

Conclusion: Leland's madness and the tale of Piers Plowman

We will always wonder what he may have burned. Henry VIII's assaults on the medieval past, especially via the dissolution of the monasteries, issue in this dilemma of the archive: its reliance on destruction. Hence what James Simpson has called "the melancholy of John Leland," a case study of *mal d'archive* matched by, indeed seeming to prefigure, that with which Joseph Ritson was afflicted 270 years later.¹ In 1533 Henry VIII commissioned Leland "to make a search after England's antiquaries, and peruse the libraries of all cathedrals, abbies, priories, colleges, &c as also all places wherein records, writings, and secrets of antiquity were reposed."² The result of this was the *De Viris Illustribus*, a catalogue of important British writers including Chaucer and Gower, which, together with the work of his colleague John Bale, was among "the first attempts to shape a British, or even an English, tradition as an identifiable national tradition of letters," in Simpson's words.³ Yet Leland went mad in the process. As Simpson speculates, "the project of historical recuperation that Leland sets himself must of necessity have produced a divided consciousness, since Leland, in a 'highly schizophrenic' situation, is himself an agent of the destruction of the very past he seeks to recuperate."⁴

This is the dilemma of the archivist writ large, and thus of literary scholars and historians, especially, given these historical roots of the English literary archive, of those who focus on Middle English, but can do so only from the vantage point of a moment that is so much the product of Henry's, and Leland's, acts of destruction. But such archive fever can be productive in ways that come to light only via our own, new negotiation of the archives. Simpson and others have expended much energy on the creation of eras now called "the Middle Ages" and "the Renaissance" via such projects as Leland's, a process played out more finely in the production of the very concept of "the Langland archive" as an entity wholly separate from the archives not just of Shakespeare (itself set apart from the Langland archive only on dubious grounds, as Chapter 6

showed), but more so, and especially, of Chaucer. Langland's apologists are convinced that the separation of these two great poets in literary history, a process in which Leland seems so thoroughly implicated, has held sway until the modern critical era's recuperation of these two poets' "obligatory conjunction," now seen to be based on their status as contemporaries and possible neighbors who were responsible for some of the most important poetry of their era.⁵

Previous generations, it is true enough, were much likelier to deem any attempt to compare these two poets "simply absurd."⁶ It is precisely the gap at the center of the Langland archive – that where someone identifiable as "Langland" would be – that fed such a conviction. As Robert Aris Willmott would observe in the early years of Victoria's reign, "the author of *Piers Plowman* is a shadowy personage, whom it is impossible to bring clearly before our eyes; but Chaucer stands prominently forward in one of the most interesting epochs of our history." Chaucer, in sum, is not just upper-class, which might have been enough on its own to confirm his special status, but *conjurable*, both linguistically and historically:

Langland, with a vigorous mind and abundant powers of satire, spoke in the harshest language and with the most unmusical voice; Chaucer, with a fancy infinitely richer, and a vein of humour, more keen and brilliant, combined all the learning and accomplishments of the time. Instead of wandering among the Malvern Hills, he mingled in the pageantry of Edward's court, and cultivated his taste by foreign travel, and by intercourse, not only with the most distinguished persons of his age and country, but with the poets and scholars of the South.⁷

Such judgments, of course, are inescapably circular, as Chapter 1 consistently showed. Bodies of poetry are ascribed to each author on the basis of assumptions about what those ascriptions should be. As Kathleen Forni has remarked with regard to the Chaucerian apocrypha, "texts, and authors, do not enjoy aesthetic autonomy and their value is ultimately extraliterary and historically contingent."⁸ There is no "Chaucer" with a keen and brilliant humor apart from the texts assumed to be his on the grounds of their keen and brilliant humor. If, say, *Piers Plowman* had been ascribed to Chaucer, Willmott's characterization of the urbane poet would not have held up. Which is why Willmott would probably have rejected any such ascription: *Piers Plowman* does not display the infinitely rich fancy found in Chaucer.

