

Clemson University

TigerPrints

All Theses

Theses

8-2019

Relict: Widows and their Expressions of Agency through Personal Piety and Religious Devotion in Fifteenth-Century England

Mikkaela Beth Bailey
Clemson University

Follow this and additional works at: https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_theses



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bailey, Mikkaela Beth, "Relict: Widows and their Expressions of Agency through Personal Piety and Religious Devotion in Fifteenth-Century England" (2019). *All Theses*. 3236.

https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_theses/3236

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses at TigerPrints. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Theses by an authorized administrator of TigerPrints. For more information, please contact kokeefe@clemson.edu.

RELICT: WIDOWS AND THEIR EXPRESSIONS OF AGENCY THROUGH
PERSONAL PIETY AND RELIGIOUS DEVOTION
IN FIFTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
History

by
Mikkaela Beth Bailey
August 2019

Accepted by:
Dr. Caroline Dunn, Committee Chair
Dr. Stephanie Barczewski
Dr. Thomas Kuehn

ABSTRACT

Widows who lived in fifteenth-century England present an interesting case study for their exercises of agency through personal piety because they are underrepresented in the historiographical discussion on this topic. This thesis focuses largely on widowed laywomen and the different ways in which they could access agency through personal piety and the legal system. The examination of their choices in donations, bequests, and other pious actions reveals widows' ability to express themselves. The chief focus of this thesis are the ways in which widows' actions of personal piety provided them with access points to agency, authority, and power. While there has been much study on women's piety and women's agency, this study seeks to fill historiographical gaps by combining these aspects of medieval Englishwomen's lives as they experienced them in the fifteenth century.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to all the important women in my life who have paved the way for me. To my grandmother, Lois Burdette, who inspired my love of stories and inspired my research with her collection of obituaries. To my mother, Beth Burdette Bailey, who indulged me as a child by taking me to museums and historic sites, as well as buying me every book on ancient Egypt at the bookstore. Finally, a special exception to this list of women is my father, Dr. W. Terry Bailey, who never discouraged me from pursuing my dreams, even when I told him I was going to be Chief Justice of the Supreme Court when I was ten years old.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I owe a great debt of gratitude to Dr. Caroline Dunn, my committee chair, who has expertly guided me during my time at Clemson with patience, grace, and encouragement. She helped me find my area of interest and this thesis is a product of her ongoing mentorship and support for my research. I am also grateful to Dr. Thomas Kuehn for his instruction and participation on my committee. Special thanks belong to Dr. Stephanie Barczewski, especially for allowing me to infect her Historiography seminar with a discussion on the plague. Throughout this process, Dr. Paul Anderson supported me as my program coordinator and I am grateful for his faith in my ability. Lastly, I would like to thank Dr. Kenneth L. Myers, who always believed in me.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
TITLE PAGE	i
ABSTRACT	ii
DEDICATION	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iv
CHAPTER	
I. Introduction.....	1
II. Donations	11
Section I: Donations.....	12
Section II: Complicating Factors and Considerations	33
III. Wills.....	41
Section I: Widows, Single Women, and Wills	42
Section II: Widows Exercising Agency.....	49
IV. Additional Expressions Of Piety in Public Settings	68
Section I: Public Acts of Piety and Access to Public Expressions of Sentiment.....	69
Section II: Laywomen and Local Participation in Pious Acts	72
Section III: Marriage and Remarriage	76
Section IV: Laywomen and Pilgrimage.....	80
V. Conclusion	98
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	101

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The study of medieval women's piety has become a popular topic among historians in recent years, as has women's exercise of agency and power. Yet few works of scholarship have examined these topics in tandem. While the study of women's donations has unveiled many patterns of giving and the process by which they typically approached these gifts, an element missing from the discussion is the implications for women's agency that these trends exhibit. Widow's wills also express a high degree of individuality and other evidence that women were able to not only own property, but that they knew how they wanted to exercise their power over it. In many other instances, women exercised piety as an access point to control their public images, legacies, and influence in their communities. Through their donations, chantries, bequests, and gifts for the worship spaces in their local parishes, women were able to create their own spiritual paths and pursue individual faith experiences. The examination of sources from England from 1425-1480, focusing mainly on the later years of the fifteenth century, illuminates women's lived experiences as they sought to exercise agency through their access to means of power and influence.

The discussion of women's access to power and agency through actions of personal piety and religious devotion in England has largely focused on the thirteenth century. More work has been done on the daily lives of women and their religious experiences in the fifteenth century, especially as a result of discoveries like *The Paston Letters* and *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Yet, many of these works of scholarship have

not made the connection between agency and personal piety in the fifteenth-century laywoman's experience.¹ As a result, records of donations, endowments, and foundations for religious institutions leave much to be discovered, especially in the fifteenth century cartularies and Patent Rolls. Wills, copies of royal letters, and other personal correspondence and literature offer glimpses of women's priorities and desires in exercising their agency through actions of personal piety.² Some exercises of agency, like will-making, may not have been purely pious but originated as a practice with religious context.

Agency, which can be defined as the ability of those individuals who are members of marginalized groups to exercise power apart from that which is granted by those in authority, is significant to the study of laywomen's personal piety. Married women expressed agency when making donations, bequests, and public performances of piety because they were establishing themselves as individuals who could be defined apart

¹ For an overview of the discussion on medieval noblewomen and their expressions of religious devotion, see Rowena E. Archer, "Piety in Question: Noblewomen and Religion in the Later Middle Ages," in *Women and Religion in Medieval England*, ed. Diana Wood, 118-140 (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2003). Archer describes the current historiographical conclusions about noblewomen's religious practices and how they inform the study of their lives. For a discussion on the ways in which studying gender and devotion provides a more complete portrait of medieval life, see Kathleen Ashley, "Cultures of Devotion," in *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe*, eds. Judith M. Bennett and Ruth Mazo Karras, 464-79 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). Both provide an interesting introduction to the possibilities this topic holds since medieval female piety has long been neglected in historical discourse.

² After surveying dozens of wills, I selected 29 as examples for analysis. There was no textual evidence suggesting that decisions made in regard to personal piety were influenced by the Wars of the Roses in any of the wills I examined. While it is likely that many women sought political and social influence through donations, there was no direct connection that could be made to the pious actions studied in this thesis. As a result, the Wars of the Roses have not been intentionally excluded, but are not examined as a factor in women's expressions of agency through their actions of personal piety.

from their husbands, though they were subordinate to them both under the system of coverture and according to cultural norms. Autonomy, in contrast, is a deliberate assertion of desires and the use of power. Though it exists in many forms, power is typically expressed through the ability of an individual or collective to influence or command those who are under them socially, economically, or otherwise. In its private form, power is accessed by women through their roles as wife or mother. Influence over the household and the family is, however, difficult to measure accurately and demonstrates little agency. Public power is the ability to access power in the public realm, where it is respected by others and recognized as legitimate. Access to the legal system and to the church were forms of public power, and widows were able to access this power in their own name without the supervision of a male relative.³

Misconceptions about the ability of medieval Englishwomen to maneuver through society have influenced the popular opinion that women had limited opportunities for independence throughout the Middle Ages; however, incredible evidence suggests otherwise.⁴ Within English legal records, we see women acting of their own accord in a variety of capacities. Some of the ways women were able to access the legal system and

³ Barbara J. Harris, "Defining Themselves: English Aristocratic Women, 1450-1550," *Journal of British Studies*, Volume 49, No. 4 (2010), 740. Michael M. Sheehan, *The Will in Medieval England: From the Conversion of the Anglo-Saxons to the End of the Thirteenth Century* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1963), 235.

⁴ For examples of scholarship on the roles of medieval European women, especially noble and aristocratic women, outside of England, see: Amy Livingstone, *Out of Love for My Kin: Aristocratic Family Life in the Lands of the Loire, 1000-1200* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010); Sally McKee, *Uncommon Dominion: Venetian Crete and the Myth of Ethnic Purity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000); Theresa Earenfight, *The King's Other Body: Maria of Castile and The Crown of Aragon* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010); Roisin Cossar, *The Transformation of the Laity in Bergamo, 1265-c.1400*, *The Medieval Mediterranean: Peoples, Economies and Cultures, 400-1500* (Boston: Brill, 2006).

public power are contained in the Patent Rolls, copies of royal letters that reveal women petitioning to remarry, contesting wills, or acting as executors during probate. Widows sometimes went to court to try and recover their dowers if their late husbands previously sold it without their consent (or if a son/stepson withheld it).⁵ Widows and never-married women had fewer constraints on their legal mobility than married women, so most medieval wills were left by single women as a result. Though many licenses and grants to build chantries or endow religious organizations include wives' names alongside their husbands, the truly revealing examples come from unmarried women who were acting to make donations on their own behalves rather than as fulfillment of a husband's final wishes. One key insight is the way in which women were able to express agency through religious devotion and personal piety by distributing items, money, or land to the church through these means.

Widows frequently carried out actions typical of other women. The difference is simply the absence of a husband. According to Barbara J. Harris, "as widows, women continued to perform tasks that they had first undertaken as wives with new authority."⁶ Evidence suggests that these women were capable managers and were often trusted by their husbands to administer most, if not all, of the properties in possession of the family. Many wives likely had the ability and opportunity to express agency and autonomy, but historians possess less information to accurately assess the agency of married women in

⁵ Barbara A. Hanawalt, *The Wealth of Wives: Women, Law, and Economy in Late Medieval London* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 98. For more on this topic, see Sue Sheridan Walker, "Litigation as a Personal Quest: Suing for Dower in the Royal Courts, circa 1272-1350" in *Wife and Widow in Medieval England*, ed. by Sue Sheridan Walker, 81-107, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1996).

⁶ Harris, "Defining Themselves," 740.

this context. Because the husband's degree of involvement simply cannot feasibly be gauged with the available materials used in this study, widows' agency and access to public power will remain the central focus of this discussion.

The gradual increase of women's (especially widows') agency can be traced from the beginning of the common law's development through the Early Modern Period. Michael M. Sheehan, a significant historian on the topic of English wills, explored the restrictions facing women who crafted them.⁷ Sheehan argues that women's access to the legal system, property ownership, and will-making were greatly reduced by feudalism in the emerging Anglo-Norman society that followed the Norman Conquest. Before the Norman Conquest, he argues women had greater mobility in society. According to Sheehan,

This resulted in a limitation of the woman's right to own and control property, and influenced her capacity to bequeath. The married woman had no right to dispose of property without the husband's consent. Common law came to look upon the husband as the guardian of his wife, entitled him to the fruits of her lands, gave him ownership of all chattels that she had or that came to her during marriage.⁸

Married women's inability to possess property was seemingly a result of both the new system of land-holding and of family structures changing as society evolved in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Yet, the ability of women to become or remain independent increased with the introduction of the Magna Carta and its protection for widows and their property. Prior to the institution of the Magna Carta, widows could

⁷ Following a tragic biking accident, Michael Sheehan's work was left incomplete and as a result he was only able to examine the earlier centuries of the medieval period. He had hoped to broaden his study, but as of yet no one has completed the work he began.

