



The Archival Iceberg: New Sources for Literary Life-Records

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ABSTRACT: The carefully curated, small-scale world of literary manuscripts in institutions such as The British Library is far removed from the vast scale of government archives where documents are measured by the kilometers of shelf space they offer. The sheer scale of the surviving archives can mean that thousands of records remain in sacks for centuries, unsorted and unlisted. We might assume that the life-records gathered together for a figure such as Geoffrey Chaucer are fairly complete and that there are unlikely to be significant new documents. The discovery of the new Chaucer-Champagne documents presented in this issue demonstrates that there is more to be found among the vast collections of medieval legal material at The National Archives. Here we present two approaches to researching these complicated collections and demonstrate their potential for uncovering new life-records, literary and otherwise. In doing so, we present minor new life-records for Chaucer, Gower, and Skelton from recently accessioned material.

KEYWORDS: archival studies, Chaucer, Court of Common Pleas, Court of King's Bench, Gower, life-records, Malory, Rising of 1381, Skelton, The National Archives

Initially the preserve of legal historians, closely followed by historians of late medieval politics, government, and administration, the records of the central law courts of England have increasingly come to the attention of those

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working outside of these traditional fields, including scholars of social, medical, and English literary history, among many others. The focus of much of this research in recent years has been the plea rolls of the Courts of King's Bench (Kew, The National Archives [TNA], KB 27) and Common Pleas (TNA, CP 40), on which were recorded pleadings held before the courts as well as *mesne* process (the content of the various writs and process documents issued by the courts to summon defendants to appear)—a valuable source both for the study of the law and for historical enquiry.¹ These records have long been appreciated by those literary scholars in search of Geoffrey Chaucer, including those earliest pioneers of the life-records, even if for many years such records remained difficult for others to access and interpret. The case for the plea rolls as a source of historical information—including for literary lives—was made stridently by H. G. Richardson a century ago, and the cause has been taken up by an increasing band of scholars in the century since, as the records have become more accessible to researchers.² In this time, several efforts, including the excellent work of the Selden Society, have been made to increase knowledge of these vast collections of documents by publishing a vast number of extracts, calendars, and editions of year books and plea rolls, among other collections, and making many of these records available to a public (although largely a legally minded) audience for the first time. Access to these records has been revolutionized even further in recent years by projects such as the Anglo-American Legal Tradition (AALT) website, which has made more than nine million images freely available to academics and

1. This focus was not always the case. For many years, the plea rolls were viewed by many as a poor companion to other sources of legal history—the “skeleton, the dry bones of the bare facts” compared to the “living body, acting and speaking and thinking and wrangling and changing its mind on the pressure of the moment” presented by the year books, the earliest law reports in which the legal arguments presented by the medieval justices were recorded and kept. See William C. Bolland, *The Year Books, Lectures Delivered in the University of London* (Cambridge UK, 1921), 29–30. The year books, Bolland continued, contain “innumerable matters of interest, legal, historical, constitutional and social, about which the record is entirely silent.” He might, perhaps, have added the word “literary” to his list. As the analysis of the new discoveries presented in this issue notes, information preserved in the year books highlights the legal uncertainty that surrounded actions of procurement in the late fourteenth century, providing crucial context for our understanding of the actions brought by Thomas Staundon against Geoffrey Chaucer and Cecily Champaigne.

2. H. G. Richardson, “Year Books and Plea Rolls as Sources of Historical Information,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 4th ser. 5 (1922): 28–70.

researchers around the world.³ Research that would previously have required a visit to the reading rooms at the Public Record Office (PRO) in Chancery Lane, or to The National Archives (as the PRO is known today) in Kew, and an encounter with the often bulky, sooty, and unwieldy plea rolls can now be done from the comfort of one's office or home, from Pennsylvania to Perth. Freed from the need to travel to the archives, to reserve a reading room seat, and to order up a document, researchers can now browse the contents of a fourteenth-century plea roll in search of their chosen research interest—whether it be a poet like Chaucer or Gower, an event of national consequences like the Great Revolt of 1381, or the debt disputes of a bustling London merchant—anywhere, at any time. Indices to selected documents, compiled by volunteers, allow those less familiar with the records (or those less inclined towards the chance encounters that come from browsing these largely unindexed records) to identify specific entries with relative ease, while digital images allow even the slightest of manuscript notations to be examined in minute detail. All these factors have, in recent years, combined to bring about a flurry of newly published life-records and expand our collective knowledge of late medieval literary lives. And yet there remains much more to be explored.

It has often been assumed that there is little more to be found by those searching for life-records of Chaucer and his associates. The extensive searches of the major records series at the Public Record Office by the earliest life-record searchers, it is true, were extremely thorough. Even in Frederick J. Furnivall's own time, there was talk of "completing" the archive:

3. Online at: <http://aalt.law.uh.edu/>. Few modern scholars would argue that the provision of free digital images by the AALT has not prompted an expansion of those able to research and access TNA's legal collections, and yet the way in which such material has been made available can also serve to obscure the original manuscripts themselves, as well as the context in which they were produced, stored, and utilized throughout their long history. The aspiring researcher who wishes, for the first time, to dip a toe into the ocean of material photographed and made available online by the AALT is required to develop a mastery of two skills. First, they must be able to decipher the complex palaeographical and procedural conventions of a medieval plea roll. Second, they must do the same with an equally arcane construction, the AALT website. In order to facilitate the speedy photography of rolls, for example, the front and dorse of each rotulet have been separated on the website, with individual images ascribed only an image number rather than an internal reference. Contemporary indices compiled by the clerks of the court (and which are therefore documents in their own right) are relegated to a mere "IDX" designation, stripped of their catalogue references and connection with the original record. Links to TNA's online catalogue, and the detailed descriptions, provenance, and context provided therein, are dissociated from the images of records themselves, available only through a specific link on a specific page, and therefore easily overlooked by the unfamiliar user who finds themselves scrolling through a plea roll online.

Even since Selby's time, when the records had for some years been brought together under one roof, they have been rendered more and more accessible by the constantly flowing stream of new calendars and indexes, either in print or in manuscript, which are in active preparation at the Public Record Office. It is hoped that, with the aid of these works, the collection of the Life-Records of Chaucer is now nearly complete; but there are still several unindexed classes of records which may yield additional particulars.⁴

Fifty years later, this view remained, although Furnivall's talk of unindexed classes had been partially abandoned. As Albert Baugh wrote in 1951:

Certain items reported from time to time by Miss Rickert and occasionally by Manly are interesting but not startling, and these gleanings testify to the success with which Furnivall and Kirk and other nineteenth-century searchers covered the ground.⁵

This may be true, broadly, but it also ignores the millions of writs, returns, memoranda, and other administrative records that sit behind the final plea rolls of courts such as the King's Bench and Common Pleas. Lying underneath these rolls is a huge range of rich documentation preserved in files that have barely been studied. These process documents, most of which are not online, many of which do not have detailed indices or catalogue descriptions, and some of which are unavailable even to the researcher who visits TNA with a willingness to delve into some of the more obscure collections, form the bulk of the medieval legal collections at TNA, and yet have been relatively unexplored by researchers. It is, perhaps, illustrative to consider the plea rolls, year books, and Chancery rolls as merely the tip of a vast archival iceberg, supported by a mass of administrative parchment and paper that lies below the surface. In many ways, this great mass is obscured not only by limited catalogue descriptions, but by the sheer bulk of material now available online. The inexperienced researcher, coming across the AALT page for Richard II's reign alone, might be excused for thinking that it is exhaustive, just from the sheer amount of available images, and that everything that is worth reading has been included, without an awareness of what has *not* been photographed.

4. Frederick J. Furnivall, "Forewords," in Walford Dakin Selby, Francis Tate, Frederick James Furnivall, Edward Augustus Bond, Walter Rye, and Richard Edward Gent, eds., *Life-Records of Chaucer*, 4 vols. (London, 1900), 4:v.

5. Albert C. Baugh, "Fifty Years of Chaucer Scholarship," *Speculum* 26 (1951): 659–72, at 660.

This circumstance is not a new phenomenon. The vast bulk of the medieval legal collections now held at The National Archives has remained elusive from most historians. Many still in need of listing, conservation work, and careful handling remain overlooked in comparison to their more accessible cousins, the plea rolls. This situation is, in part, a consequence of their long, complicated history, neglected for many years, in damp storage facilities, chewed by rats and mice, and often broken as a consequence.

