

*Urry, Burrell, and the pains of John Taylor:
the Spelman MS, 1709–1766*

Werewolves, accessories to murder, decapitated rebels, drunken annotators, heretical apostates: even if most of these figures' connections with *Piers Plowman* remain shadowy, they still demand our attention. By contrast, what is generally taken to be "a comparatively fallow period for *Piers Plowman* textual scholarship,"¹ that between the editions of Crowley (1550) and Thomas Whitaker (1813), might not seem to offer anything comparably engaging. The truth, though, is that this era's fabricators of the Langland archive are no less intriguing, and much better defined, than their predecessors. Even the one major bore at the heart of the story this chapter will tell is superlative in his dullness, and his companions here include maligned non-juring editors, dissipate viscounts, hapless librarians, insane antiquarians, and others who despite their obscurity are central to the creation of Middle English studies. For the eighteenth century is the era in which the world we study came into being as a projection of scholarly desires and an object of its methods. To locate the authentic *Piers Plowman* solely in the manuscripts and editions is to remain beholden to many layers of transmission whose existence is neglected. Yet our analyses are the products as well of the intervening centuries' engagement with the textual record. "If we hope to understand the medieval manuscripts that we study and the manner in which we study them," observes Jennifer Summit, "we must begin by asking where they came from" – not just where they *originated*, but also their subsequent sojourns in the libraries of owners and institutions, out on loan or hidden from view.²

The first half of this chapter concerns the ways in which readers and scholars of the eighteenth century could consult, or just know about the existence of, the texts of *Piers Plowman*. The focus will be the document that is now San Marino, Huntington MS Hm 114 (sigil Ht for Langland's poem). Though its text barely figures in modern editions, this was by far the most important copy in the earliest stages of serious textual work on the poem. In tracking its movements, we will keep encountering evidence

of the partiality of our received archive of primary texts, quite apart from the absence of manuscripts lost to early neglect, disaster, and Cromwellian destruction. In general, the post-Crowley era witnessed the steady consolidation of materials in the hands of the major collectors like Robert Cotton or Edward Harley and by the major repositories of the British Museum, the Bodleian, and Cambridge University Library. This chapter bears witness to some of those developments, which must remain at the heart of our histories of textual transmission and scholarship. But the company kept by Hm 114 alone shows the partiality of any account that looks only there. Manuscripts now lost or not readily identifiable, important volumes erroneously catalogued, and unexpected auctions associated with Hm 114 and its peers disturb any attempt to form a coherent image of the eighteenth-century *Piers Plowman*. These items' resistance to any accommodation by the historians and fabricators of the Langland archive – in this case, their resistance to the original goal of this chapter, the mapping of the eighteenth century's increasing interest in the text of *Piers Plowman* – underscores the imperative not to write them out of our story.

Lord Weymouth, John Urry, and the Spelman auction of 1709

The *Piers Plowman* text of Huntington Hm 114 is notorious both for its modernization of the language and, especially, for its conflation of all three versions so as to form a massive text, which have kept this copy on the outskirts of Langlandian editorial history.³ But students of the poem's production and transmission have made great strides, focusing on what exemplars the scribe had to hand, how he treated them, and, most recently, his identity: according to Linne Mooney and Estelle Stubbs, he was Richard Osborn, the clerk of the Chamber of the City, 1400–37, in which capacity he was colleague of John Carpenter, John Marchaunt (Scribe D), and the other figures involved in the promulgation of vernacular poetry in the early fifteenth century.⁴ This document's post-medieval history, though, has not attracted such close attention. The Huntington Library's catalogue of manuscripts and its derivations rely entirely on the inscriptions within the manuscript itself in relating its provenance, thus identifying no owners between the antiquarian Henry Spelman (?1564–1641) and Dr. John Taylor (1704–66), the two inscriptions on folio 1^r (see Figure 9).⁵

But evidence external to the copy indicates that it was among the twenty or so volumes that Thomas Thynne, first Viscount Weymouth (1640–1714), purchased at the two auctions of Spelman's collection by the bookseller John Hardyng, held in December 1709 and January 1710.⁶ The discipline of Middle English studies thus owes almost as much to his efforts, which established the great collection at Longleat House, as to those of another

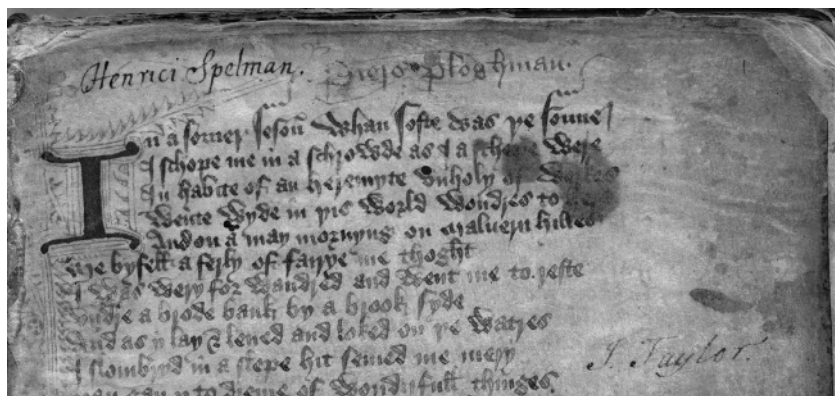


Figure 9 Ownership inscriptions at the opening of *Piers Plowman*. San Marino, Huntington Library, MS Hm 114, fol. 1^r

member of an earlier generation of his family, the sixteenth-century Chaucer editor William Thynne. Though no longer in the Longleat collection, the manuscript's inclusion among these items is indicated by Timothy Thomas's Preface to John Urry's *Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, published posthumously in 1721: "The Reader will observe *MS. Sp.* often quoted in the Glossary, by which is meant a MS. in Octavo partly written on Velom and partly on Paper, containing the Five Books of *Troilus* and *Criseide*. This I found amongst Books and Papers left by Mr Urry; but I could not perceive that he had made any use of it." At first Thomas "did not know to whom it belonged," but was eventually able to piece together its provenance:

it seemed to have once belonged to that Learned Antiquary Sir *Henry Spelman*, his name [*Henrici Spelman*] being written in fair hand on the first leaf of it, and at the beginning of other Tracts contained in that Volume. But I have been since informed that it belonged to the late Lord Viscount *Weymouth*, from whom it is probable Mr. Urry borrowed it not long before his Death; which might be the reason that no notice is taken of it in that Catalogue he left of the MSS. which he had seen and perused.⁷

