

Introduction: archive fever and the madness of Joseph Ritson

“We will always wonder what, in this *mal d’archive*, he may have burned”: thus, in remarking on the effects of Freud’s “archive fever,” does Jacques Derrida speak to the dilemma inherent in literary scholars’ relationship with the concept of the archive. Freud was “burning with the desire to know, to make known, and to archive the very thing he concealed forever”: the archive is both the repository of those remnants of the past from which history can be written and an indelible reminder, precisely on account of its selectivity, of how much must be excluded, burned, if it is to exist at all.¹ Derrida points out that “the meaning of ‘archive,’ its only meaning, comes to it from the Greek *arkheion*: initially a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the *archons*, those who commanded,” but that home is not open to all: “The archons are first of all the documents’ guardians. They do not only ensure the physical security of what is deposited and of the substrate. They are also accorded the hermeneutic right and competence.”²

A pertinent question for modern literary scholars, says David Greetham, is whom we are to recognize as those Derrida calls the *archons*.³ Its pertinence derives in large part from the fact that the work of these guardians is the foundation for any concept of the author, on which so much literary research is still based. Michel Foucault famously pushed the question to the limit by imagining a limitless authorial archive: “But what if, in a notebook filled with aphorisms, we find a reference, a reminder of an appointment, an address, or a laundry bill, should this be included in his works? Why not? These practical considerations are endless once we consider how a work can be extracted from the millions of traces left by an individual after his death.”⁴ Foucault’s questions are intended to bring about recognition of just how fragile are the concepts at the heart of literary study. “The Author” and “the Work” are arbitrary figments, not securely identifiable entities. And so they are. But if the exclusionary practices of the archive are the basis for such assertions, Middle English

scholars, at least, have more pressing worries.⁵ Would that we had the laundry bills of William Langland, the address book of Margery Kempe! The *Chaucer Life-Records* volume is a substantial exception to the absence and loss that are our era's most striking characteristics, yet it hardly leads anyone to fret over whether *Troilus and Criseyde* is a work, or Chaucer its author.⁶ Medievalists tend to see themselves as guardians only, protecting from any further destruction what has survived the assaults of fire, neglect, Cromwell, and so many other powerful forces.

Yet this sense allows for a much more fine-tuned assessment of the forces behind the creation and maintenance of the literary archive at large, whether or not those forces entail the death drive and the pleasure principle, than do the archives of more modern eras. For Derrida's diagnosis of the "trouble" of the archive remains partial in its very gesture toward comprehensiveness: it is, he says, "the trouble of secrets, of plots, of clandestineness, of half-private, half-public conjurations, always at the unstable limit between public and private, between the family, the society, and the State, between the family and an intimacy even more private than the family, between oneself and oneself."⁷ This whole list might well ring true for students of modern, especially modernist, literatures. Scholars of Joyce's life and works are always coming up against some powerful combination of these forces. Yet most medievalists would encounter only the final item in this catalogue, by far the most important: those secrets at the unstable limit between oneself and oneself. This is the case because for the most part the medieval literary archive is relatively transparent and well defined. A working definition of the Langland archive as generally accepted, the focus of this book, would be the collection of the fifty-plus extant manuscripts of *Piers Plowman*; the history of the poem's reception and criticism; and those more abstract beliefs that have attained the privileged status as near facts, external guarantees, as it were, of other interpretations, such as statements regarding the authorship, localization, and political valence of *Piers Plowman*. Once in a while, to be sure, the other forces Derrida identifies do come to the fore. An important early manuscript, formerly owned by the duke of Westminster, for instance, is now in anonymous private hands, and has been on deposit at the University of York (Borthwick Institute for Archives, Additional MS 196) – but only on the strictest of conditions. This situation pushes the unstable limit of public and private to the breaking point.

Yet the relative absence of such dramas from Langlandians' engagement with the medieval literary archive to date offers them no promise of exemption from the questions Derrida and others have raised, or modernists

exemption from considering the challenges of the medieval archive. For as *The Myth of Piers Plowman* will argue, this seeming tranquillity highlights our own role as the archive's *archons*, those guardians of knowledge whose interpretations create rather than emanate from a study of the archive. Derrida himself recognizes, if at one remove, that it is in the modern confrontation with the distant past that the *mal d'archive* presents itself most acutely. His final case study is a novel, Jensen's *Gradiva*, contemporary with Freud, one indeed that fascinated him, but whose protagonist, Hanold, is an archivist trying to bring the ancient past to life via his occupation as classical archaeologist. Hanold, writes Derrida, dreams of "reliving the singular pressure or impression which Gradiva's step [*pas*], the step itself, the step of Gradiva herself, that very day, at that time, on that date, in what was inimitable about it, must have left in the ashes." In Derrida's account, the dream turns out to be bibliographical in nature:

He dreams this irreplaceable place, the very ash, where the singular imprint, like a signature, barely distinguishes itself from the impression. And this is the condition of singularity, the idiom, the secret, testimony. It is the condition for the uniqueness of the printer-printed, of the impression and the imprint, of the pressure and its trace in the unique *instant* where they are not yet distinguished the one from the other, forming in an *instant* a single body of Gradiva's step, of her gait, of her pace (*Gangart*), and of the ground which carries them.⁸

It does not take much of a stretch to see that *Piers Plowman*, too, fits this description, perhaps even more interestingly than Jensen's novel does. Derrida obsesses over the *pas*; Langland, over his poem's *passus*, the same term, here denoting the "steps" that the dreamer, or the reader, takes en route to the conclusion. Hanold's Gravidia is Will's St. Truth or Conscience's Piers the Plowman, an elusive figure who leaves behind traces, impressions, footsteps. And as Emily Steiner has argued, "*Piers Plowman* reveals the conditions of God's contract with humanity as the unpacking or unfolding of an *archive* of redeeming texts": Meed's charter, Truth's pardon, Moses's maundemaunt, and so forth.⁹ The need for a contract between God and humanity, which is the need for *Piers Plowman* in its author's mind, arises from the division of unity into plurality. This is what instills in Hanold and Will, and in their readers, the desire for that moment, that unique *instant*, in which the separation has not yet occurred. The fall generates the work in the first place.

