RECORDS OF EARLY ENGLISH DRAMA: Reflections of a Hardened User

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When Thomas Sharp first published *A Dissertation on the Pageants or Dramatic Mysteries Anciently Performed at Coventry, by the Trading Companies of That City; Chiefly with Reference to the Vehicle, Characters, and Dresses of the Actors, Compiled, in a Great Degree, from Sources Hitherto Unexplored. To Which Are Added, the Pageant of the Shearmen & Taylors' Company, and Other Municipal Entertainments of a Public Nature*,[1] he did not meet with wholehearted critical acclaim. *The Monthly Review* of May 1826 printed the following:

> ... but he [Sharp] is, at the same time, possessed with some share of overweening belief in the deep importance of his particular theme, which seems inevitably to result from the long pursuit of such researches ... it is evident either that he conceived a very extravagant opinion of the paramount magnitude of the subject, or that he very much exaggerates the value and novelty of his own discoveries ... Whatever certain antiquarians may delight to believe, the useful end of investigation does not consist in laborious trifling with which the attention is frittered away upon minute certainties and petty doubts ... nor do we exactly comprehend why he deeply regrets the want of items and charges of representation for the Shearmen and Taylors' Pageant, which could only have resembled fifty other accounts of the kind to be found in his volume.

But in Sharp the habit of complete record remained ingrained: he cut out the review and pasted in his own proof copy of his work, now British Library MS Additional 436452. Neither he nor his reviewer could have anticipated the fire which in 1879 destroyed the Free Reference Library in Birmingham and with it most of the records of Coventry's cycle from which Sharp had taken his extracts, but generations of scholars have had cause to be grateful that he did concern himself with those 'minute certainties and petty doubts'.

Sharp's technique in compiling non-dramatic texts relating to Coventry's pageants as a narrative record of their production anticipated the activities of REED. His work also met, and continues to meet, an equivalent range of criticism, from those who found his activities less than intellectually

important, to those who wish he had done a more thorough, a more 'complete', job. I wish to make it clear that in what follows the majority of the criticisms which I level at REED are as unanswerable and unfair as to complain that Thomas Sharp died before he had transcribed all that existed in his time. State-of-art computer database systems become yesterday's technology in a few short months these days, yet REED's now cumbersome software continues to generate a usable product. Equally, some selection is inevitable, so some arcane research requirement will always be thwarted, and some inclusions will prove intransigent in their apparent meaninglessness. All selection is intellectually manipulative, positivistic in effect. Most of the other pitfalls 'encouraged' by REED are the responsibility of the user: *caveat lector*, for, when all is said and done, we would not wish to be without those red volumes which make it easier than ever to leap to mistaken conclusions.

It should be clear that as a user I find the *REED* volumes indispensable: I read the York and the Coventry volumes frequently. I also use Sharp. In using Sharp I am alert to the fact that the assumptions of the early nineteenth-century local antiquarian are not those of the modern scholar. Nor was Sharp a scholar who showed undue respect in our terms for the priceless artefacts he handled. This is, after all, the man who shamelessly ticked off relevant accounts in the surviving Weavers' manuscript in heavy lead pencil, while his friend the antiquarian Maitland used a similar pencil, pressing hard, to trace the *Castle of Perseverance* staging-diagram when that manuscript came into his possession. He had all manner of ideas about how fifteenth-century urban culture functioned which would not be our own. I am careful, therefore, to read with critical attention.

I have become aware too of the degree to which this kind of reading, alert to the limitations of the conventions of the text, is necessary in reading *REED*, but how that does not necessarily compromise its functionality. I would actually assert that while the uncritical acceptance of the *REED* volumes as somehow a neutral mediation of information may be distorting, there are many ways beyond its declared functional intentions in which *REED* can inform the study of medieval drama, or the study of that study, in our own time. Crucially, the enterprise as a whole has created a revisionist narrative history of medieval plays which observes a different decorum from, for example, that of E.K. Chambers. *REED* has disposed once and for all of monolithic evolution and coherent assumptions, and has put in their place a tyranny of hard evidence and an accompanying fragmentism.

