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Edited by Eckehard Simon

Excerpt

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I

Introduction: trends in international drama research

GLYNNE WICKHAM

Set the task of charting for this volume the most significant advances in the research work undertaken during the past twenty-five years relating to theatre in the Middle Ages, I regard it as advisable to start by trying to establish an historical framework against and within which to measure recent developments. It is thus without further apology that I shall retreat from the present and recent past deep into the nineteenth century in order to supply a *raison d'être* for regarding the past quarter-century as a period possessed of some significance of its own rather than as just an arbitrary, if convenient, time-span to validate the organising of this volume. Against the background of this introductory survey, covering landmarks of international interest in the dramatic literature and theatre practice of the Middle Ages from their demise late in the sixteenth century until the middle of the present century, I shall then proceed to examine four particular areas of study in which I believe major advances to have been made in previously accepted criteria for critical evaluation: records; performance; centres for research, colloquia and journals; and, finally, historical and critical analysis.

FACTS AND THEIR INTERPRETATION, 1700–1960S

As a start, it is useful to recall that, from the early years of the seventeenth century until near the end of the eighteenth, knowledge of medieval dramaturgy and its accompanying stagecraft slowly waned as interest in it, from both a scholarly and a practical viewpoint, crumbled everywhere in Europe under the weight of the advancing neo-classical Enlightenment. Dismissed as a product of Gothic outlooks on life, and thus as barbaric, memorials of it retreated into the custody of libraries and municipal and parish archives for the better part of two centuries.

When recollections of it were stirred out of this long sleep by the Romantic Revival, they returned at the hands of antiquarians and archaeologists in the early years of the nineteenth century overpainted with both the roseate tints of the Romantic imagination and the darker stains of continuing Protestant distrust of the Roman Catholic Church and all its works, both in Britain and in much of Germany. The result resembled a visit to a kind of zoo in which the artistic endeavours and customs of a vanished era were resurrected as curiosities for leisured gentlemen and ladies to gaze at, and to ponder

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in their libraries. Three fine English examples of this process exist in Joseph Strutt's *The Sports and Pastimes of the People of England* (first published in 1801); in William Hone's *Ancient Mysteries Described* (1823); and in Thomas Sharp's *A Dissertation on the Pageants or Dramatic Mysteries anciently performed in Coventry* (1825).

Just as important to future pronouncements on the nature and quality of medieval drama was the steady increase in the editing and printing of metropolitan and provincial civic records, not only in Britain but also in France, Germany and other continental countries, many of which contained isolated facts and figures relating to dramatic performances in churches, guildhalls, convents and market squares. This process was further strengthened and accelerated by the foundation of Societies – historical, literary, philological and philosophical – whose members dedicated themselves to a more systematic approach to the recording and transmission of surviving evidence: the Percy Society, the Camden Society and the Early English Text Society may suffice as examples. Thus, by the end of the century, a large enough corpus of factual documentation had become available to scholars to encourage attempts to impose some form of order upon the random assortment of play texts (some in Latin, some in vernacular languages), of records of histrionically oriented folk games and dances and of payments to actors and to craftsmen for stage-gear and for time spent in rehearsal and performance recorded in Treasurer's Accounts.

An important stimulant to the undertaking of such tasks arrived in 1888 with the discovery of Johannes de Witt's sketch of the Swan Playhouse in London (c. 1596) which led directly to the earliest practical attempts to revive at first Elizabethan and Jacobean plays and then medieval ones, in conditions resembling those depicted by de Witt, stripped of all Victorian pictorial clutter. In this respect the founding by William Poel of the Elizabethan Stage Society in 1894 must be regarded as at least as significant to future research as, say, the publication of L. Petit de Julleville's *Les Mystères* (2 vols., 1880) or H. Deimling's edition of *The Chester Cycle* (for EETS, 1892).

