

Book Reviews

THE WORLD UPSIDE-DOWN: ENGLISH MISERICORDS. Christa Grössinger. 1997. Illustrated. Harvey Miller Publishers, London, £38 (hbk), £18 (pbk). ISBN 1-872501-98-2 (hb); 1-872501-64-8 (pb)

It is nearly thirty years since the publication of G.L. Remnant's now quite rare standard work, *A Catalogue of Misericords in Great Britain*, so the publication of a major new book on the subject by one of the foremost misericord experts, Dr Christa Grössinger, is welcome news, indeed. Not that Dr Grössinger aims to replace Remnant's work, though. 'It is my aim to write more comprehensively on English misericords, uniting the scholarly and more popular aspects — probably an impossible task!', as she writes in her Preface, adding that the main emphasis is on iconography. The result is a book that deals with an enormous variety of misericords all over England, from cathedrals to village churches never previously mentioned, according to the author.

The first striking characteristic of the book is its wealth of illustrations, almost all of wonderful quality, which makes it a valuable visual resource. The photographs offer excellent comparisons between representations of the same theme in different churches, such as the sow playing the bagpipes at Beverley Minster and Ripon and Manchester Cathedrals (plates 80-82), or the meeting between Tristan and Isolde at Lincoln and Chester Cathedrals (plates 222-223). Prints and drawings, such as the two views of choir-stalls by Villard de Honnecourt of c. 1235, also provide additional information or serve to illustrate comparisons between misericords and their possible patterns, e.g. Israhel van Meckenem's engraving of the 'Rabbits' Revenge' and a misericord of the same subject at Manchester Cathedral (plates 99-100).

One problem, however, may have been Dr Grössinger's very aim at comprehensiveness. The book is absolutely crammed with information, descriptions and examples, which does not make for easy reading, especially when the reader has to look elsewhere in the book to find illustrations on which the text

often relies quite heavily. Another problem is the structure of the book, which was clearly adopted to help present the material in a logical way. After an extensive introduction, Part I (only indicated as such in the table of contents) deals with both the historical and cultural background and a discussion of general themes; particularly interesting information can be found in chapters 1 ('The Carvers and their Workshops') and 2 ('Misericords and their Models'). The lay-out of the text changes for the much shorter Part II, in which Dr Grössinger discusses the iconography of certain themes, although it really seems more like a continuation of the discussion of themes in Part I (chapters 3-8). Overlap between the two parts, and between different chapters, has not always been avoided nor do the headings adequately describe the contents in every case; for example, the chapter on 'Preaching' (Part I), is mostly about the story of Reynard the Fox. The insertion of certain themes under specific headings is also at times somewhat awkward, like 'Natural fauna and flora' as a separate section in the chapter on the Bestiary, or a long section on 'The Wild Man' at the beginning of the chapter on 'The World of Chivalry' (both in Part II), and some chapters end rather abruptly.

The captions to the illustrations are often quite extensive, making for interesting perusal by themselves, although there are occasional discrepancies between the descriptions in the captions and those in the main text. Thus, the Manchester misericord of the 'Rabbits' Revenge' (p. 67 and plate 99) is described on p. 85 as 'Hares roast a hunter', while a stall elbow at St Botolph in Boston is described as 'a man, with his dog and carrying a bag over his shoulder, arriving before the city gates' in the caption (plate 34) and as 'a beggar with a begging bowl' in the main text (p. 31). The caption to plate 210 describes 'a mermaid piping to the sailors' at St Botolph, Boston, yet the main text claims that this is 'the bird-siren who causes the sailors' downfall' (p. 140), in clear contrast to the illustration itself. In another case (plate 216), the caption describes a misericord as showing juniper foliage and berries although it is actually the grape-vine mentioned in the main text. The discussion of patterns is not always convincing either; the elephant at Exeter Cathedral is explained as the carver having possibly seen a drawing from life by Matthew Paris (caption to plate 202) or probably based on a pattern similar to Matthew Paris' drawing (main text, p. 137), and one might also doubt whether Thielmann Kerver's woodcut was really the actual model used in reverse(!) by the Bristol carver (plates 104-105). There are a few annoying misprints and inaccuracies, like 'Aarschoot' for 'Aarschot', incorrect and confusing italicisation of 'St Lawrence' (p. 129), a demon named 'Secundus' (instead of just the second devil) in the Chester Cycle (p. 81), or the listing of the four humours as blood, phlegm, choler and *melancholy* instead of black bile (p.109). Some errors and inconsistencies may be hard to avoid in a book written over a longer period but, clearly, the author could have been better served by a more meticulous text-editor.

