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Inheriting the Library: The Archon and the Archive in George MacDonald's *Lilith*

Lauran R. Fuller

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

Inheriting the Library: The Archon and the Archive in George MacDonald's *Lilith*

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George MacDonald's novel *Lilith* relates the story of a young man inheriting his deceased father's estate and coming in contact with its remarkable library and mysterious librarian. The protagonist's subsequent adventures in a fantastical world prepare the young Mr. Vane to assume authority over his inherited archive and become an archon. Jacques Derrida's exposition of the responsibilities of the archon including archival authority, domiciliation, and consignation illuminate the mentoring role of the elusive librarian Mr. Raven in Vane's adventures. By using Derrida's deconstruction of archives to unpack the intricacies of knowledge transfer in MacDonald's novel, the lasting impact of the archon on the archive and the individuals in *Lilith*, as well as the importance of the archon in the transfer of knowledge between individuals facilitated through relationships, becomes apparent. The archon, acting as a gatherer, organizer, and shaper of texts, uses the materials within the archive to exercise power and to bequeath power upon other individuals, as seen in the character Mr. Raven's actions. *Lilith* illustrates the necessity of the archon as he shapes the archive's contents and governs the interactions between book and reader, ultimately allowing the archive to become a place where knowledge is heritable.

Keywords: archive, archon, Jacques Derrida, George MacDonald, *Lilith*, knowledge transfer, archive theory

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Inheriting the Library: The Archon and the Archive  
in George MacDonald's *Lilith*

**Introduction**

Published at the conclusion of his career and near the end of his life, George MacDonald's 1895 novel *Lilith* is often thought a disjunctive addition to the Scottish novelist's oeuvre, but it is one that MacDonald felt was particularly important, even inspired. Better remembered for his simplistic and sentimental children's fairy tales, MacDonald strays from the childlike innocence and optimism that permeates his other works to an almost fearful exploration of death and the influence of evil in *Lilith*. Robert Lee Wolff describes *Lilith*'s "cruelty, its ugliness . . . [and] its brooding depression," and deems the novel "the most violent . . . of all MacDonald's works," concluding that "it would have been better . . . had *Lilith* not been printed" (332). Even MacDonald's wife, an unfailing supporter of her husband's publications, was "troubled" by the "strange imagery" in *Lilith* and urged her husband to not publish it (Greville MacDonald 548). Her protest unsettled MacDonald, for, as his son Greville relates, MacDonald wrote *Lilith* as one under "a mandate direct from God," seeking to produce "his last urgent message" (548). Though *Lilith* is still considered an anomaly—the "most ambitious" and "most enigmatic work" (Harriman 1)—among MacDonald's publications, the fact remains that MacDonald viewed *Lilith* as an inspired creation during his final years.

The novel begins prosaically enough but quickly shifts toward the supernatural and the strange. Mr. Vane, the young protagonist, comes to his ancestral home when his father dies, leaving Vane in possession of a large estate library. There he makes the acquaintance of a mysterious being named Mr. Raven, who leads Vane to a large mirror tucked into a forgotten attic room. Vane, the tale's first-person narrator writes,

A few rather dim sunrays, marking their track through the cloud of motes that had just been stirred up, fell upon a tall mirror . . . [S]uddenly I became aware that it reflected neither the chamber nor my own person. I have an impression of having seen the wall melt away, but what followed is enough to account for any uncertainty:—could I have mistaken for a mirror the glass that protected a wonderful picture? (*Lilith* 11)

The remarkable mirror allows Mr. Raven to convey Vane into an alternative universe that Vane learns to navigate with the help of Mr. Raven, who plays dual roles in the novel. Mr. Raven first identifies himself as the sexton of the alternate world’s remarkable cemetery but then adds, “I am librarian here as well.” Vane, confused, protests, “But you have just told me you were the sexton here!” “So I am,” Mr. Raven counters, “It is much the same profession. Except you are a true sexton, books are but dead bodies to you, and a library nothing but a catacomb!” “You bewilder me!” exclaims Vane (30). For readers, however, this odd pairing of roles is not so much bewildering as compelling, for the idea of the book as a living (or dead) thing in need of a caretaker is an unusual and intriguing concept.

This is the first comparison between the cemetery and the library that MacDonald presents to readers in *Lilith*. The strange associations between books and bodies, libraries and catacombs, keepers of books and keepers of the dead give the text a gothic cast and blur the line between the real and the imaginary, the corporeal and the uncanny. MacDonald’s library, fitting the traditional description of a collection of books housed in an institution or home, is in fact an archive—a broader term that encompasses collections of not only books but also documents and potentially artifacts. Including the cemetery as an archive initially seems unnatural and slightly morbid. By creating a parallel between these seemingly contrary spaces, MacDonald

successfully defines both the cemetery and library as archives and sets these two collections alongside one another, allowing readers to investigate the purpose and importance of the archive.

Indeed, the archive—in the various forms it assumes in MacDonald’s fantasy novel—provides one element of continuity amid the seemingly bizarre symbolism of *Lilith*. The location of both the opening and closing scenes in *Lilith*, the library contains all of the adventures related in the novel, and it is a familiar setting in MacDonald’s other literature as well. Scholars such as Robert Lee Wolff, Richard Reis, and Daniel Boice have debated the importance of libraries in MacDonald’s work; however, no critic has considered the librarian’s role in these repositories of knowledge or looked at MacDonald’s libraries through the lens of the archive and archival theory.

