



BOOK REVIEW

Richard Rastall with Andrew Taylor. *Minstrels and Minstrelsy in Late Medieval England*

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Minstrels and Minstrelsy in Late Medieval England is the work of two scholars with long and deep knowledge of their respective fields: Richard Rastall, historical musicologist and musician, and Andrew Taylor, literary scholar with an interest in the transmission of medieval and early modern texts. Twelve of the book's fifteen chapters are Rastall's work, drawn primarily from meticulous archival research; Taylor contributes three substantial chapters on the literary evidence relevant to minstrel performance. This welcome study, both detailed and comprehensive, surveys the current state of the field and demonstrates that minstrel performers played a more significant role in late medieval English society than is often recognized.

As a working definition of minstrelsy, Rastall offers “any entertainment in which music played a part” (xxiv), excluding the singing of polyphonic songs and acting in dramatic performances. In addition to the familiar picture of minstrels providing musical entertainments at banquets and festivals, the records show that they were rewarded for many other kinds of work. They could be charged with various civic duties. They might play for noble visitors before the holiest sites within churches and cathedrals. In large households, they might serve as night watchmen, or their role might overlap with the highly responsible duties of heralds. Their provision of “still” or quiet music to the sickroom might bring them into intimate relationships with important persons. “Waferers” made and served sweet wafers at the end of a banquet, and paid along with the minstrels, they presumably also offered some form of light verbal entertainment. A minstrel might be a “bearwarden,” the provider of music for a dancing bear. Often on the road, minstrels could carry letters. Female minstrels were usually dancers, as with the delightfully named Matilda Makejoie. Minstrels used their instruments to make noise as well as music: tabors and horns in hunting and hawking, trumpets to help a retinue or army stay together.

Most of the evidence for the lives and work of medieval minstrels must either be painstakingly extracted from patchy archival records, including domestic account books and local ordinances, or cautiously inferred from iconographical representations and surviving written texts. Among this book's merits is full transparency about the nature and limitations of the source material on which its conclusions rely. Both authors acknowledge how much we simply cannot know about these long-vanished performances. Reflecting the silence of the source materials, the first ten chapters record the wide range of minstrel activities enumerated above but say almost nothing about the music itself. As Rastall writes, minstrels played a central role in royal and aristocratic processions, and the sources “may describe the visual and verbal content of the procession and sometimes described what instruments were used: but the music itself, unless it was vocal, carrying a text, is never mentioned” (143). Chapter 14, “Instruments and Performers,” treats the probable sound, appearance, and uses of medieval

instruments, supplementing the sparse documentary record with evidence drawn from contemporary images and surviving medieval instruments. This next-to-last chapter might have been designated as an appendix and referenced throughout as an aid to non-specialist readers unfamiliar with the lesser known instruments mentioned. Chapter 15 surveys relevant literary texts and notated music for clues to how minstrel music was composed, performed, and shared among musicians. As with the narrative texts discussed by Taylor, the best guess is that the transmission of minstrelsy involved “a spectrum of activities” (372). Musicians listened to other performers, and they invented, improvised, and performed from memory. Some may also have had recourse to short or fragmentary manuscripts containing collections of tunes with small ranges, written in simplified notation.

Taylor’s contribution, chapters 11–13, undertakes the equally difficult task of relating the surviving written narratives of the late Middle Ages to what we can know about their means of transmission. As with Rastall’s work, Taylor foregrounds his sources, acknowledging their limitations and carefully drawing tentative conclusions about the role of recitation from memory, limited improvisation, reading aloud, and private reading in the transmission of medieval literature to its audiences. These chapters expand the book’s geographical range and timeframe, looking beyond the “late medieval England” of the title to works in Old English and Occitan.

Rastall’s collaboration with Taylor suggests a possible solution to a long-standing mystery: why do medieval fictions so frequently mention storytellers called *gestours*, *rymours*, or *disours*, when the account books mention them so seldom? In regard to royal minstrels, Taylor notes that the vast majority played an instrument, whatever else they might have done, and “a minstrel’s favoured instrument provided the most convenient designation for the book-keepers ... Any one of the minstrels identified as a still musician could well have included storytelling or chanting or singing in his repertory” (293–94). Harpers are well represented in records of minstrelsy, and they in particular were likely to have played their instruments as accompaniment to singing, chanting, and speaking. Although in the twentieth century a strong reaction against romantic fantasies about wandering merry minstrels led to a deep skepticism about the circulation of versions of the surviving texts in any medium but writing, Taylor’s “very tentative conclusions” suggest that performance by “professionals of various kinds played a significant role” in the transmission of certain types of chivalric works (311). His sensible suggestion is that we need not think of written texts as supplanting orally delivered narrative entertainments in the later Middle Ages; different forms of transmission can co-exist, as they do today.

Record by record, *Minstrels and Minstrelsy* extends our knowledge of the pay, travels, and duties of these medieval entertainers. Rastall frequently points out where more research is needed and occasionally offers advice on how it might be conducted. With its larger scale and more theoretical bent, Taylor’s contribution contrasts with the detailed archival approach of most of the rest of the book, but its emphasis on the limits and relative merits of the available sources harmonizes with Rastall’s presentation. Informative chapter titles and subheads lead the reader through a study that often relies on minute particulars, and its many tables present detailed information in accessible format. Boydell & Brewer deserves mention for persisting in the reader-friendly practice of placing notes at the bottom of the page.