The dilemma is replicated in more secular form in literary studies, especially of the pre-print era. Dozens of medieval manuscripts of *Piers*

Plowman survive, but they almost never provide the basis of literary studies of the poem. Critics instead opt for editions, reproducing them down to the letter, out of a desire, it would seem, to recreate that *instant* before the author's words were distinguished from their representation by later scribes. More transparently with Middle English literature than anything later, the process of literary interpretation is the archaeological enterprise Derrida and Foucault, the latter in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, pronounce it to be. Indeed, given its extraordinarily complicated textual history, *Piers Plowman* has a fair claim to be the work that most intensively puts the status of the archive to the test. What is the relationship between the texts attested in the surviving manuscripts and the author's original? How many authors were there? How did original audiences respond to early forms of the poem, and how did the poet in turn revise the work? It would be difficult to imagine any interpretative approach to *Piers Plowman* that is not somehow implicated, often quite deeply, in certain answers to these questions. And given the poem's historical importance in its day, whether in the Rising of 1381, its influence on Chaucer, or engagement by the Lollards, certain interpretations of the Langland archive underpin a substantial amount of scholarship into late medieval English culture, religion, and politics.

When Derrida indulges in one of those lists intended to encompass everything – “the trouble of secrets, of plots, of clandestineness, of half-private, half-public conjurations, always at the unstable limit between public and private, between the family, the society, and the State, between the family and an intimacy even more private than the family, between oneself and oneself” – the “work” itself, say, Freud's *Delusion and Dream in Jensen's Gradiva*, is merely one of the constitutive items of that archive, rather than the contested product of its interpretation. The constitution of the Langland archive, then, is no less fraught and contested, and no less subject to the powers of the *archons*, than is, say, the Freud or Joyce archive. Major differences lie in the facts that where the moderns might anguish over whether Joyce's laundry bills would undermine *Ulysses's* status as a “work,” medievalists almost never have access to any authorial document; and that the *archons*, who determine the definition and users of the archive, are for Langlandians identical to those doing the interpreting: there is no unstable limit to speak of between the public and private, between the individual researcher and the State or the estate.

The most powerful *archons* of the Langland archive have been its editors, whose interpretation of the textual evidence as attesting three (or four) versions of *Piers Plowman*, A, B, and C (and possibly Z), all

by a single poet, has been accepted wholesale as the single issue on which every critic must have a judgment. In my previous book I argued that certain assumptions about the archive predetermined the results of such investigations, with devastating results.¹⁰ The particular debate in which I there engaged suggests that the main argument of the current book holds true even at the most fundamental level: our field is engaged not in a negotiation between the transparent archive of historical facts and the ingenuity of the modern interpreter, but rather in the continual production of that archive in the first place. But the process plays itself out over and over, as is seen quite precisely where the terms of the debate seem to present themselves as straightforward questions of how we are to interpret the factual data constituted by the Langland archive.

It might thus be more accurate to say that literary scholars “fabricate,” rather than “constitute” or “construct,” the archive. Any of these terms would acknowledge that archives do not come into being of themselves, from which point they merely await consultation and interpretation. But literary history has easily appealed only to those archival materials that in turn support its assumptions, a circularity that justifies the less innocent connotations of the term “fabricate,” which will appear in various guises throughout this book. My point is not that criticism has somehow engaged in fraudulent behavior, but that in general it has not subjected the archive to the sort of intensive examination that it applies to just about everything else. In this sense, the only true fraud, if a fascinating and appealing one, discussed in this book, the early-nineteenth-century literary forger William Dupré, renders visible, simply if extremely, the modern *archon's* role in fabricating, creating, the archive.

But if this book does not see the archive as a retreat from theory into a supposed repository of transparent facts, neither does it urge some post-modern abandonment of the archive as a positivist fantasy. That would result in intellectual paralysis, or, at best, the easy and implicit endorsement of the fabrications that have produced current paradigms, within rather than against which it would operate. Instead, I will advocate the incorporation of a self-aware, historically responsible study of the processes of archive formation into any attempt to interpret the archive. Among the particular projects such an approach would entail are a rigorous analysis of all the agencies behind stages of the text, including the authorial, scribal, readerly, and editorial; a nuanced definition of the text, which accommodates not just the manuscripts upon which editions are based, but also the lively traffic in excerpts and the evidence of oral transmission; the bracketing of received narratives that have taken on the veneer of fact

(e.g., Langland wrote the C version in the site where its “best” manuscripts are localized) so as to follow the evidence; and an appreciation of the ways in which the histories of literary production and the rise of institutional archives created the circumstances in which we work today.

The rest of this Introduction will lay the groundwork for this book’s pursuit of such questions by treating three episodes in the history of *Piers Plowman*’s production and reception, together, crucially, with the modern construction of the frame of reference that has granted, or obscured, the episode’s meaning. The basic point is that these two seemingly separate realms are indivisible: it is not just the rather banal fact that the archives are subject to competing interpretations, but that they are to greater or lesser degrees determined by those interpretations in the first place. Literary scholars cannot help but fabricate the archive to some degree, whether in the term *fabricate*’s neutral or negative connotations. To tip the balance more favorably toward the neutral, we need to recognize the degree to which what we have taken to be interpretations of the received archive have been involved as well, or instead, in its fabrication.

The melancholy of Joseph Ritson

The element of the Langland archive that has, together with the authorship controversy, proved most contentious over its critical history is the issue of versions: A, B, C, Z, ur-B, and so forth. With this topic any division between the manuscripts themselves (the foundational archive) and the modern study of them dissolves: the versions are what Langland wrote; the versions are the results of the modern interpretation of the evidence. Both have reasonable claims to be true, which is why critics addressing the questions of how many versions and/or authors there were must also confront the history of those very questions: must confront the archive of *Piers Plowman* criticism, which is what renders the archive of *Piers Plowman* texts comprehensible.