To take the King's Bench as an example, the structure and organization of the major file series in use in the King's Bench in Chaucer's lifetime are fairly clear and self-explanatory.⁶ The oldest and largest series are the *Brevia*, comprising writs and returns of cases on the plea side and crown side of King's Bench (prosecutions of the suits of private individuals in the former, and those of the Crown in the latter). Writs relating to cases in the crown side at the king's suit were filed in the *Brevia Regis* (TNA, KB 37), while those on the civil side of the court were filed in the regular *Brevia* files (TNA, KB 136). As we will see, a wide variety of working documents were also kept in the burgeoning *Recorda* files (TNA, KB 145), including the records of local courts, commissions, and proceedings, and which during the reign of Richard II gave rise to separate files of *Indictamenta* (TNA, KB 9), indictments taken in King's Bench. Physically linked by a thong to the *Recorda* files were the much smaller files of *Precepta Recordorum* (also TNA, KB 145), which for convenience grouped together records relating to procedure in the court (Fig. 1). Finally, the *Panella Assise et Bille Finite* (TNA, KB 146) includes files, not only of documents relating to jury empanelment (which they were initially intended to hold), but which from the fourteenth century on also increasingly included bills alleging trespass that eventually came to dominate the series. Of all these files, only the indictments in KB 9 are available on AALT, while none of the file series are catalogued or indexed beyond the date ranges assigned to each bundle. Many other files for the central law courts contain the writs of the Common Pleas, the Chancery, and other related process writs, while much remains unsorted, yet to be found.

6. C. A. F. Meekings, "King's Bench Files," in J. H. Baker, ed., *Legal Records and the Historian* (London, 1978), 97–139. The structure of the King's Bench files, as illustrated by Meekings's diagram, is clarity itself ("King's Bench Files," 124). The way in which the file series (depicted by Meekings) develop, give rise to new series, and disappear epitomizes V. H. Galbraith's vision of an archivist's history, comprising "a slow pageant of slowly changing records, marked from time to time by the occasional disappearance of one class and the gradual emergence of another" (*Studies in the Public Records* [London, 1948], 7–8). However, it took an enormous amount of time for the archivists of the PRO (as it then was) to understand the structure of these files, and a great deal of loss and disruption occurred in the process of digesting these enormous file series.



FIG. 1 *Recorda and Precepta Recordorum* files as originally attached to each other by catgut thong. Kew, TNA, KB 145/3/7 (1383–84). Reproduced by permission.

In order to understand the current status and structure of the vast corpus of premodern legal collections that sit behind the plea rolls, it is important to understand something of the long and complex archival history of these files, and the challenges this history presents. As such, before considering the value these files have for literary lives, and for historians, it is worth briefly considering some aspects of this history.

I

When Sir George Gilbert Scott was appointed Architect to Westminster Abbey in 1849, he immediately started investigating all the abbey's neglected nooks and crannies, taking a particular interest in the "incomparable"

thirteenth-century Chapter House which had been used by the government for the storage of public records since the dissolution of the monasteries.⁷ Scott inveighed against the “tender mercies of some barbarian, who fitted it up for the records, with studious regard to concealment or destruction of its architectural beauties.”⁸ He was particularly intrigued by a walled-up doorway in the cloister that had formerly been the entrance to the monk’s dormitory. Opening the doorway, he found that it led to a chamber beneath the Chapter House. This was the Pyx Chamber, one of the oldest surviving parts of the abbey. Scott described what he found there:

I found its floor heaped up several feet deep apparently with stones and rubbish. While standing on this heap, I was puzzled to find it spring beneath my feet, and stooping down and clearing away a little rubbish, what was my astonishment at finding that I was standing on a large heap of parchment rolls! It proved, however, to be less of a find than I at first hoped, for it consisted mainly of packets of ancient writs from the courts of justice, interesting only from their age, which varied, I think from Edward III to Henry VII.⁹

These packets of writs included files of fourteenth-century documents from the King’s Bench, among which were probably the *Precepta Recordorum* or *Brevia* files for 3 Richard II containing the writs that, we now learn, transform our understanding of the relationship between Geoffrey Chaucer and Cecily Champaigne. Hidden away amongst the rubble in the bricked-up Pyx Chamber, their existence apparently unknown even to Arthur Agarde, the indefatigable sixteenth-century abstracter and cataloguer of the legal records at Westminster, these files constituted the working documents of the King’s Bench from the mid-fourteenth century.¹⁰ Far from being “interesting only for their age,” as Scott assumed, the range and variety of information in many of these files are far greater than that found in the plea rolls.

Records from the Chapter House were removed to the new Public Record Office at Chancery Lane between 1859 and 1861 under the supervision

7. The Chapter House was an important repository of records of the Exchequer and of older law courts, including the Courts of King’s Bench and Common Pleas. See Elizabeth M. Hallam and Michael Roper, “The Capital and the Records of the Nation: Seven Centuries of Housing the Public Records in London,” *London Journal* 4 (1978): 73–94, at 76–77.

8. George Gilbert Scott, ed., *Gleanings from Westminster Abbey*, 2nd edn. (Oxford, 1863), 39.

9. Scott, ed., *Gleanings*, 40–41.

10. Meekings, “King’s Bench Files,” 97n1.

of Joseph Burt, an Assistant Keeper of Public Records.¹¹ After the records had been cleared, Scott began to plan the restoration of the Chapter House and made his way back to the basement chamber. There he found, to his great surprise, “my old friend the parchment heap where I had left it in 1849.”¹² Scott immediately alerted Burt, who confirmed that

The great bulk of the documents were found to be ordinary judicial writs, from the reign of Richard II to that of Henry VI; many of which are in very bad condition. They were mixed with a considerable quantity of ordinary brick rubbish, which has been carefully sorted over, and the documents &c. picked out.¹³

These files, including the file containing the documents concerning Chaucer and Chaumpaigne, were loaded into sacks and transferred to the Public Record Office, where they were left unopened until the 1930s.¹⁴ When the files of King’s Bench and Common Pleas arrived at Chancery Lane, there was nothing to indicate the structure and nature of the files. C. A. F. Meekings of the PRO notes how, “in resacking sacks in poor condition, matter from Common Pleas seems often to have been tipped in with King’s Bench. Such sacks, when opened, presented archaeologically distinct layers, usually with bric-a-brac of the 1890s at the division or bottom.”¹⁵ A renewed and more systematic attempt was made to sort the mass of files in the 1930s.¹⁶ One of

11. Edmund Venables and G. H. Martin, “Joseph Burt (1818–1876),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online at: oxforddnb.com.

12. Scott, ed., *Gleanings*, 41.

13. Joseph Burt, “On Some Discoveries in Connection with the Ancient Treasury at Westminster,” in Scott, *Gleanings*, Appendix, 282–90, at 282.

14. Meekings, “King’s Bench Files,” 116–17. The Chapter House material formed only one portion of the King’s Bench files. Pressure on record storage space meant that the King’s Bench records were dispersed across a number of different buildings. The earliest group ran from the early to the middle of the fourteenth century, and was kept at the Tower of London. The later files, from 1422 to the late eighteenth century, were kept in the Treasury of the King’s Bench itself, and pressure on the court’s accommodation meant that a variety of temporary stores were used, ending up ultimately in the riding house at Carlton House before their transfer to the PRO (97n1).

15. Meekings, “King’s Bench Files,” 115. Choice pieces were recovered from these sacks and the present class of *Indictamenta* (Ancient Indictments) (TNA, KB 9) was formed from such indictments, removed from their original context and thereby destroying information about the original file structure. Both Vernon Harcourt and Bertha Putnam trenchantly criticized these procedures, pointing out the inconsistencies of the distribution of documents between these artificial record classes. The PRO was, however, unresponsive to external criticism at the time (116–17).

