

# Unbroken REED

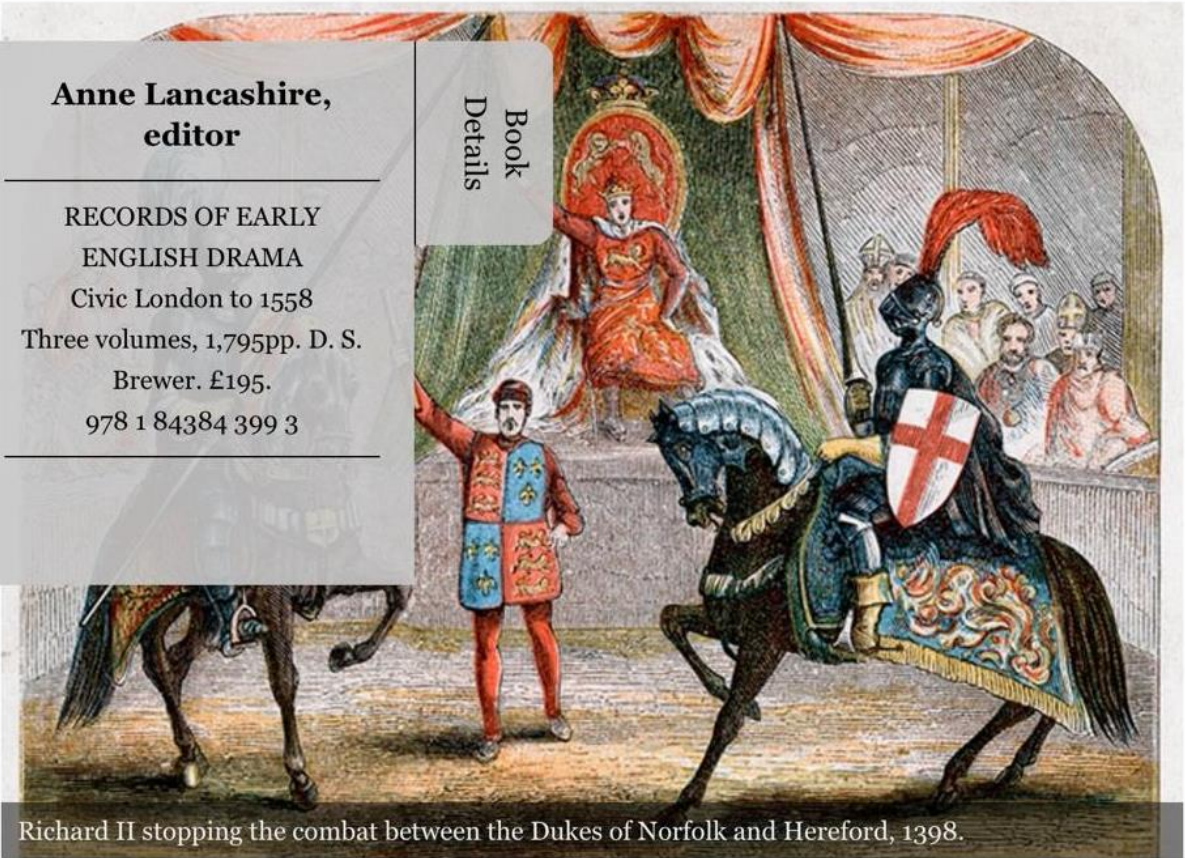
**Anne Lancashire,  
editor**

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RECORDS OF EARLY  
ENGLISH DRAMA  
Civic London to 1558  
Three volumes, 1,795pp. D. S.  
Brewer. £195.  
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Book  
Details



Richard II stopping the combat between the Dukes of Norfolk and Hereford, 1398.

How the attempt to survey  
drama county by county moves  
into the digital age

**PAMELA KING**

**M**edieval London's dramatic entertainments are unique for a number of reasons. Here alone, town and gown relations became town, gown and Crown on a routine rather than exceptional basis. The river played a role in many of the theatrical activities recorded, as did the semi-autonomous authority that governed London Bridge. The livery companies remained the chief drivers of the entertainments: their focus

was the pageantry of mayoral inaugurations and the Midsummer Watch, events which involved portable pageants carried through the streets, morris dancers, giants and firework displays. The same companies also hosted lavish dinners with entertainments on each company's traditional feast day and for distinguished occasional guests. Where the companies can be observed participating in royal events, the Crown governed the protocol while the City paid and performed. In 1390, Geoffrey Chaucer was clerk of works for Richard II's jousts at Smithfield; the poet may also have seen the concurrent London parish clerks' plays, since he seems to allude to them in *The Canterbury Tales*.

