

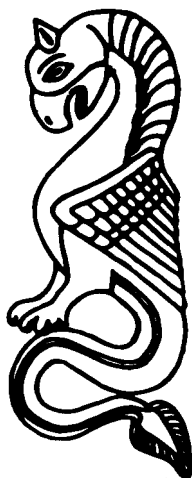
# Leeds Studies in English

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## Meg Twycross

Sarah Carpenter (and contributors)

Meg's glowing entrance at the METH meeting that celebrated this collection, her vividly sequined peacock jacket drawing and dazzling the eye, 'feeding the gaze' of assembled friends and colleagues, enacted in literal performance the role she has taken for the last thirty years in the field of medieval drama. She has been, at many levels, a beacon for medieval theatre studies. All her work has been visually spectacular, meticulous in material detail, responsive to and projected through the affective complexities of performance.

The understanding of medieval theatre has shifted dramatically over the last decades, particularly perhaps in the increased focus on and access to the material evidences of performance. Meg has always written and published vigorously and with immeasurable scholarship in this area. But her greatest influence may not have been in the published word, but in her engagement with other means of understanding performance. The prime areas of Meg's work show her as one of the key figures in opening up the new approaches that transformed the field.

Back in the 1970s at the University of Oxford she began, with the N.town *Mary Play* a long and impressive series of productions of medieval dramatic texts. They have contributed strikingly to the way in which performance itself has become a research tool in early theatre study. Meg's productions, from the beginning, drew on her detailed knowledge of iconography, costume and fabric, staging, spectacle and the physical conditions of performance. Trusting to these as keys to unlocking and developing the supposedly 'simple' texts of mystery and morality plays, her productions have over the years helped to confront and explore key issues in medieval performance. The *Mary Play* enacted the iconographic complexity of many of the mystery plays, respecting their seriously mixed tones of high seriousness and farce. Later productions with the *Joculatores Lancastrienses* investigated the relationship between drama and liturgy in productions of the *Resurrection*; the implications of male performance of female roles in the *Purification*; the effects of pageant wagon staging in the spectacularly impressive *Doomsday* pageant played with fire, music and towering Heaven through parts of the original route along the streets of York; and numerous effects and questions raised by the energetic inventiveness of sixteenth-century

interludes. The interaction of scholarly research with vibrant performance opened many academic and non-academic eyes to the expressive possibilities of medieval texts.

Production especially stresses the joint, co-operative nature both of theatre and research into it: such communal enterprise has always been important in Meg's work – as in her life. In 1979 she was instrumental in establishing *Medieval English Theatre*: the society and journal dedicated to research in early theatre, especially aspects of performance. Its annual conference meeting has brought together and maintained a cohesive and mutually supportive community of medieval theatre researchers, with a forum to share and develop the kind of work that does not always sit comfortably in traditional academic journals. Both in her own publication, and in the editorial roles METH led her into, Meg has been instrumental in raising the standard of published work in the field. She judges all contributions by the exacting standards she sets herself, and offers lengthy suggestions on every worthy article she referees. All the work which has passed by her dreaded red pen has been the better for it.

The intersection of the academic with the theatrical, of the visual and material with the verbal and conceptual, has always characterised Meg's work and often been the source of her creativity. Consequently, she has been particularly receptive to the possibilities of multi-media technology, and what it can offer to the study of medieval theatre. In the 1990s she was involved in establishing the *York Doomsday Project*, a research project into every aspect of the *York Plays* and their complex contexts. This draws on the resources of multi-media computer technology to collect, hyperlink and reproduce high-resolution manuscript, image, record and other evidences electronically. Although in its infancy, such technology has the potential to revolutionise access to and study of medieval performance across the world.

Meg's work has consistently addressed new or unfamiliar areas and approaches in the field, liaising with colleagues in other fields and other countries to expand the possibilities for medieval English theatre. She was among those most receptive to the comparative study of medieval theatre across Europe that has invigorated the English field; in particular her research with colleagues from Leuven into the pictorial and archival evidence of processional performance in the Low Countries will open up new areas of evidence to theatre researchers in Meg's characteristically vivid, visual but meticulous style.

Meg's work has always been creatively bound up with her role as a teacher. All her productions in Lancaster have been the products of a unique course in

## *Meg Twycross*

which undergraduates learn about the medieval theatre by putting on a play. Her teaching is always innovative and imaginative: her undergraduates can take a course in medieval palaeography which is now taught through an interactive computer programme she has written, and examined in part by the requirement that they each make a medieval manuscript. In her longstanding course on the Themes and Images of the Middle Ages, students are immersed in the texts and pictures, themes and myths, and are invited to share her intimacy with and enthusiasm for the Middle Ages. Her favourite teaching area is Anglo-Saxon, however, where again she attracts a loyal and dedicated following for a subject area neither fashionable nor compulsory. Like everything she does, her teaching is endlessly painstaking, deeply challenging, and wholly original. Through her active role in the Erasmus project there are now ex-students all over Europe who vividly recall being taught by Meg.