16. However, this attempt to assemble all the files in one single record class (TNA, KB 136) completely obscured the development of the various file series. The work was still bedeviled by the process of sorting documents into modern categories rather than reconstituting the original file series.

the scholars involved in this phase of work on the King's Bench files was the veteran James Conway Davies, who in 1953–54 published an enthusiastic account of the value of the files of courts such as King's Bench and Common Pleas, emphasizing the scale of the information awaiting exploration in them:

Common Law Writs and Returns . . . make available a vast area of virgin territory which waits to be explored. They number some millions still in process of sortation. . . . For the two centuries from Richard I to Richard II, some two million and more items are already in sight, even with the many gaps for legal terms and even regnal years which still persist.¹⁷

In 1966, Meekings began his herculean work, which finally brought order to the King's Bench files—one of the great achievements of archival reconstruction in modern times—enabling us to locate such documents as the writ addressed to Chaucer and Chaumpaigne. The sheer quantity of dust and parchment confronted by Meekings and his helpers is almost unimaginable. Sacks of files had been stored in vaults underneath the Round Reading Room in Chancery Lane, and although a lot of work had been done on this material in the 1930s, Meekings found there were still many sacks to work through, about five feet deep in places. Nearly 2,000 files were recovered in what he remembered as “work in great heat and dust.”¹⁸ Another 350 sacks or so had been stored in the Clock Tower at Chancery Lane and had been transferred to former Ministry of Defence property at Hayes in Middlesex in 1964.¹⁹ In order to make sense of the vast quantity of material to be listed, Meekings devised a new reference system for each series of writs, which would enable files to be immediately given numbers as they were identified.²⁰ By 1973, he had finally

17. James Conway Davies, “Common Law Writs and Returns, Richard I to Richard II, Part One,” *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 26 (1953): 125–56, at 127.

18. Meekings, “King's Bench Files,” 118n1.

19. Meekings described how this material at Hayes, when sorted, “produced sacks of potentially whole or part K.B. files etc and broadened one's knowledge of the range of sacked bulk by producing sacks of files from Exchequer, prerogative courts, and even medieval assizes, in addition to the preponderant C. P. [Common Pleas] and miscellanea, mostly of Chapter House or Treasury of the Receipt provenance” (“King's Bench Files,” 118).

20. This comprises the King's Bench class number, a number designating which reign the record was compiled in (with “1” the first reign in the series) and a number corresponding to the regnal year. Thus, the *Recorda* file for 1 Richard II is KB 145/3/1. Where there is more than one file for a regnal year, usually because there are term files in a particular series but also when the *Recorda* and *Precepta Recordorum* files have become separated, an additional piece number is allocated at the end, so that the reference for the *Precepta Recordorum* file containing the Chaucer-Chaumpaigne document is KB 145/3/3/2. This very flexible referencing removed what had previously been a bottleneck in the arrangement of the files (Meekings, “King's Bench Files,” 120–21).

put in order some 10,820 files for all the classes of King's Bench files from Edward II to James II. An enormous quantity of new documentary material was now available for scholarly use. However, there were still some formidable obstacles, which have inhibited extensive exploration of this massive new accession of medieval and early modern documents. The most significant was the fragile condition of the files. Many of the files were as the medieval clerks had left them, consisting of dozens of writs and other documents threaded on a catgut thong attached to a large piece of parchment forming the wrapper of the file. This parchment wrapper, having been untouched for hundreds of years, is often rigid and difficult to unwrap. Above all, in many cases, the thong holding the file together is extremely fragile, and there is a constant risk, in examining the file, that the thong will break, causing the documents in the file to chaotically cascade out, so that any sense of the original order of the file and the context of the documents in it is irretrievably lost. Full conservation of these files seemed an impossibly expensive proposition, given their vast scale and poor state of conservation. Despite all the work of Meekings and his predecessors, it was initially very difficult to get permission to use the files, and they generally had to be consulted under the supervision of a curator or conservator. This state remains the case with several files. Indeed, the *Recorda* and *Precepta Recordorum* in which Champaigne's warrant was uncovered still need to be consulted in TNA's Collection Care department, under supervision, on account of a broken thong, while several other files from Chaucer's lifetime require treatment before they can be handled safely.

Another problem that hindered the conservation of the King's Bench files and their wider use by researchers was, in the words of Meekings, "the belief, which perhaps died harder in the Record Office than outside it, that everything—at least everything of value—was in the plea roll."²¹ This point was also emphasized by Conway Davies in 1953:

These files, however, are not only supplementary to the enrolments; they are also complementary. Moreover they contain a mass of detailed information which was never enrolled at any part of the period now being considered. For it is a complete misconception that the files supply no useful information except perhaps a few details of comparative insignificance. There is much detailed information most of which is of significance, and there is also much information of the most vital importance to legal history and administration

21. Meekings, "King's Bench Files," 97.

which was never entered on the roll. The files supply a large mass of new information on all kinds of legal and procedural matters, of both national and local significance and interest.²²

Despite the fine work of Meekings and his successors at the Public Record Office (notably David Crook, and in recent years Adalgisa Mascio) in sorting and making accessible the supplementary files of the central law courts (a process which still continues today), these documents remain a vast and understudied collection, with much potential yet to be realized.²³ Here, we present two research methodologies that demonstrate the potential for new finds through the use of the *Brevia* and *Recorda* files. First, we outline how new literary life-records can easily be identified through existing biographies and life-records and remain to be found. Second, we demonstrate the potential for new insights into medieval life through a case study of the Great Revolt of 1381.

II

The writ bundles and supplementary rolls of the central common law courts may appear, at a first glance, impenetrable and overwhelming. As Richardson wrote of the plea rolls a century ago,

in later reigns [after the reign of Henry III] the rolls increase in number and bulk, and seem to strike terror in many breasts: and seeing that so little has been attempted since the seventeenth century to render them accessible, perhaps some gratuitous and irresponsible advice may be excused.²⁴

22. Conway Davies, "Common Law Writs and Returns," 139. Nevertheless, this conviction that the files contained no historical information of interest led to the authorized destruction by the PRO of many files of common and special bails, *Satisfacciones* and *Committiturs*, from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Much of this destruction was undertaken with little investigation of the contents of these files (Meekings, "King's Bench Files," 111–12).

23. The most recent efforts to sort and catalogue these files was the Unknown Treasures project that ran at TNA between 2014 and 2018, which made available more than 5,000 *Brevia* files from the Court of Common Pleas. See Adalgisa Mascio, "Almost too ruinous to be repaired': The Unknown Treasures Project at The National Archives and the Court of Common Pleas Brevia Files," *Archives: The Journal of the British Records Association* 53 (2018): 1–11. See also David Crook, "Recent Work on Lists of Common Law Records in the Public Record Office," *Journal of Legal History* 15 (1994): 163–74.

24. Richardson, "Year Books and Plea Rolls," 69–70.

The same might be said of the *Brevia* and *Recorda* files. Yet the files themselves are actually relatively easy to navigate—the *Brevia* particularly so—once the internal structures and makeup of each file are understood. Each writ bundle, for example, was intended to be consulted by the clerks within each court if the need arose (such as when a defendant did not appear on their specified day), and, as a consequence, the internal structure of each of these bundles is highly organized. Each *Brevia* file is first organized chronologically by return day, the period in which a defendant was summoned to appear in court. Each writ bundle might contain one or multiple return days, depending on the extent of business transacted by the court each term. Within each return day, the returned writs (original and judicial)—were then arranged on a catgut thong, grouped together in a fixed order by county.²⁵ As a consequence, where files have remained complete, it is relatively straightforward to identify writs. The researcher interested in London, for example, only has to view a defined section of the bundle for each return day to identify documents of interest. The *Recorda* files are more complex. Arranged (roughly) chronologically as records appeared in the court's offices, the researcher often needs to look through an entire year's worth of records to ensure they have not missed anything, while the files themselves contain a wide range of document formats, sizes, and materials. Yet they do contain an inherent structure. Writs sent out by the King's Bench were returned with the documents summoned by the court—such as proceedings of an inferior court, referred to the King's Bench as the superior jurisdiction—and corresponding documents were grouped, stitched, and filed together. In many instances this grouping has been retained, even when the files themselves have been broken, allowing the researcher to identify related entries with ease. Those interested in a particular geographical area can also quickly locate documents of interest by the county information contained in the initial writ (generally addressed to the sheriffs of each county) or by the marginal county notes that accompanied proceedings in the central courts.

25. The established order of counties was as follows: Norfolk, Suffolk, Essex, Hertfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Huntingdonshire, Middlesex, London, Kent, Surrey, Sussex, Hampshire, Wiltshire, Somerset, Dorset, Devon, Cornwall, Herefordshire, Worcestershire, Gloucestershire, Oxfordshire, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Bedfordshire, Northamptonshire, Rutland, Shropshire, Staffordshire, Warwickshire, Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire, Lincolnshire, Yorkshire, Northumberland, Cumberland, Westmorland, and Lancashire. As a palatinate, Lancaster disappeared from the files temporarily in 1351–61, and permanently after 1377. From Edward II's reign, when excessive business required the splitting of files into multiple parts, they were split between Gloucestershire and Oxfordshire, so that part 1 contained Norfolk–Gloucestershire, and part 2 contained Oxfordshire–Lancashire.