⁸ Sheehan, *The Will in Medieval England*, 235.

sometimes buy their independence and remain unmarried, but they would more commonly be betrothed according to the king's wishes so that the land they inherited from their husbands would be redistributed. With the institution of protection from this manipulation, women were free to remain unmarried (or pay a fee to remarry) and therefore own property and dispose of it in their wills as they saw fit. Sheehan observed that many of the widows initially chose not to take advantage of their newfound opportunity, however, and instead remarried or otherwise passed significant property along to other heirs.⁹

Examining other scholarship on medieval widows reveals numerous cases of women taking responsibility for the management of large estates and for their affairs. Margaret Paston (1423-1484) leaves behind a larger body of evidence than most medieval women, not only through legal documents and her appearance in various other historical records, but through the famous personal correspondence she and her family left behind, known as *The Paston Letters*. For example Margaret wrote to a lawyer not only on her own behalf, but on behalf of those living on the lands she inherited from her father's family.¹⁰ Within Margaret's letters, nothing of great significance suggests she should be viewed as particularly exceptional among women of her social status. As a possessor and owner of property, as well as an active participant in family business, her correspondence provides a guide for the examination of the influence medieval women held. It can also inform the examination of their ability to access authority and power

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Margaret Paston, "Letter to Unidentified Lawyer," in *The Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century, Part III*, eds. Richard Beadle and Colin Richmond (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 29-30.

through their property. Margaret's use of legal terminology, according to Alison Spedding, is significant in communicating the ability of women to act as capable administrators of property.¹¹ Many of Margaret's decisions were a result of her filling the role of head of household during her husband's many absences (and for the years after his death), but the decisions were hers and she was not simply carrying out the wishes of her husband. From this perspective, medieval women's decisions regarding the property they possessed are deliberate and calculated rather than simply regurgitated commands of male relatives. The agency expressed in Margaret's letters gives an example of Harris' argument that women's actions as widows were a continuation of their duties as wives, the difference being their independence from husbands in legal records.¹²

The difference between Michael M. Sheehan's observations about England in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries as opposed to the implications of Margaret's letters and other actions in the fifteenth century indicates that there was an increase in agency and in awareness of the ability of the individual woman to care for herself and her property. An evolution in not only ability, but in perception of self by the women who were able to administer their property, is an indication of the growing access women had to public power and authority. While it is possible that there are more instances of women accessing power and authority in other sources, their inclusion in sources that previously held fewer accounts of women's actions serves as an example in itself that changes were

¹¹ Alison Spedding, "I Shalle Send Word in Writing': Lexical Choices and Legal Acumen in the Letters of Margaret Paston," *Medium Ævum* 77, no. 2 (2008): 241-59.

¹² Harris, "Defining Themselves: English Aristocratic Women, 1450-1550," 740-1; See also Mavis E. Mate, *Daughters, Wives, and Widows After the Black Death: Women in Sussex, 1350-1535* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 1998), 156-9.

occurring.¹³ A growing awareness of identity in combination with a growing ability to control the perception of oneself allows for the widows to be concerned with the way they would be remembered, and to address those concerns personally through preparations for their deaths.

Nuns, anchoresses, and other women who completely dedicated their lives to God are not considered in this study because they were treated differently from the populace in many ways. One consideration is their status as virginal unmarried women. Though there were cases of women taking on a religious role and then leaving it for marriage (i.e. beguines), these women were typically associated with some sort of religious order or were enclosed while seeking even a temporary religious occupation.¹⁴ In many cases,

¹³ “Insecurities roiled by the quickening pace of social change, religious upheaval, and the accelerated transition from a medieval perception to a modern one intensified the individual’s need to establish identity and to control remembrance. Women were an entrenched part of this process... The pragmatic purpose of a will was to pass on property and possessions and to order that transference according to their owner’s desires. Yet above and beyond this lay an overriding emotional urgency to imbue this assemblage, which contained the contextual matrix of their lives, with some trace of themselves, passing on not only the physical artifact but also a mnemonic of family, of past events, and most particularly for many women a remembrance of the will-maker herself.” Susan E. James, *Women’s Voices in Tudor Wills, 1485-1603: Authority, Influence, and Material Culture* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2015), 59. Examining the transition from medieval to Early Modern, James asserts that these women were finding themselves and a new form of self-expression through the legal system. Yet, evidence of this same form self-expression is present in wills that James cites previous to the English Reformation and the dawn of the Early Modern Period. What she contends is observable in other wills of earlier decades. This legacy often includes a great deal of religiosity as demonstrated from the beneficiaries in the wills selected for this study. Harris, “Defining Themselves,” 741.

¹⁴ For more information on beguines, see Tanya Stabler Miller, *The Beguines of Medieval Paris: Gender, Patronage, and Spiritual Authority* (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017). A beguine was a woman who chose a life of special religious devotion, usually including a period of time living in an enclosed community, which often included living off of alms and providing spiritual encouragement to local communities. It would not be a stretch to consider them as a part-

women were given positions of authority they would may not otherwise have been able to achieve. Since their lived experiences do not reflect those of laywomen who faced very different limiting factors, they have been excluded from the documents surveyed.¹⁵

In the first chapter, I examine the donations women made to religious institutions. Mainly considering chantries and endowments of universities and monasteries, the analysis of women's choices regarding the distribution of their land and money reveals their ability to create, maintain, and dissolve relationships with their spiritual communities. Widows who chose to sacrifice money and property for spiritual gain were likely doing so for a variety of reasons, such as the gain of spiritual reward or influence (social and political). Closely tied to this topic is the subject of widows' wills, which are the focus of the second chapter. In these wills, widows were able to shape their legacies and establish their final wishes, revealing not only what they valued but how they prioritized their personal piety amidst other concerns. Dissecting widows' expressions of piety and what motivated them will give a clearer understanding of the ways they used acts of religious devotion and the public nature of their piety to exercise agency over their identities and legacies.

Other examples of women's religious devotion and the ways they shaped their own spiritual paths include their choices to engage in public acts of personal piety. The third chapter of this thesis addresses these topics only in part as there has been a greater

time, freelance nun who has not necessarily taken vows of a lifetime commitment to chastity and poverty.

¹⁵ Lionel Butler and Chris Given-Wilson, *Medieval Monasteries of Great Britain* (London: Joseph, 1979), 80. It was common for older widows to seek an enclosed life as they aged because it provided a sense of community and security during a lonelier stage of life, though this was not demonstrated conclusively by the women included in this study.

body of scholarship on Englishwomen's pilgrimages since the discovery of *The Book of Margery Kempe* and other resources that shed light on these experiences.¹⁶ While there are some points about women's experiences that can be made from an analysis of these sources, for the purposes of this thesis they have provided contextualization for women's lived experiences rather than a thorough study of how pilgrimages and lay involvement in the local parish influenced women's exercises of agency.

Through an analysis of widows' acts of personal piety, especially those involving the transfer of land and money, this thesis will demonstrate the ways women expressed agency through their religious devotion. Fifteenth-century Englishwomen provide an especially interesting group to consider because the connection between personal piety and expressions of agency has been understudied. While many strides have been made in both feminist and religious history for this era, this thesis will add to the historiographical discussion about what women's pious actions reveal by addressing the role of women's agency. Widows' use of religious devotion and personal actions of piety were often a means for their expressions of agency, whether they were genuine in their spiritual pursuits or using them for their own self-interest. Motive may be difficult to assess, but their actions remain.

¹⁶ Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, trans. Anthony Bale (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

CHAPTER II

DONATIONS

Introduction

The transfer of objects of power (i.e. land and money) to religious institutions by women demonstrates a deliberate personal investment in spiritual pursuits. As a result, donations of land and money reveal how women exercised agency. The medieval experience of faith was an inward one, but it also had a component that reflected the public nature of piety. Public expressions of a personal piety display the agency of those who chose to make them. Women often found a freedom of self-expression in their ability to pursue their faith and share their devotion. Actions of a religious or spiritual nature were often a more accessible outlet for women's individuality and agency than other aspects of their public lives, which were largely male dominated. The examination of various sources, including the Patent Rolls and assorted cartularies, demonstrate unique qualities in women's expressions. Analyzing these records, it appears evident that women were not only involved but deliberate in their actions of personal expression of their faith through both the financial support of religious institutions and donations of property.

In this chapter, women's agency will be explored through the examination of their donations, specifically the types of donations they made and the recipients they chose. In the following two sections, I will discuss the donations and recipients as well as the donors and the complications they present. The first section will cover their donations in preparation for death, but also the donations they made in life either on behalf of their own souls or the souls of loved ones. An examination of the recipients of these donations,

like chantries, universities, and burial gifts, will reveal much about the women who chose to donate to them. In the second section, I will address the complications presented by the available source material and subjects of this study.

Section I: Donations

Women's agency is observable in the records they leave behind. Typically widows are the women who remain in the written records because medieval England's practice of coverture limited married women's agency as they often acted under their husbands' names. Still, throughout their lives and in death women left donations that provide not only a legacy of their actions, but of their values and wishes. In life, women gave donations to many different religious organizations, even endowing and founding many on their own. Yet death also gives many examples of women's personal piety and the way they wished to be remembered or honored in death. By examining the burial gifts first, it will give a window into the ways a woman's final wishes give a deeper understanding of the life she lived, or the legacy she wanted to leave behind. Following the discussion of burial gifts, examples of donations to monasteries, universities, and chantries will give examples of the sacrifices women (especially widows) made in giving their land and money for spiritual gain.

Burial Gifts

Key to this study are not only the deliberate decisions, which display agency, but the motivations behind women's choices as well. What motivated these women is their desire to effect change, which is also a display of agency. Wills and personal or sentimental

gifts display motives to right wrongs, create and support relationships, or establish legacies. Donations to religious institutions display an engagement in the public sphere motivated by their concern for practical matters as well as spiritual. Women who supported monasteries and universities were doing so out of concern for their own souls, but also the souls of their loved ones in addition to the knowledge that their support would increase the reach or spiritual prowess of the ministries they supported. In the case of women funding chantries and chapels for spiritual benefits, it was also a matter of their ability to fund such a venture and thus display their wealth and management of their estates. Their personal piety was then demonstrated on a larger scale in the public arena.

¹ So, while women may have had other avenues through which they could express agency, those who had spiritual motives are significant because they found a freedom of expression that fit with their individual goals. Widows and never married women were able to navigate this sphere of influence in life and even after death through their legacies.

Despite many donating in life, there are also notable instances of women bequeathing items of great value, or even simply money, when planning for death. Burial gifts were a type of endowment given to a religious institution in exchange for a burial location within the church or specially-established chantry, ideally by the altar.² If the

¹ Barbara J. Harris, "Defining Themselves: English Aristocratic Women, 1450-1550," *Journal of British Studies*, Volume 49, No. 4 (2010), 740-1. Harris' argument reflects trends in women's control over their legacies in preparation for death, but she also addresses how women spent a great deal of their lives considering how they would be remembered in death.

