Introduction

This book begins with a famous ending. In the York Mercers' play of the Last Judgment, performed for nearly two centuries in the northern English city as part of a larger, community production of sacred history, now preserved in a fifteenth-century manuscript known as the "Register," God orders the assemblage of a formidable inventory. His angels must gather together "Ilke a leede þat euere hadde liffe" [each person that ever had life]; and take care, he warns, "Bese none forgetyn, grete ne small" [let there be none forgotten, neither great nor small].[1] That is not all: besides the "ilke a leede," assembled in fleshly or spectral form, the many thoughts and deeds by which they are to be judged also somehow become apparent at the angels' call, each record taking form as a kind of uncontrollable autobiography, marked upon the body or perhaps, as contemporary iconography suggests, in their suddenly legible hearts.[2] These inscriptions or sometimes vocalizations of "rekenyng" [reckoning], as the York angels call them, provide a sorting mechanism: each soul will, ready or not, bear his or her complete history to the "grette assise" that God instates (ll.94–5), and there, according to the "Anima Mala" [bad souls], all the "wikkid werkes . . . / þat we did ofte full pryuely, / Appertely may we se þem wreten" [the wicked works . . . that we often did in secret, we may see them openly written] (ll.129; 131–2).

The amount of narrative God's angels summon to the playing space is thus conceptually enormous: nothing less than a detailed personal history for every creature that ever lived. Of course, only a limited number of bodies would fit onstage for this momentous judgment, but these would be understood as representative, evoking the late medieval audience gathered physically before them, and suggestive also of "euery-ilke a gaste," every single soul who came before: the entire population of history, now risen to be counted (l.85). It is a complete cast, and it both forms and witnesses a complete account of human history as that history veers toward its close.[3] The players playing the assembled dead, at last reunited with their fleshly

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forms (sounding, presumably, like the rustle of costumes), and the crowds assembling to watch them play all gather around God and his deputized angels, who "sounderes þame" [divide them up], some to heaven and some to hell (l.73):

1 ANGELUS: Goode and ill, euery-ilke a gaste,
            Rise, and fecche youre flessh þat was youre feere,
            For all þis worlde is broght to waste.
            Drawes to youre dome, it neghes nere.
2 ANGELUS: Ilke a creature, bothe olde and yhing,
            Belyue I bidde ȝou þat ȝe ryse;
            Body and sawle with ȝou ȝe bring,
            And comes before þe high justise;
            For I am sente fro heuene kyng
            To calle ȝou to þis grette assise,
            þerfore rise vppe, and geue rekenyng,
            How ȝe hym serued vppon sere wise.   (ll.85–96)

ANGEL 1: Good and ill, each and every soul, rise and fetch the flesh that was your body, for this whole world is brought to waste. Come to your judgment, it draws near.
ANGEL 2: Each creature, both old and young, I bid that you now rise; bring with you body and soul, and come before the high justice; for I am sent from the king of heaven to call you to this great assize. Therefore, rise up and give reckoning of how you have served him in various ways.

The play describes an annotated, cosmic roll call, one that God will read with absolute comprehension, for, as he assures the "Anima Bona" [good souls] at York, he has seen them feed the hungry and clothe the cold, and he understands those actions as signifying love toward himself (ll.309–12). Complete knowledge and unerring interpretation are performed as entirely recoverable in the play. Even the devils admit as much: "For nowe," says one, "schall all þe soth be sought" [for now shall all the truth be sought] (l.226).

This book is about late medieval representations of extraordinary inventories, such as the sort assembled in the York Doomsday play. It investigates what such representations might reveal about medieval perceptions of history, narrative, and the accumulation of knowledge. I examine how various late medieval texts and performances represent the desire to amass collections that fully account for the world: how they attempt to compress time and space onto page or stage to offer, at times, a record that rivals the completeness of original creation. I refer to this desire to accumulate as much knowledge as possible, in both material and narrative form, as an

archival one, and I use the term for a number of reasons. First of all, "archive" suggests a flexibility of inventory, encompassing the sense of "library," "treasure trove," and even codicological compilation, since a codex might be an archive unto itself, as in the massive Book of Life consulted by the angels at the end of time, or the famous Domesday book, sharing with its namesake cosmic roll call a similar sense of exhaustiveness and dread.[4] And though in modern usage, "archive" sometimes denotes collections more narrowly defined – "the organic relationship of record to the generator of that record"[5] – twentieth- and twenty-first-century theorists have expanded its conceptual range to describe the collection and transmission of knowledge more generally.