Everyone involved with theatre knows that it is an area where warmth, spectacle, vivid engagement combine with endless stress, improvisation and unlimited personal commitment. Meg's frighteningly wide-ranging, rigorous and polymathic research has always combined with intense personal engagement of individual people in the projects of performance. The richly detailed verbal and visual textures of her work, whether on the page, the stage, or in her friends lives, have inspired and enlightened many overlapping circles of medieval theatre workers – if occasionally exasperating those in charge of deadlines, word-limits and other kinds of academic constraint. Meg knows, sees and creates too much to make 'finishing' anything an easy task.

Yet if her status and significance in the subject are plain in her writing and productions, it may be that her influence on friends and colleagues is an equally important contribution to the living field of medieval theatre studies. The rich range of topics addressed by her friends in this collection – productions medieval and modern; illustration and text; Spanish, Dutch, Flemish and English performance; mock battles and legal covenants; acting techniques and playing places; formal texts and informal games – confirms the breadth of her own interests. But a random sample of reminiscences and reflections collected from friends and colleagues testifies to the less tangible but even more vivid ways in which Meg has touched the perceptions and lives of the medieval theatre community.

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*Sarah Carpenter*

'I first knew Meg as a student actor taking on a puzzling role: Mercy in the 'Parliament of Heaven'. I was already hooked on performance, but this confronted me with all kinds of new questions. How does the conceptual combine with the actual in an allegorical 'character'? How can an actor engage the audience emotionally in 'non-naturalistic' theatre? How can the immediacy of performance throw light on historical perceptions and cultures? The weight of the head-dress, the way the costume influenced gesture, all drew me into a preoccupation with medieval performance. That preoccupation, fed by Meg's endless individual engagement and inspiration, came to shape my whole academic life.'

'I first remember Meg from an undergraduate lecture. She was talking about what the Green Knight *wore*, which was a completely unexpected topic – not at all what we would have expected then from a literature lecture. My own teaching is still influenced by her techniques. I remember how she got us all to dress up in different historical costume to get to grips with pronunciation change.'

'I first met Meg at an appointments committee in 1974. Our deliberations weren't protracted: she was so obviously the best candidate and Oxford's loss was Lancaster's lasting gain. Since then I have watched with admiration how she has led medieval studies (especially drama) from predominantly historical and philological approaches (although she can teach these too) into an absorbing practice-based and literary discipline.'

'I remember exciting early conversations with Meg about the forming of *Medieval English Theatre* and the wonderful, characteristically exhaustive, questionnaire on pageant waggons that she compiled for the first METH meeting. My only contribution, I think, was the eccentric spelling of 'waggons'. I also remember a wealth of postcards from travel abroad – especially 'Antichrist's mother', which is still stuck up in the kitchen at home. There was her generous help in handing over her own modern-spelling texts when the deadline for production of the 1980 Wakefield plays was looming – a generosity that inadvertently and shamefully was never recorded in the programme. And productions, of course. The rich, endlessly-inventive, and hugely entertaining Chester 'Purification' still seems to me unmatched in pageant productions.'

'I first met Meg at the first METH meeting in 1979, when I was a postgraduate student at York. It was the first conference in my life, the first paper I ever gave, and the York gang made me drive the minibus too. I found Meg pretty terrifying, and the fact that she had two meek daughters at her bidding

*Meg Twycross*

handing round home-made scones completed the image of a worthy role-model. *Medieval English Theatre* and I have grown up together, shaped from that beginning. Meg is now friend, colleague and co-conspirator in a number of projects and adventures all more or less concerned with the study of medieval theatre, but as a role model I have yet to find a better.'

'We first met on our Medieval Players' maiden tour in Summer 1981, where in the shadow of Carlisle Cathedral we ate lunch at Franco's Pizzeria. Like the setting, our theatrical project was a strange mix of the medieval and modern, and Meg's immediate and intuitive grasp of what we were attempting gave us great encouragement to continue with the experiment. From the very start Meg proved a generous and loyal supporter of the Medieval Players. But she wasn't uncritical: half in jest she once remarked that it was her role to provide us with expert advice and it was ours to ignore it. Her own productions may have been informed by the most detailed research but they weren't without their moments of refreshing anachronism: my favourite was in *That Girl from Andros* when the cast burst into a Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers' number – 'Pick Yourself Up' from *Top Hat*. I hope that Meg recognised in our productions some traces of her humour and her sound advice.'

'The first time I saw Meg was on a stage, explaining how costume determined posture on the stage and in paintings. I was woefully ignorant of the theatre, let alone medieval theatre, and all of a sudden understood so much more and was so fascinated.'

'In one of my filing cabinets I keep folders and appropriate contents from every one of the METH annual meetings since 1979. Periodically, when I need to create space for other documents I look at the METH folders and wonder whether I should throw them away. To date, I have always resisted this bold action. This is because the annual METH meeting has always provided me with a 'life-line' to my medieval friends and colleagues and their work. When my work at Bretton Hall has taken me in directions other than medieval ones, the last Saturday in March (the usual day of the METH meeting) has always provided me with sufficient stimulus to drive through my medieval work for the coming year. I don't know to what extent Meg knows of this significance and her role in it. I hope she does now.'

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*Sarah Carpenter*

The brilliant colour and inventiveness of Meg's contributions to medieval theatre studies can, inevitably, hardly be matched or captured in a work like this. But the range of interest, engagement and scholarship captured in this volume may at least be a gift from the medieval theatre community to mark the special quality of what she has given to it.