² A chantry was typically a small chapel or designated area within the local parish, or possibly on the estate of a wealthy noble family. Often included but not required was a priest to give masses and a burial place for the deceased. Chantries will be discussed in detail in a later section.

donor was the primary patron of the monastery or church, they and their descendants would likely continue supporting the institution and eventually be buried in a place of honor where masses and prayers would be the most beneficial to them in the afterlife. As a result of this connection, many would leave an endowment to the church along with instructions for burial. A number also included alms to be given for those who participated in any ceremonial proceedings like a funeral or special mass.³

The charitable gifts and donations found in women's wills are indicative of personal piety in many ways, including the transactional nature it sometimes held. While burial endowments were often a matter of practicality, there was often an individualistic element to them. These expressions of individuality in the sentimental nature of their choices often set women apart from male testators. One pattern, identified by P.H. Cullum's research, suggests that late medieval women typically gave smaller amounts to more people and groups. Included in these bequests were often close friends, family members, and gifts for those involved in the burial or who would be offering prayers for the soul after death.⁴ As a result, it seems many men and women had varying individual expressions of personal piety, as individuals and respective to their genders.⁵

³ Clive Burgess, "Chantries in the Parish, or 'Through the Looking-glass,'" in *The Medieval Chantry in England*, eds. Julian M. Luxford and John McNeill, 100-129, (Wakefield: Charlesworth Press, 2011), 102-3. Burgess also states that many chose to found chantries in their local parishes so they could be buried at an altar, even when they were not wealthy enough to be buried in another place of prominence either in a cathedral or in a better location even within their parish. By choosing a humbler, more local burial place the testator could also afford more services or a grander funeral service than they could have had they tried to attain a burial place in a cathedral or higher-demand location.

⁴ P. H. Cullum, "'And Her Name was Charite': Charitable Giving by and for Women in Late Medieval Yorkshire," in *Woman is a Worthy Wight*, ed. P.J.P. Goldberg, 186-207, (Wolfeboro Falls: Allan Sutton Publishing Inc., 1992) 185.

⁵ Though the topic of wills is covered in depth in another chapter of this thesis, burial endowments are often a direct result of the donor's connections to the religious

According to Joel T. Rosenthal: “Not all wills that stipulated the place of burial even left bequests to the church. But the majority did, leaving gifts in a variety of forms. The simplest way of enriching the burial house was by simple bequest; an outright gift in cash or kind, sometimes in property yet to be alienated.”⁶ Sentimental gifts to the church, such as personal items or garments, were more likely to be actions of devotion or expressions of personal attachment. Gifts to favored members of these religious institutions, aside from the abbot, bishop, or other authority, often also denoted personal attachment. Gifts to authority figures were common whether there was a close relationship or not. In contrast to the bequest of sentimental items or specific goods, endowments of money were often transactional as a result of the request for burial rather than strictly personal or sentimental expressions.⁷ This does not discount cash gifts as expressions of piety, but emphasizes the relationship between the church, death practices (will making, funerals, burial), and the individual.

While it was common to give small sentimental gifts, it would have been significant for a woman to provide a large burial endowment. The status of a woman who was able to request a special burial location, especially if it was by the high altar or near a relic, would have been demonstrated. Her ability to access power, whether it was through

institution in life, whether it was personal or through family connections. An analysis of a sample of these burial endowments is included here to provide context for the relationships between the benefactresses/donors and the religious institutions that were the recipients of their pious expressions. For more information about the ways wills endowing the local parish presented an opportunity for women to support and sustain it, see Clive Burgess, *‘The Right Ordering of Souls’: The Parish of All Saints’ Bristol on the Eve of the Reformation*, *Studies in the History of Medieval Religion*, (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2018). His fourth chapter is particularly helpful.

⁶ Joel T. Rosenthal, *The Purchase of Paradise: Gift Giving and the Aristocracy, 1307-1485* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972), 85.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 87.

her own family or her husband's legacy, gave her the chance to make a place for herself in a place of great significance. Some women rejected this practice, perhaps in their own individual expression of personal piety. Cecilia, Lady Kirriel, gave specific instructions that she be buried near her place of death instead of making arrangements for a special burial place.⁸ Ann, Duchess of Exeter, also forewent special funeral arrangements but instead chose to use her bequest to pay for prayers and masses.⁹ In these cases, it is a deliberate choice to exercise an individual personal piety rather than to follow a pattern of ritualistic devotion. In choosing alternatives to a more common burial practice by the wealthy and aristocratic individuals providing burial endowments, women were expressing their personal religious devotion in their own way, and thus still displayed agency while rejecting a public display of power.

Yet the purpose of a will was to provide arrangements for the body and alms for the soul of the deceased. As a result, many women followed the trends of providing burial instructions, though many retained their individual expressions of their values. Alianore, Lady Saint Amand, made preparations for her burial by the high altar near her husband, in addition to the masses and special services she arranged in her testament.¹⁰ Lady Elizabeth Fitzhugh had an elaborate will outlining not only her sentimental bequests, but extensively detailing her burial arrangements as well as her funeral. She

⁸ "Will of Cecilia Lady Kirriel" (7 April 1472) in *Testamenta Vetusta: Being Illustrations From Wills, of Manners, Customs, &c. As Well As of the Descents And Possessions of Many Distinguished Families. From the Reign of Henry the Second to the Accession of Queen Elizabeth* ed. Sir Nicolas, Nicholas Harris (London: Nichols & Son, 1826), 1:327, available online at <https://archive.org/details/testamentavetust01nico> (accessed 27 April 2018).

⁹ "Will of Ann Duchess of Exeter" (20 April 1457) in *Testamenta Vetusta*, 1:281-2.

¹⁰ "Will of Alianore Lady St. Amand" (1426) in *Testamenta Vetusta*, 1:211-2

wished to be buried by her husband near the high altar, and have twenty-four torches burning for her with incense and prayers also on her behalf. In addition to these things, her burial endowment included support for the poor who may venture into the church while masses were being given for her, in which case she provided that they would be fed and supported until the money she left ran out.¹¹

Though her will does not specify that she was a widow, Phillipa, Duchess of York and Lady of the Isle of Wight, gave complex instructions for her burial. Not only was she to be buried in the church, but she requested her body's journey to its final resting place hold great spiritual significance. With thirteen poor men, each with a torch wearing long cloaks and black hats accompanying her body, she instructed that they should escort the hearse to her grave while singing masses for her soul. The hearse was also given special instructions, including being covered in black cloth and topped with a smaller wax model hearse. Upon her body's arrival and interment, there were to be masses said by several local religious orders on behalf of her soul.¹² All of these individual touches demonstrate the individuality women expressed in their wills and burial endowments. While it was common to provide some financial compensation for the honor of being entombed in a church, there were many ways this could be accomplished. Women took control of this aspect of their finances, and their legacies. Those who expressed spiritual interest were motivated by their need to secure a spiritual path for themselves, which also demonstrates their agency in cultivating their faith experience.

¹¹ "Will of Elizabeth Lady Fitzhugh" (1427) in *Testamenta Vetusta*, 1:212-4

¹² "Will of Phillipa Duchess of York" (1430) in *Testamenta Vetusta*, 1:218-9. While she does not identify herself as a widow, she also does not indicate her husband's permission in making the will. It is evident from the will and accompanying footnotes written by Sir Nicholas Harris that she was married twice.

It seems that widowed and never married Englishwomen had a greater degree of freedom to possess property, and as a result also a greater degree of freedom to bequeath property than others in some parts of Europe. While many European widows' bequests were from their dower, women also frequently inherited land and money from their husbands and other relatives. In these cases, women often drew from all sources for their donations and burial gifts. There were similar trends elsewhere in Europe that reflect widow's agency in choosing the ways they were able to dispose of their property. In her research on fifteenth-century Sweden, for example, Tuula Rantala found that aristocratic and wealthy women frequently willed their morning gifts to monasteries. Though she argues that the motivation for these women to donate their property is very similar to what is argued in my study, Rantala does not examine the impact of agency on these choices.¹³ One of the key differences between Englishwomen and women living in continental Europe is the degree of autonomy single women experienced in England that they seldom experienced outside of northern Europe.¹⁴ As a result, it is possible to explore and make comparisons between women's experiences of piety in England and in other regions of Europe, though the finer details like trends in giving and amounts or materials given may differ.

¹³ Tuula Rantala, "Monastic Donations by Widows: Morning Gifts as Assets in Planning for Old Age and Death in Fifteenth-Century Sweden," in *Planning for Death: Wills and Death-Related Property Arrangements in Europe, 1200-1600*, eds. Mia Korpiola and Anu Lahtinen, 66-87 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 71-3. A morning gift is very similar to a dower in that it was given to the wife by the husband, typically the morning after the wedding, as an assurance that she would be provided for should he pass away before her. Women were able to trade, sell, or use their morning gift while still married, but they had the greatest degree of freedom to sell, trade, or use this property as a widow.

¹⁴ Amy Louise Erickson, "Coverture and Capitalism," *History Workshop Journal*, no. 59 (2005): 1-16, 3.

Monastic Donations

Though some trends are difficult to establish, there are many patterns or commonalities that persist. In some cases, there was a connection to the local monastery or congregation because some of those who gave gifts also rented from or otherwise had a business arrangement with the religious institution. The reciprocal relationship of some monasteries to those who lived on their property creates a complexity that must be examined.¹⁵ Monastic cartularies exhibit many patterns. Whereas there were significant numbers of donations by women (most often widows) in the thirteenth century, there were few in comparison in subsequent years.¹⁶ This decline results from a variety of economic, practical, and legal reasons, but there is still an evident relationship between donors and religious institutions.¹⁷

¹⁵ Some women were dependent upon the religious houses for support. There are several accounts of widows being granted tenure of land, especially in the case where their husbands died and left them the use of the land. Protection for the widow's right to hold her husband's property until her death was also demonstrated in cartularies. Through the church, these women had a significant claim to their property since crafting a will was a sacred act allowing the testator to provide for his or her soul. Taking these final wishes seriously was important to the church, and therefore was a priority for those who were benefitting from the donations or provisions for both practical and spiritual reasons. Michael M. Sheehan, *The Will in Medieval England: From the Conversion of the Anglo-Saxons to the End of the Thirteenth Century* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1963), 235; Arthur Ogle, *The Canon Law in Mediaeval England* (New York: Lenox Hill Publishing and Distribution Company, 1971), 85-89.

¹⁶ This can be seen in the cartularies and the Patent Rolls, and has been discussed in secondary literature. See, for example, Karen Stöber, *Late Medieval Monasteries and Their Patrons: England and Wales, c. 1300- 1540* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2007), 16.