But even more importantly, the idea of the archive, in its Latin and Middle English manifestations, synonyms, and near-synonyms, and through its perceived etymologies and constellation of associations, generated extensive descriptive and allusive power during late antique and medieval centuries. In his seventh-century *Etymologies*, Isidore of Seville links the Latin "arc(h)ivum" (archive) to the word "arca" (ark), which, as we will see in later chapters, also can refer to ships ("arca noe," Noah's ark of the flood), and hearts ("arca cordis," the ark of the heart). Isidore writes:

> A strongbox (*arca*) is so called because it prevents (*arcere*) and prohibits seeing inside. From this term also derives "archives" (*arcivum*, i.e. *archivum*) and mystery (*arcanum*), that is, a secret from which other people are "fended off" (*arcere*).[6]

Medieval etymological work consistently echoes portions of Isidore. Hugutio of Pisa's twelfth-century *Derivationes* emphasizes the idea of the "arca" as a protected space that wards off intrusion, circuitously connecting the term to "arcanus" (arcane) or "secretus" (secret), that from which others are held off ("a quo ceteri arcentur"), and further linking the "archivum" to the "librarium" (a place for books, often a bookcase) and "armarium" (a bookcase or cupboard).[7] The thirteenth-century *Summa Britonis* suggests that the "archarius est qui custodit vel facit archam vel custos thesaurorum": he is the one who protects or makes the "archam," the guardian of the treasure houses.[8] In the eleventh century, Ælfric uses "archivum" to translate the Old English "boochord" (book horde),[9] and the Latin word continues to be used to refer to collections – of parchments, tally sticks, treasures, and more – throughout the medieval period.

The details in this etymological work suggest an emphasis on enclosure, secrecy, and protection, as well as the need for a figurehead to guarantee these things: a God, for instance, to acknowledge a list of names, thoughts,

and deeds whose compilation proves beyond reproach. These aspects associated with the words "arca" and "archivum" can be discerned in the representations of archival projects that this book explores. But my examination also moves beyond explicit statements of archival etymology and definition to consider how both the form and content of late medieval engagements with sacred history, including works of poetry, prose, iconography, and performance, reveal a vested interest in cultural transmission and the archival labor that underpins it: how, for instance, a play like the York Doomsday, which does not use the word "archive" even once, seems nonetheless continually to investigate the idea of one. It is in such texts, images, and records of performance that I propose to reveal elements of medieval archival imagining, or ways of thinking about the compilation and appraisal of inventories and the methods by which they are organized, preserved, and ushered through time.

In addition to engaging with suggestive, premodern etymologies, my use of the word "archive" also responds to the rich and varied critical histories and more speculative theories of the archive that have been produced in recent decades, some of which involve the Middle Ages, but many of which skip over those centuries all together. Postmodern theoretical interest in the archive, lead most notably by Foucault and later by Derrida, has increased the critical uses to which the word might be put. I want to superimpose this conceptual flexibility onto the allusive reach of the medieval "arca"/"archivum" in order to see what sort of resonances and disjunctions might be found. Such a diachronic approach risks a certain amount of self-reflexivity, a tendency to coil inward as it pursues ideas central to the archive itself: continuity and its ruptures. But it also permits the Middle Ages, situated at the beginning of English literary history, to take up its rightful place in discussions about how that literature apprehends time, transmission, tradition, and loss.