Examined in this context, *Lilith* can be read as a story about librarianship but, more importantly, also as a story about the cultivation of an archon—the term Derrida uses in *Archive Fever* to refer to an archive keeper empowered by his control of the archive—and this figure’s importance in the transference of knowledge. Though the library is often viewed as a repository of truth, in *Lilith*, the library becomes only the medium by which truth is obtained. According to MacDonald, the power of the library rests not in the books but in the bookkeeper, a figure as significant for MacDonald as it is for Derrida. The keeper or archon, acting as a gatherer, organizer, and interpreter of texts, uses the materials within the archive to exercise power and to bequeath power upon other individuals, as readers see in Mr. Raven’s ability to use knowledge gained in the library to change other characters and to empower his young charge. In *Lilith*, then, two archives—the estate library and the House of the Dead—illustrate the necessity of the archon as he shapes the archive’s contents and governs the interactions between book and reader, ultimately allowing the archive to become a place where knowledge is heritable.



## MacDonald, Derrida, and Archive Theory

Namesake to the opening chapter of the novel, *Lilith*'s library is more than a recurring setting. It's an integral part of the story. The house Vane inherits from his father is "of some antiquity," and its library springs from ancient date, "before the invention of printing," with additions made by each of Vane's knowledge-loving ancestors (5). However, MacDonald portrays this library not as a sanctuary of knowledge but as a mysteriously festering growth, suggesting to readers that the library, as a conscious presence in the plot, demands as much attention from readers as Vane himself does. MacDonald animates the library, which is described as in "an encroaching state" that "absorbed one room after another until it occupied the greater part of the ground floor" (6). Like an abandoned garden with no gardener to prune or cultivate it, the library has expanded until it "overflowed" into other rooms which are "covered with books almost to the ceiling" (6). These additional rooms of "various shapes and sizes" are connected "by doors, by open arches, by short passages, by steps up and steps down" (6). Vane's library exudes a feeling of wildness—the creeping, untamed library overwhelms the house which once nicely enclosed it—which prefigures the discomfort Vane experiences as he spends time in the library.

Although he is the legal inheritor of the library, Vane doesn't quite feel at home there. He describes the "transitory nature of possession" which leaves him haunted by an impression of being a visitor in his own house (6). This is strange, as Vane seems more than qualified to glean knowledge from the library's textual inhabitants. Having "just finished [his] studies at Oxford," a place of education and book-learning, Vane enters the library not only as a scholar but as one who descends from a long line of ancestors "given to study"—he is not the first owner of the house drawn to the library (5). Vane initially approaches the books with anticipatory pleasure,

looking to them to dispel his unsettled feelings, but he is soon interrupted by unexplainable incidents in the library that make it impossible for him to continue reading passively.

This expository combination—the sprawling and disorganized library and the young man who inherits, visits, or organizes it—is not at all anomalous in MacDonald’s work. As Rebecca Thomas Ankeny points out, MacDonald “frequently describes readers reading [and] the libraries they own” (1). In MacDonald’s first adult romance, *Phantastes* (1858), the central chapters are dedicated to the character Anodos’s sabbatical in the library of the Queen of the Fairies, which he spends reading fantastic stories that influence his adventure (*Phantastes* 74-104). In addition, much of MacDonald’s realistic fiction features libraries. In *The Portent* (1864), young Duncan Campbell volunteers to organize a neglected library and in the process experiences a life-altering event. *Wilfred Cumbermede* (1872) also features a young and inexperienced character who accepts the challenge of bringing order to a disused library. And in his novel *Alec Forbes* (1865), MacDonald includes not only the familiar setting of the library and its attendant librarian-in-training but also introduces a seasoned librarian, Mr. Cosmo Cupples.

Noting this motif’s place of prominence in MacDonald’s publications, scholars such as Robert Lee Wolff generally interpret MacDonald’s love of libraries as a nostalgic nod to his own experience organizing a library during his college years (16-17). In the summer of 1842, MacDonald “spent some summer months in a certain castle or mansion in the far North . . . cataloguing a neglected library” (Greville MacDonald 72). Although a record of these summer months has not been unearthed, and MacDonald’s biographers cannot even pinpoint at which castle or mansion the experience took place, scholars take for granted that MacDonald’s time there was a “seminal experience” (Collins 7) during which MacDonald “added much to the

materials upon which his imagination worked in future years” (Greville MacDonald 72; see also Reis 111).

However, other scholars noting the persistence of this trope have suggested that MacDonald’s libraries embody a deeper meaning than a personal allusion to a well-remembered summer. Reis, although agreeing that MacDonald’s love of libraries was generated during that summer, concludes that the motif is a “private symbolic phenomenon” which “meant something intensely significant to MacDonald” but is purposefully ambiguous to readers (111). Reis suggests that the library might represent “the liberating power of knowledge” or “a repository for the souls of the dead great” (112). Boice, who finds *Lilith* to be the book in which “the library plays its most important role” in MacDonald’s fiction, alternatively concludes that the library’s purpose is either to mirror the protagonist’s state of mind or to bridge the gap between this world and the world of the imagination (77, 78-79).