¹⁷ The Statute of Mortmain, passed in the late thirteenth century, prevented the establishment of chantries as well as other institutions as a result of the significant numbers that increased the church's holdings while reducing the king's profits from the land. Mortmain, or "dead hand," gifts were only granted license when they did not detract from the king's bottom line. For more information about the statute as it pertains to chantries, see G. H. Cook, *Mediaeval Chantries and Chantry Chapels* (London: Phoenix House Limited, 1963), 71-9. For more information on the Statute of Mortmain and its

According to Ilana F. Silber, there is no effective sociological explanation for the benefits of donating land, money, or goods to a monastery. She argues that the Benedictine Rule and the efforts of self-sufficiency on behalf of monks is contrary to the system of donations, so the dependency on donations was not meant to be part of the religious structure. In Silber's model to explain donations, they would either need to be given as a religious tenet or as a way to gain favor with an authority or peers. Because monasteries were so isolated, it was difficult for people to gain influence with gifts of this kind unless they were unusually large gifts that were more directly related to the interests of church authorities.¹⁸ So, it is a logical progression that women who chose to donate land and money to the church were doing so out of a personal devotion to God or as a way of gaining favor in the next life. There were certainly cases where pious gifts were used as a method for gaining influence, but it was more likely for individuals to give for the benefits available in the afterlife rather than for their earthly gratification.

Interestingly, monasteries functioned as a bridge between lay and spiritual matters. Monasteries provided a physical center for spiritual manifestations (some in the

impact on the church in England, see Sandra Raban, *Mortmain Legislation and the English Church, 1279-1500*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982). For a brief explanation of the reasons the Statute of Mortmain was seen as necessary, see J. H. Baker, *An Introduction to English Legal History* (Bath: The Bath Press, 2002), 241,

¹⁸ Ilana F. Silber, "Gift-giving in the Great Traditions: The Case of Donations to Monasteries in the Medieval West," *European Journal of Sociology* 36, no. 2 (1995): 209-43, 210-4. Interestingly, Silber points out that monks were not the only people who could intercede for souls, and therefore are an interesting choice to be recipients of donations. In fact, monks were meant to pray whether they received alms or not so their support through donations and patronage is an interesting development. For more on patronage, Benedictine monasteries, and their patronage see Julian M. Luxford, *The Art and Architecture of English Benedictine Monasteries, 1300-1540: A Patronage History*, Studies in the History Medieval Religion (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2005).

form of relics, miracles, or other wonders), and they were also places where the pious laity could find instruction and direction. So, even though many of these spiritual centers were in relatively remote locations, distance did not keep people from building a relationship with these sites. According to Emilia Jamroziak, the laity were often highly involved in various feast days at the local monasteries and were great supporters as they shared close relationships with the inhabitants. Jamroziak's study focuses on the especially welcoming nature of Cistercian monasteries and their close ties with their communities. As a result of their relationships with the laity, Jamroziak argues that the physical features of the monastery from defensive structures to guest quarters bears the mark of the patrons who donated their funds or laborers to build.¹⁹ Since there were such close community and individual ties to these monastic communities, it is no surprise that many would choose to support them through donations both in life and in death.

This reciprocal relationship defines many of the terms under which items were given because there was a spiritual benefit associated with these gifts. By expressing agency in choosing to give a donation, these individuals were engaging in an act of piety which translated directly to the state of their souls. Despite the likely presence of some degree of social exploitation involved in the donation of large pieces of property or great sums of money, these exchanges were mostly acts of devotion. The genuine intent is especially implicit when donations were given by single women or widows who perhaps had less to give, or less authority to give than a male counterpart.

¹⁹ Emilia Jamroziak, "Spaces of lay-religious interaction in Cistercian houses of Northern Europe," *Parergon* 27, no. 2 (2010): 37-58, *Academic OneFile* (accessed 1 June, 2019), 40-3.

While many chose to give land to the monasteries and abbeys, there was also a large community of laypeople who leased from these institutions. It is common to find a variety of social classes and economic statuses represented in these leases. They often mention widows or husbands and wives, and there are even a few in which a daughter is named.²⁰ Leases were not only honored after the death of a husband, but some were made to widows in their own right. Joan Minshull leased a salt house from a convent, which she could hand down through her family for 81 years.²¹ The use of this building could have brought Joan an income to support herself and potentially her family. By leasing this property, she was able to demonstrate self-sufficiency and independence. Without a husband, Joan likely had to provide an income for herself even if she did have some inheritance or dower since she likely was not of a wealthy class and was certainly not of the nobility. Interestingly, there was also some protection for widows that can be found in these records. Margery Turner and her son William should hold the property until their deaths.²² This implies a level of protection of the widow's interests and wellbeing as she is not only listed, but there is a clear statement that they should hold the land until their deaths, which applies to all members of the household. In contrast, Joan, late the wife of Roger Rokeley, was the subject of a complaint to the Prince's Council by the abbot resulting in a formal settlement because she had not paid the rent on the property her

²⁰ "No. 1037," *The Cartulary of Haughmond Abbey*, ed. Una Rees (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1985), 196. A widow named Matilda Ruiton is mentioned as the property being allotted bordered hers.

²¹ "No. 1296" (1478) *Haughmond Abbey*, 235.

²² "No. 1328" (1470) *Haughmond Abbey*, 239.

husband rented. As a result, Joan had to pay back what was owed but it seems she was allowed to hold the property so long as she complied with the appropriate payment.²³

One of the many reasons a single woman or widow may have chosen to donate her land could have been a lack of heirs to whom she would leave her property. Another might have been her intention to enter the abbey as a nun to have a supportive community as she aged. Whatever the case may have been, the wishes of many widows and single women live on in the cartularies. Helewise's donation of land appears in *The Cartulary of Haughmond Abbey* not on its own but as a description of the land being rented out to a man named Ralph Lee. Because Helewise is identified as the "daughter of Hamon of St. Regimus," it is reasonable to assume she was a single woman.²⁴ It is significant that her donation of one-half a virgate of land continued to bear her name as it was being leased because even though ownership had passed to the monastery, her authority to give the land was remembered and recorded. Even if this record was meant to be a descriptor, there still remains a footprint of female agency because she was able to control the land she owned and chose to give it to the abbey for use or profit.

More evidence of the reciprocal relationship between these religious institutions and their benefactors and benefactresses can be observed in the reclamation of a donation by Isabel, who was identified as the widow of Walter Langley. According to the license,

²³ "No. 1347" (1479) *Haughmond Abbey*, 241. In this case, Joan's son John was also held responsible and likewise faced a penalty, but Joan's name came first when they were mentioned, so it is likely she bore more of the burden.

²⁴ "No. 167" (1445), *Haughmond Abbey*, 152. It is reasonable to assume Helewise was a single woman because she was identified as a daughter and not as a wife or widow. It is sometimes the case that married or widowed women were identified by their father's name if he was better known or if she had closer ties to her family, but in a document like this it would be typical to address her widowed state.

Isabel was to be given land that her late husband's kinsman had either rented or donated use of to the local parson and also some land rented to a grocer.²⁵ In this case, it could have been a personal arrangement and not a donation to the church that was being dissolved. Yet, it is interesting that there are times in which the church and those who initially possessed the land come into conflict causing the heirs to dispute a donation, or a need arose which caused them to reconsider their earthly needs against their spiritual needs. For instance, Thomasia, widow of John Gra, inherited property from him, and a concern that needed to be resolved. He held the land as a result of the grant of Bishop William Waynflete who had the reversion of the land but did not own it. So, Thomasia had the unfortunate responsibility of having to navigate her holding and various legal complications as a result of a complex situation of property holdings and rents.²⁶ These challenges befell many, partially due to political maneuvering and changes in influence as relationships changed within the region.

Universities

One trend in Englishwomen's patterns of giving that directly resulted in new dynamics of influence and power was their patronage of universities. Without detracting from the popularity of other religious institutions for gifts that translated to spiritual rewards, individuals often patronized universities as an alternative that offered social and spiritual returns. Though colleges and universities were popular recipients, it seems they were less

²⁵ *Calendar of the Patent Rolls Preserved in the Public Record Office, Edward IV-Henry VI* (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1891), 4 July 1471, 271. From here on to be cited *CPR*.

²⁶ *CPR*, 8 October 1467, 43.

favored as benefactors in wills than other religious institutions. Instead, they were popular beneficiaries of gifts made by the living to memorialize the dead or otherwise bring spiritual benefits to themselves. This could be a result of a greater personal connection to the desired burial place or simply practical considerations for the availability of interment spaces. Regardless, universities were an outlet for many to express their devotion to God and loved ones. Alan Cobban states: “The fact that some of the prominent burgesses of Oxford, Cambridge and London preferred to trade their benefactions for the purchase of university commemorative services instead of making more conventional chantry provisions is eloquent testimony to the attractiveness of the universities as venues for spiritual insurance.”²⁷ According to Cobban’s argument, there were many motivations for one to donate to the university, most of which were rooted in the desire for salvation.

Though there were noble families who gave to the universities for their relatives who were studying, there were many cases where there was no obvious connection. Cobban also makes a point to address noblewomen’s donations to universities and suggests that there is no particular pattern to them as some had stipulations and others had few or no stipulations.²⁸ Many of the women who established lectures or endowed universities had a relationship with the property or a vested interest in the theology being taught at the institution. This is especially the case with royal women, like Lady Margaret Beaufort (mother of Henry VII), who established positions for teachers at several universities. All of the universities she patronized were under her influence not only

²⁷Alan B. Cobban, “English University Benefactors in the Middle Ages,” *History* 86, no. 283 (2001): 288-312, 290.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 294-6.

because she funded them but because they were within her lands (or her family's lands). So, they were political, spiritual, and practical. Maintaining the connections between their spiritual lives and the practical aspects of political life could be incredibly useful to any individual, but especially to women.²⁹ Universities offered many prayers for their patrons, but they also produced capable public servants. Essentially acting as a chantry of its own, the university brought great spiritual rewards to those who founded them while also bringing them practical gains from the professionals who would potentially be practicing law or serving their interests in public service.³⁰ By combining her many forms of influence with her spiritual pursuits, Lady Margaret was able to maximize the effect of her patronage in universities.

Cobban's argument that the role of the benefactress was the most powerful role for a woman in the university is compelling. One of the women he cites in his study, Dame Alice Wyche, endowed a fellowship (among other donations) and several other

²⁹ For another example of a widowed king's mother using her circumstances to shape an identity and wield influence, refer to J. L. Laynesmith, *Cecily Duchess of York* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 89-91. According to Laynesmith, Cecily worked to fulfil the social expectations of a woman of her status, but also wielded great influence and made deliberate choices with not only her piety, but her access to power.