Urry had cut his editorial teeth on the 1710 edition of Gavin Douglas's *Eneydos*. He undertook to edit the works of Chaucer "much against his inclination," the task thrust upon him by "some Persons, [who imagined themselves] well acquainted with Mr. Urry's Qualifications" and who saw this as a potential way to raise funds for Christ Church.⁸ Thomas's list reveals that, in addition to Hm 114, Urry had access to another *Troilus* lent by the first Viscount Weymouth, a *Canterbury Tales* lent by the widow of

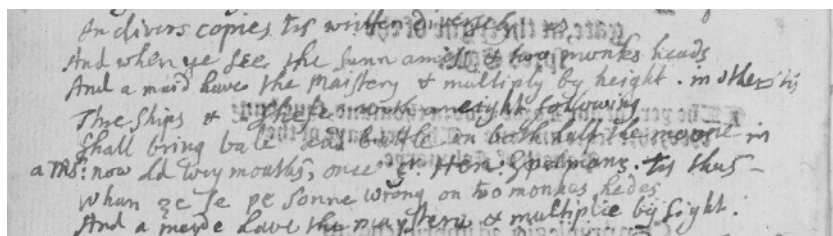


Figure 10 Urry's reference to the Spelman MS in his transcription of Crowley's preface. Oxford, Balliol College 525.a.1, verso of title page

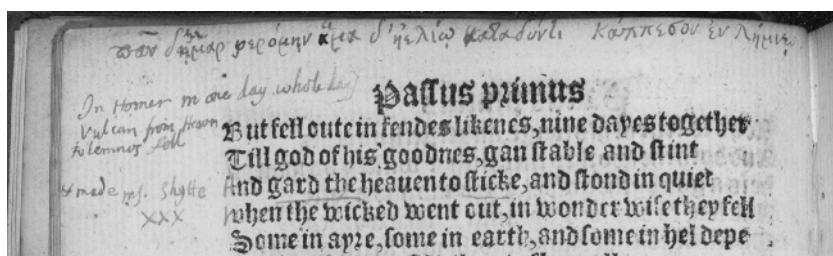


Figure 11 Urry's comparison of *Piers Plowman* to Homer. Oxford, Balliol College 525.a.1, sig. B.ii^v

his son Henry, and another whose loan was arranged by George Harbin, Lord Weymouth's librarian.⁹ Kate Harris points out that "Urry (like the 1st Viscount Weymouth) was of Christ Church, matriculating in 1682: he was deprived of his studentship on the accession of William III for his refusal of the oath of supremacy. These two reasons alone may be enough to explain his becoming a recipient of Weymouth's patronage."¹⁰

It appears, though, that Urry took a greater interest in the *Piers Plowman* text of the Spelman/Weymouth MS than in its *Troilus*. The library of Oxford, Balliol College, contains a copy of Owen Rogers's 1561 *Vision of Pierce Plowman* in which Urry, whose hand I identified in his signed transcription of the *Canterbury Tales*, now BL Additional MS 38178, loosely transcribes Crowley's address to his readers onto the verso of the title page, into whose discussion of the ubiquitous "monks' heads" prophecy he inserts reference to the reading of "a MS: now Ld Weymouths, once S^r Hen. Spelmans" (see Figure 10). Ensuing annotations reveal some interest in *Piers Plowman*'s literary milieu, the reference to the devils' nine-day fall from heaven (B 1.121) prompting the comment, "In Homer in one day whole day Vulcan from Heaven to lemnos fell" with the appropriate Greek line

inscribed atop the page (see Figure 11). On the one hand, this gloss is the only comparison of *Piers Plowman* to Homer I have ever encountered, and as such occupies a noteworthy place in the history of Langland scholarship; on the other, it just shows that Langland was more fully incorporated into the larger intellectual streams of the age than has been known, ones in which Joshua Barnes's 1711 edition of Homer was causing such a stir.¹¹

Urry's particular focus in this volume is the collation of this Rogers against the text of the *Piers Plowman* text in the Spelman/Weymouth copy throughout the Prologue and passus 1. He inscribes that manuscript's distinctive lines – most from the A or C versions represented in Ht's collated text, a few unique to it – in the margins, and he marks variants, as in MS *made* and *shytte* for the Rogers *gard* and *sticke* in Figure 11. After passus 1 the only such instance is the hunger prophecy, unsurprisingly given his inscription of Crowley's preface as cited above, where Urry records one small variant and inscribes Ht's unique line after the end of passus 6: "And shild us from his vengiaunce, while that we bene here. MS." This is something of a milestone in the history of Langlandian textual criticism. Robert Crowley did his share of comparisons among manuscripts, but not, so far as we can tell, as systematically as this.¹² Urry's approach to Langland was in line with the work he did in preparation for the editing of Chaucer. William L. Alderson observes that, like other editors of his era, Urry "appears to have carried out his collation by noting various MS readings in the margin of his own copies of earlier printed texts. A 1561 Stow is extant in which Urry's collation of that text with several MSS is identifiable"; and Simon Horobin has now identified a Speght that he collated as well.¹³ Yet the result was an edition of Chaucer whose reputation as "by far the worst that was ever published," in Thomas Tyrwhitt's words, has dogged it from the time of its publication to today.¹⁴