As thoroughly as these scholars have explored MacDonald as bibliophile, one notices that in their criticism, they consider the library as archive only in the traditional sense, as a store-hold or location where documents are kept and one enters, reads, and leaves, with little or no human interaction. In the past two decades, however, there has been a “striking growth of interest in the concept of the archive” across multiple disciplines (Manoff 9) and a corresponding movement away from the “popular connotation of dusty basements and old parchments” and toward understanding the archive as a “central metaphorical construct” with influence upon “human knowledge, memory, and power” (Schwartz and Cook 4). The physical expansion of the archive (largely due to advancements in technology and communications) and its accompanying theoretical discussion have resulted in this significant “paradigm shift” (Cook 5). Until the post-structuralist era, scholars and archivists, for the most part, regarded the archive as an objective,

impartial source of truth where fact and history were just waiting to be found. Theoretical efforts to “de-naturalize what society unquestionably assumes is natural, what it has for generations, perhaps centuries, accepted as normal” have changed this (Cook 8). Rachel Hardiman asserts that any notion of the “neutrality” and “factuality” of the archive “is itself a form of fiction, the rhetoric of a fundamentally positivist epistemology” (36). Cook and Joan Schwartz agree that archives “are not some pristine storehouse of historical documentation that has piled up, but a reflection of and often justification for the society that creates them” (12). By shifting the concept of the archive from “a value-free site of document collection and historical inquiry” to “a site for the contestation of power, memory, and identity” (Schwartz and Cook 6), it becomes possible to see how the archive ceases to be a neutral territory and how it reveals both its subjectivity and its ability to construct the narratives of the society that created it.

In this sense, the archive might best be described as a kind of “laboratory” where knowledge is produced rather than simply warehoused (Manoff 13). Thus Barbara Biesecker, who encourages scholars to consider what happens inside an archive rather than what is contained within it, describes the archive as “the scene of a doubled invention rather than as the site of a singular discovery” (124). In order to replace the illusion of discovery with the reality of invention, Cook advises that “the postmodern watchwords” of “[p]rocess rather than product, becoming rather than being, dynamic rather than static, context rather than text” become “the foundation for a new conceptual paradigm” (24). As a “womb,” home to narrative creation, rather than a “tomb,” an objective compilation of facts waiting to be dusted off (Roberts 302), the archive therefore embodies an unusual amount of formative power, making it “essential to reconsider the relationship between archives and the societies that create and use them” (Schwartz and Cook 5).

Acknowledging this power immediately raises questions about those who steward the archives, the archivists who “wield power over those very records central to memory and identity formation,” as Schwartz and Cook assert (2). This is striking for, until the theorization of archives, archivists were viewed as “the very antithesis of power,” impartial beings who “received records from their creators and passed them on to researchers” but had no active hand in the archiving process (Schwartz and Cook 1-2). No longer need archivists identify themselves “as passive guardians of an inherited legacy” (Cook 4). Instead, they can “celebrat[e] their role in actively shaping collective (or social) memory” (Cook 4). It is now commonly accepted that through their “initial intervention and on-going mediation” with the archive (Schwartz and Cook 4), archivists actually shape the society that empowers them.

In the groundbreaking 1998 South African conference on archives, this ability was described as “an agreement between archivists and society—an archival contract” (Hamilton et al. 16). Acknowledging archival interaction as a contract suggests a mutual dependence between both parties engaged in archive work: the archivists and those who come to the archive in search of information. The archivist has certain responsibilities toward archive patrons, primarily involving preservation and accessibility. Patrons, on the other hand, must be willing to submit to what Hamilton calls the “acceptable exercise” of the archivist’s authority (Hamilton et al. 17). Since the archive is “the foundation of the production of knowledge in the present, the basis for the identities of the present and for the possible imaginings of community in the future” (Hamilton et al. 8-9), archivists and patrons are bound together in the formation of meaning and cultural memory.

Derrida, who has produced “a way of thinking about the work of librarians and archivists quite unlike anything” that came before him (Manoff 11), provides a model for theorizing these

archival relationships brought into being by the contract Hamilton describes. He does so by unpacking the role of the archivist, a figure he designates the “archon.” In his 1995 *Archive Fever*, Derrida highlights the subtle but powerful influence of the archon in selecting what knowledge survives history and who receives that knowledge. Although it is a book mainly concerned with Freud and psychoanalysis, *Archive Fever* has also helped scholars interested in memory and the storage of knowledge to explore the archive in terms that better reflect the paradigm shift described by Cook. For MacDonald’s *Lilith*, Derrida’s descriptions of the archive keeper and his power, both in the archive and in the larger society of individuals in the novel, become particularly useful.

For Derrida, this power does not originate from the archive or the possession of documents; as we will see in *Lilith*, the archon must receive his authority from an outside source in order to exercise influence over the archive and in society. But this is not Derrida’s only helpful contribution to understanding the role of the archon in MacDonald’s novel. Derrida also demonstrates the importance of the archon’s domiciliation of the archive by placing the public archive in a private space. Although Derrida suggests that the housing of the archive in a private space becomes less important in modern societies, the archive’s containment within the home remains significant in *Lilith*. In the novel, keeping the archive within the private sphere fosters a relational transfer of knowledge, or a process of learning facilitated by communication between individuals who share an intimate relationship (patron and archivist) rather than the more impersonal assimilation of knowledge that takes place between patron and archival artifact. Furthermore, Derrida discusses the archon’s responsibility to interpret and shape the archive, allowing the archon to do more than influence society: he creates the meaning that will be adopted and reiterated by society. Thus, the archon holds power exceeding even that of the

author, for the archon transforms the work of the author and by doing so constructs the narratives that will shape the past and the future.

According to Derrida, the word “archon” first emerged in ancient Greece as a political title honoring “those who commanded,” who served as one of the “superior magistrates” (2). Since the archon “held and signified” power in society, he was appointed as “guardian” of important official documents and “considered to possess the right to make or represent the law” (Derrida 2). This hermeneutic or “interpretive” function of representation allowed the archon to “make choices” regarding how the documents under his stewardship impacted society (Bell 150). It was only through the appointed archon that the documents were able to “speak the law: they recall the law and call on or impose the law” (Derrida 2). This “publicly recognized authority” sanctioned the archon to become the embodiment or mouthpiece of the archived texts and to exert public influence (2).

