

INTRODUCTION

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The idea, and title, for this issue of *Medieval English Theatre* came from the 1995 conference of the Medieval English Theatre group, which was held jointly with the Wessex Medieval Centre in Southampton.¹ At a time when we can all feel with Dame Study that there is ‘no wit worth ... but if hit of wynnynge soune’ it is a pleasure to acknowledge the financial support received for that venture from various institutions of the University of Southampton from the English Department to the Vice-Chancellor, and, in particular that of the Hartley Institute, which funded the keynote address by Peter Greenfield, an expanded version of which is printed here. The articles in this volume by Pamela King, Graham Runnalls, and Greg Walker are also versions of material first given at the conference. The other papers have been specially commissioned.

Medieval English Theatre 17 is intended to cover a range of issues relating to the business of ‘Using Early Drama Records’. It contains a substantial amount of primary source material on early drama, para-dramatic activities, and music, here presented and interpreted for the first time, and it has value from that alone. However, it also stands as an acknowledgement by record researchers of the varied uses to which such data may be put, and of the rich interpretative possibilities that it offers. If it was ever true that the researching of medieval drama records was unduly positivistic or their interpretation too diffident, it is not a criticism that can be honourably made now, and the current volume is designed to make that point. The credit for this should be shared by the editors and the cultural historians, often the same people, who have shown an alertness to the wider theoretical implications of their activity, and a willingness to co-operate and be mutually educated, despite the competitive climate which too often prevails in academe.

The present volume should, then, be read as offering a range of services: a practical, and highly encouraging, entrée to record research in France, and one which coincidentally forms a point of continuity with the preceding volume of *Medieval English Theatre* (Runnalls); a series of record studies which have different degrees of local and national, historical and methodological focus, and which touch on subjects as diverse as local land rights (Cowling), civic unrest (Humphrey), advice to princes (Walker), readers’ responsibilities

(King), and music (Mills, and Greenfield); an analysis which reveals the complexity of interpreting terms which occur in the records (Twycross); a paper which shows the value of the record-publishing enterprise to lexicography (Wyatt); and finally, a report on an electronic project which opens new possibilities in the field of records research and conservation (King and Twycross).

The 1995 *Medieval English Theatre* conference was wider in its scope and reference than the work of the *Records of Early English Drama* organisation. Nonetheless, several of its speakers, and of the authors writing in this volume, are closely involved with REED's systematic researching and publishing of the records of early drama, ceremonial, and secular music. This project will eventually be seen to rank with the Early English Text Society in its contribution to the long-term sustaining, directing, and developing of medieval (and in REED's case early-modern) studies; it was inevitable that the nature and value of its activity would be implicit in much of what follows, and is explicitly addressed in some papers. The strength of contemporary record research lies in its capacity to serve the academic community while remaining responsive to the changes in interpretation and knowledge which it has helped to bring about. The present volume of essays bears witness both to the contribution of REED and to the methodological self-consciousness of record researchers.

Like REED, *Medieval English Theatre* has moved quickly with the times, finding room for theoretical problems, and embracing issues of social history as well as the practicalities of theatre which have been its continuing strength; it has never set its boundaries at the local parish. As a guest editor for a volume inspired by a conference, following Jean-Paul Debax and Yves Peyre (volume 16), I find myself the beneficiary of *METH's* responsiveness and generosity. I am grateful to the editorial board for inviting me to be involved with the journal, and to Lyn Hitch of Lancaster University for her help in producing the copy.

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NOTES

1. The conference report appears in *Records of Early English Drama Newsletter* 20:1 (1995) 21–23.