The figure cited most frequently as the first to identify in print the existence of three authorial versions is Joseph Ritson (1752–1803), whose reputation as an “impudent libeller” and “*abominably* conceited and impudent writer” (the hardly disinterested judgment of the Shakespearean scholar Edmond Malone, among Ritson’s prime targets) has put him on the outskirts of British literary history.¹¹ But Ritson’s centrality to Langland studies is cemented by what George Kane has called his “radical insight,” in the *Bibliographia Poetica* (1802), into the nature of the poem’s manuscript variation: “it appears highly probable that the author had

revised his original work, and given, as it were, a new edition.”¹² This conclusion is the result of his grouping of the witnesses to *Piers Plowman* into, first, the “printed copys, and (in substance) *the Harleian MSS.* 3954, 875, and 6041; the Vernon MS. in the Bodleian, Hales, in Lincolns-inn, and others” – that is, B and A, whose versions of Prol.1–10 all agree; and second, those with our C.Prol.1–11, which appear in the “MSS. *Vespasian B.xvi*, *Caligula A [xi]*, [*Royal*] 18 B *xvi*[1], *Harleian*, 2376, Mr. Douce’s and others.”¹³

Given its subsequent reputation, it would be easy to imagine this announcement as a major claim, worthy of special attention. In fact the comment appears only in a footnote in one of the many entries in Ritson’s large-scale bibliographical survey of pre-1600 British literature, on which he had been collaborating with the antiquarian Francis Douce. “Have the goodness to look over the inclosed, & make as many additions, alterations, corrections, remarks, &c. as you possibly [*sic*] can,” Ritson wrote to Douce in December 1798; and Douce’s additions and corrections in red ink dot the pages of Ritson’s notebook, BL Additional MS 10285.¹⁴ This collaboration had collapsed in acrimony in early 1801, when “a little girl who was in the room” as the staunch vegetarian Ritson was lurching on bread and cheese in Douce’s home “very innocently looked up in Ritson’s face and said ‘La! Mr. Ritson, what a quantity of mites you are eating!’ Ritson absolutely trembled with passion – laid down his knife, – and abruptly quitted the room!”¹⁵ Their relationship was irrevocably severed. In the Advertisement of the *Bibilographia Poetica* Ritson acknowledges “the kind attention, and literary exertions, of a very learned and ingenious friend,” whom it is left for Douce to identify in his copy: “Originally F.D. but he afterwards cancelled the name from a bit of spite.”¹⁶ Any hopes for reconciliation were dashed when Ritson died a year later, in the grip of madness in his chambers at Gray’s Inn, where he was attempting to burn all his papers. The *mal d’archive* had claimed another victim.¹⁷

The footnote regarding the “two editions” was enough to guarantee Ritson’s importance to the history of *Piers Plowman* criticism. But there is more to the story, for many modern critics have preferred to look to what they take to have been his earlier musings, in that notebook with Douce’s red annotations (BL Additional MS 10285), on the textual state of the poem: “The difference as well between the printed copies on the one hand and most if not all the MSS. on the other, as between the MSS. themselves is very remarkable. Of the latter indeed there appears to be two sets, of which the one has scarcely 5 lines together in common with the other” (fol. 247^v). E. Talbot Donaldson influentially interpreted this as providing

“evidence for supposing that Ritson had at one time” – that is, before the depressing final chapter of his life – “distinguished *three* forms of the poem.”¹⁸ In this rendering, Ritson first gathers the printed copies and those B manuscripts that agree with them, then divides them from the remainder of the manuscripts, and finally finds “two sets” of “the latter,” which means that the “second sentence must be a reference to the differences between the A- and C-Versions.”¹⁹ The question of why Ritson later abandoned this insight has never been explained,²⁰ but the seeming fact that he did has been supported as well by an appeal to the materiality of the archive: Vincent DiMarco says that the notebook entry is “written on paper which elsewhere in the manuscript bears a watermark of 1795,” that is, as many as seven years before his published comments.²¹

But a new entry to the Langland and Ritson archives reveals this to be just sloppy syntax rather than critical insight: Ritson only ever identified two, not three, “editions” of the poem.²² This is his copy of the first of Robert Crowley’s three 1550 editions (known as sigil Cr¹), now Lehigh University Library 821.I L265p 1550, available in facsimile on that library’s website, which includes substantial annotations on the opening and closing flyleaves. Its final entry reads: “There is such a difference between Cal. A.xi & 6041 (both ancient MSS.) that there are scarcely 5 lines together the same in any part of the poem: of which, in fact, there appears to be 2 sets. The P.CC. agree with 6041.”²³ The phrases that received so much attention in the notebook appear in identical form here: “scarcely 5 lines tog^r”; “there appears to be 2 sets.” The printed copies are unambiguously included with the sets, not separated from them as previously assumed: “The P.CC. agree with 6041.” And while Ritson certainly did enough work on his own to confirm this reading of the situation, his conclusion and even its wording had already appeared in a catalogue he consulted, that of Cambridge Corpus Christi manuscripts by James Nasmith, who says that MS 293, a C text, “differs greatly from Roger’s [*sic*] edition of 1561 (the only one that I have seen) the orthography is much more antique, and the variation so numerous that I seldom found three lines together the same in both,” followed by a printing of its Prol.1–13.²⁴

Neither is there any possibility of any substantive gap between Ritson’s inscription and the *Bibliographia Poetica*.²⁵ At all stages of his engagement with *Piers Plowman* Ritson distinguished two editions, as it were, and never three. Yet it is still worth looking more closely at the context of this annotated Cr¹, which illuminates chapters of the poem’s critical history that are much more interesting than the one that has occupied attention to date. As the sale catalogue of Ritson’s books says, this copy contains