Gaining this authority initiated not only the archon’s position but also the life of the archive, for the archive did not exist until *after* the archon was appointed by this outside force. The archon’s house—the Greek “arkheion”—became the storehouse for official documents, deriving its title from the authorized archon and acting as both archive and home (Derrida 2). It is important to note that the archive’s existence did not pre-exist the archon—rather, it is the archon which called the archive into being—because it anchors the source of the archon’s power outside the archive and not in the possession of documents. This shows the surrender of the public sphere to the private archive. One cannot assume control of the archive simply by holding the archive’s contents; the public must be complicit with the archon’s appointment in order for the archive to become interpretable. Only when society yields control of the documents does the

archon receive the rights and powers associated with owning the archive, becoming authorized to amass, interpret, and distribute its contents.

This public surrender of the archive to the archon is magnified in the fact that the archive is originally (and in *Lilith*) domiciled by the archon. He must create a space for the archive separate from the outside world. Derrida defines the archive as the “*there* where things *commence*” and also as the “*there* where men and gods *command*, *there* where authority [and] social order are exercised” (1, emphasis original). The archive cannot even be termed a place, merely a “there,” until under the ownership of an archon. It is “in this *domiciliation*, in this house arrest, that archives take place” (2, emphasis original). In the action of gathering the documents, the archon gives the archive “localization” and therefore existence (2).

Housed by the archon, the archive becomes estranged from the public sphere—“an in-between space: between the living and the dead, the personal and the impersonal, the public and the private” (Wallen 262). The “domiciliation” of the archive by the archon creates something of a paradox: the archival content “is domiciled in a private space and controlled by a person who dwells in that space” (Lynch 79), but the documents themselves are public property. Although the texts within the archive at one time perhaps belonged to other individuals, once “[e]ntrusted” to the archon and placed within the archive they become subject to the archon’s ownership—he possesses them (Derrida 2). The archon stands at the boundary between the outer, public world and the inner world of the archive, mediating between the privatized documents and the public’s need for information. This means, of course, that those outside the archive must come to the archon—into his home, the place of the archive’s domiciliation—to access the documents, otherwise the archive is inaccessible to them.



Locating the archive within a private domicile rather than a public institution changes the public's relationship to the archive. Domiciliation protects the archive from discordant public pressures. Under the control of the archon and sheltered from the need for recognition or reward, the force of the majority, and even the passage of time, the archive becomes a focused, united entity. Even inside the archive "a whole series of barriers and controls are placed between the archived object and the person trying to access it" (Saunders 169), further separating the archive from non-archontic influences and leaving every individual who enters the archive in need of the archon's guidance. Thus anyone coming to the archive in search of documents must interact with the archon, entering with his permission and accessing the documents with his assistance. This means the archon not only "ensure[s] the physical security" of the archive (Derrida 2) but protects its hermeneutic integrity as well.

The domiciliation of the archive is necessary for the gathering and preservation of knowledge because it allows for a certain type of shaping or interpretation of the documents: a protected, relational interpretation overseen by the archon. In the familial space of a home, the archive functions according to rules of hospitality, guidelines for the master of the house regulating certain expectations of fulfillment for those entering the space. It also imposes close emotional connections such as those between host and guest or parent and child. Knowledge is gained not through impersonal investigation (going to the archive to "discover," as Cook describes it) but within a familial network of dynamic archontic interaction that invents or creates meaning. The archon, embodying this "patriarchic" function of the archive (Derrida 3), fills the instructional role in the relational act of learning. Without his illuminating explication, only the bare informational material exists, with no authorized meanings attached.

Although the archon's influence is apparent as he publicly "represent[s] the law" and privately guides individuals through the archive, the archon's most significant effect emerges as he exercises the "power of *consignation*" within the archive (3, emphasis original). Derrida employs his usual expert wordplay when introducing this concept, defining consignation, as exercised by the archon, as "the act of assigning residence or entrusting . . ." and as "the act of *consigning through gathering together signs*" (3, emphasis original)—that is, bringing together a multiplicity of meanings as he creates meaning by "assembling the documents together into a coherent corpus" (Bell 150). The power of consignation allows the archon to "relate the documents in the archive to one another" and form meaningful connections between the archive's contents (Bell 150). By "gathering together" the archive, the archon gives direction to the archive's meaning, "coordinat[ing] a single corpus, in a system or a synchrony in which all the elements articulate the unity of an ideal configuration" (Derrida 3).

In this "place of consignation" the archon shapes and "consigns" the archive by deciding what to include and how to combine the archive's knowledge (11). In doing so the archon prunes the archive's contents and uses the remaining documents to propagate a specific narrative—only what the archivist chooses to save is preserved in the archive (Bradley 113). This affects the public sphere, for "as Derrida suggests, the prior consignation of documents to the archive limits what visitors can find in it" (Lynch 79). The public power bestowed on the archon is weighty indeed: it authorizes the archon to not only house and guard the archive, but to mold the archive itself and the knowledge available to the world outside the archive.

Herein lies the significance of the archon: the power of consignation results in transformation, both within and without the archive. Through consignation, the archon does more than shape the archive's contents—he shapes the past and future by crafting the narratives

that will be reiterated thereafter. He shapes the knowledge that he communicates to those who enter the archive. This changes the future by determining what is remembered, who is remembering it, and how it is remembered outside the archive: “what is no longer archived in the same way is no longer lived in the same way. Archivable meaning is also and in advance codetermined by the structure that archives” (Derrida 18). Because the knowledge of the archive cannot be conveyed in an objective sense but is consigned and transferred by the publicly authorized archon, the archon’s power expands beyond his present moment. As Derrida states:

the question of the archive is not . . . a question of the past. It is not the question of a concept dealing with the past that might *already* be at our disposal or not at our disposal, *an archivable concept of the archive*. It is a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow. (36, emphasis original)

By changing how information about the past is received in the present, the archon changes the future. It is not surprising that the archon influences society—it is expected when he is appointed archon. But his ability to shape the past and create the future exceeds the power of an ordinary society member or even a leader. The archon’s control over the archive grants him the power to shape individuals, transforming public perceptions of reality.