This introduction thus offers a summary of the ways in which comparatively modern discussions of the archive have conditioned our approach to the past as well our efforts to define our work as literary critics, work that, in recent decades, has taken something of its own archival turn, even inspiring what some might term a "fever." It then moves into medieval considerations of the archive – bureaucratic, poetic, and especially moments when these categories overlap – to consider the elements shared between medieval and modern approaches to the collection, organization, and transmission of knowledge in its various forms. My intention is to demonstrate how medieval works take up questions central to current conversations about archival theory and practice, though, of course, in

different forms and at times with different stakes. Finally, by returning to the sacred history culminated by Judgment Day, I present three other famous episodes that investigate archival processes: the creation and loss of Eden, that garden of exemplars; the loading of Noah's ark ("arca noe"), the ship that attempts to forge continuity between ante- and postdiluvian worlds; and the Harrowing of Hell, in which Christ liberates the repository of an embodied past. Like the Mercers' play, medieval engagements with these earlier episodes of sacred history permit the interrogation of aspects of archival labor, putting pressure on and delighting in processes such as compiling inventories, protecting records, making copies, and turning backward toward the past. Implicit in this turn to sacred history is the idea that a culture's conceptions of the value of archival work might be explored through its narrative traditions, particularly when a narrative tradition so crucially structures that culture; to put it another way, poetry about and performances of sacred history can be seen both to produce and examine English medieval intellectual history, particularly as it relates to questions regarding the transmission of knowledge.

1   The Archive (and the Archives)

Archivists, historians, and literary and cultural critics, medievalist or otherwise, frequently imply a division between the "archive" and the "archives."[10] The singular refers to an abstract conceptualization of the storage, preservation, and transmission of knowledge, and the plural more specifically indicates the buildings, rooms, or institutions in which collections take form: all the places scholars go to find things, especially the past. Carolyn Steedman has examined this divide between theory and practice in a tongue-in-cheek meditation on Derrida's influential essay, "Archive Fever." At first passing lightly over the fraught longings for origin that characterize his description of conceptual maladies, she describes the health effects of the literal dust inhaled by readers toiling in actual archives: the headaches, for instance, about which the prolific French historian Jules Michelet used to complain after visits to the reading rooms. Steedman acknowledges how Derrida's approach has helped to sharpen the way scholars think about power, knowledge, and interpretive license, or "the hermeneutic right," as he puts it, the one exclusive to the archivist, and which God wields with such authority at Doomsday.[11] But one of the interpretive risks of such an approach, she suggests, is that the archive then can be "inflated to mean – if not quite Everything – then at least, all the ways and means of state power,"

eventually producing a suspiciously "capacious metaphor" that none-theless leaves aside the dust of real reading rooms.[12]

Derrida is not the first to expand the term "archive" beyond its designation of a specific place, collection, or practice. In the *Archaeology of Knowledge*, written three decades before "Archive Fever," Foucault defines the archive as "the law of what can be said."[13] Not, then, one of the more traditional definitions he specifically rejects – "that which collects the dust of statements that have become inert once more, and which may make possible the miracle of their resurrection" (as with Michelet, for instance, inhaling the dead in the reading rooms, giving them life in a strange inverse of God's original exhalation[14]) – and not "the library of all libraries."[15] For Foucault, the archive is that which can "reveal the rules of a practice that enables statements both to survive and to undergo regular modification. It is *the general system of the formation and transformation of statements*."[16] Rather than a site of documents and dust, it is a system by and within which we live and think and speak. Conversely, in her book on the interplay between medieval documents and poetry, Emily Steiner turns away from the singular archive of post-modern theory, regarding it as too "abstracted from the materialities and genres of preservation."[17] In fact, she explicitly salvages some of the definitional work discarded by Foucault, including the description of "the institutions, which, in a given society, make it possible to record and preserve those discourses that one wishes to remember and keep in circulation."[18]

Though it might appear as something of a critical standoff, those theorizing the dustless archive and those thinking about and from within actually dusty archives frequently cross paths, producing not so much a détente as a critical canon, a way of making the overlap between these categories into its own kind of poetics. Arlette Farge's *The Allure of the Archives*, recently translated into English, combines a deep familiarity with the everyday experiences and materialities of institutional reading rooms – heaps of paper, the kind of string that ties them, the handwriting, the "everything and nothing" – with a sharp warning about the forms of authority shaping those traces of lives once lived.[19] "The archive," she writes, "is a vantage point from which the symbolic and intellectual constructions of the past can be rearranged," but it is also a place of surprising encounters with both ineffable and material presences: a note scrawled on smuggled laundry, a handful of miraculous seeds, the not-quite real memory of the bodies from which they issued.[20] Farge writes about lives whose records exist by virtue of a collision with authority, but

also lives whose suggestiveness exceeds the documentary formulas imposed upon them. Archivists, themselves, frequently write about the shaping mechanisms of authority: both the forms of authority associated with those in the past who have bequeathed us their records, and the authority of those who today receive, appraise, organize, and permit access to them. They emphasize the crucial need to resist perceiving their procedures as neutral, acknowledging the interpretive frameworks through which their work is carried out and demonstrating how the need to recognize and articulate such frameworks matters, in a postcolonial world, for example, or in one bewilderingly inundated by new, digital forms of record.[21]