“MS. notes and Index, and specimens of the various MSS. of Pierce Plowman’s Vision; likewise mentioning where they are deposited, and accounts of the different printed Editions.”²⁶ These features together offer a comprehensive and representative picture of Langland scholarship c.1800: musings on the poem’s authorship (Ritson denies ascription to either Robert Langland or John Malvern, the two main candidates; see Conclusion); a survey of its history in print (he deems Cr² superior to Cr¹); a judgment regarding the correct reading of Prol.1 (Crowley’s “set” vs. MS “soft,” discussed by just about all eighteenth-century critics);²⁷ a bibliography of *Piers Plowman* criticism; and, most remarkably, two indexes, one a list of nearly 300 words, and the other, just beneath it, a briefer list of “memorable particulars,” from *Ale* to *Waltrout* (see Figure 1). Such lists pervade the annotated copies of the sixteenth-century editions (the three by Crowley, plus that by Owen Rogers in 1561, taken mainly from Cr³). The best example appears over four front flyleaves of the copy of Cr¹ that is now Cambridge University Library (CUL) Syn. 7.55.12, which, like Ritson’s list, is arranged alphabetically, listing fifteen items beginning with “A” alone, from *Absolucyoun* to *Averice*. Others, such as the Cr³ that is now Duke University D.9 L282V, are a bit shorter and proceed sequentially through the text rather than alphabetically.

Among all this material in Ritson’s copy, the most extravagant and valuable are the inscriptions from the manuscripts on which basis he distinguished the two groups: “The MSS. marked B agree with the PCC,” he explains, with the excerpts from all the A and A/C splices thus marked; those marked “A,” by implication, our C manuscripts, are set apart.²⁸ The *Bibliographia Poetica* already shows that Ritson collated the opening passage of the Prologue, whose versions in these copies are included here – something we now know was first done in print by Nasmith thirty-five years earlier. The new information is that Ritson also transcribed the final seven lines of those manuscripts he deemed complete (A MSS being described as “imperfect”): C 22.380–6 (beginning five lines earlier for Harley 2376), and, for Harley 3954, the six-line conclusion comprising two unique lines followed by received A 11.312–13 and the explicit (see Figure 2).²⁹ Ritson attempted faithful transcriptions of the manuscripts, preserving original orthography and abbreviations.³⁰ This is the activity that eventuated in the analysis presented in the *Bibliographia Poetica*.

Like all great textual scholars, Ritson also recognized and spoke eloquently of the literary and historical merit of the literature under discussion. In the same notebook page that includes his famous classification of the manuscripts, he observes that the poem’s satirical passages

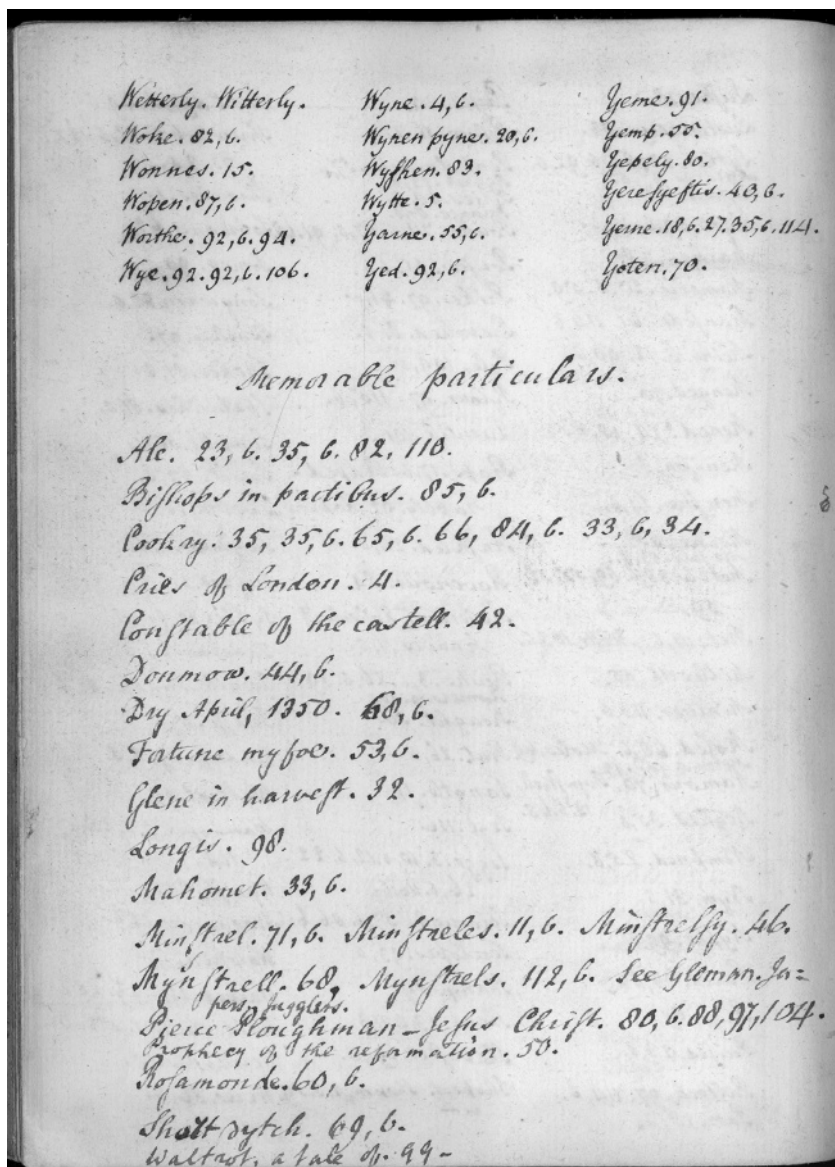


Figure 1 Ritson's list of difficult words and "memorable particulars."