It is in the archon’s transformation of knowledge and of individuals that Derrida’s notions become essential to understanding the transfer of knowledge that occurs in *Lilith* between Mr. Raven, the novel’s archon, and Vane, who will ultimately inherit Raven’s position and become an archon himself. As Mr. Raven seeks to persuade Vane to recognize and submit to his archontic authority, he teaches Vane about the necessity of the domiciliation of the archive for the protection and diffusion of knowledge, about the power of consignment (which Mr.

Raven wields in his struggle against the novel's main antagonist, Lilith), and about the transformation of beings both inside and outside of the House of the Dead. These archontic functions illustrate a premise that lies at the heart of *Lilith*'s plot and is central to the Vane/Raven relationship: Vane, alone, cannot become what he needs to be—archon within his own archive—without the guidance of Mr. Raven. Knowledge cannot be transferred without the cultivation of a relationship that is brought into being by an archival contract first established in Mr. Raven's House of the Dead and later extended to Vane's library. It is in both the library and Raven's archive of souls, a home that acts as a model archive and an allegory of Vane's estate library, that Vane learns to become an archon himself.

### **Archonship in *Lilith***

Vane's initial incapacity to act as archon within his inherited archive becomes apparent in the opening pages of MacDonald's novel. The young protagonist begins *Lilith* confident in his ability to understand the books in the library, but despite his academic learning, he is unable to navigate the huge, neglected collection. Its overwhelming, animate presence within his newly-acquired home leaves Vane feeling alienated and uneasy, emotions compounded by the mysterious things that start happening in the library. These strange events begin as Vane contemplates a portrait in the library of one of his ancestors, Sir Upward. As Vane later learns the history of Sir Upward—a past librarian at Vane's home who initially discovered the mirror that leads to the other dimension—readers discover a pattern of apprenticeship that drives MacDonald's narrative forward and structures the remainder of the novel. Upward, who acted as archon long ago, trained Mr. Raven to follow in his footsteps (39). Now Raven, an archon with power to influence not only Vane's world but the entire alternate dimension connected to the old library, must undertake to train Vane, who will succeed him as archon and inherit both the

library and the guardianship of the portal between worlds. It is through Raven that Vane learns the skills and develops the characteristics necessary for becoming an archon. This education, however, begins with a process of unlearning; that is, Vane must forget what he thinks he knows about the world and his ability to perceive it and open his mind to an alternative way of discerning reality.

Vane quickly realizes that he cannot trust his own senses—the basis of rational knowledge—in his library when Mr. Raven orchestrates the disappearance and reappearance of books. When he first appears, Raven is a ghostly specter of a man, remaining outside Vane’s realm of understanding: Vane instinctively says “I saw” in reference to Raven but immediately corrects himself by saying he only “seemed to see” (6-7). Once, when seeking a specific book where the mysterious apparition had just disappeared, Vane finds “a gap in the row where [the book] ought to have stood”; the following morning the book is inexplicably restored to its place, “just where [Vane] had thought to find it” previously (7). After this, Vane repeatedly sights “the old man in search of a book” and looks for a logical explanation, but he cannot account for the shadowy presence and his ability to remove and reshelv the books in Vane’s library. Forced to find explanation for events that do not adhere to his previous experience with reality, Vane offers himself the less-than reassuring excuse that his “optic nerves had been momentarily affected” by the sun or the dust or some inner malfunction (7), but neither he nor the reader is convinced.

Vane’s perceptions of reality are overturned still further when he observes a faux bookshelf, decorated with fake book-backs, that covers a door leading to a closet housing “the oldest and rarest of the books” in his library (7). Permanently affixed to the ornamental bookshelf is a real fragment of a “manuscript upon parchment” that Vane assumes an “inventive workman apparently had shoved in . . . and fixed” to enhance the decoration’s authenticity (7).

One day, however, this previously “fixed” manuscript suddenly goes missing, angering Vane considerably due to his “great liking for the masked door” (7). Later that same day, Vane catches sight of Raven “in the act of disappearing . . . into the closet beyond” and, although Vane hurries in pursuit, he opens the door and finds no one (8). Vane uncertainly concludes that, like the previous episode, he has seen an “illusion,” but his confusion intensifies after noticing the next day that the missing manuscript has been returned “in its place,” once again “firmly fixed” and “immovable” despite Vane’s attempts to replicate the removal (8-9). More than a little spooked, Vane begins to realize that he understands very little of his own library and of his responsibility as librarian. He also begins to see that Raven has the ability to access the archive in ways that Vane cannot.

Finally, upon his third sighting of Mr. Raven, Vane decides to abandon his attempts to find a logical explanation for the odd happenings in the library and follows the mysterious old man. In doing so, he implicitly agrees to begin his reeducation under the archon and enters the other dimension, where his study will take place. Still questioning his sanity, Vane wonders whether he “might be following a shadow” rather than a real person (10). As he pursues Mr. Raven, Vane travels from his library, through the magical mirror, and into another world, a “wild country, broken and heathy” (11). It is only then that Mr. Raven turns and at last presents himself to Vane as both librarian and sexton, beginning to teach Vane how to understand and control the archive by addressing the young man’s mistaken perceptions of reality.