Literary critics as well as historians and archivists have taken up these questions concerning the records and silences of the past. How to find things obfuscated through organizational strategy or by the accidents of history has become increasingly significant to literary studies in the long wake of new historicism, one of whose central injunctions is expansion of the archive: expansion of what counts as a text, what gets deemed worthy of scholarly interest, and who gets to be remembered.[22] Reassessments of the archive and the attendant conversations about theory and practice also resemble a number of the questions and opportunities surrounding the more recently revitalized field of book history,[23] in which scholars approach the material book, encoded with dynamic histories, as an anchor to a world otherwise reduced to memory, and as irreducible proof that the past is not something that we inevitably create in our efforts to reveal.[24] But critics of this growing field suggest that the attention paid to material remains and the admittedly obsessive, sustained study that such difficult, recalcitrant objects require can end up substituting the material object for the past itself.[25] Such critiques cast the archive and its contents as fetishes, mistaken by painstaking scholars for the world that they purport to record.[26]

The study of medieval literature has a unique stake and perspective in such conversations, both as a field of study with a rich history in the dusty archives and as one continually confronted with the problem of the distant past and the tenuous connection between its often obscure objects of study and the present. Medievalists study a past not only particularly remote in time, but also one whose records frequently were expunged or recreated.[27] The dissolution of the monasteries during the Reformation left only a portion of those institutional inventories, and the early modern centuries that followed, as Jennifer Summit, Theresa Coletti, and Gail McMurray Gibson have shown, remade the Middle Ages through their own strategies of collection and revision.[28] The texts that survive in material form thus

frequently are elevated to the status of quasi-relics, partially out of reverence for the tenacity and fragility their transmission across centuries suggests, and partially, perhaps, because of the estrangement such a passage across time produces. These objects offer information discernable only through skills closely associated with traditional archival research, such as paleography and codicology, but they also carry traces of their own inscrutability, hints about all the information obscured by the silencing effects of time. Medievalist scholarship continually must confront such indications of continuity and rupture, or profound recognition tempered by a sense of the elusive. Along with the solid weight of a book in the hands, the smell of vellum and faded inks, one also encounters – or rather notes that one *fails* to encounter – all the hands, now invisible, that once held it, the mouths and eyes that read, and the kingdoms, schools, parishes, and days that shaped such moments.

These questions of our engagement with the past, material and ineffable, accessible and vanished – including what to look at and how to see it, or in what forms "definitive and usable historical knowledge" might be found[29] – pervade critical conversations about texts such as the York Doomsday play, with which this introduction began. But such questions also are useful to medieval drama writ large, whose performances are more surely disappeared than other objects of study. For what kind of recorded past, or what kind of knowledge, might we access about a medium often thought to elude archival endeavor through its inherent ephemerality?[30]

Nevertheless, medieval drama has invited *considerable* archival research. Over the past several decades, an increasing awareness of the richness that local historical context provides for understanding popular performance has motivated one of the most committed turns to the archives in medieval studies: the Records in Early English Drama (REED). The project was initiated over forty years ago by Alexandra F. Johnston and Margaret (Dorrell) Rogerson, whose spearheading efforts to excavate, organize, and publish the civic registers and recording efforts of medieval bureaucrats have considerably enhanced our access to a large amount of information about medieval plays and other entertainments. Johnson, Rogerson, and a team of meticulous researchers locate, gather, and compile documents relating, sometimes obliquely, to medieval English drama and performance culture, including "memoranda, minutes of council meetings, accounts, letters, wills, ordinances, and legal contracts which touch upon and illumine practices of long-standing custom and ceremony."[31] The project describes its goals as the comprehensive compilation of a massive reference series, one that collects information, termed "raw material," with as little interpretive mediation as possible, into one place.[32] Over a decade into the

project, Theresa Coletti published an influential essay raising some of the same kinds of objections as those critiquing aspects of archival research and book history. She suggested that REED pursued an exhaustive historical record, conducted within "a fiction of its own neutrality," without sufficiently investigating its own interpretive methods, and that its scholars sometimes errantly seemed to believe in a whole, true, or recoverable past.[33]