³⁰ Michael K. Jones and Malcolm G. Underwood, *The King's Mother: Lady Margaret Beaufort, Countess of Richmond and Derby* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 206-11. She also used her position and influence to establish several chantries which were connected to her endowments, so both were firmly under her influence and garnered her the greatest available spiritual rewards for her funding each. For more on relationships between royals, their influence, and the chantries (and other endowments) they made, consult Antje Ferhmann, "Politics and Posterity: English Royal Chantry Provision 1232-1509," in *The Medieval Chantry in England*, ed. Julian M. Luxford and John McNeill, 74-99 (Wakefield: Charlesworth Press, 2011); Michael Hicks, *Richard III and His Rivals: Magnates and Their Motives in the War of the Roses* (London: The Hambledon Press, 1991). Hicks discusses another notable noblewoman's foundations and endowments in his analysis of the Hungerford family patronage, especially that of Lady Margaret Hungerford.

women prevented universities from closing or otherwise provided essential support. Though he acknowledges that this was not unique to women, there is seemingly a pattern of women choosing less affluent institutions over others whereas men commonly donated to both.³¹ In all cases, there was an expectation of great spiritual reward equal to that of other forms donations, such as a chantry or gifts to an abbey. However, A. K. McHardy argues that universities often fulfilled their role in power dynamics established by their patrons, they seldom maintained their spiritual obligations to offer services regularly and to the extent expected.³² If this was truly the case, patronesses were likely aware that their gifts may not reap the spiritual gain they hoped. Those who chose to give regardless of this concern were surely considering the social implications of their choice.

Just like their individual motivations for donating, individual women often made unique contributions. Some women took different approaches from typical expressions of support, like endowing a professorship or building on to the campus. For example, Alice Belasys was given a license to grant property to Oxford University for the use or support of the master and scholars.³³ The ways in which women chose to support their preferred institutions reflects their social status, wealth, and personalities. Agency in not only choosing to make these donations, but deciding how much to give and when to give, is incredibly significant. Testatrixes who gave to religious institutions in their wills were

³¹ Cobban, "University Benefactors," 302. Dame Alice Wyche's will is addressed in the chapter of this thesis entitled "Wills."

³² A. K. McHardy, "Patronage in Late Medieval Colleges" in *The Late Medieval English College and its Context*, ed. Clive Burgess and Martin Heale, 89-109 (York: The Boydell Press, 2008), 89, 92-3. McHardy also asserts the role bishops played in the establishment of colleges to reward subordinates when their monastic cathedrals offered few opportunities for advancement.

³³ *CPR*, 16 May 1447, 73.

exercising agency in giving for the benefit of their souls and crafting for themselves a spiritual journey with the expectation of heavenly rewards. Women who donated in life likely sacrificed to do so, which could demonstrate a greater degree of devotion than that expressed by testatrixes. However, there are a number of women whose bequests were a result of a lifetime of religious devotion. In these cases, they may have donated small amounts (that may not be recorded) as married women and then larger amounts as widows, not to mention their potential influence over their husbands' donations. Single women's habits are easier to observe over the course of their lives, though the challenge presented is their lack of appearance in records because they did not typically have enough wealth to donate notable sums or leave a will.

Chantries

While many chantries were themselves established in wills, there are also many cases when a chantry was established during life. The Patent Rolls and cartularies from the various churches and monasteries give evidence of religious donations made during life, and a few that were made in death. These gifts given during the life of the patroness are an example of a public display of personal piety and an expression of personal sentiment on a potentially large scale. While donations varied quite a bit from content, quantity, and quality, there is a common theme in that there was usually a personal connection resulting in the donation.³⁴ These were gifts made for the benefit of the soul or for the outward expression of an inward faith. Whatever the motivation for the gift, the effect of

³⁴ According to Rosenthal in *The Purchase of Paradise*, many more chantries were founded than appear in the wills and Patent Rolls, especially in the thirteenth-century records, 32-5.

a woman expressing agency by making a public decision to give her property or money to a religious organization was significant because it demonstrated her control of her own property and ownership.

Patterns in the foundations of chantries in the Patent Rolls go beyond simple terminology. Typically donations would be recorded as grants or a license to build, donate money, or give property in exchange for whatever form the donation took. Most donations from the records examined in this study resulted in a chantry, though there were some building projects or endowments for universities.³⁵ Interestingly, most of the variants were donations made by men while women's donations displayed consistency. In addition to licenses to found a chantry there is also evidence of women holding influence over multiple chantries and even the appointments of clergy. These positions of influence and power would have given the women holding them the ability to express a greater degree of agency or perhaps access to power through their ability to appoint or recommend individuals to positions of leadership within the community.

Cecily, duchess of Warwick, was granted a large swath of land with all its amenities to "hold in dower" following her husband's death. While this was typical, one of the interesting features of such a grant is the numerous chantries she then possessed. This is interesting because it is likely that her husband established or inherited the responsibility of providing funds to the chantry for the benefit of the souls of his family and potentially some friends. Cecily may have been able to amend the stipulations of the

³⁵ For more information about the ways in which chantries were founded, and the variations of chantries found in England and the continental Europe, see K. L. Wood-Legh, *Perpetual Chantries in Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965). Wood-Legh's second chapter is especially informative.

chantry, if she so desired, to reflect new needs like prayers for the soul of her late husband or perhaps even some of her relatives. Additionally, she was also in possession of some degree of power as she received:

advowson of the church[es] of Hampslape [and] Olney... the manor of Flamstede and the advowson of the church thereof... the advowsons of the churches of Fambrugge and Stanbrugge... the advowson of the 'Beauchampis Chaunterye' in St. Paul's church, London... advowson of the church of Wodebergh... advowsons of the churches of Abbotley, Shraveley, Ribbeford, Grafton Flevord, Elmeley Lovet and Salewarp.³⁶

A woman with the ability to appoint or recommend clergy to places of authority, especially when she had authority over no fewer than thirteen recommendations, could have given her great sway with the local clergy and therefore with those in their parishes, and potentially with church leaders who would have had an interest in those appointments for their own proteges or relatives. As a result of her position within the power dynamic, this could have made it easier for her to manage her property. It may have also been advantageous for her in consideration of her own pious interests and spiritual needs.

Many of the chantries founded by women were on behalf of their own souls, but also those of their loved ones who preceded them in death. Joan, identified as the widow of William Warrewyke, was given a grant to found a chantry for both her and her husband's souls, as well as the souls of her parents and husband's parents. Interestingly, the chantry was named after her husband even though it benefitted many people. Joan also received permission to grant a mortmain holding to the chaplain who would oversee

³⁶ *CPR*, 22 May 1447, 37-8.

the chancery so that he would be supported in his prayers for the souls of her family.³⁷ Joan probably established this chantry in the memory of her late husband and for the benefit of his soul so that he could enter heaven sooner. There is no doubt that Joan was aware of the spiritual benefits she would reap as the benefactor for this chantry and accompanying chaplain. Just two months after the first, she received a second grant to increase the holdings of the chaplain appointed to her husband's chantry.³⁸ While these demonstrations of piety were often a result of love for the deceased, there was a certain degree of personal gain expected on the side of the giver. Undoubtedly, Joan was hoping to receive spiritual rewards in addition to those that her late husband and their parents would also receive as a result of the masses and prayers that would be given on their behalves. Since Joan was able to found the chantry and support the chaplain, it is likely that she enjoyed financial stability and some degree of affluence, since her husband was a merchant.

Isabel, widow of John Bridde (identified as being from Marleburgh), was granted a license to "alienate in mortmain" a large amount of property including more than 50 acres and the buildings on them. Interestingly, she had already founded the chantry to which these lands were alienated. Not only was the chantry in her local parish church, which speaks to the connection to her community, but it was also founded at the altar of "St. Katharine therein."³⁹ Women choosing to establish a connection to a female saint

³⁷ *CPR*, 8 March 1447, 48; Barbara J. Harris, *English Aristocratic Women and the Fabric of Piety, 1450-1550*, Gendering the Late Medieval and Early Modern World (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 100-1. According to Harris, many aristocratic women not only founded, but also richly adorned the chantries established for themselves and their families.

³⁸ *CPR*, 1 May 1447, 61.

³⁹ *CPR*, 10 December 1449, 301.

was common in medieval England, but it was also meaningful. The saint one chose to venerate and the location of the burial was incredibly significant for those who were asserting their influence or shaping their legacies. Associating herself with a particular saint or holy place would show that she either held similar qualities or hoped to receive a special benefit from this nearness. In the case of founding chantries in the local parish, it could have been the result of sentiment but was often the result of an individual seeking to solidify or demonstrate their influence within the region.⁴⁰

In some cases, those who were unable to afford to found a chantry themselves pooled resources to found one, either for a specific purpose or because they could not independently do so. Margaret, widow of the knight Thomas Rempston, founded a chantry for him with two other knights, William Babyngton and Thomas Chaworth, as co-founders. This particular chantry was for the benefit of Margaret and her family's souls, with emphasis given to her late husband's soul. Henry IV is also listed among those to be honored in the masses.⁴¹ It is possible, in this situation, that two associates, friends, or relatives of the deceased husband wanted to help his widow honor him when she was not financially able to do so on her own. In this case, she perhaps is exercising less agency that she would have been had she been the one to dictate the terms of the arrangement. Nevertheless, she is still exercising a degree of agency because she was not obligated to participate in the expression of piety. Clearly, she understood that there were

⁴⁰ Harris, *Fabric of Piety*, 61. Harris states that many women founded or adorned chantries in several locations to maintain their influence or honor their family ties to those places.

⁴¹ *CPR*, 1 March 1447, 49.

spiritual benefits to reap from this for not only her late husband and family, but for herself.

Section II: Complicating Factors and Considerations

Husbands and Wives

While it was common for men and women to give earthly gifts in exchange for spiritual benefits, the patterns in women's gifts are interesting to observe.⁴² Although more men donated property and money, there were many cases when men would include their wives in the donation. Because married women did not own property under coverture, medieval Englishwomen only donated property if they were widows or single women. Married women would not have been able to donate anything without the consent of their husbands. As a result, the cases in which husbands' and wives' names both appear with the husband as the primary donor could result from the wife's desire to give to religious houses and spiritual causes. To determine which husbands acted upon their wives' prompting is nearly impossible due to the procedural phrasing of most donations. Examining married women's agency in this case would be largely speculative. For example, while Joan's name appears alongside her husband Thomas Halewey in the license for their founding of a chantry, this was very common and not indicative of a woman's piety. The only thing that could indicate her potentially-influential role in the

⁴² Not examined in this chapter is the support given to women who joined monastic communities. Though there was much support from their relatives or community members, these gifts were likely of a personal nature or an obligation to care for the nun's needs. This study focuses on the actions of laywomen in their expressions of personal piety and therefore will only address the laywoman's relationship to religious houses or organizations.

planning and execution of this founding is the inclusion of both the king and the queen in the list of people who were honored in the masses.⁴³ Many entries in the Patent Rolls indicate that the king, and even past kings were included but the queen was seldom included.⁴⁴ Another indication could have been that the chantry was given the family name rather than named after the husband, as was typical of many chantries.⁴⁵ Yet there is not enough evidence to demonstrate statistically-significant patterns when examining records of married women's gifts.