The footnotes are few and generally brief, which will no doubt suit the general reader although scholars may well wish for more. Page numbers throughout the book would also have been preferable; instead, the running header has been omitted where it might interfere with the illustrations, which can leave up to five consecutive pages unnumbered and the reader quite frustrated. The index is not always reliable, while chronological and subject listings of misericords might have been helpful, but there is a location map of misericords mentioned in the text as well as a useful (though not complete) bibliography.

For all its shortcomings, this book is evidence of great enthusiasm for misericords, and with its lavish illustrations and wide-ranging information it must be a welcome addition to the literature on this fascinating subject.

SOPHIE OOSTERWIJK

GROWING OLD IN THE MIDDLE AGES. Shulamith Shahar. Translated from the Hebrew by Yael Lotan. First English Edition 1997. Routledge Ltd, London and New York, £45.

ISBN 0-41514-126-5

Why is this book uninteresting? The author has written a book on women which taught me much; the book under review taught me nothing. There are a possible three reasons for the book's failure to please and instruct. The first is that the reviewer has just been able to purchase his Senior Citizen's Railcard, and that Bruce McFarlane on being asked what compensations there were in Old Age promptly and unchallengeably replied: none. Secondly, is Old Age a subject worth writing about? Or, rather is Medieval Old Age really a subject at all? Is it not a very modern concept, a very fashionable one as Gerontology Departments proliferate at our universities, more the modern than the medieval ones, and the elderly become a drag on national resources? What perturbs me about the book is the amount of contemporary psychology, anthropology, and sociology in it. It is not only a comparison with baboon communities, current cant about the body, and the view of the elderly as post-cultured which disturb me, it is the whole business of Anxiety Theory as applied to the Middle Ages that is weird. I do not believe God the Father only became an old man at the Renaissance, nor that Mary was more than fifty when her eldest son was killed. Anxiety about an old body being repellent is very twentieth century; all the anxiety before the Renaissance was about the soul becoming so. Thirdly, too many conclusions about the role of the old in medieval societies are incorrect. If men did become marginalized in peasant (and working-class urban) cultures as they became physically incapacitated after years of back-breaking and knee-debilitating labour, among the ruling elites old

popes, old doges, as well as old soldiers went on until they dropped. The author is clear enough on all that. It is where women are concerned that I feel she seems not to have read the *Montaillou* I have. Women in polite society always have been shoved into the background, unless and until men needed them to be foregrounded. Even then that is more theory than practice: we all know about Jewish Mothers, Alice Chaucer, a variety of queens, and a whole host of feminine saints — some of them growing old in an odour of respect as well as sanctity. In peasant cultures, however, at any rate in Montaillou around 1300, as women grew old they grew powerful; those *babushkas* were the repositories of all the knowledge which did not relate to field-work. Formal education for boys destroyed such prestige, but that is a Modern Matter. I am aware of male resentment at the wisdom of old women. That too is closely connected to Modernity, because it arises first among educated men in towns, as Richard Kieckhefer and Robert Lerner taught us many years ago: Wild Women and Witches are figments of the intellectual male imagination, and whatever contribution monasticism made to that fantasy world, it was largely the product of what was regarded as forward-thinking in medieval or early modern Western Europe. I will end on a less sour note. It is good to know that it was in two of the most sophisticated, and therefore most careless, cities of medieval Western Europe, that compassion for decrepit senior citizens is to be found; the guild of Parisian cooks had a special fund to provide for 'the old men of the craft who lost their standing owing to a [failed] transaction, or old age', and the guild of Venetian wall-crack fillers and carpenters 'succeeded in forcing their employers to hire, for every six artisans, one of their veteran colleagues who was over 55.' I write in what will be my last week spent following the profession of university teacher; my guild has done rather less for me than the Venetian Guild of Wall-Crack Fillers did for its ageing members. Better to be an old medieval wall-crack filler than an old modern university professor it seems.