The REED project and the criticism it has elicited interest me in several ways. First of all, the volumes of records are tremendously *useful*.[34] REED provides an extraordinary amount of information that permits one to envision those vanished performances, such as the ones put on by the Mercers' guild, in new ways, with props, costs, arguments, and otherwise unimagined juxtapositions between performance activities and "regular" life. The published records help to evoke an assemblage of bodies in costumes with scripts, complaints, and desires, who have left behind enigmatic, textual traces of these things. But secondly, through the articulation of its methods and the volumes produced year after year, REED offers its own faith in the power of the archive and in the idea that there is efficacy in gathering as much as possible into one place, that eventually, as Coletti claims the project implies, it might lead one to see and to understand a kind of totality, whether of a particular facet of culture, a city in the fullness of its lived century, or a whole world now vanished. The REED project thus offers a version of archival desire that some critics might designate as fetishistic: a yearning to reconstitute, out of many scattered parts, whatever whole or sense of fullness might be salvaged, a record whose extensiveness potentially rivals or replaces the world (the past) that it records.[35]

The exciting developments and reasonable hesitations attending the archival turn in literary studies tend toward a few implicit questions. Which precise mixture of theory and dust might offer the sharpest resolution as we look backward toward the past? How far are we to be lulled away from theoretical lenses by the concrete facticity of material in our hands, codices attesting to so many earlier readers, writers, editors, artists, patrons, and sellers? Or, how far from these material links to the past should we stray as we become rerouted through the pressing questions of the present, lost in the words of our own arguments, blithely woven far from the doors of the archive? This book proposes that such questions, foregrounded by conversations surrounding the archival turn generally and projects such as REED specifically, *also* animated medieval conversations about the archive, that is, about how to access, shape, understand, and preserve the past and the present so that they might be comprehended and transmitted

to future populations. I am interested in how medieval thinkers and scholars queried the value, risks, pleasures, and critical blind spots of archival activity; how they imagined the dangers and enticements of reaching back toward a past passed on to them; the attempts to decipher the various forms in which it arrived; and the prestige and unnerving power associated with one's own efforts to archive the always-unspooling present.

This book demonstrates how imaginative medieval works anticipate crucial elements of the intellectual debates over archival endeavor in which Coletti and the editors at REED, or those studying the "archive" and "archives" across disciplines, participate. Medieval imaginings of the archive do not break down neatly into questions of theory and practice, but they illuminate the hopes bound up in a fully recoverable past and a fully recordable world, and they frequently foreground the collateral damage of such aspirations: that which is left out of purported wholeness; the dangers wrapped up in the search for a specific past or origins; and the vise grip upon the future that the desire for exhaustive recording frequently entails. The next section turns to specific medieval texts in order to demonstrate how we might begin to uncover the desires and hesitations wrapped up in ways of imagining the archive, and it shows how both bureaucratic and poetic texts reformulate and anticipate some of the questions rehearsed above.

2 Sacred and Compendious Histories: The *Liber Albus*, the *House of Fame*, and *Paradise*

The kind of revisionist history described by scholars such as Summit, Coletti, and Gibson was not a strategy invented in the early modern period. Patrick Geary suggests that medieval writers and historians regularly reshaped their own inherited pasts, revering tradition even as they labored to mediate it through "transmission, suppression, and re-creation."[36] Rather than being a period merely organized into being by the Renaissance, the Middle Ages worked to organize itself, with its subjects continually rewriting histories of the past through the revision and new production of historical documents and archives.[37] And importantly, as Michael Clanchy argues in *From Memory to Written Record*, the production of those records began to increase dramatically in the second half of the medieval period.[38] Documentation spread through the work of royal, municipal, and ecclesiastical bureaucrats and scribes, who produced and sorted through contracts, receipts, charters, wills, and books of account, storing these more earthly reckonings in large rolls of parchment, wound up and preserved in cabinets, waiting for uncertain futures and accumulating authority like interest.[39]