Lehigh University Library 821.1 L265p 1550 [Endmatter 4]

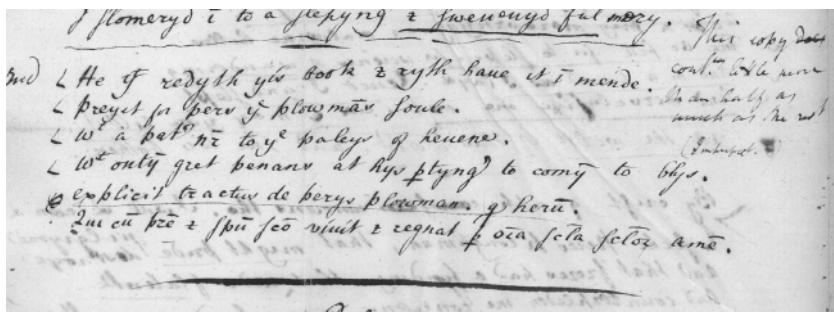


Figure 2 Ritson's transcription of Harleian 3954's final lines. Lehigh University Library 821.1 L265p 1550 [Endmatter 6]

concerning the clergy “are the most curious, not only on account of their poetical merit, but from the insight they afford into the manners & customs of those times.” But it turns out that he was of the C. S. Lewis school of *Piers Plowman* criticism: “It must be confessed, however, that excepting particular instances, the work is but a dull performance and scarcely merits the care of a modern impression.”³¹ Perhaps if he had looked elsewhere than the opening and closing lines and noticed the extensive textual variation, that would have been enough to tip the balance. Seeing Ritson as a constituent rather than, or in addition to, interpreter of the Langland archive alters not just his story, but the field's.

The gentleman's *Piers Plowman*: John Mitford and the authorship controversy

The decades following Ritson's work on *Piers Plowman* would witness the dawn of the modern editorial era. Our next case, like Ritson's, shows how the printed sixteenth-century editions served as the foundations for the more widely recognized published scholarship on the poem – here, in an important piece never brought to light. While Ritson is less of an innovator than previously assumed, the gentleman scholar to whom we now turn merits a notable place in critical genealogy of Langland criticism. The story begins with an apposite observation from the April 1843 issue of *The Gentleman's Magazine*:

To the lovers of English poetry a more acceptable present could scarcely be made than a careful and critical edition of the Vision of Piers Ploughman . . . The poem is among the earliest and the most curious in the language; it is, in fact, the earliest original poem in English, – it appeared nearly thirty years before the *Canterbury Tales* of Chaucer – it became excessively popular, as

the numerous manuscripts attest; subsequently several editions of it appeared, – it was referred to by the early writers in our language, it was subsequently submitted to critical examination by Warton, Percy, and other critics, but it still was cased in its rough and almost impenetrable doublet of black letter,

until, that is, the editor whose volume is here under (anonymous) review, Thomas Wright, exercised his “courage and good taste” to change black letter “for a more appropriate and commodious form.”³² Thomas Whitaker’s 1813 edition was of a quality to prompt its reviewer for *The Gentleman’s Magazine* – again, not identified in the text, but now known to be Thomas Wright himself – to take on the “invidious” and “unpleasant” task of concluding that “the text which Dr. Whitaker has published, is not one with which we can be satisfied.”³³ No wonder the appearance of a proper new edition of this important poem was seen to constitute such a welcome present to the lover of English literature in 1843.

The review of Wright’s own edition just quoted was by the Rev. John Mitford (1781–1859), and has never been known to historians of Langland’s editing and reception. This is on account of its absence from Vincent DiMarco’s invaluable *Reference Guide*, the catalogue-of-record for the Langland archive, probably on account of its absence in turn from the index volumes of *The Gentleman’s Magazine*.³⁴ Mitford, too, annotated his Crowley, a second edition, in which he signed his name and inscribed two dates, “1806” and “December 1825,” and which is the only sixteenth-century copy of *Piers Plowman* known to have made its way to the southern hemisphere, where it is now in Melbourne’s State Library of Victoria. The *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* paints a picture of a man whose marriage was unhappy, and whose membership of the priesthood ill suited him. Instead, he “gratified his love of shrubs and books by planting a great variety of ornamental and foreign trees, and by forming an extensive library, mainly of English poetry”: in sum, as Charles Lamb put it, Mitford was “a pleasant layman spoiled.”³⁵ He produced the first serious edition of Thomas Gray, and between 1830 and 1839 edited numerous poets (Spenser, Milton, Dryden, Swift, *et al.*) for the Aldine edition. All of this made him well placed to take on the editorship of *The Gentleman’s Magazine* in January 1834, shortly before it published Wright’s review of Whitaker.

Mitford, like Ritson a few years before him, used the flyleaves of his Crowley as a compendium of *Piers Plowman* scholarship, ranging from the sixteenth-century literary historian William Webbe (read in a reprint), who believed “Piers Ploughman” to be the poet (and “a very fitting” one, if harsh and obscure), to Ritson’s rejection of Langland’s or Malvern’s

authorship of the poem. There is also some room to make this copy a celebrity scrapbook, in the form of a pastedown of the catalogue entry for the Rogers owned by Alexander Pope (and, after him, Thomas Warton), which is found in other copies as well.³⁶ The final front flyleaf adds a few more items from scholarly authorities, but also enlivens things with excerpts concerning *Piers the Plowman* from two of George Gascoigne's poems.

The appearance of Wright's edition in 1842 finally enabled Mitford to put these materials to good use in the public arena. Indeed his "review" is more an overview of the poem with supporting scholarly apparatus, most of which appears in the flyleaves of his Crowley, than an engagement with Wright's editorial procedures.

Its appearance in *The Gentleman's Magazine* guaranteed the review's influence, despite the lack of much original thought. Yet the Crowley edition contains other marks of Mitford's engagement with the poem that are not replicated in the review. For one, like so many others of this era, especially the protagonists of Chapters 5 and 6, he sporadically cross-referenced this volume with another text, in this case Whitaker's 1813 edition of what we now call the C version. Most often he signals where the equivalent passage appears in Whitaker, but sometimes he records variant readings, such as at sig. Dd.iii^v (B 19.238), "And some he taught to tyllye, *diche* and to *hegge*," where he writes "v. Whit. ed. p. 378. 'leche, and to coke.'" As in Ritson's copy, the back flyleaf contains a list of items that caught Mitford's attention, keyed to folio, from "Walsingham" (ii) to "Brybors, Pylors, and Pikehennes" (cxvi).