REED also reinforces the hierarchical habit of reading play scripts. Scripts are one category of text, and records, all records, have become another, one

which is informative, but subsidiary. This implied distinction of textual materials has been structurally useful, but it is not neutral. To set play scripts in the context of records of monetary transactions relating to their performance, instead of, or as well as, putting those play scripts alongside passages recounting the same narrative events in the work of Langland and Dante, is a critical departure, but it is just as positivistic. In particular, *REED* continues to privilege the literariness of the play script itself by a significant policy of omission: one which, incidentally, Sharp did not observe. Why are the playbooks themselves not included in *REED*? Not only is their omission theoretically hard to justify, a wealth of casual marginalia is lost, it too all part of record. The sole surviving Coventry playbook,[2] the one compiled by Robert Croo in 1534, has all sorts of people's names scribbled in its margins and on its flyleaves, names of individuals which lead to the families involved in the play's production but who, as custodians of the text, treated it with rather less respect than the modern student might imagine to have been the case. These are not recorded in *REED*, nor in any extant edition of the play itself.

In relation to the records it does include, *REED* has a flattening effect. 'Records' have become a homogenous group, everything which is not text or performance. Yet each record has its own context, manuscript, social, and cultural: a will, a guild account, and a proclamation in a city council memorandum book are all very different from each other, perhaps as different as each is from a script. Different types of record are scrupulously identified according to *REED* editorial policy, but the way in which the very accessibility of the volumes encourages users to work does not necessarily mean that this information is given due account by them. I believe that the average user has a quick trawl through the index in search of a particular subject, all references to soap, for instance. The results are fairly instantaneous, but the status of each individual record is lost in a way it cannot be when one is physically running between city archives, guild hall, and ecclesiastical records, looking at manuscripts of widely differing status and provenance.

Of course when REED was set up there were no ways of making the physical auspices of different records obvious in a database; now with the advent of multi-media computing it is possible to reproduce facsimile alongside transcription on screen, thereby preserving the distinctiveness of each source. The York *Doomsday* Project,[3] using multi-media techniques, is able to treat the Mercers' pageant itself as essentially ephemeral, existing only in each unrecapturable performance, but surrounded by a number of

artefacts, including the play script, which bear witness to it. The level of resolution now possible in digitally captured images foregrounds the physical nature of each manuscript source, rather than treating it as a transparent vehicle of information. Once the archive is assembled, material can be extracted from it and written into books on CD-ROM. Hypertext links will allow the reader to form his or her own narrative, further subverting the idea that these materials tell any single evolutionary story.

REED editors take scrupulously literally their brief to collect 'records of drama'. Although choices may vary somewhat from volume to volume, this policy leads in all cases to omissions, some, when they are detected, more irritating than others. Particularly people are omitted — the proper names of those whose personal history and culture are entwined with the plays. We know so little of personnel, of milieu. If modern scholars are to interrogate the material cultural circumstances in which playing flourished in the Middle Ages, we need to know whom to pursue. Wills and inventories survive of people who were intimately involved in pageant production but who failed to mention that fact. For example, Nicholas Blackburn senior, merchant and mayor of York, never once refers to the *Doomsday* pageant in the long and lavish provisions of his will, but his charitable bequests can be read as an enactment of the works of corporal mercy for his own time and class.[4] Particularly vulnerable, then, to the *REED* editorial policy, is information about the tastes and affiliations of the people originally involved.

The omission of individual items from a single account is especially annoying: the presence of an apparently irrelevant item in an account otherwise devoted to dramatic activity testifies to a connection made at the time the account was written, so it ought not to be censored because it is no longer obvious. Tangential reading may, in any case, make the connection both plain and revelatory. For instance, in the midst of the Coventry Weavers' accounts for Corpus Christi Day 1574 is the record of the payment of eight pence at the burial of 'Mistress Pixley'.[5] Ingram edited out this line when he reproduced the account for *REED*.[6] Yet Harry Pixley and William Pixley had been Masters of the Weavers' guild, and sixteenth-century accounts abound with the surname. Moreover, both Alan Pixley and Richard Pixley wrote their names in the margins of the playbook, one of them, probably Alan, adding the words, 'right reverend father and mother'. The fact that the burial of a woman from this family, possibly even the 'reverend mother', becomes economically entangled with the provisions for the pageant, has some status and relevance in relation to the culture of the plays, even in some small way to gender rôles in them.