My hypothetical proposal is itself not so fanciful as it might at first appear. For a longstanding tradition, beginning with Leland himself, had it that Chaucer did in fact write *Piers Plowman*. A few of the items I will

survey here are known, but misdatings and other accidents of history have prevented a proper understanding of them; the others (like Willmott's judgments) are wholly new. Recognition of this tradition is important on a number of fronts, aside from its inherent interest to students of Chaucer's and Langland's reception histories: the establishment of the Chaucer canon in the sixteenth century, the work of the Harley cataloguer almost two hundred years later, and the tradition of amateur, and female, responses to the medieval are among the concepts and episodes here implicated. This conclusion turns attention away from the Langland archive, whatever its heuristic and inherent value as a category, and toward broader arenas, here represented by the murky ground occupied by both Langland and Chaucer. The power of concepts of authorship, and the richness of the early modern archive, will here serve as reminders of archives' tendency to undo themselves just as they lay bare their secrets.⁹

Leland's *De Viris Illustribus* includes a substantial chapter on Chaucer, whose catalogue of works begins thus:

Fabulae Cantianae viginti quattor, quarum duae soluta oratione scriptae

Sed Petri Aratoris fabula, quae communi doctorum consensu Chaucero, tanquam vero parenti, attribuitur, in utraque editione, quia malos sacerdotum mores vehementer increpavit, suppressa est.

Twenty-four *Canterbury Tales*, of which two are written in prose

The Tale of Piers Plowman, however, which is attributed by the common consent of scholars to Chaucer's authorship, has been suppressed in both editions because it vigorously attacked the bad morals of the clergy.¹⁰

This item is universally taken to be a confused reference to the apocryphal *Plowman's Tale*. This assumption has both fueled and in turn been enabled by another assumption: that Leland wrote this in the mid-1540s, a few years after *The Plowman's Tale* was first ascribed to Chaucer, in William Thynne's 1542 edition.

Yet, as Alexandra Gillespie points out, the item "was apparently produced before the 1542 edition of *The Workes* that includes *The Plowman's Tale* (Leland uses a 1532 edition of Chaucer to list his works), and Leland thinks of Langland's Plowman, Piers, not the unnamed pseudo-Chaucerian Plowman, as he writes up his bibliography."¹¹ Gillespie's crucial point now receives confirmation in James Carley's edition of *De Viris Illustribus*, which shows that this item is part of what he terms "Stage I" of Leland's production, c.1535–7, rather than "Stage II," which began c.1542.¹² This suggests that Thynne's inclusion of *The Plowman's Tale* in that edition might well be a sign of the influence of

the *De Viris Illustribus* rather than the other way around. That influence might also be seen in Francis Thynne's claim, in 1598, that Cardinal Wolsey had prevented his father from including a "pilgrymes tale," presumably the *Plowman's*, in the 1532 *Works*.¹³ There is great confusion here, not least in the fact that Wolsey was dead by 1532, and one of the likely explanations of the younger Thynne's claim, as Gillespie suggests, is that it developed from Leland's own account rather than referring to an event known to both of them.¹⁴

This redating of Leland's item raises serious questions about whether *The Plowman's Tale* is his referent at all, where "referent," it must be stressed, means a murky collection of cultural associations, not a well-defined and carefully interpreted work. For whichever poem was his referent, he did not know it well: *The Plowman's Tale* has no Piers; *Piers Plowman* is no *fabula*, no "Canterbury tale." On that criterion the two cancel each other out. But every other indication would favor *Piers Plowman* alone, bringing this work, in disguise, into the first account of the British literary archive. Whereas only a single copy of one edition of *The Plowman's Tale* securely datable before 1542 is extant,¹⁵ *Piers Plowman* was extant in numerous manuscripts, three of which, plus one excerpt, were themselves products of the first half of the sixteenth century.¹⁶ If by "*Piers Plowman*" Leland meant *Piers Plowman*, the absence of that poem's author from *De Viris Illustribus* is no longer a problem. No one would wonder about the absence of *The Plowman's Tale*. Finally, Leland would no longer be guilty of a glaring and extraordinarily uncharacteristic error of confusion.