The first major assaults on Everest – if I may so describe the double task of trying to impose order on, and to abstract sense from, the mass of documentary evidence by then available – were made in four different countries between 1891 and 1906. First, from Italy, came Alessandro D'Ancona's *Origini del teatro italiano* (2 vols., 1891), next from Germany, Wilhelm Creizenach's *Geschichte des neueren Dramas* (3 vols., 1893–1903), then in England, Sir Edmund Chambers' *The Mediaeval Stage* (2 vols., 1903 [9]), and then from France, Gustave Cohen's *Histoire de la mise en scène dans le théâtre religieux français du moyen âge* (1906). Nothing could ever be quite the same again; for here were set the groundrules by which all subsequent scholars engaging in research into medieval drama and stage conventions would have to live. The plain fact is that all four works remain, nearly a century later, essential basic reading for today's aspiring M.A. and Ph.D.

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students; and if that is not remarkable enough, what is still more astonishing is that these books were largely written as a leisure-time occupation. There is a lesson here for us to which I will return in the concluding section of this chapter.

With that said, it remains to observe that all four of these scholarly giants laboured against several serious obstacles, the worst of which was the still substantial gaps in the factual data available to them. As those of us who have sought to impose order upon historical narrative know well – whether that pattern be theological, political, social, economic or aesthetic – when confronted either with a baffling lack of concrete evidence, or with only slender or ambiguous bits of quasi-documentary evidence, we find it difficult to resist speculative judgements that fit the desired pattern and so allow the narrative to proceed with some semblance of logical progression. The pattern chosen, moreover, normally reflects an outlook coloured by the personal prejudices and predilections of the author. To this extent the four cornerstones to which I have referred, and upon which scholarly opinion in the first half of the twentieth century grounded its attitudes to medieval drama, were still deeply dyed in what we now recognise to have been Victorian approaches to the Gothic past. To some students medieval drama remained ‘naïve’, ‘ quaint’, ‘primitive’ and dead beyond recall; to others it resembled a monolithic structure which, despite organic evolutionary growth along sound Darwinian principles, was even less accessible to the public at large than the Greek or Roman plays; to yet others (most notably to Protestants and scientific humanists) such claims as it could muster to regain contemporary respect arose directly from its secularisation once it had been transferred from the hands of the clergy to those of peasants and artisans. In one way or another all these prejudices have stuck, and continue to surface from time to time even in the 1980s, as anyone who teaches the subject will know from the experience of answering students’ questions.

Inevitably, in the wake of these four major ‘histories’, there had to be a breathing space for scholars to digest their conclusions and to allow time for some of the still substantial gaps in factual knowledge to be filled by further research before any serious questioning of these conclusions could begin; in scholarly terms of reference that breathing space lasted for nearly half a century which, perhaps surprisingly, brings us to within a decade of the 1960s.

This period of consolidation, however, also heralded two important advents, one international, the other specifically American. The first was the growth of learned, quarterly journals which accorded space to interpretative articles about medieval plays and stagecraft; the second was the publication of Karl Young’s *The Drama of the Medieval Church* (2 vols., 1933 [31]). Both of these developments provided launching pads for new departures; yet notwithstanding the innovative and monumental grandeur of Young’s work, it served in two vital respects to confirm existing prejudices. It did so by reinforcing the traditional (if rather indeterminately defined) divisions

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between text and music, as also between Latin liturgical drama of the tenth, eleventh and twelfth centuries on the one hand and vernacular religious drama of the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries on the other, leaving that of the thirteenth century suspended in a kind of limbo from out of which it still awaits rescue today.

Thus by the outbreak of World War II, scholarly opinion in the West, concentrated as it then was in university departments of language and literature, had come to regard the reappearance of dramatic literature in Christian Europe as a strictly literary phenomenon rather than either a theological or a musical one, and thus as a subject as readily divisible into compartments as, say, philology, with a clear-cut beginning, middle and end. The first of these three sections could conveniently be defined as 'Latin liturgical drama', starting with the earliest version of the *Visitatio Sepulchri* (stripped of course of its music) and ending with expanded versions of the *Ordo Prophetarum* and the *Officium Stellae* and loosely linked to Latin offices for Easter and Christmas. The second section, despite the lack of any substantial texts relating to post-Easter offices, was described as 'transitional drama', starting with the assumed aggregation of all existing plays into complete Latin liturgical cycles, followed by translation into vernacular languages. The third section could then be labelled 'vernacular drama', beginning with the transfer of responsibility for texts and performance from churchmen to laymen, a process held to account for the advent during the fifteenth century of morality plays, saint plays and moral interludes, and to end with the collapse of all religious drama under the combined pressures of economic recession, anticlericalism and humanist alternatives of neo-classical origin. Lest it be supposed that I am still discussing events in some distant past, let us all recall that this simple, evolutionary view of the birth, growth and demise of medieval drama was being broadly reiterated as recently as 1955 by Hardin Craig in his *English Religious Drama of the Middle Ages* (105). And so too was the view that the vexed areas of folk drama, civic pageantry and courtly entertainments (vexed because both were so ill-equipped with texts) could be hived off from the mainstream of medieval and early Renaissance drama as lacking any serious claim for study in departments of language and literature.