Some might wonder, then, whether his low place in the annals of Chaucer scholarship downgrades his importance to Langland scholarship as well. But each of the critics who voiced this cliché has a different agenda, which is rarely to discuss the quality of Urry's edition. John Dart, who supplied the edition's biography of Chaucer, for instance, declared in 1723 that he was not "willing to buy it, when my old one, with my own written Notes, serv'd me as well" – but he was bitter about the whole experience, feeling "ill return'd by this ungen'rous Age / Unthank'd the Labour, and defac'd the Page."¹⁵ In 1736 Thomas Morell called Urry's text "the worst that is extant," but his criterion was the fact that John Entick, his fierce opponent, rival as next potential editor of Chaucer, and addressee of this

claim, implicitly endorsed the edition – for Urry’s was worst, he clarifies, “except the little I have seen of your’s.”¹⁶ Joseph Ritson called the edition “very pompous, and most inaccurate and licentious” in 1802 – but he seems offended by its appearance in folio; he is eager to bolster his preferred edition of Tyrwhitt, whose text was “settled by an indefatigable collation of all the printed and MSS. copies”; and he is the most irascible scholar ever to have published on medieval literature.¹⁷

This level of anger is difficult to account for: the worst that can be said for Urry’s approach to the normalization of the text is that the edition does not indicate his emendations, in the form, usually, of added prefixes or filler words to normalize the meter. But that is the fault of the editors who brought out the text six years after his death. In any case, the lack of any such brackets in *The Riverside Chaucer* has not incited equivalent complaints.¹⁸ Alderson’s observation that “few men have felt it necessary to study the edition before condemning it out of hand” is justified.¹⁹ And such condemnation has obscured the fact that Urry was a pioneer in a mode that is potentially of far greater value to scholars today, the one in which we ought to situate his work on Langland: his collation of multiple manuscripts. Ritson’s implication that Tyrwhitt was the first Chaucer editor to give due attention to the manuscripts and printed editions in fact indicates how poorly those who saw Urry’s work into print executed their responsibilities. Ritson was surely appalled to find no indication that Urry consulted any manuscripts in Oxford, but their absence from Thomas’s account was a simple oversight.²⁰ Alderson remarks about this “ground-breaking survey of MSS”: “The Urry–Thomas list of Chaucerian MSS in the 1721 preface is impressive, if only for the large group of MS texts which are here for the first time brought into close association, clearly located, and described in some detail.”²¹

The discovery that John Urry collated his 1561 *Vision of Pierce Plowman* against a manuscript, *any* manuscript, of the poem only underscores the evidence that he was ahead of his time in recognizing the need to consult manuscripts far and wide. It also suggests in turn that our sense of Langland’s distance from Chaucer in eighteenth-century scholarship is not quite right. For what would have prompted Urry to engage in so systematic a collation? Crowley’s remarks about the “monks’ heads” prophecy obviously attracted his attention, but on their own they point only to a few lines in *passus* 6. Our knowledge that Crowley consulted other copies comes not from any explanation by him, but via our own collation of his text with the manuscripts. We are now so accustomed to the idea that engaging with the variant states of *Piers Plowman*’s texts is just what one

does with them that it is easy to overlook how foreign such a notion would have been three hundred years ago. Urry's experience with Chaucer taught him about the reality of manuscript variation, which he found manifested in the Langland archive as well. He probably did not notice any greater number of differences between the Spelman/Weymouth and Crowley texts than among the Chaucer manuscripts, since, as George Russell and Venetia Nathan remarked in their own groundbreaking essay on Ht, "the text of the Prologue is unique in the early part of the poem in that it shows no evidence of any substantial use of material from A or C," and passus 1 has only one substantial non-B passage, C 1.112–25, just after the lines on Lucifer's fall, of which Urry transcribes the first four lines at the bottom of the page, not seeming to notice the remainder.²²

Had he only continued one more passus, the wildness of the Spelman/Weymouth copy would certainly have become apparent – over thirty A and twenty C lines are added to the B text of passus 2²³ – and any number of possibilities might have eventuated: Urry might have considered Ht to be an authorial text, or followed Crowley in distancing Langland from the variants, or sought out more manuscripts, or even, if not defeated by Chaucer, undertaken the first new edition of *Piers Plowman* since 1550. Instead, it seems, he dutifully returned to his Chaucer and then died prematurely, Christ Church eventually reaping the benefits of his work and subsequent critics taking their pleasure in carping. Urry left behind, as would so many others in the vein of Joseph Ritson, frustrating and unfulfilled potentialities, poised just on the threshold of a serious understanding of *Piers Plowman's* textual states. But, more important, he also bequeathed new evidence, among the earliest, for the facts that scholars were tentatively investigating that variation in the Langland archive much earlier than previously known, and that Crowley's edition did not crowd its manuscript predecessors from the scene.

The pains of John Taylor

John Urry's collation was just the beginning of what I will call, following Urry, the "Spelman MS"'s role in the formation of modern textual scholarship on *Piers Plowman*. In fact it pales in comparison to our next episode, the best introduction to which is a remark by Richard Farmer (1735–97), librarian of Cambridge University, noted Shakespearean, and great book collector, on a flyleaf in his own 1561 Rogers: "Dr. *John Taylor* took much pains with this Book."²⁴ Taylor, we remember, was the first owner after Spelman to inscribe his name into Huntington Hm 114. Assiduous and

dutiful are perhaps the best descriptors of “the most silent man, the merest statue of a man” Dr. Johnson claimed ever to have encountered.²⁵ In his capacity as Farmer’s predecessor as Cambridge University librarian, in the 1730s, “or rather before, and perhaps after, he took great pains” – the motif here articulated by *Gentleman’s Magazine* editor John Nichols (1745–1826) – “as did some others, before Booksellers were obliged to be called in, in classing the noble present of George I. to the University, consisting of 30,000 volumes of the best books, besides MSS. formerly belonging to Bp. Moore.”²⁶ His earliest engagement with *Piers Plowman* was around 1730, the date he records on the inside front cover of his copy of Rogers, now Oxford, Bodleian, 4° Rawlinson 274.