It is difficult to dissociate these indications from their subsequent influence: *The Plowman's Tale*, perhaps as the result of Leland's confusion, soon made it into the Chaucer canon, after which this seemed his obvious referent. When Dryden, in his Preface to the *Fables* (1700), asserted that Chaucer "seems to have some little Byas towards the Opinions of Wickliff . . . ; somewhat of which appears in the Tale of *Piers Plowman*," he was channeling Leland and certainly meant *The Plowman's Tale*.¹⁷ But, whether because others were confused by this important comment or because they referred independently to a tradition already known to Leland, the belief that Chaucer wrote *Piers Plowman*, and *not* the shorter Wycliffite poem, had taken hold.¹⁸

Stephan Batman (?) and the ploughman problem

On August 22, 1577, a learned commentator inscribed his copy of Owen Rogers's 1561 edition of *The Vision of Pierce Plowman* and *Pierce the*

Ploughman's Crede with a treatment of this ploughman problem. Simon Horobin has convincingly proposed that this was probably Stephan Batman, noted collector of medieval manuscripts and chaplain to Archbishop Parker, who owned and inscribed two manuscripts of *Piers Plowman*.¹⁹ The inscription opens with John Bale's Latin attribution of the "Visionem petri Aratoris" to Robert Langland and description of the poet as a disciple of Wyclif (item 1 in a list) together with additional thoughts on authorship:

2. Mention is made of Peerce Plowghman's Creede, in Chawcers tale off the Plowman.
3. I deeme Chawcer to be the author. I thinke hit not to be on and the same þat made both: for that the reader shall fynde divers maner of Englishinge on sentence; as namelie, Quid consyderas festucam in oculo fratris tui, trabem autem in oculo tuo etc.
4. And speciallie, for þat I fynde Water Brute named in this Creede: who was manye yeeres after þe author off þat Vision.²⁰

The Plowman's Tale is here unquestionably Chaucer's, as is the *Crede*, of which this annotator "deems Chaucer to be the author" because of its lines "Of Freres I have tolde before / In a makyng of a Crede."²¹ But the author of "þat Vision" is not "on and the same" as Chaucer, a claim made on the grounds of dating and, it seems, the prominence of Latin therein but not in the *Crede*. Given how conclusive this commentator takes the evidence against *Piers Plowman's* ascription to Chaucer to be, one wonders why he mentions the possibility at all. The belief must have been prominent enough, whether only in Leland's account or in the literary circles of his day, to merit rebuttal. If not for that belief, however it was manifested, this note would not exist, in this form at least.

Elizabeth Johnson and her Chaucerian copy of *Piers Plowman*

The title page of the copy of the Cr¹ that is now CUL Syn. 7.55.12, signed "Ez. Johnson" in a seventeenth- or eighteenth-century hand, is explicit about the phenomenon Batman takes for granted: "The Vision of Piers Plowman sd to be wrote by Chaucer some say by a Wickliffian about Rc 2d time." It seems very unlikely that Johnson is aware of the scholarly debates over the authorship of *Piers Plowman* that had occupied scholars since Leland's time at least. Had she been, she would have mentioned not Chaucer, but one or both of the candidates discussed by every other such annotator: "Robert Langland," as proposed by John Bale and Robert Crowley, and "John Malvern," John Stow's ascription, endorsed by

Dr. John Taylor,²² figures whose respective merits made for a frequent item for discussion on the blank spaces of the manuscripts and early printed books.²³

