

DEREK BREWER, ed., *Medieval Comic Tales*, rev. ed. Rochester: Boydell and Brewer, 1996. Pp. 190. ISBN: 0-85991-430-5 (hard), 0-85991-485-2 (paper). \$27.

In the vast *oeuvre* for which he is directly or indirectly responsible either through his own authorship or his sponsorship of the Boydell & Brewer press, Derek Brewer's new edition of *Medieval Comic Tales* should maintain a secure, if minor, place. This slim volume (at somewhat under 200 pages barely the length of Professor Brewer's *C.V.*) collects a variety of (generously defined) tales of varying lengths (from under a page to about fifteen) from several European countries, particularly representative of what has been called the 'second tier,' the literatures of Spain, Italy and the Netherlands. While the focus remains Eurocentric and might, in this post-Afrocentric age, open itself to criticism, it does allow for a more coherent sense of divergent genres of humor that retain a recognizable core sensibility. As his application of Radin's *The Trickster* makes clear, however, Brewer is clearly conversant with non-European narrative traditions.

The editor has assembled a stellar team of scholars to prepare the texts and annotations: Peter Rickard (French), Alan Deyermond (Spanish), David Blamires (German), David Johnson (Dutch), Michael Lapidge (Latin), and Brewer himself (English and Italian) have all made intriguing, representative selections and provided varying degrees of annotation. While for a collection of this sort the 'skeletal' annotations and scrupulously limited bibliographies provided by most contributors are entirely appropriate, the extensive annotations and expansive (for the context) bibliography Alan Deyermond provides for the Spanish tales makes his contribution particularly impressive and the segment that can most easily be used as a prolegomena to further study.

Each area is represented by roughly ten tales, although some provide fewer (Italian and Dutch, for example, only six) and others more (thirteen for the English). In light of such rigorous limits, the reader should not expect complete coverage of the comic possibilities in any one literature. Nevertheless, while excluding the familiar, such as the tales of Chaucer or Boccaccio (hence the limited Italian representation), the collection aims to be representative. What may be more arguable is the definition of 'tale,' which is flexible enough, especially in the Latin segment, to include songs and plays. Admittedly, the generic borders are somewhat porous, but the definition of 'tale' may here be uncomfortably stretched.

While readers will judge the value of the collection on the basis of the selection, the highlight of the book is Brewer's introduction. In his survey of forms of humor and the nature of comic tales in European literature, he displays his uncommon learning and even more uncommon common sense.

In short, *Medieval Comic Tales* is a useful collection of medieval humor, although a bit too heavy for casual reading and a bit too light for serious research. As a teaching text, it probably covers too wide an area to serve in most single-language surveys, but it could be a useful supplement to a class in humor or medieval genre studies.

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