Mr. Raven is the ideal choice to help Vane on his path to archontic authority, but this only becomes clear when he brings Vane into the alternate dimension and shows him his sexton’s cottage, or the House of the Dead. This model archive materially depicts what some scholars, like Achille Mbembe, metaphorically describe: the archive as “a temple and a

cemetery” where rituals of a “quasi-magical nature” are performed (19). Mbembe argues that archival “internment” is similar to “laying something in a coffin” and allows the archon “to establish an unquestionable authority” over the item (22). The archive acts as “a cemetery in the sense that fragments of lives and pieces of time are interred there, their shadows and footprints inscribed on paper and preserved like so many relics” (Mbembe 19). An archive of bodies rather than books, the House of the Dead contains persons who slumber in an endless room of couches under the influence of Mr. Raven. Though not actually dead, the bodies in the archive remain in a deathlike state and are guarded by Mr. Raven while they dream, heal, and change under his guidance until they awaken and leave the House, transformed by their experience (33). Mbembe describes other archival artifacts in surprisingly similar terms: “it is only at the end of [a] period of closure that the archived document is as if woken from sleep and returned to life” (21).

Much like books in a library, which are “but dead bodies” unless brought to life under the direction of a knowledgeable archon, the sleeping individuals in the House of the Dead need Raven’s guidance to become enlightened beings (30). This means that each sleeper is both archival artifact and archival visitor within the House of the Dead. Like the archival texts described by Ronald Suresh Roberts that “inhabit” the readers who visit the archive as much as the readers inhabit them (314), the sleepers under Raven’s stewardship pass from their consigned internment within Raven’s library to the outside world, where their transformative experience as archived souls ripples throughout the larger public sphere as they share their newly obtained knowledge with others. Of course, it is the archon’s influence over these dual texts/visitors that creates the transformation, which affects both the sleepers’ past and their future. So by observing Raven’s stewardship over the House of the Dead, Vane gets his first lesson in archonship.

Vane's education reveals Raven's specific archontic functions. By allocating space in his House for the archive of souls, Raven draws the border separating the outside world and the inner space of the archive. The boundary keeps at bay outside influences, as Vane sees when he first enters the cottage: "I struggled across the threshold as if from the clutches of an icy death. A wind swelled up on the moor, and rushed at the door as with difficulty I closed it behind me. Then all was still" (28). Mr. Raven also protects this space: as readers later discover, only those whom he approves can enter into the cottage. When the villainous Shadow seeks entry, he is unable to come in and, under Mr. Raven's watch, he "dares not disturb one dream in this quiet chamber" (217). As archon, Raven also organizes and gives meaning to individuals under his jurisdiction, telling Vane that he seeks to help creatures "rise higher and grow larger" by finding "their origin" (20). Additionally, Mr. Raven continually provides knowledge to those in the cottage. He teaches Lilith why sleeping in the House of the Dead will redeem her (214) and explains the unusual occurrences, such as illusions and sleepwalking, that Vane sees in the chamber (227). Most importantly, however, Mr. Raven provides evidence to Vane of reality, helping him to rework perceptions of what is real on his own journey to archonship. Vane is in especial need of Raven's guidance as he becomes aware of the alternate dimension in which Vane's adventures take place. Raven corrects Vane, for example, when he mistakes "an ancient hawthorn" for a "gnarled old man" (24) and again when Vane spots a "snow-white pigeon" that Raven correctly identifies as "a prayer" on its way to heaven (25).

Initially, however, Vane has little desire to undertake the journey of learning and responsibility that becoming part of Raven's archive would entail. Even though Raven foretells that the House of the Dead will "prove precipitate" to his education as archon (29), and even after witnessing Raven's archontic actions, Vane flees from the archive of sleepers and Raven's



guidance (37). Eventually, however, Vane returns and agrees to place himself under Raven's stewardship, an act that will culminate in the young man's internment in the House of the Dead.

There is no other way for Vane to access the archive and thus begin his apprenticeship except by coming and submitting to the archon. The House of the Dead is, as Derrida would term it, under "house arrest" (2) and remains physically distant from the cities and creatures of the fantastic world, isolated "in the farthest distance" on a desolate windy moor (27). The deathly quiet archive of souls, domiciled in the sexton's cottage, remains untarnished by the outside manipulations of the wicked Lilith and other evil characters. The cottage's stillness contrasts with the wars, quarrels, and misconceptions Vane confronts outside of the sexton's home. Even time passes independently of the outside world in the House of the Dead: Mr. Raven asserts that "[t]here is no early or late" in the cottage, for "true time" begins once you are within the archive (229). Although some of the bodies within the archive "died only yesterday" and some "a century ago," each individual seems to exist in the prime of life (35). Bodies within the sexton's cottage at times grow younger instead of older. Vane's parents, sleeping within the archive, do not age as they would if they lived outside the archive, and the "lady whose white hair, and that alone, suggested her old when she first fell asleep" now passes for a woman much younger than her original age (35). In addition to the passage of time, the fleeting acknowledgment of outside achievements have no meaning within the archive. Raven repeatedly tells Vane, when the young man seeks to go out and then return to the archive after having "found or made, invented, or at least discovered something!" that men mistakenly "think so much of having done" but that outside accomplishments mean nothing once inside the archive (29). Within the archive, the accumulation of knowledge through the archon's guidance surpasses the importance of any outside recognition or attainment. But beyond acting as a place where knowledge may be

gathered, the House of the Dead is a place set apart specifically for undergoing transformation, for shaping and creating in Manoff's "laboratory" sense (13).