Johnson was the last in a long line of owners to have marked this copy. This is the one I mentioned in the Introduction, in which a sixteenth-century hand added a comprehensive alphabetical index to the poem's topics and made a number of changes to the text and its punctuation. But if she attended carefully to any of the earlier annotations, the likeliest candidate was this, on the back of the page on which she wrote her comment, in another sixteenth-century hand: "An abell reader, a good sentence dothe ofte spill. / quod Chaucer," a digest of a couplet from *The Romaunt of the Rose*: "For a reder that poynth ille / A good sentence may ofte spille."²⁴ It is not widely enough recognized that copies of Langland lived the same sorts of lives as did those more thoroughly studied copies of Chaucer. For Johnson's edition bears a particularly striking resemblance to a Stow edition of Chaucer in the same collection, CUL Syn. 2.56.2, which, says Seth Lerer, "is littered with a range of marginalia, apparently spanning many years and many hands throughout the seventeenth and probably the eighteenth centuries." In this book, too, someone has added Chaucerian lines, from Pandarus's speech in Book I of *Troilus and Criseyde*, which like the couplet from the *Romaunt* in Johnson's copy is "rearranged and slightly mistranscribed" and "carries the flavour of the maximal, or aphoristic."²⁵

This tendency to excerpt Chaucerian aphoristic verse offers a more plausible, if still unlikely, explanation for Johnson's attribution of *Piers Plowman* to Chaucer than does the scholarly discussion of Robert Langland and John Malvern, for it is just possible that she took the "quod Chaucer" to apply to the whole of the poem in her hands. But the simplest explanation is that she is merely reporting what she has picked up from Dryden or a similar source. Whatever the case, in her amateur approach Elizabeth Johnson had a kindred spirit, a century or so later, in the person of one Sarah King, who likewise saw an intimate connection between *Piers Plowman* and Chaucer, as recorded in the endpaper of her copy of Rogers's edition, now held in the London Library: "Chaucer lived in 1380 in Richard 2nd time, He often makes mention of Lydagate a monk of Bury and of his good Friend Piers the Plowman ~ Chaucer."

Humfrey Wanley and the birth of "William Langland"

In the early eighteenth century the attribution of *Piers Plowman* to Chaucer finally entered the mainstream of scholarly discussion in the form

of Humfrey Wanley's catalogue of the Harleian manuscripts. First is this description, of MS 875, MS H in William Burrell's collation, which contains:

That well-known Old English Poem, call'd PIERS PLOW-MAN. Imperf.

*One of the Printed Editions ascribe it to Robert Longland: and from one of the MS. Copies, some have believed the Author to be one John Malverne: but Leland pag. 423. says, 'twas the Unanimous Tradition or Opinion of the Learned in his Time, that Geffrey Chaucer was the Author of it; which to me seems the most probable, for several Reasons.*²⁶

Leland's remarks had just, finally, been published in 1709, and Wanley's understanding of them seemed to him preferable to the two more widely endorsed candidates, Malvern and Robert Langland. Other oddities aside, we might wonder how anyone so well versed in the options could have imagined something so long as *Piers Plowman*, especially if the A version is assumed to be merely "imperfect," as a sometime member of the *Canterbury Tales*. Wanley's description of the next *Piers Plowman* copy in the Harley collection, MS 2376, explains:

At the End, is this Note, Hic explicit Visio Willelmi de Petro Plowman. Now among the several persons to whom the Poems of Piers Plowman have been ascribed, I remember not any William; so that if Geffrey Chaucer was the man, he disguised his name for fear of the Clergy, who are bitterly inveighed against in these Poems. And to shew that the preceding Note, and another that will soon follow are of some moment, I produce these Verses, extant in fol. 7.b.