COLIN RICHMOND

MEDIEVAL DEATH: RITUAL AND REPRESENTATION. Paul Binski. 1996. London, British Museum Press, £25.

ISBN 0-7141-0561-9

DEATH AND BURIAL IN MEDIEVAL ENGLAND 1066-1550. Christopher Daniell. 1997. London, Routledge, £35.

ISBN 0-415-11629-5

These two books essentially cover similar subject matter but each is written from a different standpoint. Paul Binski's book is that of a cultural historian and is addressed both to the general reader and the student. He states at the outset that the

book that he intended to write originally would have dealt with religion between the late Roman Empire and the Reformation. Elements of this have survived into the present volume by way of references to classical iconography and the work is richer thereby.

Binski's primary concern is with the imagery of death, funerary belief and ritual. Accordingly the work is illustrated lavishly, chiefly with black and white photographs but there are also eight colour plates. Owing to the great time span involved in the venture most of the illustrations are drawn from earlier periods; nonetheless about one-third come from the fifteenth century.

In the chapter dealing with ways of dying there is a discussion of the allied medieval concepts of 'the Good Death' and 'the Bad Death,' drawing upon late medieval wills, quotations from such admonishments as the *Ars moriendi* and the *Tractatus artis bene moriendi*, illuminations in Books of Hours and woodcuts. Moving on to the consequences of death attention is drawn to the 'Politics of the Body' (a heading contrived one suspects in order to introduce a pun on 'The Body Politic'). Choice of burial place is explored and hence the historical, liturgical and political attitudes toward burial within the church itself. This is followed by a commentary upon the haphazard practice of surgical sub-division of the body, with prestigious burial of its various parts in separate religious foundations.

Although 'burial' does not feature in the title it is implicit throughout and comes into its own in the mid-section of the book, with a digression on the motives for the public display of the corpse of a prominent person and an elegant discussion of the medieval tomb as a concrete symbol of 'selfhood' and space. This leads coherently to chantry chapels and other aspects of what the author calls the 'Cult of Memory' such as bedesmen, obsequies and anniversaries.

With 'The Macabre' Binski makes common cause with Daniell, dealing with the powerful imagery of 'the Three Living and the Three Dead' and the Dance of Death. In the latter period this leads to the invocation of the *Disputacione betwyx the Body and Wormes* and the curious linked European gothic phenomenon of the *transi* or cadaver tomb. In the final chapter the great issues of Heaven, Hell, Purgatory and the Resurrection are confronted with their attendant iconography.

It is the author's intention that the bibliography is of unusual format. Rather than direct the reader to specific primary sources Binski merely provides a reading list for each chapter, an arrangement that his former students had found preferable. This can prove frustrating however. Anyone who wishes to check a particular point or seeks a specific reference for further information will be disappointed.

Christopher Daniell of the York Archaeological Trust by contrast attempts an 'interdisciplinary' approach to the perceived need for a general study of death and burial in England during the Middle Ages. Thus, while his themes necessarily run in parallel to those of Paul Binski emphasis and exemplification differ somewhat.

In 'From Death-bed to Remembrance, he provides a detailed description of late medieval funerals, drawing upon those of Elizabeth of York and Henry VII and quoting extensively from the Stonor and Paston Letters. His illustrations are sparse and are limited to such rarities as the iron hearse over the tomb of Sir John Marmion at West Tanfield, Yorkshire (the only other surviving example, in the Beauchamp Chapel at Warwick, being better known).

In the chapter entitled 'The Geography of Burial' he goes beyond Binski in exploring the freedom of choice of burial place by analysing 4,700 wills dating from between 1389 and 1475 in the diocesan exchequer court of York. Where a wish is expressed it was for burial within the church building, usually specifying the choir or before the high altar. As Vanessa Harding described earlier from London wills of similar date burial near the pre-deceased spouse or other family members is frequently specified. Also in this chapter Daniell expresses the medieval abhorrence of death by drowning (a *bad* death) or of burial at sea, especially in secret. The latter is exemplified spectacularly by the alternative version(s) of the final resting place for Edward V and his brother Richard published later in Rastell's *Pastyme of People*. Their bodies weighed down with chains, were placed in a chest (itself weighted down with ballast) and were buried in the 'Black Depes' during a voyage to Flanders. Alternatively, they were enticed into the said chest and buried alive in a pit under stairs, later to be exhumed and thrown into the sea.