To demonstrate the potential for new literary life-records to come to light, a selection of case studies from the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries is perhaps illustrative. The examples presented here are taken from known life-records (recorded in the plea rolls), and as such can be considered relatively minor life-records, largely replicating what is already known from the plea roll. As the new discoveries presented in this special issue of *The Chaucer Review* demonstrate, it is in instances where *limited* documentation was copied into the plea roll that the greatest potential for new findings may be identified, although even such “minor” records can shed new light on the processes and procedures that surrounded the plea roll entries. Here we present new life-records for three medieval and Tudor poets, Chaucer, Gower, and Skelton, while briefly considering similar recent research for Malory.

Geoffrey Chaucer. Alongside the new Chaumpaigne finds presented in this special issue, two further minor life-records relating to Chaucer can also be identified among the records of the central law courts. The first of these relates to Chaucer’s time on a commission of inquiry at Dartford in 1387, investigating the abduction of Isabella Hall. Martin M. Crow and Clair C. Olson were unable to identify the original return of the commissioners’ inquiries that was copied into the plea roll and the controlment roll (KB 29) used by the king’s clerks to keep track of crown cases as they progressed, although they noted that further records relating to the commission might be available in the (then) unavailable *Brevia* files.²⁶ Unbeknownst to them, the location of the original return was right in front of them. Recorded on the controlment roll, the copied version of the return states that it was “per recorda de anno undecimo” (by the *recorda* of the eleventh year [1387–88]). Crow and Olson connected this statement with the process that followed the enrollment of the commission, and thus with the *Brevia* writ files, but it is clearly associated with the hand of the enrollment and refers to the location of the original return: the *Recorda* file of 11 Richard II (TNA, KB 145/3/11/1).²⁷ Upon consulting the relevant file, the original commission and return were identified, stitched together, and archived by the King’s Bench officials. The return itself contains no new information—its contents were faithfully cop-

26. Crow and Olson, eds., *Chaucer Life-Records* (Oxford, 1966), 375–83. The plea roll entry is TNA, KB 27/509, rex rot. 17d, and the controlment roll entry is TNA, KB 29/35 rot. 15d, online at: http://aalt.law.uh.edu/AALT2/R2/KB27n0509/bKB27n0509dorses/IMG_0343.htm; and http://aalt.law.uh.edu/AALT7/R2/KB29n035/bKB29n035dorses/IMG_0154.htm. The commission was also recorded on the patent roll, TNA, C 66/323, m. 2d.

27. While Crow and Olson were aware of the potential for new finds in the records of the King’s Bench, notably the *Brevia* files, which were unavailable for consultation at the time they were publishing, they appear to have been unaware of the *Recorda* and *Precepta Recordorum* files.

ied onto the plea roll and controlment roll—but it reminds us that the plea roll entries were not created in a vacuum; rather they were the final stage in a complex record-keeping process. It is, perhaps, of interest simply to note that the returned inquiry does *not* differ from the enrolled text and contains no additional process notes (with the exception of the name of the Chancery clerk who wrote the original commission). We can therefore be confident that we are not missing anything; the enrollment is accurate and complete.²⁸

A second example, one in which the processes of the courts' administrative procedures are clear, relates to the debt case brought in the Court of Common Pleas against Chaucer (and others) by William Venour in Trinity term 1393.²⁹ On the basis that the first recorded *mesne* process identified in the plea roll ended in the issue of a writ of *capias* to Chaucer and his fellow defendants, ordering them to appear on the morrow of St. John the Baptist, we undertook an exploratory search in the relevant *Brevia* file (TNA, CP 52/4/16/4/3). Among the writs for London, we were able to uncover the judicial writ of *capias*, which provided two interesting details of note. First, we were able to identify the date on which the writ was issued (June 12, 1393). While only a minor detail, the identification of the date provided us details of the return day originally assigned to Chaucer et al. within Trinity term (the octaves of Trinity), which would—in theory—have provided us with the location of the original writ (or any earlier judicial writ) directed to Chaucer.³⁰ Unfortunately no *Brevia* file covering the octaves of Trinity can be identified for 1393, with the bundle having been lost, damaged, or broken at some point in its history, and so no further proceeding can currently be identified. But we now know where it *should* have been. The second detail of interest found within the writ are the notes of process added to the writ, either by

28. It cannot be taken for granted that documents were always carefully copied from one source to another, with transcription errors occasionally creeping in. One fourteenth-century example, which Chaucer may have been aware of himself, concerned a case of alchemical counterfeiting, in which one of the individuals named in the indictment was recorded as “William Whitchurch” in the controlment roll, but “William Shitchurch” in the plea roll. See Euan C. Roger, “Chaucer’s *Pars Secunda* Canon: A New Identification,” *Chaucer Review* 54 (2019): 464–81.

29. Crow and Olson, eds., *Chaucer Life-Records*, 391–93. The plea roll entries can be found in TNA, CP 40/530, rots. 16d, 368d; and TNA, CP 40/531, rot. 255d, online at: http://aalt.law.uh.edu/AALT6/R2/CP40no530/530_0035.htm; http://aalt.law.uh.edu/AALT6/R2/CP40no530/530_0706.htm; and http://aalt.law.uh.edu/AALT6/R2/CP40no531/bCP40no531dorses/IMG_2072.htm.

30. The octaves of Trinity began one week and a day after Trinity Sunday. In 1393, Trinity Sunday fell on June 1, and so the return day of the octaves of Trinity began on Monday, June 9. It was customary that *mesne* process was not established until the fourth day of each return day period, in order to give defendants the opportunity to appear in response to the writ, or to be excused from appearing (in cases of sickness, for example). The fourth day of the octaves of Trinity in 1393 fell on Thursday, June 12, the date on which the writ of *capias* was issued to the sheriffs of London.

the court's filcers as part of the filing process, or by the sheriffs in the course of their business. For a start, it indicates that one of either the entry on the plea roll or the writ itself was copied incorrectly. The text of the CP 52 writ states that, in response to the original summons to appear on the octaves of Trinity, the sheriffs of London (Gilbert Maughfeld [Mawfield] and Thomas Newenton) returned that the defendants had nothing within their bailiwick by which they could be attached ("nichil habet"), while the plea roll reports that the sheriffs had returned that the defendants could not be found ("non sunt inventi"). While only a minor detail, relatively unimportant in the grand scale of the court's procedures, it highlights that the plea roll entries are not infallible. Whether the sheriffs bothered to look for the defendants in the early days of June 1393 is unclear in the absence of the initial writ, but we know that they did so in response to the writ of *capias* issued on June 12. Next to almost all of the names of the defendants is a small cross (added at a later date after the writing of the writ), where each individual has been crossed off, presumably as the sheriffs tried to locate them within the city, in order to ensure that none were missed out. Only one name is not crossed off, that of Geoffrey Sterlyng, indicating that Chaucer (and the majority of his fellow defendants) were sought out by the sheriffs of London, who returned a response of "non sunt inventi" (not found). Their response was duly recorded on the plea roll (correctly this time), and a further writ of *capias sicut prius* issued for the appearance of the defendants in the octaves of Michaelmas.³¹ The writ also cross-references the plea roll, with a note that it related to rotulet 16 (no details of face or dorse are generally given in such cross-references). Unfortunately, the *Brevia* file for this return date is much broken, only the writs for Yorkshire remain accessible, and so we cannot tell whether Chaucer and his defendants were sought out once more (and not found).³² By the end of Michaelmas term, he had clearly settled his dispute with Venour; writs of *exigi facias* (the final stages before the process of outlawry began) were issued to the rest of the defendants, but not to Chaucer and three other defendants.³³ The minor process details that we can locate in the writ tell us little more about the details of the debt, but provide some interesting context. That Mawfield was active in seeking out a man to whom he had loaned money

31. TNA, CP 40/530 rot. 368d, online at: http://aalt.law.uh.edu/AALT6/R2/CP40n0530/530_0706.htm.

32. When the defendants did not appear again at their prescribed return day (recorded in the plea roll as "non sunt inventi" once again), a writ of *capias sicut plurias* was issued for them to appear on the morrow of Martinmas, the returns for which are also lost or broken. After this point the case disappears from the plea roll as well.

33. Crow and Olson, eds., *Chaucer Life-Records*, 393.

the previous year, for example, may be of interest in tracing any relationship between the two men, while further insights may yet be found among where we know bundles have been lost or broken during their long history.