A louely Lady of lore, in Lynnen y cloped,
Com a-don fro þat Castel, & cleped me by Name,
And sayd William, slepes' þu? seyst þu þys Peple, &c.²⁷

"The Poems of Piers Plowman," plural: Wanley takes this to be a collection of separate items, which his listing of the manuscript's contents shows to be the *Visio*, the first item of the manuscript and what he is here discussing, and the three *Dos*, items two through four. The "preceding Note" is that to MS 875; the promised "other note" that will "soon follow" would certainly have appeared in the description of MS 3954 had Wanley lived long enough.²⁸ This description of MS 2376 has received some modern notice, but only in a very confused way. Caroline Spurgeon includes the item in *Five Hundred Years of Chaucer Criticism and Allusion*, but as an anonymous item under the year 1808, since she was relying on a reprint of the catalogue, which had been published in 1759.²⁹ Yet the item was composed much earlier than even that date: Wanley inscribed "13 August, A.D. 1724" on the top of fol. 1^r of

MS 2376, an image of which is now on the British Library's webpage, and he died in 1726.³⁰

Yet Wanley's description of MS 2376 deserves wide recognition, not just as the clearest expression of the tradition outlined here, but, more important, for its role in the development of medieval literary scholarship. For it enabled, if somewhat perversely, the triumph of "William Langland" as the name by which we now call the author of *Piers Plowman*, having served as model for the first and perhaps most influential modern endorsement of "William" rather than "Robert" Langland as author of *Piers Plowman*, by Thomas Tyrwhitt, in his 1775 edition of *The Canterbury Tales*. Tyrwhitt adduces a nearly identical rubric, manuscript authority, and these same three lines to go in the opposite direction from Wanley, whom he has the grace to cite, at least, if not by name:

The Visions of (i.e., concerning) Pierce Ploughman are generally ascribed to one *Robert Langland*; but the best Mss. that I have seen, make the Christian name of the author *William*, without mentioning his surname. So in Ms. *Cotton*, Vesp. B. xvi, at the end of p. 1 is this rubric. "Hic incipit secundus passus de visione *Willelmi* de Petro Plouhman." And in ver. 5 of p. 2, instead of, "*And sayde; sonne, slepest thou?*" The Ms. has, "*And sayde; Wille, slepest thou?*" See also the account of Ms. *Harl.* 2376 in the *Harleian Catalogue*.³¹

Tyrwhitt's citation of Cotton Vespasian B xvi, rather than Harley 2376, rescues him from suspicion that he is here merely plagiarizing Wanley in citing the identical lines.³² As it happens, his copy of Crowley's first edition, now BL C.71.c.29, is carefully collated against the Cotton manuscript through sig. A.ii^r, the equivalent to the location of the Cotton manuscript's rubric cited above. Still, Wanley deserves fuller credit than he has received, or than Tyrwhitt is willing to acknowledge, as the inspiration behind the centrality of "Wille, slepest thou?" in the discussions of authorship: a nom de plume for Chaucer, in Wanley's odd account, and the Christian name of the poet, in Tyrwhitt's.

Joseph Ritson, impersonator of Chaucer?

Chaucer is thus the silent presence at the christening of "William Langland" as author of *Piers Plowman*. He maintains his power even where this new ascription is rejected, again in ways whose recognition has been prevented by modern criticism's ignorance of Wanley's role in eighteenth-century letters. For the descriptions of MSS 875 and 2376 were well known among the gentleman scholars of the later eighteenth century, both on their own merits

and via Tyrwhitt's reference to 2376. Richard Farmer copied the description of Harley 875 into the end flyleaves of his copy of Rogers, identifying its author as Wanley, and points as well to the description of MS 2376.

Likewise, in the entry for "LANGELANDE ROBERT" in his 1802 *Bibliographia Poetica*, Joseph Ritson, seen in the Introduction inscribing his own Cr¹, says that Tyrwhitt's proposal that the author's name was "Wille" is counterbalanced by the evidence that the protagonist is, "as there is some reason to believe, no more than a personification of the mental faculty," for which he, like Wanley and Tyrwhitt, cites three lines, this time B 8.127–9, as supporting evidence ("Here is WYL wolde witte, if Witte coude teche hym").³³ Here Ritson just mentions Tyrwhitt's passage; in his annotated Crowley, Ritson again says that "Will" is intended for the author's "allegorical appellation," followed by an inscription of B 8.127–9 – and quotes Tyrwhitt's entire paragraph on "William Langland"'s claim to authorship, and very accurately, down to the reproduction of his italics (via underlining), and with full referencing of Wanley's catalogue.³⁴

