

The Minstrel School in the Late Middle Ages

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For Keith Polk

In the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries there existed a curious tradition among the minstrels, fiddle players, and trumpeters of Western Europe: once every year they gathered together from all parts of the continent in professional meetings known as “schools.”¹ These were not schools in the modern sense but international assemblies, the counterpart of conferences or trade fairs in our time. To organize such an event, or to attend one, was known as “to hold school”: *tenir escole* in French, *scole houden* in Dutch, *schule halten* in German.

Musicians who traveled to these meetings often received contributions toward the travel expenses from their employers. As they passed through towns along the way, or arrived in the city hosting the event, they might also receive welcoming gifts such as jugs of wine from the local authorities. All these payments and gifts were duly recorded in financial accounts, usually with a brief remark stating the purpose or destination of their journey. The minstrel school as a tradition is known to us only from these payment records, of which dozens have been transcribed and published in the modern literature; unfortunately they provide only an indirect idea of what the events were like. In the following article I propose to discuss a source that sheds new light, not so much on the schools themselves, but on their significance in late-medieval society which, as I shall argue, was considerable. Before doing so, however, it may be useful to summarize what the existing documentation has allowed us to establish so far.

Appendix 1 brings together the evidence for the minstrel schools as it has been published in the modern literature. It can be seen that the tradition goes back to the 1310s and went on until the 1440s, after which decade it was apparently discontinued. Altogether the list spans a period of 135 years; it is continuous in several decades, but there are also sizeable gaps, especially in the early fourteenth century. Taken together, these gaps add up to nearly half the total number of years—sixty-seven, to be exact. It is possible that there were years in which no minstrel schools were held, including perhaps 1350 and 1351, when the Great Plague devastated Western Europe and conditions of international travel must have been extremely difficult. On the other hand, several documents confirm that the schools were commonly understood to be annual events: “chascun an quant il font leur escolle” (1385), “aux escolles . . . que chacun an ilz on acoustumé d’aler” (1426, also 1427 and 1429). Probably, then, the evidence we have gives us only half of the picture—and this is assuming that the tradition started in 1313 and no earlier. When it comes to the question of origins, it would not be surprising if the first schools had been organized already in the late thirteenth century, coinciding with the emergence of urban minstrel guilds in France and elsewhere.²

Minstrel schools were held in the season of Lent, more specifically around *kermis* or *miquaresme*, that is, the fourth Sunday of Lent, known as *Letare* Sunday. References are numerous: “bachten caermers in de vasten” (“after *kermis* in the fasting period,” 1318), “en ce present karesme” (1369), “in der fastenmesse” (1376), “tempore quadragesimali” (1377), “au miquaresme” (1385 and 1386), and so on. Lent was the one season during which employers could grant leaves of absence to their minstrels as a body, evidently because daily musical entertainment was out of keeping with the spirit of penitence and abstention observed in the weeks before Easter. The Thursday before *Letare* marked the midpoint of the forty-day fast; to organize the minstrel schools around this time made good sense for two reasons. First, musicians coming from distant regions had as much time to travel before as after the event—at least sixteen days or so. Second, *Letare* Sunday was a time at which the church traditionally permitted special signs of joy, to encourage the faithful in their course through the penitential season; in many folk traditions it was celebrated as a special feast day. This allowed the minstrels to give festive expression to their professional solidarity even in the midst of Lent. The festive nature of the minstrel schools is emphasized in two documents, which refer to these occasions as “meeting and feast” (“feste et assemblée,” 1400; “vergaderinghe ende feeste,” 1447).

Minstrel schools were held in cities, not at the courts: one assumes that they were organized and hosted by urban minstrel guilds and confraternities. There appears to have been a system of rotation between towns, for it seldom happens that a minstrel school was held in the same place in successive years; in some years, incidentally, schools are documented in more than one locale. Most of the towns listed in the Appendix are in France; in the Middle Ages this included the county of Flanders, which is represented here by Ypres, Bruges, Ghent, Damme, and Saint-Omer. The emphasis seems to have been generally on cities in northern France, including Valenciennes, Cambrai, and Beauvais, though this may be a reflection of the poor state of documentary survival. It is hard to imagine that such cities as Paris, Arras, Rouen, or Reims would never have hosted minstrel schools, even though there appears to be no evidence to tell us otherwise. As for the Holy Roman Empire, only one school can be documented in the Rhineland (Frankfurt, 1376), and none further east or south. All others are in the German parts of the Low Countries: Namur, Mechlin, Mons, and Brussels, as well as a lone outpost in northern Hanse territory, Deventer.

Participating minstrels came from far and wide, traveling in some cases by sea (from England in 1335 and 1377) or across mountainous regions (from Spain between 1352 and 1415). What motivated musicians to undertake these long and hazardous journeys in the heart of winter? The documents tell us that they were sometimes sent by their employers: “de nostro mandato” (1374), “monseigneur les avoit envoiez” (1377), “jussu nostro” (1379), “de manament nostre” (1383). Other texts suggest that they were granted leave and given travel support in deference to longstanding professional tradition: “comme il est acoustumé” (1385, also 1414), “ainsy qu’ils ont acoustumé” (1417), “qu’ilz ont acoustumé d’aler chacun an” (1426 and 1427). Occasionally the documents mention more concrete reasons for the journey. In one case it is to recruit new minstrels (1389); in others to purchase new instruments (1378, 1383, 1386, 1389). Yet another reason is to learn the craft (1352,