Indeed, many potentially relevant files remain unavailable, or have become broken and muddled in their long history, but may yet come to light in the future. The *Brevia Regis* file for Michaelmas 14 Richard II (TNA, KB 37/2/14/1), for example, currently requires conservation work before it can be made accessible, yet has the potential to shed new light on the events surrounding Chaucer's incident at the Fowle Oak, while further clues might be found among the *Recorda* and the process files of the following years.³⁴ Further evidence for the poet's activities and connections in cases where he acted as surety for third parties, such as in the case of Matilda Nemeq (accused of leaving the service of one Maria Alconbury under the Statute of Laborers) might yet be found among the *Brevia* files of the Court of Common Pleas, the court that heard the case. The files for 12 Richard II (June 22, 1388–June 21, 1389), when the action was brought against Nemeq, however, are much broken and incomplete, with any original documents for the trial now seemingly lost in a sea of writs and returns, if they survive at all. Indeed, the *Brevia* series in both King's Bench and Common Pleas contains several files of "collected groups of writs" covering multiple date ranges, where files have been broken and (in some cases) tentatively reassembled at a later date, as well as many gaps, where documents might come to light in the future.

John Gower. Our second literary case study from the fourteenth century concerns a poet for whom the collections at The National Archives have also been scoured for life-records (if not perhaps to the same extent as Chaucer). Taking the known life-records of Gower, primarily his disputes with Walter Cook and with William and Denise Fisher in the Court of Common Pleas in 1381 and 1399 as a starting point, we sought to establish whether any supplementary documents could be identified among the court's own records. Gower's action against Cook was for his failure to fulfil his contract to build a

34. Crow and Olson speculated that further information surround the Fowle Oak might be found among the *Brevia* files in TNA, KB 136 (*Chaucer Life-Records*, 487). However, as the surviving plea roll evidence suggests, the case was handled by the crown side of the King's Bench, and so the writs should instead be found in the *Brevia Regis* files in TNA, KB 37. The entry recorded on the controlment roll, TNA, KB 29/37, Hilary, rot. 16, indicates that the *Recorda* file for 14 Richard II (TNA, KB 145/3/14) may once have contained a returned commission similar to that with which Chaucer himself had been involved some years earlier, but a search of the file was unsuccessful. It is possible that any return was refiled by the clerks at some point in the later proceedings.

house (commissioned by Gower at his expense) in Aldyngton in Kent.³⁵ Cook did not appear to answer Gower, and was summoned to appear before the court in the octaves of Martinmas next following (November 18–24, 1381), as was copied into the *mesne* process in the plea roll. Upon consulting the *Brevia* files of the Common Pleas (CP 52), a writ was located in the relevant file (octaves of Michaelmas, 1381).³⁶ The contents of the writ are largely the same as that recorded on the plea roll, but provide snippets of extra information, including the date on which the writ was issued (October 16, 1381), providing us with a far more accurate time frame than is provided by the plea roll itself. Perhaps of greater interest to literary scholars are the two names endorsed on the writ, John Petyt and John Roger. Were these two men potentially sureties for Gower's prosecution against Cook, and therefore men whom the poet would have known and trusted? Certainly they were men involved with the proceedings in some sense, and thus can be linked to Gower, even tentatively, providing new leads through which we can examine his presence in Aldyngton at this time.³⁷ While the writ provides only minor additional details in this instance, with the case postponed once again after Cook did not appear on his appointed return day, further process materials might well provide additional layers to the case, which were not reported in the plea roll. Indeed, the writs can also serve to identify additional material on the plea rolls themselves (as we shall see with Skelton), as in some instances the writs themselves were cross-referenced with their corresponding entries on the plea rolls, with the rotulet number noted on the writ as it was processed (although the accuracy of such notations can occasionally be questionable).³⁸

We are on firmer ground when exploring Gower's 1399 debt dispute with William and Denise Fisher in Norfolk. As in the previous example, the plea roll entries will be well known to scholars of Gower—having been identified by Sebastian Sobocki, and reprinted in Martha Carlin's 2019 calendar of the known Gower life-records—and concerned a debt of 40s. owed by the

35. An outline of the case can be found in Martha Carlin, "Chronology of Gower's Life Records" and "Gower's Life," in Stephen H. Rigby, with Siân Echard, eds., *Historians on John Gower* (Cambridge UK, 2019), 3–21, 22–120, at 12, 36–37. The entries themselves can be found in TNA, CP 40/483, rots. 144d, 488, online at: http://aalt.law.uh.edu/AALT6/R2/CP40no483/483_0307.htm; and http://aalt.law.uh.edu/AALT6/R2/CP40no483/483_0999.htm.

36. TNA, C 52/4/5/1/7 (Kent).

37. Michael Bennett, "John Gower, Squire of Kent, the Peasants' Revolt, and the *Visio Anglie*," *Chaucer Review* 53 (2018): 258–82.

38. The writ issued to Walter Cook, for example, states that the corresponding entry can be found on rotulet 145 of the plea roll, when it is actually found on rotulet 144d. This appears to have simply been an unintentional mistake by the clerk annotating the writ.

Fishers in Michaelmas term 1399.³⁹ The writ offers little additional context for the action brought by Gower, but, as in the previous example, it does give fragments of new information.⁴⁰ First, it provides additional chronological details. It was issued on October 12, 1399, with the Fishers summoned to appear on the octaves of Martinmas that year (November 18–24). That Gower appeared in his own person (“in propria persona”), as the plea roll tells us, affirms that the poet was personally present in Westminster (or at least in the offices around Westminster) at some point that week (on October 21, and likely also in the preceding days⁴¹), when the case was postponed to Hilary term. The writ also provides the names of Gower’s sureties—his pledges that he would prosecute the action—named as Edmund Nevyll and John Davy. Whether the two men were close associates of Gower is uncertain (that they also acted as sureties in several other Norfolk cases in the same bundle, both together and with others, may indicate that they were acting as “sureties for hire” or local men of good standing), but their names offer new avenues of inquiry for the poet’s Norfolk connections.

Thomas Malory. While the records of the fourteenth century remain largely unexplored, the fifteenth-century *Recorda* files have received greater attention from a small group of historians, in part due to the tireless efforts of individuals such as the editors of the History of Parliament Trust’s ongoing series of parliamentary biographies, who have left few stones untouched in their search for academic thoroughness. For an individual such as Thomas Malory [Mallory], therefore, who (like Chaucer) served as a member of Parliament alongside his literary endeavors, and had several brushes with the central law courts throughout his lifetime—considerably more so than Chaucer—the available legal collections have been examined at great length.⁴² It is from the *Recorda* files, alongside evidence from the plea rolls, indictments, and

39. Sebastian Sobecski, “A Southwark Tale: Gower, the 1381 Poll Tax, and Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*,” *Speculum* 92 (2017): 630–60; Carlin, “Chronology,” 19; and Carlin, “Gower’s Life,” 39–40, 43–44. The document itself is TNA, CP 40/555, rot. 118, online at: http://aalt.law.uh.edu/H4/CP40no555/aCP40no555fronts/IMG_0249.htm.

40. TNA, CP 52/5/1/17 (Norfolk).

41. While a return day period lasted a week, it was customary that judgment for the next stage in process did not take place until the fourth day. The plaintiff was required to appear on each of the first three days of the return day in order to secure the next stage of *mesne* process against the defendant. See C. R. Cheney, *A Handbook of Dates: For Students of British History*, rev. Michael Jones (Cambridge UK, 2000), 101.

42. Simon J. Payling, “MALLORY, Sir Thomas (c.1416–1471), of Newbold Revel, Warws. and Winwick, Northants.,” in Linda Clark, ed., *The House of Commons 1422–1461*, 7 vols. (Cambridge UK, 2020), 5:367–76. See also P. J. C. Field, *Malory: Texts and Sources* (Woodbridge, 1998), 47–41; *Sir Thomas Malory, Le Morte Darthur*, ed. P. J. C. Field, 2 vols. (Cambridge UK, 2013); Christine Carpenter, *Locality and Polity: A Study of Warwickshire Landed Society, 1401–1499* (Cambridge UK,

associated records, for example, that we know the terms of Malory's imprisonment in January 1452, and his transfer from the (relative) comfort of the Fleet prison in London to Newgate, where the sheriffs were placed under a huge obligation of £4,000 if he escaped.⁴³ So too, exploration among the *Recorda* and *Panella* files provided new insight for Malory's biographers into the agreements and arbitration surrounding his temporary release from that imprisonment that year, and into the bond of £300 he undertook with William Neville, Lord Fauconberg, while committed to bail five years later.⁴⁴ All of this additional information sits beyond what can be found in the plea rolls and indictments, which were also trawled for evidence of Malory's dealings with the law. Even in the most recent biography of the author of *Le Morte Darthur*, however, Simon Payling notes that further evidence was located among additional—unsorted—records that are currently unavailable to the public, only noticed through a chance find by a former medieval specialist at The National Archives, James Ross.⁴⁵ Further evidence for an author so firmly acquainted with the royal law courts may yet come to light.