Mitford's engagement with *Piers Plowman* was taking shape just as recognition of the wild textual variation in its manuscripts was entering critical consciousness. Prior to Whitaker's 1813 edition, the informed general reader could know from Tyrwhitt that some manuscripts seemed to differ from the Crowley text, which was so corrupted, he wrote, "that the Author, whoever he was, would find it difficult to recognize his own work,"³⁷ or, as we have seen, from Nasmith that scarcely three lines together are found between Corpus Christi MS 293 and Rogers's edition, or from Ritson that the variant forms of a few passages indicate "that the author had revised his original work, and given, as it were, a new edition." Whitaker's text confirmed that sense for most readers, and Richard Price, in his 1824 revision of Warton's *History of English Poetry*, announced the existence of a "third version" of the poem.³⁸ In his review, Mitford's own take on the textual variation found in the manuscripts of *Piers Plowman* (if it is indeed his – the bulk of his review is sourced from

elsewhere, but I have not found the following in these sources) differs quite significantly:

From a comparison of the readings of the different manuscripts of this poem, it is our opinion that they are far too various and remote from each other to have proceeded by way of revision from the original author; but we consider that the poem was so popular, and so much in demand, as to lead persons of talent and leisure to make important variations in their transcripts.³⁹

Although it is buried in a note, far from the focus of Mitford's energies, and never mentioned by subsequent scholars of the poem's reception, this is an important item in the history of *Piers Plowman* textual scholarship. Wright, too, had speculated that a single poet was not responsible for both his and Whitaker's texts (Wright seems not to have known of Price's "third version"): "it is my impression that the first [i.e., text printed by Crowley] was the one published by the author, and that the variations were made by some other person, who was perhaps induced by his own political sentiments to modify passages, and was gradually led on to publish a revision of the whole."⁴⁰ Although this comment probably influenced Mitford, he goes much further, seeming to posit, quite accurately, the existence of more than two textual states, and certainly suggesting, in the phrase "persons of talent and leisure," that more than the two authors identified by Wright were responsible for this massive variation from Crowley's text.

Such a belief would become quite prominent in the first half of the next century, when debate raged over whether *Piers Plowman* was "the work of one or of five."⁴¹ While no advocate of multiple authorship ever cited the *Gentleman's Magazine* review of Wright's edition, it does seem to have had an impact on an important scholar who would figure in that controversy: George P. Marsh, the American philologist, environmentalist, and diplomat who by this point, 1862, had been appointed United States Minister to Italy by President Abraham Lincoln, and who wrote of *Piers Plowman*:

The number of early manuscripts of this work which still survive proves its general diffusion; and the wide variations which exist between the copies show that they had excited interest enough to be thought worthy of careful revision by the original author, or, as is more probable, of important modification by the numerous editors and transcribers under whose recension they subsequently passed.⁴²

John M. Manly, who had instigated the authorship controversy in 1906, cited this in support of his cause, noting in his 1916 essay "The Authorship of *Piers the Plowman*" "that Marsh's views are much more precise and

definite than those of Thomas Wright, and contain in effect, though not in detail, the conclusions for which I have contended. I am glad to have the support of an independent utterance from a scholar so distinguished for soundness of taste and sanity of judgment as was Mr. Marsh."⁴³

Subsequent critics have seen Marsh's comments as signs of his indebtedness to Wright,⁴⁴ but Manly is quite correct to point out that some differences separate the two, ones that suggest that Marsh had the *Gentleman's Magazine* review of Wright at hand as well. Wright's remark that "as might be expected in a popular work like this, the manuscripts in general are full of variations" certainly lies behind the similar remarks of both later scholars;⁴⁵ but where he proceeds to isolate "two classes of manuscripts which give two texts that are widely different from each other,"⁴⁶ Mitford and Marsh instead identify "important variations in their transcripts" by "persons of talent and leisure," and "important modification by the numerous editors and transcribers," respectively. This attribution of the variant texts to multiple, conscious agencies rather than scribal corruption (as in Tyrwhitt's analysis) is a new idea, one that Manly attributed to Marsh alone, but which at least belongs first to Mitford as chronologically prior, and probably as source of his successor's idea. It is unlikely that someone as well informed and intelligent as Marsh would not have consulted the review of Wright's edition in *The Gentleman's Magazine*, and there are no other known sources for the idea until Manly resurrected it the following century.

The *Piers Plowman Electronic Archive*: how many manuscripts?

If Mitford saw Wright as a worthy *archon* after earlier missteps, many of today's critics would prefer none at all. Thus the editors of the *Piers Plowman Electronic Archive* (hereafter *PPEA*), launched in 1990, played the heroes of Charlotte Brewer's book on their kind because they intended "to make accessible to their users the essential data which underlies a critical edition but is usually obscured by it: facsimiles and transcriptions of all the individual manuscripts, and the reconstructed archetypes of A, B, and C."⁴⁷ This is among the generation of projects that has breathed new life into the concept of "the archive." No longer does the Modern Language Association give a prize for best bibliography: now it is for a bibliography, archive, or digital project, a shift in which the *PPEA* played a prominent role.⁴⁸

In light of its reputation for presenting "each manuscript unmediated by predetermined assumptions," in a more recent critic's judgment,⁴⁹ the

PPEA's original aims are easy to forget: "We can promise readers of *Piers Plowman* a text substantially better, more true to what the poet wrote than any of the editions now available."⁵⁰ Perhaps sensing a change in the wind, the project's editors now do not even mention the poet in their recent revision to the website. Authority is now vested in its users, who are provided "with unprecedented access to each manuscript we edit," and allowed "to decide for themselves how to interpret the complexity of the raw data, while also giving users the option of approaching the poem with a more traditional editorial apparatus."⁵¹ What remains missing is any clear definition of "the archive," the "raw data" to which the project intends to provide wide access. The qualifier in the first sentence above – "each manuscript *we edit*" – hints at a process of selection, of the omission, the burning, on which Derrida muses. But all the other rhetoric here suggests quite the opposite, that "we" edit *all* the manuscripts. Thus the project's list of manuscripts includes three items left out of A. V. C. Schmidt's equivalent list, ones that he says "have no textual value": "the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century transcriptions and excerpts in Bodleian mss James 2, Wood donat. 7, the BL ms Sloane 2578."⁵² Since the *PPEA* is not bound by such notions as "textual value," that is, the need for any manuscript to have the potential to provide independent witness to the authorial text, it pursues the more democratic aim of offering all users access to the "raw data" of even such productions, which are worthwhile in their own right as witnesses not to the author's text but instead to "the richness and complexity of the textual tradition of William Langland's *Piers Plowman*," which can be gained "by providing a transcription of the text of each manuscript."