What then confronts us as the real revolution in academic attitudes that has taken place since the end of World War II is the steady erosion of these artificial sectional divisions, accompanied by a growing determination to replace them with more sensitive approaches to, and reappraisals of, the actual processes of development and change. If, then, there is any meaningful subdivision to be made between the first and the last two decades of the forty-year period 1946–86, I submit that the key to it lies in the words 'erosion' and 'reappraisal'. Naturally, some measure of reappraisal had to accompany the erosion of the old beliefs, but, no less self-evidently, the process of erosion must have progressed to a point where the results had become obvious if reappraisal was to advance much beyond speculation.

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And this is where I think separation of the nature and quality of the research work in medieval and Renaissance drama undertaken between 1945 and the 1960s on the one hand, and that engaged in during the past two and a half decades on the other, becomes a meaningful proposition.

It so happens that 1946 was the year in which I myself entered upon this scene as a graduate student at Oxford, so from that time forward I can at least speak from first-hand experience. In the following sections of this chapter, therefore, I shall try to maintain the distinction that I have just made between 'erosion' and 'reappraisal' both after and before c. 1965 without, as I hope, distorting or diminishing the respective achievements of either the first or second halves of what, historically, has unquestionably been a single era of accelerating change. Both processes began with the publication of George Kernodle's *From Art to Theatre* in 1944 (9a), followed by H. C. Gardiner's *Mysteries' End* in 1946 (104). Between them these two American books, written during the war years, set up a large question mark above the most fundamental dogma of orthodox academic opinion both in North America and in Europe. Could it be – so both authors appeared to ask – that medieval drama was *not* a self-contained literary and artistic entity, born either by immaculate conception or by committee resolution relating to the presentation of the Eucharist c. 975 and dying from exhaustion derived either from obesity or from sterility some six hundred years later? Kernodle, by first insisting upon adopting an aesthetic approach, and by then imposing its values upon the visual aspects of dramatic art during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, succeeded in opening up for young students of my generation new vistas of approach to medieval drama: Father Gardiner, by insisting that medieval drama was deliberately murdered by its enemies in the course of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation rather than dying of natural causes, did as much to make the continued segregation of 'medieval' from 'Renaissance' drama an untenable proposition. These were the first wide cracks to appear in the seemingly well-shored-up edifice of the received account of the historical development of medieval drama.

A third yawning gap in credibility was shortly to appear following Sir Tyrone Guthrie's revival of Sir David Lindsay's *Ane Satyre of the Three Estaitis* at the Edinburgh Festival in 1948, and the first full-scale production of the York cycle at York in 365 years by E. Martin Browne in 1951. Audiences and critics alike who witnessed these performances were astonished. In an almost literal sense, those who had come to gaze, even to mock, stayed to pray. Once more, therefore, nothing could ever be quite the same again where critical appraisal of medieval dramaturgy was concerned: for the speed and efficacy of the stagecraft had proved to be as compelling and convincing as was the power of the spoken text to stir imaginations and to move hearts to both laughter and tears. Such plays could no longer be dismissed as historical curiosities: rather did they cry out to be reassessed as living theatre. In short, medieval drama had at last escaped from the enforced custodianship of librarians, archivists and dons, and had returned to audi-

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ences drawn from all walks of life. The edifice of received academic pronouncements upon it was not yet in ruins, but it was crumbling fast.