Many cases follow a pattern similar to that of Robert Ogle and his wife Isabel's donation, which mentions Isabel's name several times but does not indicate any other expressions of feminine influence like the mention of other women or naming practices indicating neutrality. But one complicating factor is the way these donations vary in form because this is a frankalmoign landholding given in exchange for prayers for the family and all heirs of Robert and Isabel.⁴⁶ So, while these donations followed broad patterns of employing formulaic language and cultural norms for the types of gifts given, there is

⁴³ *CPR*, 18 May 1448, 250.

⁴⁴ For example: *CPR*, 1 March 1447, 49. Margaret, widow of a knight named Thomas Rempston, founded a chantry for him along with two other knights, stating that services should be given for the founders, their relatives, and for the king (Henry VI) as well as Henry IV. *CPR*, 22 January 1450, 322. Five men, including a bishop, also founded a chantry for their souls and "for the good estate of the king" without mention of the queen. *CPR*, 24 May 1452, 557. One of the few inclusions of the queen I found was in the license for Humphrey, Duke of Buckingham, and his wife Anne to found a chantry in their manor. Interestingly, it was in honor of the Virgin Mary and thus had a connection to female power both spiritually and temporally..

⁴⁵ Harris, *Fabric of Piety*, 53, 58-9. Harris gives several examples of men and women founding their chantries together, of widows founding them according to their late husbands' wills, and of men taking the credit for chantries founded with their wives' money (since many women brought land, wealth, and powerful family connections into their marriages).

⁴⁶ *CPR*, 12 May 1468, 83.

little accurate measure of the role married women played in them. Depending on what the gift was composed of, there is some degree of individuality that can be assessed, especially in the donations made by never-married or widowed women, as they tended to be more sentimental or personal.

Even when men were the donors, it could be the case that their wives were consenting parties. Claire Breay observed a pattern of female donors and the explicit consent of wives in donations in her examination of the cartulary of Chatteris Abbey.⁴⁷ While there is not often a mention of the explicit consent of a wife, there are many cases in which the wife may have been involved in the decision to leave property to the religious house. In one case, Ralph Lee left his property to Haughmond Abbey for 99 years following the death of Elizabeth, his wife.⁴⁸ Whether Elizabeth was part of this decision-making or not is impossible to ascertain, but her possession of the lands as a widow suggests that she may have consented and her soul benefitted from this arrangement. While it is speculation, there is an observable pattern in donations made by a husband for the benefit of his soul in that they usually include the wife's soul when the donations were substantial or concerned family lands and funds.

Class Differences

One of the other complications with the examination of donations is the issue that there were many undocumented gifts. Some widows were potentially part of the decision-making process when their husbands willed their property to a religious organization with

⁴⁷ Claire Breay and Chatteris Abbey, *The Cartulary of Chatteris Abbey* (Rochester: Boydell & Brewer, 1999), 49.

⁴⁸ "No. 1071," "No. 1073" *Haughmond Abbey*, 201.

the stipulation that she have the use of their property until her death. In these cases, there is no way to assess whether or not the widow was involved in the choice to donate property. Because it was stipulated in her husband's will that she have use of the land until her death the widow may have affirmed it in her will, but likely left no record of her own involvement and her affirmation is not necessarily an indication of her own devotion but perhaps of her support of her late husband's devotion. Again, it is not the absence of sentiment and personal piety but the inability to observe a direct connection between an individual and these actions that prevents a clear analysis of these types of gifts.

Change Over Time

Other patterns in donations that could prove a challenge to understanding them and their nature is the infrequency of gifts to religious institutions in the fifteenth century. Women commonly gave gifts in the thirteenth century, but it seems that donations declined steadily between both men and women over the course of the fourteenth century and severely dropped off before the beginning of the fifteenth century.⁴⁹ The number of donations that were not associated with sentimental gifts or burial endowments severely declined after the thirteenth century and were far less frequent across social classes and genders. One of the reasons for this steep decline is that monasteries were being built and needed to be funded in the thirteenth century, whereas they were generally completed by

⁴⁹ Burgess, *The Right Ordering of Souls*, 223-4. This may have partly resulted from the Statute of Mortmain, discussed on page 19. Burgess argues that many chantries in the late fifteenth century did not require a license to alienate in mortmain, and that many of the documents associated with chantries were lost as they were kept separately from church warden's accounts in many cases. Despite these caveats, there was still a drop in establishment of chantries when taking these considerations into account.

the fifteenth century. As a result of the large number of monasteries, according to Karen Stöber, “The cost of religious foundations went up, as the value of land in the fourteenth century increased sharply, while at the same time income was reduced. The ‘rising price of piety’ was undoubtedly felt by potential lay patrons and meant that founding a monastery was once again no longer an affordable option for many a layman.”⁵⁰ This adds to the complexities of women’s donations because even a wealthy widow may have been unable to afford substantial gifts to religious institutions unless she was uncommonly wealthy.

In some cases, gifts were made to institutions facing financial trouble or otherwise in need of aid following the fourteenth century.⁵¹ Other gifts were likely to help the monasteries expand, develop universities, or to employ a cleric to say masses and prayers for the spiritual benefit of the donor.⁵² Many gifts were small and personal unless they were larger gifts, which were less frequently given than in previous centuries. As a result, there are few records of donations to examine in the fifteenth century. Yet, this does not mean women were not making donations in other ways that have gone unrecorded. Some of the differences that can be observed in the fifteenth century is the significance of a

⁵⁰ Stöber, *Late Medieval Monasteries and Their Patrons*, 16.

⁵¹ Wood-Legh, *Perpetual Chantries in Britain*, 98-102. According to Wood-Legh, many chantries faced great poverty in the fifteenth century and faced closure. Usually, the chaplain would have to seek license to either request more funds from other relatives of the deceased, seek out new posts and carry out prayers and services alongside new duties, or raise funds for materials and labor to carry out repairs and continue the services. While some testators made provisions for this inevitability in a perpetual chantry, most did not.

⁵² Stöber, *Late Medieval Monasteries and Their Patrons*, 65; Luxford, *The Art and Architecture of English Benedictine Monasteries*, 117. Luxford expands the idea that monasteries needed little in the way of expansion in late medieval England, but instead looked to external patrons for help maintaining what they possessed, especially any legal rights.

donation when it is such a rare occurrence. In these cases, it is a demonstration of the devotion these women had to their faith.

Motivations

What is interesting in the patterns that can be observed is that donations were often given by the poorer classes of laity, even though they had less land to give than the nobility. According to Breay, it is very difficult to distinguish the social or economic standing of the patron. Even in the case of a large donation, it may not have been the case that the donor was of the nobility.⁵³ Stöber also states that the experience and intention behind supporting these institutions, much like the experiences of the monasteries themselves, took many forms and held many meanings to the different individuals.⁵⁴ Sentiment was often a result of the deep personal connections women felt to the institutions they chose to support. In addition to this, there was commonly a relationship between the people who donated and the local institutions, or there was a connection between the donor and the relic, saint, or other subject of veneration at the institution. In this case, the women who chose to donate were carving out their own spiritual experiences as benefactresses and patronesses who likely dictated stipulations or made specific requests of those they supported. Much like the experience of leaving behind a will, these women established a lasting legacy that demonstrated their values, which were expressions of piety and personal connections to causes greater than themselves.

⁵³ *The Cartulary of Chatteris Abbey*, 45-6. According to Breay, there were also cases where women would bring their dowry into the nunnery as a gift upon being admitted. Though this was banned in the thirteenth century, she has found evidence that many still required or practiced this tradition of requesting the dowry from novices. 52.

⁵⁴ Stöber, *Late Medieval Monasteries and Their Patrons*, 65.

Conclusions

These examples indicate that women, especially widows, were able to possess and distribute their wealth and earthly possessions. While a married woman was able to participate and potentially even give sentimental possessions, she would not have been able to give property or significant amounts of money without her husband's permission and oversight. Through the analysis of wills, and the donations, burial gifts, and chantries found therein, it is evident that women had a significant role in developing and maintaining religious institutions. Since this was not compulsory, it is evident that the women who made these donations were expressing their individual convictions to honor their faith or improve the state of their souls. Perhaps improving the condition of their souls after death was a highly motivational purpose for these gifts, but it does not negate the agency and sentiment behind the choice to donate their personal possessions.

Women's agency as expressed by personal piety is particularly significant because of their motivations. There may have been a greater degree of individual expression available through religious avenues and the cultivation of a faith journey, but that circumstance is not in itself a motive for women to give of their own personal possessions in support of religious institutions. Actions, whether motivated by spiritual or social rewards, give insights into the decisions women made in regard to the property and money they possessed. While some pious acts may have been a deathbed attempt at increasing spiritual standing and improving the circumstances of her soul in the afterlife, special attention must be paid to donations made in life. Donations of land and money during a widow or single woman's life was indicative of a greater experience of piety with complex social considerations. Memorialization of a loved one, support of

institutions tied to family legacies, and the patronage of universities all held different purposes not only in and of themselves, but for each individual woman who chose to give to them. While there are many patterns and trends apparent in these gifts, there is also overwhelming evidence to show that there was a unique personal connection experienced by each woman in her desire to support, or even reject, the opportunity to express her personal faith.

CHAPTER III

WILLS

Introduction

Elizabeth Woodville was widowed by her husband King Edward IV and was therefore responsible for disposing of her property upon her death by crafting a will and naming executors. What is notable about this particular royal will is the absence of material items and the desire to be buried with little pomp and circumstance. Within this document, the former queen consort's wishes appear clearly: "Item, whereas I have no worldly goods to do the Queen's Grace, my dearest daughter, a pleasure with, neither to reward any of my children according to my heart and mind, I beseech Almighty God to bless her Grace, with all her noble issue; and, wish as good heart and mind as is to me possible, I give her Grace my blessing, and all the aforesaid my children."¹ Elizabeth is not concerned with the distribution of her material possessions, which she requests be sold to pay debts and benefit her soul after her children have been given the opportunity to take whatever they would like to keep. Listing no items specifically, Elizabeth made a point to emphasize simplicity and piety in her final bequest.² Her testament illuminates elements of her personality, values, and beliefs. Perhaps Elizabeth is not an appropriate guide for understanding the lives of all women in medieval England, but she provides an example

¹ "Will of Elizabeth" (1492) in *Testamenta Vetusta: Being Illustrations From Wills, of Manners, Customs, &c. As Well As of the Descents And Possessions of Many Distinguished Families. From the Reign of Henry the Second to the Accession of Queen Elizabeth* ed. Sir Nicolas, Nicholas Harris (London: Nichols & Son, 1826), 1:25, available online at <https://archive.org/details/testamentavetust01nico> (accessed 27 April 2018).

² Ibid.

of how wealthy widows were able to express agency through their final wishes and legal actions.