This volume’s abundant flyleaves provide perhaps the first summation of scholarship of the poem, in what Nichols describes as Taylor’s “large, fair, elegant hand.”²⁷ Its contents are impressive by any standard, especially so early in the poem’s critical history: a transcription of Crowley’s preface to the reader (fols. ii^r, iii^r), a list of the various “John Malverns” who might be candidates for the authorship (vi^r, xiv^r–xv^r), a catalogue of the “plowman” poems he has encountered (*I playne Piers* etc.; ix^r–x^r), an explanation of the use of the caesura in various manuscripts (xxxviii^r), transcriptions of the glossaries found in CUL MS Ll.4.14, fols. 169^v–70^v and in Wolfe’s 1553 edition of the *Crede* (xl^r–xli^v), and comparisons of a few readings against four manuscripts over the opening pages of the Prologue and the interleaves there. Most important, and a focus later in this chapter, is his notice of the “MSS Copyes of our Author.” Much of this is in Latin, and there are a few specimens of Byrom’s shorthand, of which Taylor “was a perfect master,” and “which he looked upon as barely short of perfection,” as well.²⁸ Other than actually reading and analyzing the contents of the poem, activities in which few scholars of this era were much interested, it might be difficult to imagine what remained.

Yet this would serve as mere preparation for an extraordinary episode of textual scholarship, far beyond what Urry achieved with Langland or Chaucer, whose only rivals are to be found in the careers of George Kane and A. V. C. Schmidt. For the Bodleian also holds a copy of Crowley’s third edition so heavily interleaved and annotated that the formerly slender volume has turned into two separate and very thick items, now 4° Rawlinson 272/273, whose title page includes signatures of Taylor, one “John Champion” in a much earlier hand, and William Burrell (1732–96), “a Gentleman Commoner of this Colledge . . . and a very particular friend of mine,” wrote Taylor, who taught Burrell at St. John’s Colledge from 1749 to 1755.²⁹

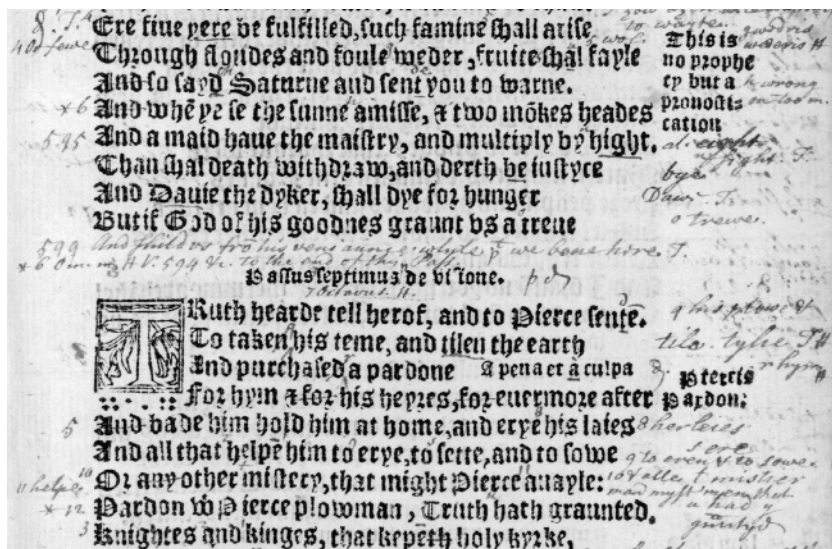


Figure 12 Burrell's collations of Cr with the Spelman and Harley MSS.
Oxford, Bodleian Library 4° Rawlinson 272, sig. I.iv^r

It is Burrell's hand that fills up the two volumes, most likely, it would seem, in execution of a task set by his tutor. The verso of the interleaf facing the Prologue has a box with two *nota benes* that explain all the marks:

The Readings markt H or with .1.2.3.&c. are out of a Fragment in the Earl of Oxfords Library 62.B.16. containing Passus.1.2.3.4.5.6. & part of the 7th. being 22 Leaves in Fol. minoris. Formæ. Membr:

The various Lectons markt with the Letters. a.b.c. &c are taken from a MSS. in 8vo. written partly on Vellum partly on Parchmt. which has S^f H. Spelmans Name frequently wrote in it with his own Hand, containing besides, Chaucers Poem of [blank] & Criseide. & another called Susanne. & which now belongs to Lord Weymouths Library. markt T.

Burrell, that is, compared his text to those of what is now BL MS Harley 875, MS H for us today as for him, and the Spelman manuscript, marked "T," presumably for "Thynne." The "two monks' heads" passage at the transition from passus 6 to passus 7 exemplifies the results of his work. The term *Ere* opening the top line of Figure 12 is marked 4 to its upper left, and keyed to Harley 875's "Or fewe" in the left margin; *weder* in the next line is marked g, and keyed to T's "wedris" and H's "wederis" in the right margin. What Burrell has signaled as lines 594–9 are omitted in H, as indicated by the asterisked note

attached to item 6; and all the readings underlined in the rest of passus 6's lines have the variants in T as indicated in the right margin ("sight" for *hight*; "bye" for *be*; "Daw" for *Davie*; "trewe" for *treue*). In the opening lines of the following passus both sources of collation are extant again, the variants keyed by number and letter intermingling in the right margin.