In 'The Bodily Evidence' Daniell provides a lengthy chapter on the archaeology of burial, summarising recent discoveries in medieval cemeteries excavated or within churches and cathedrals. The subsequent chapter 'Cemeteries and Grave Goods' is also a new departure. There is a great deal of information on the technology and furniture of English medieval burials. Various types of tombs and coffins are described as well as certain peculiarly English practices as packing the burial with charcoal or powdered chalk, providing the head with a stone 'pillow' or covering the body with a layer of stones or tiles. 'Grave Goods' in the christian context are usually the tools of the trade, such as the croziers found in the coffins of bishops or the pewter chalices and pattens in the graves of the lesser clergy. Burial in shrouds was intended to be universal but there were countless exceptions of interment in clothes appropriate to one's stature in the community, notably in ecclesiastical dress. To the many examples known Daniell adds from his study of wills that of John Nygthyngale (1475) who wished to be buried in the habit of a monk in Whitby Abbey. Soon, however, a rare departure from the use of primary sources leads Daniell to doubt that King John was buried in Worcester Cathedral wearing the monk's cowl that he specified, here (p. 156) quoting Welander's recent work on the history of Gloucester Cathedral (*sic*). In fact, when John's tomb was opened exactly 200 years ago he was found wearing robes similar

to those depicted on his effigy. (including a sheathed sword by his side), except that he wore the said monk's cowl instead of the crown (Valentine Green *An Account of the Discovery of the Body of King John in the Cathedral Church of Worcester July 17th 1797*, Worcester, 1797, pp. 4-5). A little further on John is ignored again: 'the whole opening of Edward I's tomb seems to be unique for an English king ... [although a] ... partial attempt was made in 1832 to expose the body of Henry IV which was encased in lead' (p. 172). Sweepingly then the further examples of Richard II, Henry VI and Edward IV are ignored. Indeed one would be hard put to find tombs of English monarchs earlier than Henry VII that have not been prised open by the curious or violated by iconoclasts (there are three perhaps but this is a minor quibble). Finally, he discusses a recent theory (after Sam Lucy 1992) that in England from 1465-80 the cadaver tomb (*qv*) was a political symbol of Lancastrian adherence.

Covering a subject as vast as they do these two books are to be recommended highly. Everyone will have a personal preference but it remains the case that where the authors are not ploughing a parallel furrow their works are complementary.

W J WHITE

THE BATTLE OF WAKEFIELD 1460. Philip A. Haigh. 1996. Sutton Publishing Ltd., Stroud, £18.99. ISBN 0-7509-1342-8

It appeared to be a good idea when Sutton Publishing embarked on a series of books devoted to the battles of the Wars of the Roses: such a series could have provided very useful monographs had they had careful editing.

Unfortunately, the present volume, *The Battle of Wakefield, 1460*, is not totally successful. In their articles in *The Ricardian* (volume IX, number 117, 1992) Keith Dockray and Richard Knowles pointed out the difficulties involved in trying to find out what really happened at Wakefield. Contemporary references are extremely brief and it is not until the Tudor period that detailed accounts occur. In all cases these seem to be a mixture of fact and fantasy. One reason for the shortage of accounts from contemporary writers is that Wakefield was a Yorkist failure and so Yorkist sympathisers were unlikely to give it much attention. The most reliable summary of the battle remains the one in *The Ricardian* that I have referred to.

Like Richard Knowles, Philip A. Haigh has a great fund of local knowledge but despite his enthusiasm for his subject he has not really made the picture any clearer. Chapter Five is confusing with its separation of 'Accepted Account' and

'Suggested Account'. In any case, much of the information freely discussed is that which was given by Leland, Hall and Stow, and sixteen full-page maps devoted to the battle seems to be excessive.

Another aspect of the need for more careful editing is in the style of writing and the occasional detail. There is frequent use of the expression 'a modern-day' instead of the straightforward 'modern', 'earl's' for 'earls' (p. 15) and there is a reference to Richard Plantagenet, Duke of York, as the son of the *fifth* earl of Cambridge. Finally, when the author refers to Leeds Library, which is a private library, he really intends The City of Leeds Public Library.