So much then for an historical context for this research survey – a long and curious story briefly sketched. With that behind us and, as I trust, some measure of agreement about its central features, we can now move with greater safety into the more treacherous rapids of contemporary scholarship. As I have already stated, I believe the dominant characteristic of the period from 1945 to the 1960s to have been the systematic erosion and demolition of all doctrine relating to medieval drama that could no longer stand up to either detailed critical analysis or to the equally exacting test of theatrical revival, and that of the period from the 1960s to the present day to have been methodical reappraisal, based upon supplementary factual evidence within a wider time-frame that is leading towards a rebuilding of the old edifice both on more stable foundations and refaced, with most of the original, decorative features that were formerly missing now restored. To divorce these two processes altogether would however be wrong, since that could only be to the detriment of an accurate understanding of where we stand now: for many of the speculative, but cautious, reinterpretations of artistic and literary achievement during the Middle Ages that were postulated in the 1950s and early 1960s have in fact been corroborated in the work of scholars during the 1970s and early 1980s, and much of the strictly factual materials unearthed during the earlier period provided the data needed to lead to some of the critical conclusions reached in recent years.

RECORDS

Arguably, the most important single development in research over the past twenty-five years respecting medieval drama has been the renewed onslaught on the orderly unearthing, transcribing, editing (frequently re-editing) and publishing of records, spearheaded by the Malone Society through its continuing series of 'Collections'. Giles Dawson's edition of *Records of Plays and Players in Kent* appeared under this imprint in 1965 (138) followed in 1974 by Stanley J. Kahrl's *Records of Plays and Players in Lincolnshire* (139). Flanking these invaluable provincial facts and figures lie *Dramatic Records in the Declared Accounts of the Treasurer of the Chamber, 1558–1642*, edited by David Cook and the late F. P. Wilson (1962 [137]), and the no less valuable *Dramatic Records in the Declared Accounts of the Office of Works, 1560–1640* (1977 [140]), transcribed by F. P. Wilson and checked and edited by R. F. Hill. The principal burden, however, of providing up-to-date scholarly editions of English records has shifted since 1975–6 to Canada and to the team of young scholars based at the University of Toronto, led by Alexandra Johnston and funded initially by the Canada Council.

Records of Early English Drama was launched, as JoAnna Dutka observed in her first *Newsletter* under that imprint, for the specific purpose of systematically locating, transcribing and publishing all surviving civic and

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ecclesiastical records pertaining to medieval drama in Britain. This effort to co-ordinate the interests and labours of scholars previously working in isolation in Canada, the USA, Australasia and Britain has already enriched us with volumes on York, Chester, Coventry, Newcastle, Norwich, Cumberland, Westmorland, Gloucestershire and Devon (with more to follow), each of which now possesses the authority of a standard text. As the editors have been the first to admit, all of them have been helped by a small army of English archivists who, since 1945, have been patiently restoring, cataloguing and conserving such municipal and parish records as survived the wartime air-raids and accompanying damage from fires, fire-fighters and rehousing, thereby making the editorial tasks of locating and transcribing records easier than it had ever been before. Since 1945 other, more isolated items of factual record have been discovered in legal documents and school libraries and subsequently published in an expanding number of journals (see pp. 12–13, below).

In France, similar endeavours, pioneered by Jean Jacquot at the Centre Nationale de la Recherche Scientifique in Paris, have led to the publication of the *Collection Le Choeur des Muses* starting with *Fêtes de la Renaissance I*, published in 1956. Unlike the Canadian enterprise which has restricted itself to records of English drama, this one has been conducted from an international standpoint and has substantially augmented contemporary comprehension of Burgundian, German and Spanish drama of the sixteenth century and earlier, as well as French. It is to this initiative that we owe Elie Konigson's superbly organised volume, published in 1969, on the Passion play at Valenciennes in 1547 (335).