John Skelton. Moving into the sixteenth century, we can once again take a lead from recently discovered entries in the plea rolls relating to the “poet laureate” of Tudor England, John Skelton, in an example that highlights the benefits of increased access to the records of the central law courts through resources such as AALT, but also the potential for missed references. Sobecki's discovery of three new life-records for Skelton (a plea of debt brought by the poet in 1514, and two *mesne* process entries from 1516 in a case of debt brought by the executors of Sir William Danvers against Skelton) in the records of the Court of Common Pleas was initially based on indexing work prepared by Vance Mead and hosted on the AALT website.⁴⁶ While an initial search for writs relating to the 1514 plea was unsuccessful, a search for the 1516 case was more successful. The two entries located by Sobecki are found in the plea roll for Hilary term 1516 (rotulets 3d and 84). Upon exploring the writ bundles for Hilary 1516, two writs were identified.⁴⁷ The first document (TNA,

1992); and Christine Carpenter, “Sir Thomas Malory and Fifteenth-Century Local Politics,” *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 53 (1980): 31–43.

43. TNA, KB 145/6/30.

44. Payling, “MALLORY, Sir Thomas,” 5:371; TNA, KB 145/6/30; TNA, KB 146/6/30/3; and TNA, KB 146/6/36/1.

45. Payling, “MALLORY, Sir Thomas,” 5:375n24.

46. Sebastian Sobecki, “New Life Records for John Skelton as Rector of Diss, Norfolk (1514 and 1516),” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 83 (2020): 395–400. The indices can be found online at: http://aalt.law.uh.edu/Indices/CP40Indices/CP40_Indices.html.

47. TNA, CP 52/12/7/4/1/2 (writ of *sicut prius capias* dated November 21, 1515); and TNA, CP 52/12/7/4/4 (writ of *sicut plurius capias* dated January 23, 1516).

CP 52/12/7/4/4, Berks) is a writ of *sicut plurias capias* (as it is described on the plea roll) and is dated January 23, 1516. It corresponded with the first of Sobecki's newly discovered plea roll entries (rot. 3d), and summoned Skelton to appear before the court on the octaves of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin (February 9–15).⁴⁸ As in some of our previous examples, the writ provides only minimal new information. The writ was returned with the note that Skelton could not be found in the county, as stated on the plea roll, and the contents largely replicate one another (although a marginal note on this writ cross-references rotulet 210 of the corresponding plea roll, where there is no enrolled *mesne* process relating to Skelton).⁴⁹

Elsewhere in the *Brevia* files for Hilary term, however, is a second writ (TNA, CP 52/12/7/4/1/2, Berks), this time of *sicut prius capias*, dated November 21, 1515, summoning Skelton to appear on the octaves of Hilary to respond to the charges against him. This writ predated the entries on the plea roll identified by Sobecki. When we consider that the octaves of Hilary began on January 20, with cases not progressing until the fourth day of each return day period (January 23), we can see that it was a failure to respond to the summons that led to the *mesne* process recorded on rotulet 3d.⁵⁰ Indeed, the writ was returned “non sunt inventi.” This new life-record thus suggested that the case against Skelton had begun earlier than previously thought, and also provided a cross-reference to the rotulet on the plea roll where the entry could be found (rotulet 256 on the Michaelmas plea roll; TNA, CP 40/515).⁵¹ While CP 40/516 had been indexed, CP 40/515 had not, and so this entry had gone unnoticed, hidden away in the bulk of the plea rolls. It may be that earlier material can also be identified in the same way, while Sobecki's finds indicate that the case also continued into Easter term, where further process might be found.

Many of these newly discovered minor life-records may, at first sight, appear underwhelming and of limited interest to the literary specialist, but an awareness of their existence is imperative for those using published life-records. While targeted searches from *known* events and plea roll entries have been

48. Sobecki, “New Life Records for John Skelton,” 398–99. The document itself is TNA, CP 40/1013, rot. 3d, online at: http://aalt.law.uh.edu/AALT2/H8/CP40no1013/bCP40no1013dorses/IMG_0006.htm.

49. This appears to simply be a scribal error.

50. Technically this could also have been identified from the form of writ recorded in the plea roll entries (*sicut plurias capias* being the third form of summons), although this would not have provided us with a date.

51. The reference for this newly discovered entry is TNA, CP 40/1012 rot. 256, online at: http://aalt.law.uh.edu/AALT2/H8/CP40no1012/aCP40no1012fronts/IMG_0517.htm.

used here to demonstrate that material can easily be identified in the supplementary file series that sit behind such entries, the newly discovered life-records are hardly likely to tell us anything new. It is in the *unknown*, the *little-recorded*, or the *confusing* that we will find documents such as the Chaucer–Chaumpaigne–Staundon documents that transform our understanding of the field. It can be a slow and frustrating process, which many will choose not to undertake. Yet even for scholars who will choose not to venture beneath the tip of the vast legal iceberg, an awareness of the mass of material that sits beneath the surface can transform our understanding of medieval literary lives. For Chaucer, Gower, Malory, and Skelton, the mass of writs, warrants, summons, names, and dates was not an arcane and incomplete collection to be studied, but a living and breathing experience with the law courts and legal officials who regulated their lives and interaction with the law. The law could be messy, slow, bureaucratic and complicated, full of compromise and negotiation, much more than the summarized pleadings and law reports might lead us to believe. Thus to truly understand Chaucer’s or Gower’s knowledge and presentation of the law, we need to try and understand the complex archive that the law created. When we are able to assemble the full range of documentation preserved in both file and roll, completely fresh perspectives can appear.

III

The vast legal collections held by The National Archives provide not only new light on literary figures, but on the historical events, networks, and individuals among which they lived and worked. In recent years, for example, the files of King’s Bench have provided a mass of new information of particular interest to Chaucer scholars on the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381. The large scale of the revolt of 1381 and the extensive number of prosecutions across the entire range of available courts mean that the revolt is as much of interest for the wide range of its archival traces as for its inherent historical significance. It is unlikely that the process of identifying cases connected with the revolt will ever be concluded, so extensive are the records. The potential of plea rolls for investigating the revolt had been shown by antiquarians in the nineteenth century, and their work was so thorough that Bertie Wilkinson declared that “it does not seem probable that any sources of outstanding importance remain to be discovered,” a view that Barrie Dobson, reviewing studies of the

revolt on the anniversary in 1981, suggested was likely to be misplaced, given the vast records of The National Archives and the way in which “almost any category of late medieval governmental record may indeed throw important light on violent activity in 1381.”⁵² The material relating to the revolt published by such nineteenth-century pioneers as André Réville, A. Sparvel-Bayly, Edgar Powell, and W. E. Flaherty was indeed just the tip of the iceberg. J. B. Post of the PRO, for example, found in 1976 that many private prosecutions were undertaken against rebels in both Common Pleas and the plea side of King’s Bench. Even though they often never got further than the *mesne* process used to try and get the defendant to come to court, and there are only summary notes of the cases on the plea rolls, they could be identified from tell-tale references to the burning of records and contained the names of hundreds of rebels. Above all, thanks again to the mediation of Post, who had worked closely with Meekings, it was realized that the *Recorda* files of the King’s Bench were a rich source of information about the Rising. Among the most spectacular of the documents relating to the revolt on the *Recorda* files, for example, is a complete plea roll of a commission under Thomas of Woodstock, Earl of Buckingham, to chastise and punish Essex insurgents, which held sittings in Essex between July 3 and July 24 before being summoned into Chancery by a writ of *mandamus* in May 1382. This roll has transformed our understanding of the development of the revolt in Essex. It vividly describes the early stages of the Rising along the marshlands of the southern Essex coast, reporting how John Snel raised the Rising in St. Osyth by ringing a bell, and evoking the unsettled, rumor-filled atmosphere, as when a carter told the people of Great and Little Wakering that Robert Hales was coming with one hundred lances to kill them all. The discovery of the Essex roll also brought to light for the first time a key moment in the development of the revolt, a great meeting at Bocking on June 2 at which those attending “swore to be of one agreement to destroy divers lieges of the Lord King and his common laws and also all

