

Renaissance and Reformation
Renaissance et Réforme



MacLean, Sally-Beth, and Alan Somerset, co-directors. Records of Early English Drama: Patrons & Performances (REED: P&P). Other

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Records of Early English Drama: Patrons & Performances (REED: P&P).

Other.

Toronto: University of Toronto, 2003. Accessed 28 May 2020.

reed.library.utoronto.ca.

The REED: Patrons and Performances (REED: P&P) website, as its name suggests, provides “a wide range of data about professional performers on tour.”¹ Building on the Records of Early English Drama (REED) project (reed.utoronto.ca), REED: P&P offers the ability to search patrons, venues, troupes, and events. The site contains the latest data from the published REED collections, and more data is being added from the REED Online site (ereed.library.toronto.ca).

REED and REED Online are concerned with the actual records of performances. They offer transcriptions and ample metadata describing each of the source materials. Rather than merely present the documentary evidence, REED: P&P expands on this information to create a relational database focused on the performers and performances. The site enables a fuller discovery of early English performance history, offering several access points into the data, linking together the various facets surrounding performance events.

This relational database and the connections between records enable users to fruitfully navigate a network of connections across the site. REED Online jumps straight into full sets of records, relying on optional filters to limit the results. REED: P&P provides separate landing pages for “Patrons,” “Venues,” “Troupes,” and “Events.” The search mechanism is simple and straightforward. The search fields sit above a browsable list of records. Drop-down lists are available, where appropriate. Keyword and date searches are also supported. Naturally, there are fields specific to each page. Patrons can be searched by rank/title. Troupes can be filtered based on the type of performer. Venues are searched by type of venue, location, or troupe. Events can be selected by event type, location (city, town, county), and performer (troupe, performer type). Each of the results links to a content page with detailed information.

Although the interface is divided into separate search pages, the underlying data is clearly related. Patrons sponsor troupes who perform in events at venues. REED: P&P reinforces these relationships through the search

1. See “About,” reed.library.utoronto.ca/about.

results and the detail pages. For example, each result from an “Events” search hotlinks the associated venue and troupe, linking each to its content page. The content page for the troupe then links back to its patron and to associated events. The “Patron” page links to other related patrons, troupes, and events.

A key feature of the site is the map. Like the one on REED Online, the map provides another view into the data. Not only is it a helpful way to visualize the location of performances, but it also serves as a mechanism for searches. Venues can be selected from the map through links to the detail pages. The colour of the icon distinguishes the type of venue (town, residence, or monastery), and the shape denotes whether the venue is one of the selected performance venues.

We found the map to be a useful addition, with several innovative technical features. We especially appreciated the way the venues are clustered into groups depending on the zoom level. However, the implementation, it seems to us, works imperfectly. As we zoomed in and out, it was unclear whether the numbers added up correctly. We were also uncertain whether filtering our search results had any effect on venues denoted in the map. Some of this, no doubt, is user error, as we had trouble distinguishing selected venues from other locations. But perhaps the map could be simplified to highlight only the relevant information, based on the search terms used?

The interface, the map included, comes from a codebase shared by several sites that together form the On the Road Again (OTRA) project. This framework is well suited for REED: P&P’s content. Searching works well. The layout is logical. The “Tag Records” feature, enabling users to save, print, and email records, is useful for researchers. The documentation for the site and the sources of data is sufficient.

However, we do recommend an improvement to the implementation of the tiles on the home page: specifically, the tiles could be more consistent and intuitive. Tiles for the “Patrons,” “Troupes,” “Events,” and “Maps” pages do not have labels; the meaning of the tile images is not immediately clear. The “Venues” tile does have a label, but that is only because the tile itself is a link to a “Featured Venue,” and the label is the link to the general “Venues” landing page. The images are lovely, and the ability to highlight featured results is wonderful, but the overall effect is confusing. Quietly mixing featured results in with links to general landing pages violates usability guidelines, such as Jakob Nielsen’s Consistency and Standards principle (see “10 Usability Heuristics for User Interface Design,” nngroup.com/articles/ten-usability-heuristics). OTRA and

its other sites provide labels for their tiles, so we have to wonder if this is an oversight specific to REED: P&P.

Overall, REED: Patrons and Performances is a deep resource, providing an entry to a rich and carefully researched database. The underlying data is thorough and arranged logically, enabling multiple avenues of investigation. That said, we feel that this is a site that presupposes in its use a measure of subject matter expertise. Without domain knowledge, users may have trouble navigating not the site itself, which is well designed, but the content. There is good documentation, including instructions for how to search the site, but there is little descriptive content contextualizing the data. Some of this is mitigated by the drop-down lists on the search pages, which, while functional, also help to self-document several categories within the data. But this site does not follow REED Online's example of offering "How To" pages and "Editorial Materials" alongside the search records. Adding interpretive content is by no means necessary, as REED: P&P accomplishes what it sets out to do. However, highlighting featured results, adding guided tours, and telling interesting stories might help to attract and orient new and/or casual users. Without that piece, REED: Patrons and Performances is still a wonderful site, but it may be better suited for answering questions rather than generating them.

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Folger Shakespeare Library

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open.ac.uk/Arts/reading/UK/index.php.

The UK Reading Experience Database (UK RED), housed at the Open University, is an open-access database that offers searchable records of the history of reading from the capacious timespan of 1450 to 1945. The scope and ambition of the project is at once its greatest point of interest and its most evident shortcoming. What is truly novel about the project is its attempt to establish a data-driven baseline of a history of reading that does not centre