MINSTRELS

The entertainers now known as minstrels went by many other names during the Middle Ages. They were *iuculatores* in Latin, players and entertainers, and *gleemen* in Anglo-Saxon England. Their most common name in medieval French was *jongleurs*, which became the modern word *jugglers*. Jongleurs could often juggle, but they did much more. They were the all-purpose professional musicians, actors, and players of the time and could be found at fairs, in castles, and in city squares.

A minstrel in *Beowulf* makes a stately appearance, singing heroic songs for the king and his men. He was a *scop* (pronounced "shop"), a composer of verse, not just a singer. He accompanied himself on a harp. *Scops* were honored and seem to have lived at royal halls, though some may have traveled. Traveling singers were known as gleemen and could have learned the songs and stories the *scops* wrote.

In Charlemagne's time, both in England and in the land of the Franks, there were not only court poets and wandering singers. There were also many other entertainers. They sang and danced, juggled and tumbled, put on plays, and traveled with trained animals. The *iuculatores*—players—were part of a tradition of singers, dancers, and clowns.

There were essentially three categories of minstrels. Musicians sang and played many different instruments, and, although they were ranked below the noble troubadours, they were at the top of the general minstrelsy scale. Next were the jongleurs and mimes, who could do nearly anything else. They did acrobatics such as headstands and handsprings. Some had puppet shows; others wore costumes and acted like animals. Some had trained animals; others had learned magic tricks while in the Middle East on crusade. These performers could travel widely, since their acts did not depend on a common language. A third group, the smallest, was made up of dropout scholars. They traveled with minstrels and used their learning to entertain. They were satirists and may have performed essentially stand-up comedy. They may also have been the origin of court jesters.

During Lent, all performances stopped. Some minstrels traveled to the minstrel schools in France, where they exchanged stories and songs. Royal minstrels received licenses to travel. Travel was very important for minstrels, since they had to provide not only the old favorite songs and acts but also new, fresh material. The minstrel school in Paris was the central place to learn new songs, but any foreign travel, even to another region of the same country, brought the minstrel into contact with different songs, stories, and tricks. Minstrels taught each other to play new musical instruments, and they traded their ideas for accompaniment and dance tunes.

Minstrels of all kinds used musical instruments to accompany themselves or others. The instruments were chiefly stringed: harp, lute, and various forerunners of the violin. Their music ranged from dance tunes, to bawdy tavern songs, to refined epics about the lives of the saints. They could also mock or parody important people to please the crowds; alternately, they could flatter great men to receive more pay. The music was not usually complex. It was restricted to refrains that could be more musical between sections that were recited as stories. The music also provided sound effects to go with the story.

Heroic stories, called *romans* or romances, were among the most popular. Some of the legends of Europe had their start in minstrels' songs; the singers developed new stories about well-known heroes, and in that way the legends grew. The three traditional topics were called "Matter of France," "Matter of Rome,"
and "Matter of Britain." "Matter of France" meant the deeds of Charlemagne and his knights, including the "Song of Roland." "Matter of Rome" meant stories about the ancient heroes, such as Aeneas. "Matter of Britain" meant the legends of King Arthur and his knights. It also included other early British legendary kings, such as King Lear of later Shakespearean fame.

A low form of romance was the popular ballad, a rhymed story in the common language. Robin Hood's legends grew out of the ballads sung about him and other outlaws. Other stories, contes, told of lesser-known heroes, knights, kings, and saints. The heroes of these contes faced troubles, wandered into far-off lands, and found true love. Minstrels also sang lais, which were shorter lyrical songs. Fables, or fabliaux, told about human weaknesses.

As their profession became more established, minstrels and troubadours developed fancier costumes that made them stand out. They wore brighter colors than other people, and typically they had short hair and no beards. The distinctive jester hat developed only at the close of the Middle Ages at first more as part of a holiday tradition than as part of everyday minstrelsy. During medieval times, minstrels wore hoods much like anyone else.

Minstrels performed at weddings and many other feasts. At royal weddings, there were hundreds of them. They performed in castles and great halls, as well as at public marketplaces and fairs. Some minstrels were attached to the service of a lord, at least for a time, and traveled with him when he attended a feast. At the feast, they entertained in public and were paid by the host. Good minstrels were paid very well by the nobility, and some aristocrats who grew addicted to entertainment impoverished themselves.

The most skilled minstrels were permanent employees of great households. The records of Richard the Lionhearted of England show that he kept some favorite minstrels for many years. They accompanied him to war. Later medieval kings kept large groups of minstrels who could form a small orchestra and put on plays. By the time of England's Henry IV, the royal minstrels wore livery (a household uniform) and received a regular salary. They were required to play at five major feasts, and most were to be on standby at all other feasts. One reason for the growth of minstrel employment in great households is that the common minstrels gained a reputation for thieving and causing trouble. In the early Middle Ages, minstrels were always permitted to come into any castle or manor, which led to abuses by enemies posing as minstrels. Increasingly, minstrels needed licenses and letters of recommendation. At the close of the Middle Ages, the English king Edward IV set up a guild for minstrels to keep impostors out.

Although the best were paid well and could find stable homes in the service of lords, most minstrels walked long distances in all weather. Many were poorly paid for public performances, especially if they had low skills or a lack of connections. Some attached themselves to parties of pilgrims to provide entertainment in exchange for provisions and tips. Some performed at saints' festivals and fairs. Minstrels were vagrants by nature, and, by the close of the Middle Ages, cities had begun to license and regulate them. In some periods, minstrels needed written licenses to distinguish them from vagabonds. The disguise of a minstrel was popular for thieves and others who wished to be incognito.

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