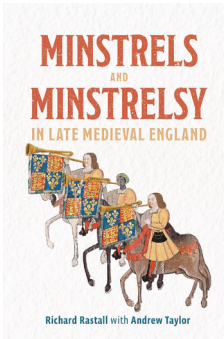


BOOK REVIEW

WHAT CAN WE KNOW OF THE MINSTRELS' SONGS?



Richard Rastall with Andrew Taylor. *Minstrels and Minstrelsy in Late Medieval England*. Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2023. 476 pp.

The story – at least the story I read in my childhood history book – goes that following his abduction, when Richard the Lionheart was held ransom at an unknown location in central Europe, his loyal minstrel, Blondel, refused to abandon hope. Instead, he wandered over Europe in search of his master. The minstrel would sing as he wandered, till one day in Austria, his singing was answered by the singing of the imprisoned King. Now Blondel could hardly free Richard alone, but the loyal minstrel did manage to instigate the campaign that finally led to the king's release.

So much for a taste of the lore surrounding minstrels – but what can we properly know of the minstrels who existed in the late Middle Ages? For minstrels did exist outside of storybooks, and Richard Rastall has unearthed a large amount of the most prosaic data vouching for their existence, such as the wages (and sometimes gifts) they received and the liveries they wore. For example, at the beginning of the fourteenth century, one Gilbert the harper received as a fee from King Edward I the income from lands in Chesterton, Warwickshire. Later that same century, in the reign of Edward III, we find even more micro-level data about payments regarding one Elias the piper: between the 19th of May and the 5th of August 1360, he received seven pence a day, but only got 4 pence a day for the rest of that year. Rastall has clearly done a very significant amount of digging in the archives, especially in the royal household Wardrobe and Chamber accounts.

Although Rastall, emeritus at Leeds, has worked on a variety of projects in his scholarly career, including the production of a complete edition of the works of John Milton the elder, the father of the poet, it is tempting to see this book as the summation of a life's interest in the minstrels, an interest signalled early on by his 1968 Manchester PhD thesis, *Secular Musicians in Late Medieval England*. This thorough and weighty book, nearly 500 pages long, which also includes 12 plates, 16 tables, 10 transcribed musical examples and 5 specially drawn maps, is divided into four major parts. The first of these deals with minstrels in elite households (especial the royal household), the

second with minstrels in towns (e.g. civic minstrels employed by the urban authorities), and the third with minstrels on the road.

In these first three parts, Rastall is simultaneously able to demolish myths (“the romantic myth is that the medieval minstrel was a wanderer, going from place to place as the whim took him, welcomed everywhere but constantly moving on” (p. 167)), at the same time as providing practical answers to questions such as “How far might a minstrel be prepared to travel to his work?” (p. 171). The answer he provides is that “a minstrel intending to perform at dinner in the early evening would want to arrive at his destination by mid-afternoon: so perhaps 20 miles was the furthest distance he could travel if he were to stay the night, or about 10 miles if he were to return home the same day” (p. 172). He also talks about the kind of hospitality that might meet minstrels who did not return home: “hospitality was ... an obligation of conventual houses. The accommodation might be a small, bare guestroom in a priory, but more likely a straw palliase in a dormitory or a pile of hay in a barn. In a secular household it could mean dossing down in a corner of the hall” (p. 183). All in all, Rastall’s expert combing and combining of the available data allows him to present a remarkable picture of the everyday activities of minstrels. There is also a touch of romance to be found from time to time, for instance in mention of minstrels’ brushes with the law (though Rastall claims that this was not as common as previous writers have suggested) or in the occasional duality of their role as being intelligence-gatherers, as well as entertainers.

And yet, what has made minstrels such an object of fascination for folklore-friendly authors such as Thomas Percy in the eighteenth century and Edmund Chambers in the twentieth (as well as for many of us in the twenty-first) is not such day-to-day questions as the wages they received or the miles they covered, but the poetry they voiced. And for people with such a mind, it will be the fourth part of the book focusing on minstrel performance that will be the most interesting. Rastall’s interests tend to the more musical side of minstrels’ activities, as the titles of his two chapters in this section (‘Instruments and Performers’ and ‘The Instrumental Repertory in England’) reveal. Happily, however, he found a collaborator in the shape of Andrew Taylor (author of the 2012 work *The Songs and Travels of a Tudor Minstrel: Richard Sheale of Tamworth*), who attempts to fill out the picture of the minstrel the book offers in his three chapters: ‘The Enigma of the Minstrels’ Songs’, ‘Professional Recitation before the Fourteenth Century’ and ‘Minstrels and Heralds and Chivalric Fame’.

The account Taylor presents is a sceptical one. Yes, various medieval texts purporting to minstrels’ performances survive, but how can we be at all sure such claims were not literary affectation? Yes, other manuscripts survive which scholars have proposed to be records of performance by minstrels (and their analogues), but how can we be sure these are not simply cases of the wish being the father to the thought? And if minstrels only sang for (part of) a single evening, how can they possibly have got through the thousands of lines we have in the texts in our manuscript collections?

A subject such as ‘minstrelsy’ (and perhaps even the word itself) is likely to generate wishful thinking, and thus to an extent the scepticism of the two authors is welcome. A remark such as “the actual customs of the pre-Christian Danes, Saxons, or other Germanic peoples may have borne as much similarity to those depicted in *Beowulf* as the customs depicted in *The Magnificent Seven* bear to actual life in the American west” (p. 286) is well taken. But I wonder if this attitude does not go too far at times. For example, Taylor writes: “It is now widely (but not entirely) accepted that the oral tags and formulae in the surviving Middle English romances and Old English poems, notably *Beowulf*, are actually literary devices and that the surviving poems bear only a remote relation to any minstrel or scop’s performance” (p. 235). But when we check the footnote supporting this assertion, we find it only cites, besides the earlier work of Taylor himself, a single book and a single unpublished PhD thesis. Taylor has the intellectual honesty to go on to reveal in that same footnote that his position is not in fact that held by distinguished scholars such as Karl Reichl and Linda Marie Zaerr. The latter has extensive performance experience with Middle English romances, and the former substantial fieldwork experience, and they are voices worth heeding.

Indeed, a closer acquaintance with the work of researchers of oral poetry from the last two hundred and fifty years would have changed the tone of this work. This scholarly literature is touched upon briefly in pages 281–285, where names known in our field, such as that of Albert Bates Lord, appear. But one would have hoped for a more thoroughgoing discussion of oral literary analogues that involved a larger number of recent references. For example, an acquaintance with Lauri Honko’s fieldwork from southern India would show a tradition where it is the norm only to perform fragments of an epic. His singer sang the full work for the first time in his life only when asked by a fieldworker. This is not evidence from late medieval England, but surely there are possible parallels of epic singers and fieldworkers now with minstrels and scribes then.

At times, Taylor seems to be finding his way independently to such conclusions, and at the end of his third and final chapter, there is a less sceptical note, summarizing what can be fairly said at our current state of knowledge about this intriguing tradition. It also makes a good note on which to conclude our review of this rich and stimulating work:

[Alongside the sophisticated chansons de geste, there was] a concurrent oral tradition ... preserved by people called variously jongleurs, gestours, disours and minstrels; their duties and art often overlapped with those of the heralds, and they probably included a number of amateur performers as well as professional musicians. ... This tradition bridged what might now be considered fiction and what we might now consider history. ... The people who told stories about these heroes were not just entertainers; they were historians, genealogists and publicity agents, and they retained this role throughout the Middle Ages. Their listeners’

knowledge of the history they were telling allowed the minstrels to perform short fragments ... and gave these fragments immense emotional power (p. 314).

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