The sticking point is the phrase "each manuscript." For Schmidt and other author-based editors, the entity would comprise those witnesses of potential textual authority (hence the inclusion of one non-manuscript, Crowley's text, also included in the *PPEA*'s list). But once those limits are gone, and items omitted by Schmidt on those grounds are now included, what can "each" mean? The *PPEA* editors do not mention the fourth item Schmidt explicitly excludes: Cambridge, Gonville and Caius MS 201/107, a complete MS of the B version, copied from Rogers's 1561 edition – which is also missing.⁵³ And this just scratches the surface. There are also:

- Cambridge, Trinity College MS R.2.36, a complete MS of the C version;⁵⁴
- BL Additional MS 29490, another complete MS of the C version;
- the list of *Piers Plowman*'s Latin lines in a fifteenth-century hand immediately after the conclusion of an A-text MS;

- the same (a different selection, hand *c.*120 years later) on the blank page facing the first page of text in a Cr²;
- the single line on a flyleaf of Bodley 851 (not taken from the “Z-version” text elsewhere in the volume);
- the line in a margin of a *Canterbury Tales* manuscript;
- Prol.1–4 at the conclusion of Huntington MS Hm 143;⁵⁵
- four lines at the top of a page after the end of the main text of London, Society of Antiquaries MS 687;⁵⁶
- any of the lines added to the extant MSS by the “other hands” mentioned throughout the Athlone apparatus;
- the completion of defective BL Additional MS 10574 in the hand of Dr. Adam Clarke (1760–1832), probably copied from Huntington Hm 128 (this will probably be included in the *PPEA* edition of that MS: but other than its location it is of equal status to the following, which will not be);⁵⁷
- the completion of any number of defective printed editions (e.g., Southern Methodist University 00712; Boston Public Library G.406.32; UCLA PR2010 A1 1550) via manuscript facsimiles;
- Joseph Ritson’s transcriptions as discussed above;
- the transcriptions, by other eighteenth-century figures, like Thomas Tyrwhitt, John Urry, Frederick Page, and William Burrell, of lines and passages from other MSS in their printed copies.

On the one hand, there is no evidence that the *PPEA* editors even knew, or know, of any of this material, all of which is discussed somewhere either in footnotes here or elsewhere in this book. On the other, any project that identifies itself as “the *Piers Plowman* archive,” one unconstrained by the strictures of former *archons*, might seem obliged to fulfill its promise first and foremost via the definition of that archive, by seeking out all manuscript witnesses to that tradition’s richness. As it stands, the criteria behind these exclusions, if such they are, are difficult to identify, and inconsistently applied. If date is important, the cut-off lies somewhere in a 220-year period (between *c.*1647 and 1867), for no stated reason; textual authority does not matter in the case of James 2, Wood donat. 7, and Sloane 2578, and cannot if the rhetoric of inclusiveness is to be taken at face value, but seems to be silently all-powerful in excluding the items in this list; proximity with other items already counted as “manuscripts” somehow matters, given that one Prol.1–4, jotted in a late-fifteenth-century account book (Kew, National Archives E101/516/9), is in while another, earlier Prol.1–4 is out; and on and on. And when we consider that the same applies to *all* medieval literary texts, especially Chaucer’s (and a previously

unknown MS line from the *Romaunt of the Rose* in a print copy of Langland will come to light here, joining ones from Gower and “John of Bridlington” I discovered earlier in a Langland MS),⁵⁸ the assumption that statements like the following relay an “archive of factual evidence” cannot easily stand: “The fact that enough manuscripts survive for *Piers Plowman* – 59, including fragments and extracts – to make it the third-ranking Middle English poem after *Prick of Conscience* (over 115) and the *Canterbury Tales* (82, including fragments and extracts), can no longer be construed solely as a function of aesthetic tastes detached from other cultural factors.”⁵⁹

Such appeals to the number of “surviving manuscripts” pervade medieval literary scholarship, but I have rarely seen anyone explain what meanings one hopes to extract from them. These statistics seem to be used as indications of the relative popularity of given works. As such they rely on a faith that the ratio of surviving-to-lost manuscripts is consistent across different works and eras.⁶⁰ That problem aside, it remains unclear why only the extant manuscripts are included. If there is no question that, say, MSS R and F of the B version descend from a now-lost copy, why not add that copy to the tally? Why not the rest of the now-lost but securely identifiable manuscripts? And to get to the fundamental issue, what is the value accorded a “manuscript” as opposed to a printed copy? The *PPEA* editors do include the Crowley editions (if not their extant copies) on account of their textual authority, a reminder that such lists are not usually of “manuscripts” at all, but of witnesses. But if these are no longer necessarily witnesses to authoritative texts (hence the inclusion of James 2 etc.), it is unclear to what entity they bear witness. If that entity is “the richness and complexity of the textual tradition of William Langland’s *Piers Plowman*,” then the question of why the excerpts written out by MS James 2 merit consideration, where those printed by James Nasmith in his catalogue of Corpus Christi MSS do not, calls for explication.

Now, if the editors had been as true to their stated purpose as they might have, they would never have started on the project or received any funding for it. I am not at all saying they should have, and I am full of admiration for the project and its aims. My edition of National Library of Wales MS 733B will be part of the project soon. What I am urging is, first, a more serious approach to the concept of “the *Piers Plowman* archive” than that project (which had the opportunity to take up that challenge) or anyone else has pursued, and second, a broader recognition of what these heroic practitioners already know, that the *archons* are creating the archive to which they devote their energies, and that the collection of data they present is not, and could never be, raw and unmediated.