Such crabbed minutiae give way to beautiful, straightforward transcription for those lines absent from Crowley but in the Harley and Spelman manuscripts, as with the latter's unique line, "And shild us *from* his veniaunce while þat we bene here. T.," the one Urry added to Crowley's account, at the end of that passus. Longer passages, such as the famous opening of C passus 5 (fol. 20^v of the Spelman MS; "All om. in H"), allow him to take flight, often over multiple pages (see Figure 13). When neither manuscript provided any source of collation, Burrell turned to a different source. At B 8.104–8 (= 103–7 by his reckoning; sig. L.i^r), for instance, where H is no longer extant, he indicates that T omits lines but he still adds some collations, here from Cr^r, in the margin: "beede" against the text's *byd* in the third-to-last line of the passage; "unto them a K_" against its *one to be kyng* in the final line. Burrell's use of the Harley manuscript also explains the series of eighteenth-century inscriptions in the top margins of its folios 17^r, 18^r, 19^r, and 21^r. On the first of these, which begins with A 7.3, for instance, he writes "Pass. 6. V.2." This is not an error, but an indication of the last line missing from Harley as the result of a lost leaf (A 6.49–7.2, the last of which is equivalent to B 6.2). He records the situation as well in the Crowley itself, at the location where H becomes defective (Rawlinson 272, sig. H.i^r): "Wanting in H. to Passus Sextus V. 2 (I suppose Pass. 7 in H.) a leaf ~~of~~ ~~two~~ being lost"; then at B 6.3, the difference between the passus numbering of the Harley and Spelman copies finally defeating him: "H continues here, which I suppose in H. Passus Sextus verse 3."

Such a level of commitment is unprecedented. Urry came nowhere close. Neither would Thomas Percy or Thomas Tyrwhitt in later years, whose own collations of Crowleys for the Prologue and first passus have led some modern critics to suggest that they might have considered editing the poem.³⁰ This was good practice for Burrell's later devotion to his history of Leicestershire, in which he showed himself to be "exceptionally diligent in collating his materials."³¹ And he did all this before he was twenty years old. One startling *terminus ante quem* will occupy us in a few pages, but another is the sale of the earl of Oxford's library to the British public in 1753. Even if Burrell's description of MS H as belonging to "the Earl of Oxford's Library" were taken to be a somewhat out-of-date way of saying "the Harley collection," it seems very unlikely that either he or

Before Pastus Quintus J. Fol. 20 b
 all out in H. Pastus v¹⁹ 3^{hi}
 Thus y wakyd wote god whan y wonyd in Cornhull
 Kytte & g in a cote clothed as a coltere
 And letely lete by leving me forsope
 Among colters of London & lewid harmyfes
 5 And y made of the men as reson me taught
 For as y come by concience wth reson y mette
 In an hote hervest whan y had my hales
 And lynys to laboure wip & lewid wel fare
 And no dede to do but drynke & flepe
 10 In helle & in inwit one me as pyed
 Remynng in remembraunce þus reson me aratyd
 Kany^u ferwyn he sege or synngyn in a cherche
 Or koke for my cokres or a carte pitche
 Mowyn or medewyn & make benche to shewis
 15 Repe & be a vepereve and erly arise
 Or have an horne & be an hayward & lye þout arightis
 And hope my corne in my crafte from pilers & peves
 Or shape shone or clope or shope or hyme kepe
 Heggyn or haprow or swyn or gees dryve
 20 Or any^{other} synnis craft pat to þe coe nedip
 Certis y sayd & so me god helpe
 I am to wayke to wote ho wip sekyl or wip fepe
 And to long leve me lowe for to stowpe
 To wirche as a wirchman any while to dure
 25 þa hast þ^e londes to lyve by god^s reson or lynage richs
 þ^e fynde þe þe food for an ydil man þowd semyft

Figure 13 Burrell's transcription of C 5.1–27 (omitting 21) from the Spelman MS. Oxford, Bodleian Library 4° Rawlinson 272, flyleaf after sig. E.iv^v

Taylor could have had access to it after that sale. But a date of c.1749–52 would not have been a problem: in 1734 Taylor even composed a poem on the occasion of the marriage of Lady Margaret Harley, who was the one who would later, as duchess of Portland, sell the Harley collection to the British public.³²

More intriguing is the status of the Spelman copy, which, while certainly in Taylor's collection on his death in 1766, whence it went to Anthony Askew,³³ was at this point still in the possession of the Weymouth family, having been returned upon its discovery among Urry's papers. Taylor had an intimate relationship with this clan: his patron was John Carteret, second Earl Granville, the maternal grandfather of Henry Frederick Thynne (1735–1826), and Thomas Thynne (1734–96), grandnephews of the first viscount, the latter of whom became third Viscount Weymouth in 1751. Granville "laid the plan, and suggested the methods, of their education," entrusting the task to Dr. Taylor, under whose auspices the brothers matriculated at St. John's in 1752.³⁴ There are any number of ways this classicist of St. John's could have learned of the *Piers Plowman* in the Weymouth library, most obviously by reading Timothy Thomas's remarks in Urry's *Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* or via a visit to Longleat. The questions of when, and in what precise circumstances, though, remain a mystery, as our turn to the shadow history of the books and manuscripts of the Augustan *Piers Plowman* will now show.

