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

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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 Gravida 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 inter-preting: 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 postmodern 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 possiblely [*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 lunching 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. 247ᵛ). 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 Cr[1]), now Lehigh University Library 821.1 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 Cr[1], 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 Cr^2 superior to Cr^1); 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 *Waltrot* (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 Cr^3). The best example appears over four front flyleaves of the copy of Cr^1 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 Cr^3 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
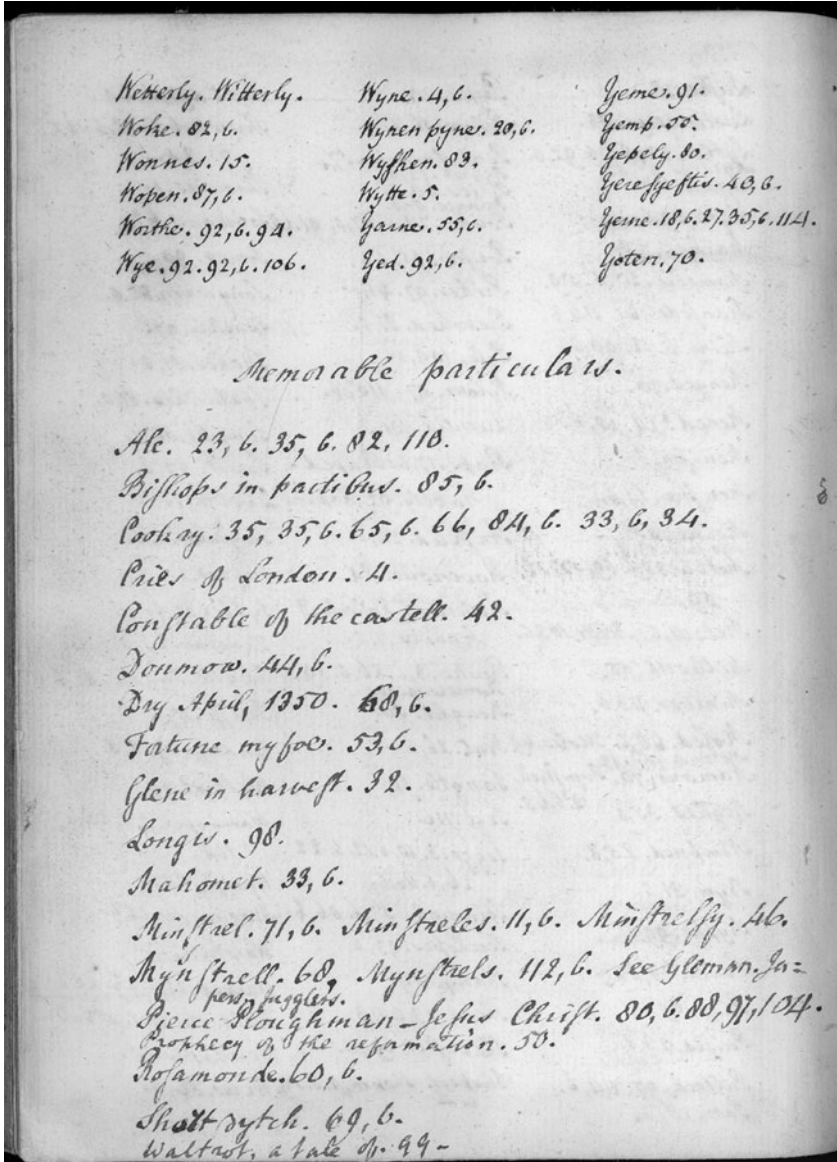
Figure 1 Ritson's list of difficult words and "memorable particulars."
Lehigh University Library 821.1 L265p 1550 [Endmatter 4]