The fact that most *REED* entries are in fact extracts from longer documents gives no idea of what proportion of the material wealth, time or attention of an organisation was given over to dramatic activity. We have still to go outside *REED* for evidence that amounts spent on plays were or were not economically significant. It is never clear whether an organisation was so given over to drama that it was effectively a dramatic society, or whether this represents a tiny part of its total operations. We are aware that some organisations exist in our own society with sporting, business or charitable pretexts, which are really drinking and dining clubs, and Anne Sutton's important work on the London Puy, which flourished briefly at the end of the thirteenth century, tells the story of an association whose sole purpose was to support its annual feast at which the winner of a singing competition was crowned.[7] How many other ostensible devotional or trade organisations in late medieval English cities evolved chiefly or solely as producers of plays, shows and pageantry, like, for instance, the York Paternoster guild? After all, Chaucer would never have presented being a poet as his major occupation in life, any more than Henry Medwall would have called himself a playwright.

At least we can say that *REED* is scrupulously chronological in the presentation and organisation of material, but the integrated chronology of all dramatic material in one place can blur the storyline of any one organisation. It is also important to read with care not only inter- but intra-volume of *REED*, otherwise clumps of tantalising information are compared directly with small regard for the fact that one body of material may be Lancastrian, another mid-Tudor. What the Coventry Drapers did in the 1550s with Doomsday is, for instance, compared with what the Mercers did in York in the 1430s, the period when that guild's dramatic records are at their densest and most exciting, a time when we have no idea what if anything the Coventry Drapers were up to. Perhaps there is a remarkable conservatism about the production of Doomsday plays, but if there is, this is something remarkable rather than another symptom of what many students appear to suspect: that everyone in the Middle Ages lived at the same time.

It is possible that *REED* is too user-friendly. We can all become transfixed by information. There is so much that it may seem possible to form a coherent newly-informed narrative, whereas in fact we just have thousands of additional shards. And because we now have so much, particularly some very dense information clusters, creative speculation is no longer acceptable. What was the Coventry cycle like when York was in its heyday? We just don't know. In the past one could say that it was possible that Coventry

originally had Old Testament plays and that the truncation of the cycle evidenced in the 1530s was the logical product of economic slump, guild mergers and nascent capitalism. After *REED*, however, we feel obliged to state firmly that there is no evidence to suggest that Coventry ever had Old Testament plays. Both statements are factually true but are rhetorically very different. It has become more difficult to make a case for hypothesis, even though the other thing that *REED* has made painfully obvious is that we will never have *enough* information.

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NOTES

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1. Thomas Sharp *A Dissertation on the Pageants or Dramatic Mysteries Anciently performed at Coventry* (Merridew and Son, Coventry, 1825); republished with a new foreword by A.C. Cawley (E.P. Publishing, Wakefield, 1973).
2. Coventry City Record Office MS 11/2.
3. see 'Beyond REED?: The York *Doomsday* Project' in this volume.
4. York, Borthwick Institute of Historical Research, Probate Register 2, 605^{r}–606^{v}. Since this was written, research has further problematised the exact relationship between Blackburn and the play.
5. Coventry City Record Office 100/17/1 (1523/4–1634), 66^{r}.
6. *REED: Coventry* edited R.W. Ingram (University of Toronto Press, 1981) 268. Two pairs of lines are omitted from this account. They are:
   1.21 Item paid for stourringe the harnes iis
   Item paid for comennecacion of an new master iid
   1.25 Item paid at the sealinge of the Indentures viijd
   Item paide at the bureall of mistres pyxlay viijd
7. A.F. Sutton 'Merchants, Music and Social Harmony: the London Puy and its French and London Contexts, *circa* 1300' *London Journal 17* (1992) 1–17; 'The *Tumbling Bear* and its Patrons: A Venue for the London Puy and Mercery' in *London and Europe in the Middle Ages* edited Julia Boffey and Pamela King (Westfield Publications in Medieval Studies 9: Committee for Medieval Studies, Queen Mary and Westfield College, University of London, 1995) 85–110.