Nevertheless it has to be admitted that we still lack any continental European equivalent to the Toronto enterprise covering municipal and parish records in France, Italy, Spain or any eastern European country. For German-speaking central Europe, a major collection of archival records, by Bernd Neumann, has just appeared (1987 [565]). Beyond the lack of adequate funding there are other obstacles of which not the least is language. The USA, Canada and Britain, possessed as they are of a common language, can muster several Roman legions of medievalists, and from their ranks can assemble several cohorts of specialists in medieval drama. That is not the case in any single continental European country. Isolated enthusiasts exist everywhere across the map from Portugal to Poland, as they have done for the past hundred and fifty years or more; but numerically they scarcely add up to more than a platoon in any one country; consequently they lack the vocal power to make their claims for funding heard in the corridors of their respective Ministries of Education whose officials everywhere control university finance.

A ray of light on the horizon is to be seen in the prospectus recently issued by the Cambridge University Press for a sixteen-volume *Theatre in Europe: A Documentary History*. Two whole volumes in this series (nos. III and IV) are to be devoted to the Middle Ages in Europe, but it is unlikely that either

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of these volumes will be published before 1994. Meantime, I wish to transfer attention to play production, more specifically to theatrical revivals of medieval plays.

PRODUCTIONS

Within the purview of this survey, I recall four events which attracted wide attention at the time, and which I still regard as outstanding. The first of these is a revival of the entire Cornish *Ordinalia*, presented by my own Department of Drama at Bristol University and directed by the late Neville Denny in the ancient earthwork 'Round' at St Piran, near Perranporth in Cornwall, in 1969. It was followed shortly after by the publication of Markham Harris' new translation of the Cornish text into English. The second is the broadcasting of the Chester cycle on British television, directed by Jane Howell, in 1977. The third is the first production in North America, also in 1977, of an entire English cycle (York) on the campus of the University of Toronto organised by Alexandra Johnston. The most recent is the production, again in Britain, of *The Mysteries*, a wide-ranging compilation and free adaptation of medieval religious plays from several sources scripted by Tony Harrison, directed by Bill Bryden and presented by the National Theatre in 1984, and again in 1985 at the Lyceum. And to this group of four, I must append a fifth, albeit from the years 1958–60: this is Noah Greenberg's revival of *The Play of Daniel* (*Ludus Danielis*) in January 1958 at the Cloisters in New York City, followed in 1960 by my own revival in his version of it for the Carmel Music Festival (with singers from the San Francisco Opera and Stanford University conducted by Sandor Salgo). The impact of both productions on their East and West Coast audiences was comparable to that of Sir Tyrone Guthrie's production of Sir David Lindsay's *Ane Satyre of the Three Estaitis* in Edinburgh in 1948 and the first production of the whole of the York and Chester cycles in York and Chester respectively in 1951.

What these previously unimaginable events have proved is that medieval drama can once again be taken seriously by the public at large: it is no longer the preserve of antiquarians, archaeologists, philologists and other academics. Indeed, it is even providing a source of fresh inspiration for today's young playwrights who now borrow its stage conventions and stagecraft without self-consciously realising that this is what they are doing!

How did this come about, and what lessons can it offer us? In answering this question, I must again revert briefly to the nineteenth century and to the discovery of the de Witt sketch in the library of the University of Utrecht in 1888 which led directly to the founding of the Elizabethan Stage Society by William Poel in 1894. That is our *fons et origo* where stage production is concerned, since it was Poel himself who led the long process of experimental revival with his production of *Everyman* in 1901 in a double bill with the Chester version of 'The Sacrifice of Isaac'. His example was swiftly followed

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by his disciple Nugent Monck whose 1909 production of the 'Passion Play' from the N-Town cycle was brought to an abrupt end with his arrest for violation of Britain's blasphemy laws!

To us this may seem as incredible as it is now laughable; but the effect of this police action, instigated by the Lord Chamberlain, was to make it dangerous to risk reviving any medieval play in Britain for presentation to a paying audience in which either *Deus Pater* or Christ Himself appeared onstage in a speaking role. In this way, advancing scholarly research became divorced from continuing experimental revival for another forty years: only in 1951, and then only as a concession to the Festival of Britain, were these laws relaxed to allow the York and Chester Cycles to be produced – a concession linked more closely by the Government to the revival of tourism than to interest in the revival of medieval drama! Even in 1959, I myself had to answer to the Lord Chamberlain for permitting a performance of Bernard Shaw's *Black Girl in Search of her God* to be presented by a Belgian company at an international student festival in Bristol without his permission. Permission to proceed was only granted three hours before curtain-up, and then only because I had apologised and supplied a written promise that the performance would be conducted throughout in French! Not until 1968 were these archaic powers of censorship abolished.

