
This monograph deals with the patterns of thought developed by the late medieval London authorities regarding the ‘milieu of the night’, that is, the attitudes to marginal groups, to vagrants, beggars, prostitutes, and their clients. The author traces processes of marginalization, locating a significant change in attitudes in the first phase of the Hundred Years War. According to Frank Rexroth the ruling circles of the city created the image of an alternative society which was posing a threat to social order and indeed the safety of the city. This imagery was created through normative texts but can also be found in writings which were not readily available to a wider audience. More importantly, it was also used in public displays, for example, the symbolism of punishments and related rituals.

While Rexroth’s approach—firstly tracing changes in attitudes in the fourteenth century, then dealing with the practices of urban and charitable institutions in the fifteenth century—may seem conventional, he has in fact produced a highly original book. Drawing largely on well-known, even published sources, he shows how immorality, begging, violent conduct, and other forms of behaviour regarded as suspicious were associated with each other and repeatedly used for proclamations and other purposes in varying permutations. They justified and guided measures taken by the urban authorities against marginal groups. These measures were often co-ordinated, being based on interaction between mayor, court of aldermen, and sheriffs on the one side, and the wards under their respective aldermen on the other, with the purpose of damaging the status of the accused, of shaming and intimidating them. Particular attention is given to John of Northampton’s term of office. His popularity is traced back to his almost fanatical stand for law and order and his campaigns against immorality, falseness, and marginal groups in general. According to
the author, Northampton used these measures to generate support for his other objective—the fight against the urban oligarchy in the 1380s.

The discussion of these developments is skilfully connected with attitudes towards the poor as shown, for example, in statutes and the practices of almshouses which catered for the deserving poor but not for those who were regarded as responsible for their own misfortunes. In this context special attention is given to the prominent figure of Richard Whittington, whose numerous charitable foundations appear to indicate that he did not subscribe to the association made between certain forms of poverty, immorality, and violence outlined in previous chapters.

This is an important book, well written and mostly well argued. Nevertheless it has to be kept in mind that Rexroth does not intend to deal with social realities in late medieval London, a modern study of which is still not available (pp. 33-4). He is almost entirely concerned with changes in mentalities, the ways in which attitudes to the ‘milieu of the night’ were formed, and how they changed. It needs to be asked to what extent his sources lend themselves to the minute textual analysis skilfully employed by the author. Late medieval English normative texts can be highly formulaic, even repetitive, and a lack of precision in the terminology can certainly be found in administrative and legal records. Such aspects deserve attention.

Furthermore, the fact that this society used two foreign languages in its administration needs to be considered because this may also have had repercussions on the reliability of the terminology used, especially when the author tries to pick up minute nuances, as, for example, on pp. 310-11, where the term and spelling ‘dAugst’ is explained as meaning not just the month of August, but a period of anguish and anxiety.

Another point which may merit consideration is the time at which the campaign against the real or imagined margins in London’s society began. Rexroth states that the threat of a French invasion at the start of the Hundred Years War led to a panic reaction by the urban authorities. The momentum was maintained by two further crisis, the Black Death and internal political problems. There can be no doubt that the latter two played a role but the author cannot show why the war with France should have had such an effect. For a time there was, indeed, the threat of an invasion of the English south coast.
but this ceased after the destruction of the French fleet in June 1340. Who at the time was aware that a major military confrontation was to follow? Why should the urban authorities have felt compelled to single out the ‘nocturnal community’ when the factor of the ‘Hundred Years War’ only emerges ex eventu? England—and London—had faced a similar situation in the previous decade (1324) when no threat to the city’s security had materialized. There is even evidence to show that the urban authorities were slow to respond to the ‘milieu of the night’ at the time. Apparently prostitutes near the Carmelite convent were a nocturnal nuisance in the 1340s but the urban government remained inactive. The friars had to turn to the royal government for redress and the command issued to the urban authorities even had to be repeated (Calendar of Close Rolls 1343-46, 544; CCR 1346-49, 37).

The problem of finding a starting point could perhaps have been solved if greater use had been made of the extensive source material available for the study of late medieval London. Accusations of sexual deviancy already appear in the records of the London eyre of 1321 which were not used (Public Record Office JUST1/547A). Further material is available in the many Newgate gaol delivery rolls surviving from the period 1275 to 1334, and it would be useful to know whether there were any alterations, for example, in conviction rates, indicative of changing attitudes to crime and related activities. Rexroth shows that disorderly chantry priests were singled out and shamed, almost satirized, in the imagery he describes. This appears to coincide chronologically with an increasing number of accusations against just this group of the clergy, and it would be helpful to know whether there was a connection. The author argues that it would be wrong to interpret such attitudes as part of late-medieval anti-clericalism but does not say why (p.324).

The subtle changes in attitude towards vagrants, prostitutes, and deviants of any sort observed and analysed by Rexroth are shown to have affected especially the corporate founders of almshouses in the fifteenth century, but it is not clear whether the campaigns were sufficiently effective to bring about a change in attitude towards the poor. Did the symbolism of language and ritual have any impact on the executors of, say, alderman John Norman, who gave 20 shillings to prisoners in every London gaol ‘to be distributed aftre the discrecions of myn executour’? A study of the charitable bequests in the
many thousands of surviving late medieval London wills might well have provided an answer. Instead, Rexroth traces and decodes patterns of thought which resulted in the creation of negative images: the violent drunkard who is responsible for his own ruin, the brothel keeper, the prostitute, and such like. One group which was certainly not welcome to the urban authorities hardly features here—the aliens, most of whom resided in the suburbs. This refers not to the rich Hanseatic merchants or Italian financiers who could afford royal protection (although severe criticism could also be levelled against them, p. 326), but to the much more humble craftsmen and their servants who stayed mostly in the suburbs, right in the middle of the nocturnal society, in their attempts to avoid guild control and other interference. If the urban authorities really had pursued a campaign of almost perpetual paranoia against marginal groups for more than a century in order to detract from other issues, why were the unpopular foreigners not included in the negative imagery of the night? Could there not be a much simpler and more straightforward explanation for the phenomenon described in the book—that the material which was so carefully analysed simply reflects the often inadequate measures taken by successive urban governments against very real problems in a period of severe crisis?

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