In order to facilitate this transformation, throughout the novel Mr. Raven strives to lead Vane away from the outer turmoil and into the archive, urging the young man to "[b]e persuaded, and go home with me" (157). Vane initially resists Raven's attempts, and the archon's efforts to instruct the young protagonist outside the archive are at first fruitless. Vane's unwillingness to follow Mr. Raven exemplifies what Hardiman terms a "dialectic of domination and resistance" that surrounds the "working of power" within the archival relationship (32) and complicates the idea of an archival contract. This power struggle between the archon and the individual must be reconciled, otherwise the connection needed for the transfer of knowledge and the creation of meaning cannot exist. When he disregards Raven's counsel, breaking the contract or refusing to abide by its terms, Vane makes choices that wreak havoc on the alternative world, such as when he ignores Raven's warning to distrust Lilith and subsequently allows Lilith to endanger innocent lives (95).

The interferences outside the sexton's home consistently provide Vane excuses to disobey the archon's command to "go to the cottage," even when Raven promises "there I will instruct you" and assures Vane that by doing so he will be able to save those he loves (221). Raven's admonitions and warnings fall on deaf ears as Vane continues to rely on his own wisdom, which repeatedly results in failure and regret. While outside the archive, Vane never successfully heeds the archon's admonitions. Not until he realizes what "a hell of horror" it is "to wander alone . . . lying an eternal prisoner in the dungeon of [one's] own being" (83) does Vane comprehend the need to escape outside distractions and submit to the archon's instruction, which he finally does after his actions cause the death of his betrothed (184).

This tragedy gives Vane the “desire to return” and “run after the archive” (Derrida 91). The instinct to flee to the House of the Dead interestingly challenges Derrida’s notion of the two conflicting drives that initially create the archive: the “death drive” and the “archival desire” or drive of conservation (Derrida 10, 12). Instead of working at odds with one another, as Derrida insists they do, these drives become parallel in *Lilith*—Vane is running to the archive in order both to die and to be conserved or saved as one of Raven’s sleeping souls. Realizing his own foolishness and inability to accomplish his desires through his ignorance, Vane returns to the domiciled, protected archive. Finally, within the archive and under the guidance of the archon, Vane receives instruction that allows him to accomplish his quest. This is the first moment in the novel when Vane listens and obeys Raven, gaining knowledge and using this knowledge to change the fate of the alternate dimension.

Once inside the House of the Dead, sleeping on his appointed couch, Vane becomes Raven’s guest, a fact that adds a new dimension (one circumscribed by the laws of hospitality) to their growing relationship. Raven’s actions as host toward Vane and all of the archive’s visitors reflect the domestic intimacy of the home rather than the impersonal rigidity of an information vault. The physical presence of the endless rows of beds within the House of the Dead are physical reminders that the archive is a home-like setting. Raven fulfills his hosting responsibility as head of household by issuing invitations and providing bread, wine, and a place to sleep: “[Raven] stood in the door, holding the candle to guide us . . . When we reached the door, [Raven] welcomed us” (213). When Lilith is brought to the cottage, the archon goes out to her and leads her inside; once inside, Raven “led the way through the door of death, and she [Lilith] followed submissive” (215). Although initially an enemy, when Raven deems it appropriate, Lilith is brought into the House of the Dead and shown the bed specifically prepared

for her (217). In doing so, Raven affirms his archontic power and authority within the private, domestic realm of his archive, but also produces the conditions for restoring peace and order in the outside world. For once Lilith leaves, transformed, the world she destructively ruled will thereafter change as well. As the archon shapes his texts, the texts go forth to shape the narrative of the present and the future.

Lilith's acceptance into the sexton's home—the House of the Dead—where Vane is also welcomed draws attention to the familial terms that increasingly appear within the novel. Raven lives with his wife in the House of the Dead, and later we meet two of his daughters: Mara and Lona. The long line of Vane's ancestors who interact with the estate library also reflects the familial feeling that permeates the archive. Along his journey, Vane comes in contact with his parents and his betrothed and, after his experiences in the archive, is called “brother” by one of Raven's daughters (239). The emphasis on family connections, especially within the archive, highlights the relational manner in which Raven passes along information. A central element of his teaching of Vane in the archive consists of drawing Vane's attention to his family members, and Raven himself fosters a familial relationship between himself and the young protagonist. Vane eventually recognizes this need for connections between individuals in pursuit of knowledge and mourns over his “past self”—which “preferred the company of book or pen to that of man or woman”—and his formerly closed-minded approach to learning: “I had not cared for my live brothers and sisters, and now I was left without even the dead to comfort me!” (83-84).

As Raven consigns persons within the archive, placing individuals in specific resting places and next to specific individuals, he creates or strengthens lasting relationships in an effort to overcome the kind of non-relational learning that Vane's comments exhibit. For example, as

the diminutive people called the Lovers are placed in the archive, they find mothers (and occasionally fathers) as they share beds with those already sleeping (217). Vane's bed is one of three empty couches grouped together. When he asks Raven why *this* is the location chosen for him, Raven tells him that his couch is set near those of his mother and father who are slumbering in the sexton's cottage, and one of the other empty couches adjacent to his belongs to his future lover. Even the villainess Lilith is consigned in relation to others. When she enters the archive, Mr. Raven proclaims, "There, Lilith, is the bed I have prepared for you!" (217). She is placed next to her long-estranged daughter. Raven's deliberate classification of the souls in his library consigns individuals to familial groups, demonstrating the archon's power not only to strengthen existing ties between the archive's subjects (as he does by placing Vane near his parents) but also to create new ties between individuals that shape their narratives, such as with the Lovers and their adopted parents.