The fabrication of Langland

The cases of Ritson, Mitford, and the *PPEA* are especially instructive in that each of these interpreters of the archive is both its creator and, no less, its constituent. Each case shows that the recreation of the instant before the foot left behind its trace entails the interrogation as well of the means of our recreation. Doing so no doubt ensures the futility of any hope not just for direct access, but even for any reliance on the transparency or integrity of the archives apart from our desires. It is my contention that this aspect of the literary archive is clearest where there are by far fewer other *archons* at whose feet to lay any charges of distortion, that is to say, in the medieval literary archive, within which the *Piers Plowman* event offers the best hope for a clear recognition of the situation.

In setting out the case in detail, *The Myth of Piers Plowman* will treat all the major components of the production and reception of a literary work: questions of authorship, oeuvre, localization, oral transmission, editorial history, forgery, and translation play equal roles in the story I will tell. The first half focuses on the pre-print era, before modern modes of editing become prominent. Chapter 1 instantly queries the absolute dominance of *Piers Plowman* as governing principle of this sizable proportion of the Middle English archive, asking why critics have been so content to identify that poem's author so completely with the poem itself. To put it another way, a slight shift in our identification of the archival evidence – paleographical, linguistic, historical, and prosodic – brings the fanciful romance *William of Palerne*, with its werewolf and lovers in bear-suits, into the picture as a potential piece of Langlandian juvenilia.

The idea was first mooted by George Kane, and has begun to be taken seriously in some quarters, but the Langland archive, so I argue, will have to shift much more fully from the demonstrative to the subjunctive as its dominant mood if it is to maintain its integrity as the foundation for studies of the works and productions closely associated with its namesake. This chapter presents the flip side, as it were, to C. David Benson's interrogation of "The Langland Myth," the treatment of *Piers Plowman* "as a record of an individual poet's life and views."⁶¹ Benson's discussion of the dangers of such an approach is apt, but the replacement of the single author "William Langland" with a single title, "*Piers Plowman*," incurs its own set of risks. What Chapter 1 inaugurates is similar in spirit, if not in the particulars of its approach, to Benson's questioning of the creation of our field of study: it is no surprise that the concept of "myth," which he

defines as “a narrative that explains what is unknown and perhaps unknowable,” features so prominently in both studies.⁶² The main difference is that my focus is on how “the unknown” so often turns out merely to be “the unlooked for” or “unconsidered,” such as the idea that Langland could have composed *William of Palerne*.

Where Langland wrote has long loomed about as large as what he wrote: and as with the concept of authorship, it is both the foundation for and product of the interpretation of the Langland archive. Few literary works invite localization more persistently than does *Piers Plowman*, which in so many ways suggests that its meaning is to be found not only in its words and manuscripts, but also in the site of its composition and early circulation. Among Chapter 2’s central claims is that the surviving manuscripts of *Piers Plowman* embody no “evidence,” per se, whether in their dialects or the sites of production, for the location of the poet when he was writing. But their words still might, a possibility I follow up in proposing a previously unnoticed reference to the London riots of 1384 in the C version. Chapter 3 turns to the murky ground between the authorial and the scribal in the production of *Piers Plowman*: a ground most clearly signaled wherever Latin tags that could easily stand apart from the poem appear. It was the poem’s Latinity, precisely because of its status as the lingua franca of the literate, that enabled a substantial proportion of its audience most directly to come to terms with its message. The poem was to them not so much a brilliant poet’s vision as a site open to audience contributions not found elsewhere in the canon of major medieval English poetry.

The second half of the book concentrates on the era in which the modern “*Piers Plowman*” came into being, beginning with the sixteenth century. Chapter 4, “Quod piers plowman’: non-reformist prophecy, c.1520–1555,” begins with a six-line sixteenth-century excerpt of “the hunger prophecy” from B passus 6, in the staunchly Catholic/recusant Winchester Anthology, which is among the six independent productions, together constituting the great bulk of sixteenth-century witnesses to the B version, that juxtapose or draw particular attention to two of the poem’s “prophecies,” and that have a character similar to that of the detachable Latin of the manuscripts: both part and not part of “*Piers Plowman*,” especially in failing to fit within the standard narrative of “Piers Protestant.” The Langland archive has mistaken as the mainstream a mode that in fact constituted a rearguard attack on the predominant approach.

The era between 1550 and Whitaker’s first modern edition of 1813 is commonly assumed to be “a comparatively fallow period for *Piers*

Plowman textual scholarship.”⁶³ Not at all, Chapter 5 shows. Using the fortunes of San Marino, Huntington Library MS Hm 114 as its focus, it uncovers extensive evidence of collation, and of the movement of items in and out of collections and libraries. These items’ resistance to any accommodation by the historians and fabricators of the Langland archive only underscores the imperative not to write them out of our story. Chapter 6 brings the concept of “fabrication” to the forefront of the book, here literalized in the career of the first translator of *Piers Plowman* into modern English, who came of age during the controversies surrounding the Shakespeare fabrications of the 1790s, in the realms of both portraiture and document.

The Conclusion brings together the main strands of the book by tracking the creation of the previously unnoticed belief that Chaucer wrote *Piers Plowman*. Both in its formation and in its effects, this belief underscores the fact that the archive is our fabrication. Michel Foucault asserts that we must recognize that such concepts as the “*oeuvre*,” the “book,” and even “literature” “may not, in the last resort, be what they seem at first sight. In short, that they require a theory, and that this theory cannot be constructed unless the *field* of the facts of discourse on the basis of which those facts are built up appears in its non-synthetic purity.”⁶⁴ While by no means rejecting Foucault’s insistence on the imperative to theorize, *The Myth of Piers Plowman* urges an empirical application of such theorizing, a testing of the case, which will certainly confirm that the categories we have inherited are not quite what they seem at first sight, but are still within view, even if only via the footsteps and traces they have left behind for us to follow.