52. W. E. Flaherty, “The Great Rebellion of Kent in 1381. Illustrated from the Public Records,” *Archaeologia Cantiana* 3 (1860): 65–96; W. E. Flaherty, “Sequel to the Great Rebellion in Kent of 1381,” *Archaeologia Cantiana* 4 (1861): 67–86; J. A. Sparvel-Bayly, “Essex in Insurrection, 1381,” *Transactions of the Essex Archaeological Society*, n.s. 1 (1878): 205–19; André Réville, *Le Soulèvement des Travailleurs d’Angleterre en 1381* (Paris, 1898); Edgar Powell, *The Rising in East Anglia in 1381* (Cambridge UK, 1896); Edgar Powell and G. M. Trevelyan, *The Peasants’ Rising and the Lollards* (London, 1899); B. Wilkinson, “The Peasants Revolt of 1381,” *Speculum* 15 (1940): 12–35, at 12; and R. B. Dobson, *The Peasants Revolt of 1381*, 2nd edn. (London, 1983), xxvi–xxvii.

lordship relating to divers lords.”⁵³ None of these cases resulted in proceedings recorded on the King’s Bench plea rolls, and it was only when the roll of the Essex commission was found on the *Recorda* file that these incidents came to light again, and that the extent and depth of Essex’s contribution to the development of the Rising could be mapped out in detail.

The *Recorda* files also supplement information in commission records from other counties. The most important source for the revolt in Norfolk and Suffolk are the records of a commission to chastise and punish rebels issued to the Earl of Suffolk on June 24. As in the previous example, the records of this commission were summoned to King’s Bench by *mandamus* in May 1382 and are now TNA, KB 9/166/1. The Earl’s executors were unable, however, to send records of the commission’s work within the Liberty of St. Edmund covering the whole of West Suffolk, because they were in the possession of another member of the commission, Thomas Morreux.⁵⁴ The Suffolk rebel leader, John Wraw, had been arrested and taken to London, where he became an approver. To assist in processing Wraw’s appeal, Morreux was instructed to send to King’s Bench all the indictments against Wraw from the Liberty of St. Edmund held by him. As a result, the *Recorda* file contains nearly thirty indictments against Wraw that do not appear in the King’s Bench plea rolls or the commission records.⁵⁵ These include indictments by juries from Bury itself, which illustrate how the Bury townfolk sought to distance themselves from the Rising and placed the blame for the disturbances squarely on Wraw. Other indictments shed light on other activities of Wraw, such as the indictment from the jury of Lackford hundred, which gives a detailed account of Wraw’s expedition to Mildenhall on June 15, 1381, when he seized and killed the Prior of Bury, describing how Wraw entered the house of John Banne and stole money there. Given all the information in Wraw’s approver’s appeal and the main commission records in KB 9/166/1, it may have seemed that our information about Wraw was fairly complete. The indictments on the *Recorda* file show, however, that this was not the case, and there is probably still more to be found among the various files of the King’s Bench.

53. TNA, KB 145/3/6/1. See Nicholas Brooks, “The Organization and Achievements of the Peasants of Kent and Essex in 1381,” in Henry Mayr-Harting and R. I. Moore, eds., *Studies in Medieval History Presented to R. H. C. Davis* (London, 1985), 247–70, at 252. The Essex roll also described the remarkable case of John Preston of Hadleigh in Suffolk, who, at a sitting of Buckingham and his commissioners on June 25 at Chelmsford, handed to the justices a note that repeated the demands of the rebels at Mile End and was immediately beheaded. See Andrew Prescott, “Writing About Rebellion: Using the Records of the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381,” *History Workshop Journal* 45 (1998): 1–27, at 13–15.

54. TNA, KB 9/166/1, mm. 1–2.

55. TNA, KB 145/3/5/1.

One of the main functions of the King's Bench in relation to legal proceedings against the rebels was the processing of pardons granted to those who had originally been excluded from the general amnesty granted to the rebels. For example, it was known that there were serious disturbances in Winchester in 1381 from forfeitures recorded in escheator's records and because a number of Winchester men were excluded from the general pardon to the rebels.⁵⁶ William Wigge, who in 1381 had been bailiff of the commons at Winchester, was said to have been one of the ringleaders of the trouble there. In 1387, he appeared in King's Bench with a pardon and the King's Bench ordered that indictments taken against him by a commission in Hampshire should be forwarded to King's Bench. There was nothing in the indictments to prevent Wigge's pardon being allowed. A copy of the indictments was placed on the *Recorda* file for 10 Richard II, where they were located by Helmut Hincke in 2010. These Winchester indictments not only provide a detailed account of the revolt in Winchester, but also show how it was closely linked to the Rising in Essex, Surrey, and Kent. As well as its role as the primary central law court, the King's Bench also acted as a court of first instance hearing indictments for felony and treason in Middlesex, and many of the cases noted by Réville in the plea rolls relating to the revolt in London and Middlesex were on indictments taken by the King's Bench as a court of first instance. The *Recorda* files for 5 and 6 Richard II contain the full indictments made by Middlesex juries relating to the revolt. For example, Joanna Ferrour of Rochester is well known as one of the few prominent women rebels in the revolt. The entry concerning her case on the plea roll states that she was indicted for participating in the attack on the Savoy and taking a chest containing £1,000 sterling from the Savoy, which was carried back across the river in a boat to Southwark, where she divided up the money with others.⁵⁷ Afterwards, Joanna was at the burning of Clerkenwell Priory, where she took two horses, and in the Tower of London, where she helped drag Simon Sudbury and Robert Hales out of the Tower of London and urged their beheading. If we turn to the original indictment against Joanna on the *Recorda* file, we learn much more.⁵⁸ The original indictment was against John Ferrour, David Calveley, clerk, Johanna Ferrour,

56. Helmut Hinck, "The Rising of 1381 in Winchester," *English Historical Review* 125 (2010): 112–31.

57. TNA, KB 27/482 rex, rot. 39d.

58. TNA, KB 145/3/5/1. The trial records for John Ferrour and Roger atte Wode are TNA, KB 27/485 rex rot. 30d, and TNA, KB 27/487 rex rot. 19d. For David Calveley, see Andrew Prescott, "Great and Horrible Rumour": Shaping the English Revolt of 1381," in Justine Firnhaber-Baker and Dirk Schoenaers, eds., *The Routledge History Handbook of Medieval Revolt* (Abingdon, 2016), 76–103, at 87.

and Roger atte Wode of Kent. Joanna was thus part of a group including her husband and David Calvey, a cleric who had been imprisoned because he obtained a papal provision to a prebend in Berkshire. Calvey was a member of the well-known Cheshire knightly family. It turns out that John, Joanna, and David were all in the prison of the Marshalsea of the King's Bench at the time of the Rising and were released when the rebels attacked the prison.⁵⁹ After participating in events at the Savoy, Clerkenwell, and the Tower, Calvey took a band of rebels to Berkshire to pursue his claim to the prebend. It is only in the *Recorda* files that we can trace his connection with the Ferrours.

Many of the cases in King's Bench relating to the revolt never came to trial, so that a number of incidents are only recorded in the full versions of the indictments by Middlesex jurors in the *Recorda* files, while the plea rolls contain only details of orders to apprehend the accused on the plea rolls. An example of an important incident in a Middlesex indictment, described in the *Recorda* files but not on the plea roll, is the killing of John Spayne.⁶⁰ On June 14, 1381, rebels dragged Spayne out of the church of St. Clement Danes in London. He was carried through the city to Tower Hill where he was beheaded, presumably at the same time as or shortly after Sudbury, Hales, and the others were executed. Similarly, a Middlesex indictment on the *Recorda* describes how during the revolt on June 14, Richard Burrell broke into the hospital and chapel of St. Mary Rouncevall at Charing Cross and stole £100.⁶¹ The indictment adds the detail that, in 1376, Burrell had forged the common seal of the hospital and sealed certain "false and suspect letters," indicating he had been in dispute with the hospital for some time. Another category of prosecution where the *Recorda* files provide fuller information than the plea rolls are the appeals of approvers—offenders who turned king's evidence in the hope of securing a pardon if they could bring enough successful prosecutions. For example, the appeal of John Baker of Deptford is represented on the plea roll by three separate prosecutions.⁶² These are only a fragment of Baker's full accusations on the *Recorda* file, which adds the names of a number of others who took part in the killing of Hales and describes the destruction of houses in Holborn belonging to the unpopular lawyer Roger Leget.⁶³ Likewise, the

59. On the process against the Ferrours for the killing of Roger Tybright of Rochester, see, for example, TNA, KB 29/32 rot. 1d; TNA, KB 27/481 rex rot. 11; and *Calendar of Patent Rolls 1377–81* (London, 1913), 456.