One even wonders whether readers of Ritson's published materials took his vociferous denial of the attribution of *Piers Plowman* to the usual suspects as an implicit endorsement of Wanley's candidate. "This writer is still anonymous," Ritson wrote around 1790; "there is no reason to believe that it was either Robert Langland, or John Malverne, but on the contrary a substantial one that it was not."³⁵ Later students of *Piers Plowman*'s authorship, like Richard Farmer and John Mitford, knew this claim well.³⁶ In the *Bibliographia Poetica* Ritson goes still further: Crowley's and Bale's attribution of the poem to someone of the name of Langland, a Shropshire man, holds little weight since "there is every reason to conclude that he was a Londoner, by residence, at least, if not by birth"; the "John Malverne" proposal is "manifestly erroneous"; the poet seems to be a Londoner.³⁷

Ritson having provoked such attention to his wholly negative speculations but offering no candidate of his own, it would have been reasonable, perhaps inevitable, for his readers to wonder whether he himself was disguising his beliefs for fear of retribution from pusillanimous critics, in effect modeling his career on that of Chaucer, who, as Wanley had said, *disguised his name for fear of the Clergy*. The single episode with which Ritson colors his account of Chaucer's life draws attention to, even while seeming to deny, the possibility:

Mr. Ellis presumes that he was entered at the Inner-temple, "because the records of that court [inn] are said to state, that he was fined two shillings for beating a Franciscan friar in Fleet-street:" a *hum* of Thomas Chatterton.

See his *Miscellanies*, p. 137. He says that Chaucer having “distributed copies of the tale of *Piers Plowman* [which it is wel known he did not write],” the “friar wrote a satyric mummery upon him.”³⁸

The italics point to *Piers Plowman* as the referent, rather than the *Plowman’s Tale*. The phrase “wel known” in this context would be ironic, since all that was really well known to most readers was that Langland wrote *Piers Plowman*, and that therefore Chaucer did not, a belief that Ritson himself demolishes a few pages later. The targeting of Chaucer via a satiric mummery, too, was re-enacted in Ritson’s own career. This anonymous item of 1783 exploits a perceived tension between his vegetarian proclivities and scholarly blood-thirst:

The Pythagorean Critick

By wise Pythagoras taught, young R—s—n’s Meals
 With bloody Viands never are defil’d;
 For Quadruped, for Bird, for Fish he feels;
 His Board ne’er smoaks with roast Meat, or with boil’d.
 In this one Instance pious, mild, and tame,
 He’s surely in another a great Sinner,
 For Man, cries R—s—n, Man’s alone my Game!
 On him I make a most delicious Dinner!
 To Ven’son and to Partridge I’ve no Gout;
 For W—rt—n Tom such Dainties I resign:
 Give me plump St—v—ns, and large J—hns—n too,
 And take your Turkey and your savoury Chine.³⁹

Finally, the version of the legend Ritson cites, that by William-Henry Ireland’s hero Thomas Chatterton, “even expands Speght’s account of the physical assault,” Sarah Kelen points out: “Chaucer now is said to have beaten his rival ‘with his Dagger.’”⁴⁰ Francis Douce claimed that Ritson, too, was always armed with a dagger.⁴¹

Richard Farmer’s or John Mitford’s response to Ritson’s negative comments on the authorship of *Piers Plowman* will always remain elusive, but neither could know that, in the privacy of his unpublished notebook, at least, where he also scorns the “dull performance” of the poem, Ritson in fact did not endorse Wanley’s belief.

