Report on the Southampton Joint Conference
_Medieval English Theatre / Wessex Medieval Centre, 24–25 March 1995:
‘Using Early Drama Records’

This conference, generously supported by various institutions in the University of Southampton, was held in the centre of old Southampton in the Dolphin Hotel, where Jane Austen danced and Thackeray wrote part of _Pendennis_. When the town’s drama records appear as part of the _Hampshire REED_ volume, edited by Peter Greenfield and Jane Cowling, they will contribute to an already rich urban history, which takes in the Romans, a major Anglo-Saxon town, and a medieval walled port which saw one of the early inroads of plague into Britain and eventually said farewell to the Pilgrim Fathers. The conference delegates (including several migrating American and Australian scholars) had the benefit of two tours, round the Lower High Street excavations and the very fine city walls, under the direction of Dr Andy Russell, a man through whom the very stones seemed to speak, including the large quantity of prune stones found in an excavated local ‘inn’ of many beds. In such a context, it was hard not to feel that discussion of the earliest documentary evidence for drama, however theoretical or methodological in emphasis, was grounded upon the physical reality of the past.

The conference was deliberately not entitled ‘Using REED’, though it was rightly expected that REED’s central position in the field would be reflected in papers and discussion. The keynote speaker was a REED editor, Peter Greenfield, but other papers came from different angles. Peter Greenfield’s address was situated at the nexus of archive recording, interpretative language, and historicist theory. While theatre history has changed its notions of the margin and centre of the discipline, archival records, no longer on the periphery, have to be articulated with theoretical self-consciousness if they are genuinely to contribute to the advance of the discipline. Any researcher has to make sense of what is distorted by the accidents of recording and the researcher’s own historical position, and is consequently driven by practical necessity towards finding the appropriate language for managing the data. In addition, the current dominance of theory demands that the REED editor speak the language of the literary critics and cultural historians who will be the beneficiaries of REED’s documentary evidence. From practical experience, Greenfield commended the hermeneutic decorum existing between that historicism which looks at public representations of power, and documents which were themselves the inscriptions of authority. His examples concerned the musicians of Southampton in the 1430s. He was able to present a convincing narrative of urban display, appropriation, and control which traced the musicians from their origin in Winchester, from whose courts they were bailed and subsequently head-hunted by Southampton, to their adoption as Southampton’s saints, and from there to their probable expulsion for continued bad behaviour. He set this earlier history alongside the complex early seventeenth-century negotiations and edicts by which Southampton sought to contain and legitimize its musicians as town servants while escaping the financial penalty of actually
paing them. At the end of a paper which was itself an exemplary model in combining theoretical awareness with record-based history, Greenfield urged the delegates to be wary of a seemingly objective approach to records which, in a kind of occupation, actually interprets while claiming interpretation is impossible.

Amongst other things, Greg Walker promised 'a low moan from the haunted East Wing of that mansion of many rooms which is early drama studies'. In fact, visitors to the mansion were greeted with a fierce blast against the claim that recognizing the fragmentariness, partiality, or inconsistency of records has been the special achievement of historicism and post-modern theory. Historians in general and medievalists in particular, Walker argued, have long understood that their discipline is not a science, and their data is not capable of providing whole, final, and objective accounts of the past. On the other hand, Walker could see the interpretative problems implicit in any editorial selection of data for inclusion in the REED volumes. Judgments of economic scale were made difficult by privileging one kind of record over another; excluding religious ceremony and music limited the capacity of the records to provide, by themselves, a cultural history of an area; and in the area of sabbatarianism, a principle of selection designed to produce records of festivity was bound to create a Bakhtinian opposition between the ludic and the clerical, whereas Walker would want to know whether other religious forces, such as itinerant preachers, might also have posed threats to the establishment by drawing people away from church attendance. Like Greenfield, Walker argued that drama history should not become ghettoized, and should put a stronger case for the political significance of its play texts and theatrical records. It was in this link between politics and theatrical expression that he could see the best hermeneutic future for REED data.

The afternoon began with David Mills and Elizabeth Baldwin explaining the background and advantages of the database which they have set up for the Cheshire records, and taking the delegates through the means of transcribing material in this form. They hope to complete this work in the next year or so, and would like to extend its range. Such a plan will involve issues of copyright and the practicality of scanning records held in printed form, but users will also need to be reminded that computerising data does not make it more definitive.

That REED users bear some of the responsibility for what they make of REED records was a recurring theme in the afternoon. 'Caveat lector', Pam King advised, recognising the inevitable selectivity of the recording and the privileging of the record over play texts, especially of the entertainment record over others which might bear upon the drama without obviously alluding to it. While regretting consequent omissions in the early Coventry volume and, like Walker, recognising the difficulty of making economic inferences from selected records, King also warned that sloppy use of user-friendly REED volumes can homogenize different types of record despite the scrupulous desire of the editors to distinguish them, and can lead to records being anachronistically compared despite their determinedly chronological presentation. For all this, REED had irreversibly shifted the scholarship of early drama away from evolutionary and totalising theories.

Peter Happé confessed to the pleasure of 'undisciplined perambulating' through unpredictable volumes as well as to using them to inform a wide range of known topics. The central difficulty for him was the gap between the motives of those who originally
provided the records and those who would now read them (in Happé's case, for primarily aesthetic ends). The silences in the documents, the ambiguities of the records, the sense that we actually make a thing into a record by critical decision, the multiple histories which could be fashioned from records, and the mistake of thinking that there could ever be moment when it is 'safe' to commence interpretation constituted the principal caveats which Happé offered. He commended, as did Peter Meredith in later discussion, the linguistic contribution which the editorial policy of REED has made to Middle English studies.

The last paper lifted the delegates out of introspection and gave them both practical advice on how to manage French archive resources, and some illustrative anecdotes about the consequences of earlier French archival practice. Perhaps more than anything, Graham Runnalls offered the delightful prospect of a scholar who has actually discovered not one but several hitherto unknown medieval plays. It was an upbeat conclusion to the formal papers, but with the additional advantage that delegates went away armed with a handout of terminology, bibliography, the names and addresses of libraries, and the system of archival classification. For those who missed the handout, Runnalls's paper should appear in a later number of the Medieval English Theatre journal.

This report does not cover the excellent discussions which took place in the morning and afternoon, but it should not omit to mention the prevailing sense that the business of how we use records is probably the central issue in early drama studies today. That this is the case is largely due to the challenge which the REED enterprise poses to literary critics and cultural historians. Listening to the speakers, one realised how major has been the shift of direction and value that REED has introduced into scholarship. The stones that earlier builders rejected are now become the head of the corner. Far from offering a dream of 'wholeness', the REED movement has put the fragmentary and the disparate into the forefront of scholars' minds, even more than the historicist theories which have accompanied it. Most of the problems which scholars seem to have with the newly-found records derive from a desire to put the fragments together again and shape new histories around them.

Corrigenda

Professor Andrew Gurr notes the following corrections to his paper in REEDN 19.2 (1994):

p 4: replusive should be repulsive
p 5: IN should be In
the the should be the
any civic note should be any civic payment being noted. Evidence for plays being staged regularly at towns like Oxford without any civic note
p 7: records in 1610–11. should be records stop in 1610–11.
p 8: Bridgnorth in Devon should be Bridgnorth in Shropshire
p 9: geniune should be genuine
p 10: came the should be came to the
p 11: it was forthright should be it was a forthright