60. TNA, KB 145/3/5/1.

61. TNA, KB 145/3/5/1.

62. TNA, KB 27/482 rex rots. 35, 47, 48.

63. TNA, KB 145/3/5/1.

appeal of the rebel Robert Bennett of Barford St. John in Oxfordshire is well known because of Bennett's rather desperate claim that he and others had previously received money from a French admiral to stir up rebellion so that the French could invade.⁶⁴ However, this was only part of Bennett's appeal. The full appeal on the *Recorda* file provides more circumstantial detail about the Rising. Bennett was a prisoner in the King's Bench prison when the rebels approached, and he describes the panic that gripped the prison, with the wife of the prison-keeper entrusting Bennett with some silver spoons to be kept safe from the rebels.⁶⁵

The *Recorda* files contain the working documents of the court and, consequently, include many informal records that take us closer to the voice of the rebels than the more gnomic and formulaic entries on the plea roll. Helen Lacey has recently discussed the examination of William Delton in connection with a resurgence of the Rising in Kent in the autumn of 1381.⁶⁶ The examination of Delton was recorded in connection with proceedings on an approvers' appeal and placed on the *Recorda* file. Delton's confession provides remarkable insights into the organization and political awareness of the rebels. It describes how the conspirators met together near Maidstone and received messages of support from across the county. Thirty-two armed men and sixty archers were promised from Romney March, and eighteen fighting men from Charing. It was hoped that Essex would provide further support. It was agreed that some of the leading men of the county should be seized and held hostage. Messengers were sent to the houses of noblemen to find out what resistance the rebels could expect. In renewing the rebellion, Delton and his companions intended to exploit any disagreement between the king and nobles or between different factions of the nobility, and sought especially to attack any parties supporting the king.

The *Recorda* files, with their wealth of documentation not included on the plea rolls, are undoubtedly the most immediately attractive of the file series, but this does not mean that the other file series are not also full of valuable information. The *Panella* files include bills concerning the riots at Beverley, which supplement the large number of petitions relating to the Rising there

64. Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*, 321–22.

65. TNA, KB 145/3/5/1.

66. Helen Lacey, "Defaming the King: Reporting Disloyal Speech in Fourteenth-Century England" in Gwilym Dodd and Craig Taylor, eds., *Monarchy, State and Political Culture in Late Medieval England: Essays in Honour of W. Mark Ormrod* (Woodbridge, 2020), 71–93, at 87–89; and Prescott, "Writing about Rebellion," 16. Delton's examination is in TNA, KB 145/3/5/1.

described by Sir Cyril Flower.⁶⁷ Some of the most valuable sources for the 1381 revolt are trespass actions brought in King's Bench and Common Pleas in an attempt to secure some compensation for losses suffered during the Rising. Although these actions often did not reach trial, and we only know the plaintiff and the place where the attack occurred, they nevertheless name hundreds of rebels not recorded elsewhere.⁶⁸ A number of these actions were not recorded on the plea rolls, but can be identified in the Anglia files of the King's Bench. An example is an action brought by the Prior of Harmondsworth against Roger Cook and Robert Freke of Harmondsworth and others in 1382 concerning the burning of charters, writings, and other muniments belonging to the Prior at Harmondsworth.⁶⁹ Harmondsworth had been the scene of constant agrarian unrest since the thirteenth century.⁷⁰ In 1358, the priory itself had been burnt. This writ in the King's Bench Anglia files is the chief indication that there was a resurgence of trouble in Harmondsworth in 1381, and important as an illustration of the lines of continuity between earlier peasant movements and the revolt of 1381.

Thanks to the work of pioneers such as Flaherty, Sparvel-Bayly, Réville, and Powell, the records relating to the revolt of 1381 were among the first legal records investigated on a large scale by historians. The files offer just as rich information about the Rising as do the rolls explored by this early generation of scholars, and it is hoped that these neglected records of the revolt will create just as much interest in the file series of King's Bench and Common Pleas.

IV

Just as Wilkinson was confident that the main documentary materials relating to the Peasants' Revolt had been identified by 1940, so likewise did Albert Baugh feel, in 1951, that the campaign to identify the life-records of Chaucer

67. For example, TNA, KB 146/3/5/1, a bill by John Wellyng of Beverley against Richard de Beston, Thomas de Preston, skinner, and loos de Frampton, haberdasher, on the petitions connected to the Beverley riots. See Cyril T. Flower, "The Beverley Town Riots (1381-2)," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, n.s. 19 (1905): 79-99. The *Panella* files also document another otherwise unrecorded attack on the house of Reginald Redyng in Holborn on June 13 (TNA, KB 146/3/5/1), and there are doubtless many similar cases which have so far not been identified.

68. The connection between these actions and the revolt is evident from the distinctive reference to the burning of records.

69. TNA, KB 136/5/5/2/2.

70. Diane K. Bolton, H. P. F. King, Gillian Wyld, and D. C. Yaxley, "Harmondsworth: Economic and Social History," in T. F. T. Baker, J. S. Cockburn, and R. B. Pugh, eds., *A History of the County of Middlesex: Volume 4, Harmondsworth, Hayes, Norwood With Southall, Hillingdon With Uxbridge, Ickenham, Northolt, Perivale, Ruislip, Edgware, Harrow With Pinner* (London, 1971), 10-15. *British History Online*, online at: <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/middx/vol4/pp10-15>.

had not changed the main facts of the poet's life, but had "merely deepened some of the lines in the picture and filled in certain details," a view reflected by Martin Crow the following year:

We could hardly have expected the main facts to be changed. It is the same Geoffrey Chaucer that we see in the new records, only the portrait is brought nearer, into better focus, enlarged, and made to seem more lifelike than ever before.⁷¹

The new documents about Geoffrey Chaucer's relationship with Cecily Chaumpaigne presented in this issue illustrate the potential of the supplementary files of the common law courts to transform our understanding of key stages in Chaucer's life, and to deepen, perhaps, a few more lines. The same could be said for any literary lives, and indeed for any late medieval or early modern lives. Few finds will change our perceptions of these lives to the same extent as Staundon's writ. The majority will produce only fragments of new information—a name here, or a date there. Yet, together, they can bring into focus networks (social and professional), allow us to place figures like Chaucer or Gower in a particular time and place, or provide new insight into the national and local events that shaped their lives. As Crow noted, to use life-records is to "see him [Chaucer] oftentimes in relation to his environment," and that such work "depends on a study of the records, *old and new, en masse*."⁷² It is not the place of this essay to make the case for or against the study of literary life-records. But if we are to use life-records, we must be conscious of the mass that lies beneath the surface.

The quantities of material (both sorted and unsorted) to be explored are enormous. The task is a daunting one. While Meekings brought to conclusion over a century's work in recovering many of the most important of the King's Bench files, there is much more to be done, both in exploring these complex files and in making available unsorted collections. As the case studies here demonstrate, the files of the Court of Common Pleas, in particular, are likely to prove equally rich in information about Chaucer and his milieu, and for the millions of other individuals who came into contact with the courts. Thousands more files and bundles of the central law courts and government—including the Common Pleas *Recorda*—remain stored deep in salt mines in Cheshire in varying degrees of arrangement, while many of the files that have

71. Baugh, "Fifty Years," 660; and Martin M. Crow, "Materials for a New Edition of the Chaucer Life-Records," *University of Texas Studies in English* 31 (1952): 1–12, at 11.

72. Crow, "Materials for a New Edition," 11 (emphasis ours).

been sorted require conservation, treatment, supervision, and careful handling. The exploration, understanding, and conservation of this material will be as demanding an enterprise as the sorting of the King's Bench files was. Yet there is reason to be hopeful and, indeed, excited. The Unknown Treasures project at TNA (drawing on work undertaken in the 1990s by David Crook), for example, has recently made more than 5,000 of the Common Pleas *Brevia* files available for the first time in hundreds of years, a testament to what can be done.⁷³ Work continues to further explore the currently available files such as the *Recorda* and *Brevia* (Meekings's legacy) and to unearth treasures to be found within them, such as the writs that have shed new life on the Chaucer–Chaumpaigne story. There is more to be found. We have barely begun to grasp the scale of the iceberg that remains to be explored.

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73. Mascio, "Almost too ruinous to be repaired"; and Crook, "Recent Work."