well as for highlighting the many areas in which more work remains to be done. Indeed, they generously suggest ways in which those projects might be accomplished. The detailed accounts provided here will provide a secure basis for future study for many years to come.

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