Section I: Widows, Single Women, and Wills

Formation of Wills

Wills were not often written by the women themselves, but were likely dictated to a professional or to one of the executors. Mia Korpiola and Anu Lahtinen examine the circumstances under which testaments were written, stating: “Law mattered at the deathbed. It shaped the process of dying.”³ According to Korpiola and Lahtinen, English wills (in contrast to continental widows’ wills) were not often taken down by a notary, but instead by someone nearby while the testator lay near death. As a result, many changes were made or reversed in the last moments of the testatrix’s life since it was common to amend final wishes either to accommodate previously-made verbal codicils or to rescind them. Korpiola and Lahtinen emphasized the absence of evidence that clergymen coerced testators into giving gifts to the church, though many relatives or those owed a debt would often apply pressure to be included and commonly contested wills in court.⁴ The significance of the conditions in which the bequests were recorded emphasizes the importance of the decisions made by the women about what to include, as well as what was most important to them. Considering all of the pressures around the deathbed, when women made preparations for their soul they were taking the time to prioritize the condition of their souls and their legacies. This pressure to conform to

³ Mia Korpiola and Anu Lahtinen, *Planning for Death : Wills and Death-Related Property Arrangements in Europe, 1200-1600* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 240.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 245-50.

expectations at such a vulnerable time was intense. While some women certainly prepared wills far in advance of their deaths to avoid these situations, many others likely spent their final days resisting pressures to adjust their final wishes. It certainly stands to reason that many women's wills reveal their deepest wishes, strongest convictions, or even devotions to their duties whether to the family or as a result of their social standing.

Thus, the actual words preserved in the documents are not necessarily the exact words of the women, but the authentic wishes of the women are present within the text. What occurred during probate may not have fulfilled these final wishes, but this was also true for men's wills. Wills were often contested by disgruntled heirs and some requests were not able to be fulfilled due to unpaid debts requiring settlement, or other factors such as the untimely death of an heir.⁵ Under these circumstances, the wishes of the widow may not have been honored, but the wishes are present nonetheless. The regular inclusion of widow's wills at courts of probate reveals the acceptance of women as testatrices in late medieval England.⁶ Despite the adherence to a certain format that restricted the voices of the will makers, and the instances when wishes were not fulfilled, "there is hardly a side of medieval life that cannot be illustrated by wills."⁷ The little left behind by medieval Englishwomen is not always indicative of their actual lived experience, but wills allow the historian to determine their wishes for the distribution,

⁵ R. H. Helmholz, *Canon Law and the Law of England* (Ronceverte: The Hambledon Press, 1987), 292. According to Helmholz, the ecclesiastical courts of England were accustomed to dealing with insolvent testators and those looking to collect debts from estates.

⁶ J. H. Baker, *An Introduction to English Legal History* (Bath: The Bath Press, 2002), 284-5.

⁷ Caroline A. J. Skeel, "Medieval Wills," *History*, New Series, 10, no. 40 (1926): 300-10, 300.

preservation, or donation of property to better understand how they lived and what they had the agency to accomplish. Women, especially widows, controlled the legacy they left, and they were able to use wills to establish the ways in which they wanted to be remembered.

Widows were especially significant in this role because they were crafting wills in their own right, not under the supervision of a male relative. In fifteenth-century England, the husband acted as the head of the household and all who were in the household were under his authority and acted in his name. Even married women who were crafting wills themselves were doing so with the permission of their husbands because of the implications of coverture. In this context, the agency of the wife can only be determined if the husband's involvement is assessed first.⁸ Widows do not present the same challenge of determining how involved the husband was in crafting the will or deciding what property could be willed to whom. Acting as head of their households in the absence of a husband or male relative, widows had the opportunity to fulfill their role in their own name and not under the name of a husband or father.⁹ Women were not simply acting as temporary placeholders for men, but access to the legal system was something

⁸ Georges Duby, "Women and Power" in *Cultures of Power: Lordship, Status, and Process in Twelfth-Century Europe*, Thomas N. Bisson, ed. 69-88, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), Accessed March 9, 2018. ProQuest Ebook Central, 73-5. For more information about medieval married Englishwomen and restrictions or liberties they experienced, as understood by a sixteenth-century author, refer to Henry Swinburne, *A Brief Treatise of Testaments and Last Wills* (London: Windet, 1590; Reprint New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1978).

⁹ Baker, *English Legal History*, 484-7, 386. Mavis E. Mate, *Daughters, Wives, and Widows After the Black Death: Women in Sussex, 1350-1535* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 1998), 31, 109-11; Cordelia Beattie, *Medieval Single Women: The Politics of Social Classification in Late Medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 24-9.

readily accessible for women who found themselves independent of a man. Women acting as heads of their households were not usurping a man's power, but they were stepping into a new, publicly recognized role.

Agency and Wills

Widows may have been influenced by male relatives or other men in crafting wills or in their other affairs, but the degree of influence the widow allowed was her choice. If she sought help or otherwise accepted advice, then she was still expressing agency as an individual capable of making the decision to accept or reject help. Access to the legal system, especially through the crafting of wills, was a way that women could display agency and take power into their own hands in a form that was publicly recognized as legitimate. Within these documents, widows' individuality, values, beliefs, and personality can be observed. What can be ascertained about these wealthy and aristocratic women may not be indicative of the experience of all women, but this is one of the few ways women appear separate from their husbands and are able to exert influence over not only the property they possessed, but over the way people would remember them following their deaths. Those who were not wealthy enough to bequeath the little property they possessed are therefore not represented in the record, nor are they remembered according to their own wishes and choices. Nevertheless, the aristocratic women who participated in holding public power set a precedent that lesser-status women might have been able to follow as the legal system evolved and women's agency increased over time.

Many of the freedoms to be able to craft wills, especially as experienced by women, originated within the church. There is evidence that women were able to leave wills for the benefit of their soul before they were recognized as legitimate legal documents in secular courts. In the medieval English church, specifically, making a testament was a religious liberty and was under the power of the ecclesiastical court rather than the secular court. Arthur Ogle argues that it was a highly regarded right to bequeath one's earthly goods, and that the result of the ecclesiastical jurisdiction was the fusion of Roman Civil Law with Roman Canon Law within the English Common Law system that upheld the decisions of the church.¹⁰ Over time, the common law system adapted to accept what had been ongoing in the ecclesiastical courts. Women's abilities to bequeath items for the benefit of their soul was not a sacrament, but was a sacred practice nonetheless as it was overseen by the church. It was also a distinctly English practice, argues Ogle. According to Sheehan, "...in time the pious gift became associated with the testament... [and] bishops acquired a right of supervision over the delivery of legacies in alms."¹¹ These expressions of women's wishes were intended to allow them to express their religious devotion and leave behind alms, donations, or property in exchange for prayers or indulgences on behalf of their souls. It was meant as a formal exchange so women would have assurance that their souls were provided for before passing on to the afterlife, even if it was not legally binding. Whether those bequests

¹⁰ Arthur Ogle, *The Canon Law in Mediaeval England* (New York: Lenox Hill Publishing and Distribution Company, 1971), 85-89.

¹¹ Michael M. Sheehan, "The Influence of Canon Law on the Property Rights of Married Women in Medieval England," in *Marriage, Family, and Law in Medieval Europe: Collected Studies*, ed. by James K. Farge, 16-30 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 19.

were fulfilled by those remaining in life is subject to question as they were often contested by heirs.¹²

Single Women

The idea that widows could make their own choices and express themselves through the distribution of property and instructions for their burial is reinforced by new studies of single women in the eyes of the law. According to Amy Louise Erikson, “Married English women had fewer resources at their disposal but single English women had more resources at their disposal than elsewhere in Europe.”¹³ Unmarried women who left behind wills, though there are few, demonstrate the ability of both never married women and widows to move freely in the legal system and to have access to a limited form of public power. With the ability of single women to maneuver through the legal system, it is evident that widows were not exceptional women usurping the power of a husband, but they were heads of households acting according to the authority they possessed. Unmarried women who were no longer members of their fathers’ households also wielded authority over themselves and over their property.

Until the mid-fifteenth century, the legal record did not distinguish between single women and widows, but all were listed without reference to husbands. According to Judith M. Bennett and Christopher Whittick, a woman named Philippa Russell offers a special insight into the lives of single women and their mobility in society. Due to her father’s bequest of his properties and her mother’s remarriage after his death, Philippa

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Amy Louise Erikson, “Coverture and Capitalism,” *History Workshop Journal*, no. 59 (2005): 1-16, 3.

appears in the record as a beneficiary of her father's will and is named again as an heir in her step-father's will. She can also be observed in other records as a result of her status as head of her household and her management of the property she owned. Bennett and Whittick argue that Philippa "reveals herself in her will as a strong-minded woman who was both closely tied to her family and separate from it."¹⁴ In preparing for her death, Philippa liquidated her land holdings and made alterations to her will to ensure accuracy. She did not hesitate to identify herself as a single woman, and she made very clear provisions for her estate that can be observed in not only her bequest of property, but also in the records of her holdings before her will was proved. Philippa's self-identification and determination to see her wishes made clear demonstrates her ability to access a level of authority typically held by a man without ever having been married or associated with a man's power in her adult life.¹⁵

The presence of single women like Philippa provides evidence of the agency wielded by women. Fewer single women are present in the record because it was rarer for a single woman to have been wealthy enough to leave behind an inheritance worthy of a will and an executor. Many women chose to marry and have families rather than remain single, which is why there are so great a number of medieval widows. However widowhood was not the only avenue of access to property for women without husbands. For any combination of reasons, there were simply fewer never-married women needing to make wills at the end of life than there were widows and wives. But those women who were set to inherit their father's possessions who lacked a husband or children to carry on

¹⁴ Judith M. Bennett and Christopher Whittick "Philippa Russell and the Wills of London's Late Medieval Singlewomen," *The London Journal*, 32:3 (2013): 254.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 252, 256.

the family legacy needed to craft a will. For example, Joan Knowght was aware of her position as an heir and realized her responsibilities to her tenants and relatives. After identifying herself as her father's heir, she listed her properties and the inheritances she was in line to receive, proceeding to distribute them among her loved ones.¹⁶ She took great care and personal responsibility to see that this inheritance would not be wasted or lost upon her death. The desire to take responsibility and make provisions for her wealth is indicative of the responsibility she felt to the property she possessed as its owner and steward. Like many other women crafting wills, Joan was aware of her role as the owner and possessor of property that required attention. The widows and single women who acted as heads of their households were able to choose for themselves what legacy they wished to leave, and those wishes are preserved in the final wills and testaments.

Section II: Widows Exercising Agency

Memory and Decision-making

Control over their own legacies was the greatest expression of agency available to widows who were able to craft wills and distribute their earthly possessions. Harris also explains that, in addition to their pious concerns, widows used testaments of bequest to preserve their memory, legacy, and care for their descendants. According to Harris,

Freed from the disabilities of coverture and controlling huge amounts of wealth, aristocratic widows transformed the last task facing them – arranging the disposition of their bodies and the care of their souls after their deaths – into an opportunity to proclaim and memorialize identities that they chose for themselves and by which they wanted to be remembered.¹⁷

¹⁶ “Will of Joan Knowght” (1459) in *Testamenta Vetusta*, 1:291.

¹⁷ Harris, “Defining Themselves,” 741.