The mysterious afterlives of the Taylor/Burrell volumes

The absence of this major episode from histories of Langland scholarship already underscores the arbitrary and contingent nature of the archive. The story of these items shows the same for the archives as conventionally defined as well: as the repositories of the materials that provide the foundations of our discipline, and as historical accounts of those repositories. Marks of ownership, knowledge of eighteenth-century social networks, and items seemingly as trustworthy as the Bodleian Library's shelfmarks and Manly and Rickert's account of recorded manuscripts of Chaucer tell a confusing story that on the whole seems to indicate the fate of these volumes in the wake of Taylor and Burrell's project. Taylor's acquisition of the Spelman manuscript would be most easily explained as a gift to him by the young Thomas, knowing of his master's earlier interest in the book, as a gesture of gratitude. And, depressingly soon after the project ended, Taylor in turn would seem to have got rid of both of his annotated and interleaved Crowley and Rogers editions, selling them to Richard Rawlinson before that collector's death in 1755 and the incorporation of his collection into the Bodleian in the following year. The Rawlinson collection, as is well known, includes two important *Piers Plowman* manuscripts, now MSS poetry 38 and 137, as well as at least one Rogers, Bodleian 4^o Rawlinson 275, which he in turn acquired,

together with MS poetry 38, from the collection of Thomas Hearne.³⁵ It would be easy to accept that he purchased three more volumes of Langland, even if the transaction occurred in the last years or even months of his life.

But this story, it turns out, is wrong on all but one count, with the seemingly unassailable indicators of the Burrell items' provenance both the more interesting and disturbing to any sense that the Langland archive is a well-defined entity in the modern era. Again, Richard Farmer's annotations to the Haverford Rogers point the way, his comment on the "much pains" Taylor took with *Piers Plowman* continuing: "his Collections are among Dr. Askew's M.S.S.," followed in a lighter ink by: "They were bought at his Auction by Mr Gough." Farmer himself made many purchases at the Askew auction, but, as he reports, the great antiquarian Richard Gough (1735–1809) was the major purchaser, picking up, among other lots, these three:

- 12, "Pierce Plowman's Vision, interleaved with MS. Notes, by Dr. Taylor, 4to — 1561";
- 13, "Another Copy, interleaved with MS. notes, 2 vol 4to 1550";
- 319, "Dialogue of Pierce Plowman, & several other Poems, Paper & Vellum."³⁶

Gough's purchase of the last of these, obviously the Spelman MS, for £2.5.0 is part of the received account of that item's provenance.³⁷ But lot 12's shelfmark, combined with critics' general indifference to the printed editions, has prevented anyone from realizing that it is 4^o Rawlinson 274, the Rogers in which Taylor constructed the first modern account of the Langland archive.³⁸ If the middle item, lot 13, did not exist, we might imagine that Taylor produced two such volumes; but that lot can only be 272/273. Of the hundred-and-sixty-plus copies of Crowley's and Rogers's editions I have located, only Burrell's is interleaved and in two volumes. These items, which entered the Bodleian's collections over fifty years after Rawlinson's bequest, must thus be "Rawlinson 272–4" rather than now-lost replicas of them.

Given the working conditions in the Bodleian Library c.1810, it was perhaps inevitable that such a major cataloguing error as this, which obliterates the books' provenance, would occur. The Rawlinson accession was "completely overwhelming" to the very small and ill-paid staff of the Library, wrote William Dunn Macray, with "the full extent of Rawlinson's collections" ascertained only in the mid-nineteenth century, when it became clear that "cupboard after cupboard was found filled with MSS.

and papers huddled together in confusion.”³⁹ In 1809 the Gough bequest of printed books and manuscripts on Saxon and northern literature, for the use of the holder of the Rawlinson professorship, added to the mayhem.⁴⁰ The situation became infamous. “Seriously speaking, I am quite vexed at Douce’s disposition of his collections,” Frederic Madden complained in 1834 when that collector did not leave his manuscripts to the British Museum: “To leave them to the Bodleian is to throw them down a bottomless pit! They will there be neither catalogued, bound or preserved, but suffered to sleep on with the Gough Rawlinson & Tanner collections undisturbed above once in a luster by some prying individual of antiquarian celebrity.”⁴¹ The error must have occurred very soon after the Gough bequest, since no *Piers Plowmans* appear in the 1814 catalogue of those items.⁴²

Blame can be laid squarely at the feet of Philip Bliss, an assistant at the Bodleian, who was cataloguing both collections. A successor to his later post as keeper of the University Archives said that his thirty-one years in that post “introduced the greatest and most far-reaching disorder in the collection.”⁴³ But Bliss’s reputation, like Urry’s, should not be sullied before taking note of his own, previously unknown contribution to the textual scholarship of *Piers Plowman*, in which indeed Urry’s influence is manifest. In the inaugural volume of *British Bibliographer*, Bliss printed “Specimens of the MSS. of Pierce Plowman preserved in the Bodleian,” which he offered “in the hope that these collations may assist some future editor of the work, by pointing out what MSS. do exist and are worthy of inspection.”⁴⁴ The specimens are the opening ten to seventeen lines of the Prologue as they appear in seven manuscripts. His sole observation about the variants concerned their near unanimous reading of “soft” for Crowley’s “set” in line 1, but he brought something new to this hoary topic by noting Rawlinson poet. 137’s unique b-verse variant “whenne I south wente.” Bliss’s comments are most noteworthy both for first suggesting that editors should collate manuscript readings and for his remark that Digby 145 “is composed of the two *Editions*, as Ritson terms the various copies he had collated,” one of which, Harley 6041, was indeed an A/C splice though Ritson did not notice as much.⁴⁵ Such minute attention to variant readings in the service of a critical edition is exceptional before the days of Skeat. Neither Thomas Whitaker nor Thomas Wright, whose editions of *Piers Plowman* would be published in 1813 and 1842 respectively, engages in much collation, and neither Urry, Taylor, the young Burrell, nor Ritson shows any interest in editing the poem.