While in a general sense (and despite the obstacle of stage censorship while it lasted) the driving force behind twentieth-century efforts to revive medieval plays has been British, considerable momentum was added to it, at first in Germany and France, and then in North America. A unique thread of continuity surviving from the first half of the seventeenth century was preserved in Germany in the revival every ten years of the Passion play in the Bavarian village of Oberammergau, where the right to participate is still jealously guarded as a matter of family pride and regarded as an act of devotion rather than as a professional or commercial enterprise. Nearby, in Austria, Max Reinhardt's production of Hugo von Hofmannsthal's adaptation of *Everyman (Jedermann)*, presented in front of the Minster at Salzburg (1912), proved to be popular enough to be repeated as an annual event, dropped only during the years of the two World Wars.

Another important innovation during this period was the formation in France by Gustave Cohen of Les Théophilians, a group of student actors based at the Sorbonne and dedicated to the revival of French medieval plays; this company then took these plays on tour both in France and abroad during the summer vacation.

Cohen's example was copied in the 1960s by John Leyerle at the University of Toronto where he founded the Pocoli Ludique Societas, and also in England in the University of Bristol. These initiatives led, during the 1970s, to the creation of a company describing itself as The Medieval Players based at the Universities of London and Cambridge.

A factor common to all these enterprises from the founding of the Théophilians to the present day has been a determination to abide as

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faithfully as possible by the original stage directions, and thereafter to employ the test of performance both as a new tool for the advancement of research and as a new dimension to critical appreciation. This has brought us to a point where performances of medieval plays ranging from cycles to single moralities, saint plays and interludes are so frequently on offer to the public as no longer to occasion surprise; nor do the large audiences who pay to attend these performances continue to regard the plays themselves as 'quaint' or 'naive' in a pejorative sense. Indeed, most of these productions are now formally reviewed and catalogued, thanks to the efforts of John Elliott Jr and G. K. Hunter who, since 1967, have been recording and publishing them annually in *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama*.

What the precise results of this extraordinary re-emergence of medieval plays in performance over the past twenty to thirty years has been is difficult to assess; but what is certain is that the new opportunities which have arisen to present, criticise and discuss these plays as dramatic art, instead of simply as texts, have led everywhere to an enriched appreciation of them, and to a new-found seriousness in the study of their stage directions, both explicit and implicit. In other words, the effort and skills needed to recover the visual iconography and the musical factors which originally accompanied both the devising and execution of these plays have led scholars to devote far more time and energy in recent years to the dramatic and theatrical, rather than strictly literary, qualities of these plays. The truth of this proposition becomes apparent on even the most cursory perusal of recently published bibliographies.

Richard Southern's *The Medieval Theatre in the Round* (1957 [122]), T. W. Craik's *The Tudor Interlude* (1958 [242]), Alec Harman's *Medieval and Early Renaissance Music* (Fairlawn, NJ: Essential Books, 1958), M. D. Anderson's *Drama and Imagery in English Medieval Churches* (1963 [110]) and V. A. Kolve's *The Play Called Corpus Christi* (1966 [151]) set the tone of the new criticism; to this shortlist I might add at one end the first volume of my own *Early English Stages* (1959 [107]) and at the other Sidney Anglo's *Spectacle, Pageantry and Early Tudor Policy* (1969 [251]). This sudden widening of research horizons has resulted in as many dissertations, articles and books being devoted to stage crafts as to texts and their interpretation during the 1970s and 1980s. This development has in turn had an effect upon the terms of reference laid down for editors of records. References to and payments for tournaments, civic pageants, mummings, disguisings, entertainments, triumphs and folk games have all come at last to be regarded as meriting inclusion alongside those to plays and players, and this enrichment of the primary evidence now available to young scholars has served greatly to extend our understanding of medieval attitudes to the aesthetic, social and political precepts of dramatic art in addition to the more familiar theological and literary considerations.

Perhaps an even more significant aspect of this development is what it has achieved during the past two decades in bringing students from many