The Appendices do bring together some useful information on chroniclers, commanders and casualties as well as a resume of the act of Attainder. For some readers the book will be a handy reference.

However, I think I must conclude with Mr Haigh's own remark about the work of Keith Dockray and Richard Knowles: 'This recent account of the battle is derived directly from the chroniclers, and other than the fact that the authors do not go beyond what can be proved conclusively, their work is quite informative'!

ARTHUR COCKERILL

CHURCH AND SOCIETY IN THE MEDIEVAL NORTH OF ENGLAND.

R.B. Dobson. 1996. Hambledon Press, 102, Gloucester Avenue, London NW1 8HX. £38. Special price of £20. plus £1.50 p&p, direct from publisher.

ISBN 1-85285-120-1

This volume contains thirteen essays published in various journals and *Festschriften* between 1965 and 1992, and it is extremely convenient to have them here gathered together. Apart from a paper on the origins of Selby Abbey and its significance in the Norman impact on the North, and another on the harassment of the archbishops of York by King Edward I, all the pieces are concerned with the church and religion in Northern England from the last quarter of the fourteenth century to the eve of the Reformation. Attention is focused, naturally, upon the very different ecclesiastical communities of York and Durham, and to a lesser extent, because of the paucity of sources, upon the bishops and canons of Carlisle. In a study of the cities and the cathedrals, Dobson emphasises that the vigour of the ecclesiastical bodies at the end of the fifteenth century was in marked contrast to the supposed decline of the towns. The cults of the saints flourished, and monasticism (to which so little attention has been paid in recent enthusiastic accounts of the late medieval church) was in fact seen as an instrument of reform

in the early Tudor period. The diversity of interests and activities among the monks of Durham was probably a source of strength rather than weakness — they became integrated with lay society, but the liturgical obligations of the corporate community were always maintained. The banner of St Cuthbert was still the rallying-point for the men of the North-East in their sporadic conflicts with the Scots, and it was only the peculation and graft of officials at the papal court in the 1460s and 1470s which persuaded the prior and convent eventually and reluctantly to abandon their claim to their Scottish dependency at Coldingham. Richard Bell emerged from the cloister at Durham to become a very efficient bishop of Carlisle (1478-95), and his career provides a salutary contrast with the disastrous pontificate of the aristocratic Alexander Neville at York a century before.

The vigour of the church of York, indeed, stemmed not so much from the initiative of the archbishops, but from the corporate solidarity of the cathedral chapter. Dobson emphasises that the thirty-four canons who kept residence between 1400 and 1500 were an extremely able group, and that the church was probably never so well administered. Their main fault was their excessive acquiescence in royal wishes and policies, yet in an examination of the relations of Richard III with the chapter and with individual dignitaries, it is demonstrated how much the cathedral might hope to gain from royal benevolence. The religious aspirations of the citizens of York, too, are studied in two papers relating to the foundation of chantries. In 1436, it is estimated, there were 260 mass priests in a city of 12,000 souls. Although there were few new foundations after 1450, such intercessory institutions continued to flourish mightily in the early sixteenth century, and the mayor and council took a close interest in the proper performance of their functions as stipulated by their founders.

These essays, in general, contribute to the current debate on the nature of the pre-Reformation church by presenting a regional picture of healthy diversity both in religious practices (although all utterly orthodox) and in the response to administrative problems. There is nothing here to signal impending crisis, and only in the disappearance of analytical historical writing can there be said to have been a decline from earlier standards. The lack of a narrative framework throws the historian of the late medieval church back on records and archives, both royal and ecclesiastical, and it is a tribute to Dobson's skill and sensitivity that he manages to construct a series of readable, as well as informative, studies from such intractable material.

CHRISTOPHER HARPER-BILL

Notes on Contributors

John Ashdown-Hill is Member of the London Branch and the Norfolk and South Essex Groups. Currently researching the identity of the bones from The Whitefriars' site, Norwich.

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Sophie Oosterwijk has published on English medieval sculpture and is currently researching the presentation of children in medieval art in the Department of the History of Art, University of Leicester.

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Daniel Williams, 'The hastily drawn up will of William Catesby Esquire, 25 August 1485', *Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society Transactions*, vol. 51 (1975-6), p. 48.

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