At least Taylor is now absolved from the charge of caring so little about the poem's textual history that he unloaded his and his student's extensive record of that history even before Burrell had graduated from St. John's. And while the next known record of the Spelman MS at first glance seems to indict the third viscount on a similar charge, that, too, is the product of a slip by the *archons*. John Manly and Edith Rickert's account of recorded manuscripts of Chaucer, if accurate, would suggest that Thomas Thynne unloaded the Spelman MS in 1751 and that only his tutor Dr. Taylor's devotion saved it from oblivion: "In a sales catalogue (T. Osborne, 25 March 1751) including books owned by Edward Webbe, counselor-at-law, Alexander Dacre [*recte* Davie] of Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, Francis Carrington, Lady Mary Worsley, and others," say Manly and Rickert, is the following: "4283. Piers Ploughman's Vision, Maundevyle, Storie of Susanne and Daniel, Joseph, Troilus in 5 books, Lucifer to all our dere felawes. Vellum and paper. Each article except the last has the autograph of Sir Henry Spelman.' 5 l. 15 s. 6 d."⁴⁶ For a long time after I came upon this entry, I imagined, that is, fabricated a narrative according to which Weymouth sold this volume c.1751, in keeping with his reputation as "an inconsiderable debauched young man," who would be "so ruined by gaming," in Horace Walpole's estimation, "that the moment before his exaltation" as Viceroy of Ireland in 1765, "he was setting out for France to avoid his creditors."⁴⁷ Poor Dr. Taylor must have had his hands full in trying to educate this young man, whose character bore no resemblance to that of the assiduous Burrell. The most probable scenario, assuming the accuracy of Manly and Rickert's account, would be that Taylor stepped in to preserve his beloved Longleat manuscript, a heroic action that ultimately prevented its loss to history, portions of its text preserved only in the collations of his student Burrell and, on a much smaller scale unknown to Taylor or anyone else, Urry.

So I believed until finally it dawned on me that Manly and Rickert encountered lot "4283" not in that catalogue of 1751 at all, but in the 1810 catalogue of the sale of the library of Richard Gough, who as we have seen had purchased it at the Askew sale.⁴⁸ Manly and Rickert confess that they made only "a rapid search" of the British Museum's sale catalogues, which made it "easy to overlook even the most interesting item,"⁴⁹ explaining how they lost track of the catalogue in which this entry in fact appeared. This Gough *Piers Plowman/Troilus*, unlike the others he purchased at the Askew sale of Taylor volumes, did not stray, even if the great Chicago editors' account led me to imagine something totally

different. In this case the archive itself, as it were, turns out to have retained its stability, if to little effect given how wildly, and seductively, off-base its only modern account, itself by now part of that very archive, turned out to be.

Manuscript of my own

The more comforting notion that Thomas Thynne gifted the Spelman MS to his tutor, then, seems the most probable explanation of how it joined Dr. Taylor's collection. There it joined other Middle English works, perhaps including another *Piers Plowman* which is now either lost or unidentifiable. Taylor certainly owned BL Additional MS 34360, a miscellany featuring lots of Lydgate and Chaucer, which had belonged to John Stow.⁵⁰ The evidence for the other item is to be found in his itemization of the "MSS Copyes of our Author" in the opening flyleaves of 4^o Rawlinson 274. The list itself is invaluable as evidence both of the growing awareness of *Piers Plowman*'s textual status in this era and, as with the Urry–Thomas list, of the provenance of certain copies. So far as I know, not until Ritson and Bliss some seventy or eighty years later were any such lists published. The bulk of items, fourteen manuscripts and two excerpts, are listed on fols. iii^v–iv^r.⁵¹ Taylor marks three of these with letters, "A" (CUL MS Dd.1.17), "B" (CUL MS Ll.4.14), and "D" (Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MS 293), marks that, so far as I can see, he employs only when noting that for Crowley's "set" in the poem's first line, ABCD read "soft," and in indicating that the glossary he transcribes in the back is from MS B. The sole entry on fol. iv^v, on the top of the page, adds two to the tally: "Two MSS. Bibl. Reg. Cant. in Ff. & Gg. The one upon Vellum & of a good Age: The other upon Paper & Recent," referring to 5.35 and 4.31 respectively.

Except perhaps for the earliness and thoroughness of the list, none of this is surprising. The situation gets more interesting on the next folio, after the seventeenth and eighteenth complete manuscripts on the list ("Cod. Coll. Gonv. Cantab." [Gonville and Caius 201/107]; "C.C.C. Oxon. library" [Corpus Christi College MS 201]) and before mention of Joseph Ames's copy (now Oxford, Oriel College 79). Manuscript "C" finally shows up here, as "Bib. Pub. Cantab.," and would seem to be CUL Dd.3.13, the only item from that collection not mentioned so far. What, then, is the following item, in a lighter ink: "MS. belonging to the Univ. of Cambridge, found by me in the Registrar's Office"? It is not Additional 4325, acquired in 1905. It could be Dd.3.13 itself, but the

absence of a demonstrative and use of the present participle (i.e., “MS. belonging” rather than “this manuscript belongs”), and the entry’s status as a later addition, distinguish it from that item. So does its appearance in a sequence of items, just before the even more tantalizing “MS. of my own, bought at a Sale in London for £1.5.0,” in lighter ink, which definitely does not describe an earlier manuscript.

Two more *Piers Plowman* mysteries, with no guiding descriptors. A. S. G. Edwards has shown that at least one manuscript of the *Canterbury Tales* that Urry consulted for his edition is now lost, but so far as I know no one has identified this possibility with regard to *Piers Plowman*.⁵² The situation is complicated by the fact that neither need be a *Piers Plowman* at all, since this is a list of manuscripts “of our author,” that is, John Malvern, and Taylor includes about five non-*Piers* manuscripts on those grounds (e.g., BL MS Sloane 59, containing a treatise against pestilence by Malvern). The item “belonging to the University of Cambridge” is wholly elusive. If it is Langland’s poem, and it is among those copies known to us now, then it must be an item whose provenance by this point is not established and that is no longer at Cambridge.⁵³ Taylor must have purchased the other manuscript in London between 1730 and 1766, details that might yield to further investigation. Unless it left Taylor’s possession during his lifetime, it ought to be among the items in the Askew sale at which Taylor’s manuscripts and books were auctioned.