*Civic London to 1558*, edited by Anne Lancashire – in three volumes, a total of 1,590 pages – is the latest production of the *Records of Early English Drama* project, which seeks to survey the country's scattered archival material, county by county. The late sixteenth century largely saw the demise, not without local opposition, of the biblical drama and pageantry that characterized late medieval England's civic culture. The texts of plays, where they survived through the good offices of antiquarians, became separated from their regional documentary contexts, and typically ended up in the collections in the British Library and the Bodleian. The contextualizing information for these play texts, on the other hand, survived,

mostly unmolested by Puritan zealots, among the day-to-day record-keeping of the civic authorities, contributory trade and craft guilds, religious confraternities and ecclesiastical authorities. Since 1978, twenty-four sets of *REED* volumes have been published; a further twenty-four collections are in progress, while the technological revolution has enabled *REED* to produce both the Patrons and Performances website, a searchable database of the activities of professional touring performers in the period, and Early Modern London Theatres (EMLoT), a research database and educational resource.

*REED* has attracted some more or less genteel criticism from the academy over the years, along predictable lines. Just as no one in the digital age would devise a project to publish selected data in large hard-backed print volumes, so too the principles of these selections have come under fire. When *REED* began its work, it was a scholarly imperative to distinguish drama from other forms of, largely literary, texts. *REED* was in the vanguard for its inclusion of performances, such as minstrelsy, which never had written scripts to make them identifiable as "plays". Now the trend is to read all social interaction as performative, and *REED*'s evolved editorial policy occasions a pre-selection that some researchers find unhelpful, misleading, or fundamentally unsound. Editorial selection is of itself a critical

intervention, and particularly so when records from a variety of sources are extracted out of context. It has become open season for the ungenerous to criticize *REED* for not doing what it never set out to do.

The present volumes open with an introduction – at 198 pages, a book in itself – that reminds the reader of the historical context which makes distinguishing a “play” from other medieval entertainments as impossible as it is fruitless. Anne Lancashire scrupulously alerts the user to the divergent nature of the records from which the extracts are drawn, each with its own agenda, and to the amount of material that is missing. We wait for the inevitable “tip of the iceberg” metaphor, deferred for fifty-two pages.

Despite the incomplete nature of the surviving material, the sheer quantity for London has proven so great that some of the usual *REED* editorial procedures have been modified, paring contextual information to the minimum. For the most part, however, the records are described in codicological detail. The livery companies, for example – the Armourers and Brasiers, Bakers, Barbers, Blacksmiths, Brewers, Butchers, Carpenters, Clothworkers, Coopers, Cutlers, Drapers, Founders, Goldsmiths, Grocers, Ironmongers, Leathersellers, Mercers, Merchant Taylors, Pewterers, Skinners, Stationers, Tallow Chandlers, Vintners, Wax Chandlers, and Weavers – are represented here by charters,

ordinances, oath books, memorandum books, inventories, court minute books, sundry accounts and quarterage books. The editor regrets that “all deeds and wills ideally would have been searched, but their sheer number precluded this”.

There are, nonetheless, problems of comparability as well as lacunae: it is certainly not possible to compare each livery company’s pageantry and entertainment activity for any randomly chosen year. Alone of all the companies, the Merchant Taylors kept a pre-Elizabethan pageant book itemizing the company’s activities in the Lord Mayor’s Day processions. The Mercers’ records, meanwhile, include information on the considerable dramatic activities of St Paul’s Grammar School, put under their governance in 1512 by John Colet, the Dean of St Paul’s Cathedral and the school’s (re)founder.

These volumes could be criticized for the positivism of their selective principles, for their unwieldiness, and for their glaring demonstration that print is rapidly becoming as quaint a medium for publishing large collections of data as were the vellum rolls of the period on which they draw. For the working researcher, however, the editorial apparatus presents a cogent overall view of what the records do and do not offer, and points towards particular research areas, such as the Midsummer Show, which have been

comparatively neglected. One splendid appendix notes the very early chronicle account of the elephant, given by the French to the English king in 1254–5, that became a popular spectacle.

*REED* must finish what it started, but *Civic London to 1558* is, we hear, the last of the big red volumes – everything that follows will be “born digital”, with the modest Staffordshire coming first, then Salisbury and then Berkshire, although there will be some print versions for archival purposes. All the “legacy” volumes are being converted into compatible “inter-operable digital format”, as funding allows. The production of this last, *Civic London to 1558*, has clearly been a feat of admirable stamina for the editor and her support, who point out their value in inserting themselves between the reader and such fine decisions as when “pipes” are for wine and not music, and when dinner-time “plays” refers to either dramatic entertainment or an eccentrically spelt fish course.