The author of this poem . . . is altogether unknown. It is commonly ascribed to Robert Langland a secular priest in Shropshire; and some have most erroneously thought it the work of Chaucer. But whoever the writer was, it seems pretty clear that his name was William, by the vulgar contraction of which he is (in some copies, at least) often saluted in the course of the poem. (BL Additional MS 10285, fol. 247^v)

Where on nearly every other issue of the day Ritson had passionate commitments, on this one his passion was only negative: the author was not William Langland, Robert Langland, or Geoffrey Chaucer. Ritson could do no better than ascribe *Piers Plowman* to “William,” and that not even in the light of print. In any case, this comment unequivocally testifies to the currency of a belief in Chaucer’s authorship that has become wholly obscure to us today. Wanley certainly lies behind this, and might well have been the sole intended referent of Ritson’s “some” who have thus erred.

The early print archive

A belief to which only a single adherent put his name in public can hardly be claimed to have achieved any dominance. Yet the very existence of a tradition that attributes *Piers Plowman* to Chaucer suggests that perhaps we should not accept the dominant approach of earlier eras, in which any such conjunction is “absurd,” at face value. Such claims protest too much, as if Chaucer’s reputation needed protection from the unmusical poem with which his name had been associated in some circles. Likewise, John Bowers’s notion that, despite their original mutual commitment to radical religious politics, Chaucer came to be seen as the safer, Lancastrian- and Catholic-friendly poet as opposed to Langland’s blatant antagonism might be a bit too neat to hold up without important qualification.⁴² Wanley pre-empted Bowers in suggesting that Chaucer had to hide his identity because of *Piers Plowman*’s anticlericalism; but in doing so Wanley shows that the two identities converged not only in the fourteenth century and in 1550, as Bowers suggests, but also in 1724 and perhaps periodically throughout history.

The tradition given voice by Johnson, Wanley, and Ritson has surely remained so obscure in part simply because the differences between Chaucer and Langland, that is, between the archives that constitute these figures today, have seemed so pronounced. It probably never occurred to anyone to look for it. But another reason is that some of the most relevant materials have remained almost entirely absent from histories of reception. Research into this topic has long focused upon a relatively narrow body of materials: the prefatory material found in editions and translations, such as those of Crowley, Dryden, or Tyrwhitt; literary histories such as those by Ritson and his enemy Thomas Warton; and essays in outlets favored by antiquarians, like *The Gentleman’s Magazine* and *Notes & Queries*. Yet manuscript catalogues, scholars’ notebooks, and the material books

themselves – here, especially the Crowley and Rogers copies – are valuable yet on the whole untapped resources. William H. Sherman marvels at “the sheer volume of notes produced by early readers” of printed books, and “by the variety of techniques, habits, and interests they document”: “These notes represent a vast archive of information about the lives of books and their place in the lives of their readers that we have only begun to explore.”⁴³ If this cursory survey of the Langland archive reveals a tradition that alters our perspectives on so many things, one wonders what a deeper exploration of the printed Chaucer archive, which is so much vaster and richer, would bring to light.

And that is one of the two main points that I hope readers will take away from *The Myth of Piers Plowman*: that, whether what is revealed is the possible Langlandian authorship of *William of Palerne*, or the non-Langlandian authorship of some of *Piers Plowman*'s Latin, or the pains of Dr. John Taylor, or the fabrications of Mr. William Dupré, a rigorous analysis of what does survive in our material archives, from Melbourne to Bethlehem to the Bodleian, will reap benefits far and away beyond the effort it takes to track them down. The other main point is not less important, if not as exciting either: that we cannot help but fabricate the archive that we then interpret, and thus, armed with that knowledge, should tread carefully and lightly, doing what we can to limit the ill effects of our own archive fever on the archives or ourselves. It is often said that “the history of Middle English literary studies as a scholarly discipline has hardly begun”:⁴⁴ while this is becoming less and less the case, the statement still carries more force than one hopes it will in the next generation, and the place to look as we begin that history is not in the online archives so beloved by today's academics (including me), such as the journal databases Project Muse or JSTOR, or even the Early English Books Online database, but the archive of extant books and manuscripts – and one could do no better than begin with the Langland archive, uncovering the ways in which *Piers Plowman* and its peers are the products of their authors' desires before moving on to the untold riches awaiting future generations.