And indeed, among the unidentified items in the catalogue of the Askew sale is this, in the list of “Manuscripts, English, on Vellum”: “328: Pierce Plowman, *morocco*, 4to.”⁵⁴ Whether or not this was Taylor’s, this constitutes evidence for either the existence of another now-lost *Piers Plowman* or the provenance of an extant copy. Two manuscripts present themselves as possible candidates, if not very comfortably, not least because they lack Taylor’s signature. In many ways Oriel College 79 seems perfect (vellum, red leather binding, quarto), but it is the next item in Taylor’s list, where he identifies it as belonging to Joseph Ames;⁵⁵ even less likely is the Ilchester MS, whose binding, while moroccan, might well be nineteenth century, and which was much more likely in the Ilchester family for time immemorial than purchased at auction by them in 1784.⁵⁶

If Taylor’s *Piers Plowman* is ever discovered, its provenance can be filled out as well. The annotation in the copy of *Bibliotheca Askeviana* that is BL shelfmark 679.e.26 reveals that its new owner was one “Lowes,” who purchased sixteen items at that auction, including one other Middle English item, lot 313, the *Canterbury Tales* that is now BL MS Egerton

2864 – the copy whose marginal annotations include *pacientes vincunt*.⁵⁷ Here the trail ends, leaving behind new information either about one of the fifty-odd items that form the core of the Langland archive, or about an item never before known, that, if discovered, has the potential to change our sense of what that archive both is and represents.

The missing Spelman *Piers Plowman*

This chapter will end where it began, at the 1709 Spelman auction at which Lord Weymouth sourced so much of his burgeoning library, including, perhaps most prominent for Middle English studies, what would become Huntington Library MS Hm 114. Yet such a judgment must be provisional, for this was not Spelman's only copy of *Piers Plowman*. While John Hardyng's description of item 30 of the folios in the December 1709 auction is, as is typical, nearly useless as a means of identification – "Volume of English Poetry, Very Old [Vellum]" – Humfrey Wanley's, as with the Spelman MS, is much fuller: "Piers Plowman, damaged & scr. Impf." (BL MS Harley 7055, fol. 232^v), where "scr." means "script," "written," and for other items is usually followed by a date. For the third time in the narrow parameters of a study of a single volume's provenance, some pressing questions regarding the identity of an affiliated item arise.

The criteria by which to identify this copy, if it is extant, are: vellum, "folio" (i.e., relatively large format), containing only *Piers Plowman*, "imperfect," and lacking a known provenance for the years leading up to 1709. If it also needs to bear the signature of Henry Spelman, the manuscript is certainly lost unless the imperfections affected the location of his inscription after it came into his hands. Of the extant archive, the best possibility is CUL MS Dd.3.13, which is clearly defective and not listed in Edward Bernard's 1697 catalogue.⁵⁸ Another possibility is Dublin, Trinity College MS 212 (D.4.1), since its history from the date of its production "is a blank for the next 300 years, when between 1688 and c.1745 it came to Trinity."⁵⁹ But this would necessitate Wanley's recognition that it breaks off mid-folio at C 22.87, some three hundred lines early, to characterize it as imperfect. Another, more distant possibility is BL Additional MS 34779, if Wanley noticed its lack of the final forty-two lines and took the effort to describe it as "imperfect" as a result. All other manuscripts that might seem viable fall short on one or another account.⁶⁰ If one of these was Spelman's, there are no indications of that provenance, quite in opposition to Huntington Hm 114 and most of his other manuscripts.

Conclusion: the eighteenth-century archive, and ours

Or the item, like the enormous labors of John Urry and William Burrell, and especially the pains of John Taylor, has vanished from modern critical consciousness, awaiting rediscovery and the chance to make its own unique impact on histories of the poem's production. Wherever it is or was, this manuscript and the other documents considered throughout this chapter bear witness to the facts that the eighteenth century was not a fallow period for *Piers Plowman* textual scholarship, and that our own, by contrast, has been more fallow than it might have been. The readers and scholars of *Piers Plowman* between the age of Crowley and that of Whitaker, Wright, and Skeat were neither uninterested in nor unaware of the wild textual variation manifested in the manuscripts, and the existence of printed editions in their libraries did not obscure the importance of the manuscripts.

The assumption otherwise is especially worthy of note and correction since this era is the one when so much of the history of our own discipline, that of Middle English scholarship, is inscribed. It seems simply not to have occurred to anyone that the material copies of the four editions produced by Crowley and Rogers in the mid-sixteenth century might provide the materials for the sort of narrative this chapter has presented. Or that early editors of Chaucer took note of what was going on in the *Piers Plowman* situation. Or that the auction catalogues might contain *Piers Plowmans* that have disappeared from view. Or that everyday decisions by the laborers in the bowels of places like the Bodleian could both lay the groundwork for modern editorial achievements and distort the record of the archive's history.

Once put forth, none of this should be very surprising, but all of it should suggest the need to look well beyond the parameters within which the Langland archive has on the whole confined itself. It seems unlikely that such archival vicissitudes are to be found only on the road trod by what is now Huntington Hm 114 and its owners, students, and offspring. It is everywhere. The arbitrary, contingent, and partial nature of the Langland archive as currently constituted becomes clear quickly upon any search. Not least in need of revision is the notion that Middle English studies kept a safe distance from the scandals of fabrication that bedeviled the Shakespeare industry in the decades following the pains of Dr. Taylor, and the fruits of that labor.