Mr. Raven's consignment of sleepers directly mirrors his more literal consignment of books, the act that brought him into contact with Vane in the opening pages of the novel and initiated Vane's movement into the alternate dimension and toward transformation. In fact, Raven's handling or use of books frequently results in immediate and wondrous transformations. Vane discovers, for example, that the glowing "bird-butterfly" escort Raven provides as Vane begins his journey is actually an illuminated, gracefully floating book; Raven transforms the instructional text into a living creature that guides Vane through the alternative dimension (46-47). Later, in Vane's own library, Raven initiates Lilith's transformation by reading "a stanza or two" from the manuscript containing the prophecies of Lilith, thereby compelling her to act and obey (143). As he reads, Lilith is forced to resume her original shape and answer the questions he puts to her. Although powerful in her own right she has no choice as Raven reads but to bend

to his will—she cannot even physically overcome the book as Raven uses it to bar her escape from the room (147-48). Raven’s consignment of books thus shapes not only the meaning of the texts themselves, but those who interact with the books, demonstrating the archon’s lasting power not only of consignment but of transformation.

His remarkable power seen within the House of the Dead is also evident as Mr. Raven—“sexton of all he surveyed! lord of all that was laid aside!” (27)—works outside the archive. Vane observes that Raven, puttering around outside the House of the Dead as librarian-sexton, “can’t keep [his] spade still” (20). He feels it his special duty to help creatures “forget their origin” and “rise higher and grow larger” (20). During his first interviews with Vane, Raven changes small creatures such as worms into butterflies, which morph into “dark little cloud[s]” (20). As Raven and Vane travel together in the alternate dimension, Raven pauses and “at intervals, now a firefly, now a gleaming butterfly rose into the rayless air” (155). Everything Mr. Raven does, both within and without the archive, contributes to this transformation of beings, helping them towards a new stage of existence.

Raven’s archontic actions all occur with the ultimate goal of shaping the world outside the House of the Dead, from worms and butterflies to rulers and heroes. Like Derrida, Raven seems to regard the purpose of consignment within the archive to be proceeding from there into the public realm. Raven restores order to the alternate dimension by transforming Lilith within the archive. Additionally, the familial groups created within the House of the Dead endure beyond the confines of the archive, affecting the organization of society far from the boundaries of the sexton’s cottage. By providing a place for them in his library, the archon prepares the sleepers to navigate successfully the outside world and eventually to progress to an idyllic existence: “I watch for the hour to ring the resurrection-bell, and wake those that are still asleep”

(35). The archive's power indisputably reaches outside the archive, but the process by which it becomes possible for him to construct the narratives of the larger world takes shape within the archive.

Vane's experiences with Mr. Raven not only serve to enlighten him as a knowledge-seeking individual who goes to an archive to gain information that may be used to transform himself and the world in which he moves; they also prepare him to become archon of the library in his estate. Near the beginning of the book Vane confesses he "had for some time intended a thorough overhauling of the books" in his library (10), but the library itself (particularly the strange events that Raven causes to happen there) defeats him. Although seeking to consign and give meaning to the library, Vane at this point lacks the proper authority that enables him to do so. As Vane's adventures come to a close after undergoing transformation in the House of the Dead, he approaches the blissful kingdom prepared for those who have awakened but is suddenly transported out of the magical realm and back into his library: "A hand, warm and strong, laid hold of mine, and drew me to a little door with a golden lock. The door opened; the hand let mine go, and pushed me gently through" (250). After passing through the locked door, he is left "alone in [his] library," authorized to now begin exercising consignation within his own archive (250). This archive, readers finally realize, is comprised of the cycle of adventures related by Vane and contained within the novel itself. Having received the knowledge and power needed to become an archon in his own right and the authorization (from Raven) to exercise his archontic power, Vane turns to the task of imparting the knowledge contained with *Lilith's* archive of tales to the reader. He begins the novel, readers recall, confessing that he has "undertaken to tell" of the strange events he has experienced (12). Thus, Vane ultimately serves as archon for the reader, who enters *Lilith* by entering the first chapter, appropriately called "The Library" (5).

## Conclusion

In *Lilith*, this “fantasia of dreams,” Vane “finds that men must sleep to awake and die to live” (Johnson 258). As Joseph Johnson explains, “While travelling with Mr. Vane through this realm of mystery many readers have felt the need of the Interpreter” (258). This sensation reflects the need within the text for the archon to bring sense to an individual’s experiences and to guide him or her on their path to enlightenment. In *Lilith*, the library only begins to behave strangely after Vane interacts with its ancient archon, Mr. Raven, who initiates the narrative action. Thus the library becomes meaningful not as a place of knowledge where readers come to discover, but as host to the instructive communication between the archon and the reader. The quest for knowledge undertaken by an individual fails time after time. No matter how hard he tries, Vane cannot understand his surroundings or his adventures on his own—personal experience and reading books fall short in every instance. The archon’s vital role makes possible the transmission of knowledge from book to reader as the archon exercises authority over his charge.

*Lilith* depicts knowledge acquisition as a relationship rather than an event. Individual efforts must be augmented by an understanding derived from the archon in order for knowledge to be transmitted. Rebecca Thomas Ankeny discusses MacDonald’s views of the text as “a relationship between human beings” (12), the “text becom[ing] an interaction between minds” (30). The concept of text acting not as the source of truth but as the point of interaction between individuals—the archon and the visitor—echoes the “archival contract” that exists between “archivists and society,” where society places “enormous power” in the archon, and the archon, in turn, commits to “engage new realities with a passionate commitment” (Hamilton et al. 16-17). *Lilith* reminds us that the archive—a place MacDonald has shown has as much personality



as the people who interact with it—possesses enormous importance. It is not, however, as important as the person who infuses meaning into the lifeless texts contained within it. “Any man,” as Vane asserts, “is more than the greatest of books!” (84)—but this is especially true if that man is an archon.

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