That this includes power to bequeath items on behalf of their souls, to arrange prayers to be sung, and sometimes to position their bodies in places of importance within the church itself speaks to the ability of widows to choose expressions of piety as important to their very identity. Whether they had spent their lives as pious and devout is not necessarily relevant because it is their control over their own legacy that is the expression of agency. Piety, whether genuine or falsified, is still a vehicle for agency and a factor in the perception of others.

According to Eamon Duffy, many testators left large bequests for the foundation of chantries, sentimental items that would be displayed, and grand gestures like building memorials to keep their names and legacies alive for those who would offer prayers for their souls. By keeping their names in at the forefront of friends' and neighbors' memories they were guaranteed a much higher chance of being prayed for frequently. The closer their epitaph or burial place to holy spaces, the more effective their strategy. In many situations the wealthy would strategically arrange for their final resting place to be near an image of their favorite religious figure, their usual seat, or other location where people would observe and remember them.¹⁸ These choices were reflective of pious sentiments, but the motives could vary. Whether it was hope that the act of remembrance would help make up for neglect in spiritual matters during life, or the natural continuation of a pious life, women's choices of burial spaces in testaments provides an example of agency. The careful decision to associate their memory with a specific location was individual and highly personal.

¹⁸ Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England c.1400-c.1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 330-4.

Oftentimes, women chose to be buried next to their late husbands, and it is revealing when they had to choose between multiple husbands since many women were widowed more than once. Several women refer fondly to late husbands in their wills. In her 1474 will, Lady Alice Wyche requested to be buried near her first husband, likely out of fondness and devotion to him. By contrast, Ann Vere, Lady Cobham, and her second husband referred to one another with great affection in their wills.¹⁹ But those who wished to remain unmarried were free to do so following the institution of the Magna Carta. Also under protection of the church, widows were respected for their decision to remain unmarried.²⁰ The study of medieval women and their access to legal power provides an opportunity to explore the experiences of a group long underestimated in their ability to access power and possess property in their own right.

Lady Alice Wyche, for example, seems to have been incredibly attached to her late first husband and less attached to her late second husband. She identified herself by association with her second husband at the beginning of her will, but did not mention him again. The only relative sharing his name is not identified by any terms of endearment, nor is it clear how he may have been related. As such, it is unlikely that Alice had surviving children from either of her marriages because she would have presumably identified them as such. She does, however, feel greatly concerned for her soul and the soul of her first husband, William Holt. Absent from her will is any mention of requests for prayer or gifts on behalf of her second husband, Hugh Wyche. Even in her requests

¹⁹ “Will of Lady Alice Wyche” (1474) in *Testamenta Vetusta* 1:336; “Will of Ann Vere, Lady Cobham,” (1472) 1:325; “Will of Sir Thomas Cobham, Knt.,” (1471) 1:323.

²⁰ Sheehan, “The Influence of Canon Law on the Property Rights of Married Women in Medieval England,” 24.

for burial, she wishes to be buried near her first husband. The assumption that she held a special fondness for her first husband is supported by her second husband's position as a knight and alderman, which placed him at a higher rank than the untitled first husband with whom she was so concerned.²¹ A higher rank may have meant he was able to provide sufficiently for his own pious needs in his testament, while perhaps her first husband had not been able to the same. Her desire to inspire others to remember her piety or carry out a legacy of her religious devotion by offering prayers for her reveals her desire to preserve certain aspects of her character for posterity.²²

Of greatest import to Alice in regard to her possessions was that her property be liquidated and the funds dispersed to the poor men and women of Lewes, England, where her first husband was from. Included in her wishes were many capital improvements to the highways and gifts of livestock to the poor families in exchange for prayers. Gifting large sums implies that she was not only wealthy, but that she also felt a duty to her community and a responsibility for its wellbeing. Donations could have been the result of a desire to earn spiritual rewards upon her death, or she may have felt an obligation to the poor living around her. Whatever the case, she acted from a personal motivation and not from a specifically outlined social obligation. Though the choice to fulfill a social obligation could arguably demonstrate agency, it is especially notable when special projects were undertaken of a widow's own volition. There were few women in this record who gave as generously as she, which implies that wealthy widows were not

²¹ "Will of Lady Alice Wyche" in *Testamenta Vetusta*, 1:336.

²² For more information on women's desires for their legacies through commemorative acts, see Christian Steer, "Commemoration and Women in Medieval London," in *London and the Kingdom: Essays in Honor of Caroline M. Barron*, eds. Matthew Davies and Andrew Prescott, 230-45 (Shaun Tyas: Harlaxton Publishing, 2004).

expected to leave such large amounts of money to the poor and to capital improvements.²³

Lady Elizabeth Andrews was also notably pious in her gifts to the church. In fact, she mentions more churches than relatives in her bequest of material goods. Her will specifically outlines an extensive inventory of linens, clothes, and other fine goods to be distributed. Of the individuals mentioned in her will, most of the beneficiaries are women, and she even makes a special request for the female servants of the aforementioned Lady Wyche to receive a gift in a codicil.²⁴ One of the even more notable elements of Elizabeth's will is her desire to settle her unpaid tithes and debts. The appearance of unpaid tithes implies a sudden desire to make amends in spiritual matters, and the request that the Host (Holy Communion) be offered at her funeral service confirms a great sense of piety. Whether personal piety was a consistent theme throughout her life or was inspired by her realization of her mortality is difficult to ascertain. Nevertheless, a great desire to offer charity, care for others, and gain spiritual benefits from gifts at the end of life are undeniably present and significant to Elizabeth at the time she crafted her will and later when she altered it.

Piety and the Individual

Some women expressed their piety by supporting the ongoing training of future clergy and monks. Eleanor, Countess of Arundel, bequeathed a silver gilt cross for the use of the

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ "Will of Lady Elizabeth Andrews" (18 October 1474) in *Testamenta Vetusta*, 1:329-31. The codicil (11 December 1474) also included more gifts to the church, but did not seem to amend the original will, only add to it.

“Masters and Fellows” of the Collegiate Church of the Holy Trinity of Arundel. In addition, she left money so they would perform annual masses on behalf of her and her late husband’s souls. Interestingly, she requested to be buried in the Chapel of Our Lady, and that the priests be paid to perform mass for twenty years on behalf of her soul (and her husband’s) there as well.²⁵ Associating herself with the Virgin Mary by being buried in the Chapel of Our Lady and setting aside so much for the benefit of her soul demonstrates her desire to prepare for her soul’s journey after her physical death. Aligning herself with a powerful spiritual figure, the Virgin Mary, by being buried in a lady chapel is not definitive in and of itself, since churches were common burial places, but it is interesting because she also allots funds for obits to be held on her behalf in the chapel where she plans to be buried.²⁶

Ann Holland overtly expressed her own piety through her wishes for the commemoration of her life. Her final testament, dated 20 April 1457, states: “I forbid my executors to make any great feast, or to have a solemn hearse, or any costly lights, or largess of liveries, according to the glory or vain pomp of the world, at my funeral, but only to the worship of God, after the discretion of Mr. John Pynchebeke, Doctor in

²⁵ “Will of Eleanor Countess of Arundel” (20 July 1455) in *Testamenta Vetusta*, 1:277.

²⁶ For more on women’s arrangements for commemoration see Peter Heath, “Urban Piety in the Later Middle Ages: The Evidence of Hull Wills,” in *The Church, Politics and Patronage in the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Richard Barrie Dobson, 209-234 (Gloucester: Palgrave Macmillan, 1984); Clive Burgess, “‘By Quick and by Dead’: Wills and Pious Provision in Medieval Bristol,” *English Historical Review* 102, (1987): 56-84; Clive Burgess, “Late Medieval Wills and Pious Convention” Testamentary Evidence Reconsidered,” in *Profit, Piety and the Professions in Later Medieval England*, ed. Michael Hicks, 14-33 (Gloucester: Sutton Publishing Limited, 1990).

Divinity, one of my executors.”²⁷ Her acts of piety included expressions of humility upon her death. Her religious devotion at the end of life is further emphasized by her bequests to nuns, clergy, and others who devoted their lives in service to God.²⁸ Absent from this document is any mention of gifts or money to be left for family and friends. Ann’s entire focus is on her soul and its well-being in the hereafter. This focus on spiritual matters and the intercession of those she paid to pray for her demonstrates a desire for security in eternity above any other concerns, such as repaying debts or giving sentimental gifts. There is the possibility that she gave these things away while she was still alive, but the sentiment in her choices in her will evidences a desire to leave behind evidence of her piety as well as her personal preference for the way in which her life should be celebrated or mourned.

Joan, Lady Clinton, leaves a detailed final testament in which she outlines instructions for the lands in her possession, the people who lived on those lands, and for the marriages of her three granddaughters. She included many other relatives in the distribution of her lands, money, and goods, including a granddaughter who had entered cloistered life. After distributing most of her monetary gifts, she lists: “the residue of the said c [100] marks I will shall be disposed in works of piety, after the discretion of mine executors, by the oversight of the right worshipful Lady my lady Dame Margaret Countess of Shrewsbury.”²⁹ Leaving these decisions, which could influence the journey of her immortal soul to paradise, with a trusted friend demonstrates that there is a highly

²⁷ “Will of Ann Duchess of Exeter” (20 April 1457) in *Testamenta Vetusta*, 1:281-2.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 282.

²⁹ “Will of Joan Lady Clinton” (12 January 1457) in *Testamenta Vetusta*, 1:285.

individual approach to religious devotion present in the final wishes of the women who left these documents. The number of women provided for in Joan's will and her trust of a female friend to care for her pious contributions indicates that there was an opportunity for women to potentially act as witnesses, testatrixes, beneficiaries, and executors with little to no oversight by a man, though it is likely there would be a male relative or close family friend included just as many men included women in their own final testaments.³⁰

Feminine Patterns in Bequests

In many women's wills, an initial examination implies there may be a pattern of women expressing preference for women, whether the testatrix chose to leave valuables or money to other women, or, as in the will of Lady Clinton, the trust of one's legacy was placed in the hands of another woman. Even though other women follow a similar pattern of listing mostly female friends and relatives, or giving more to them than male beneficiaries, there is no conclusive pattern to those decisions. Aside from the potential that some may have favored a daughter because a son may have inherited the father's money, lands, and title, there is little evidence to suggest that it was more common for women to favor other women in their wills. Many widows, like Elizabeth, Lady Welles, appointed female relatives as executors in addition to male relatives. In the case of Elizabeth's final wishes, she appointed her mother and brother as executors.³¹ So, unfortunately, there is no conclusive evidence for a pattern of preference for women

³⁰ Joseph Biancalana, "Testamentary Cases in Fifteenth-Century Chancery," *Tijdschrift voor rechtsgeschiedenis*, Vol. 76, Issue 3-4 (2008): 283-306, 285.

³¹ "Will of Elizabeth Lady Welles" (2 October 1470) in *Testamenta Vetusta*, 1:310.

within women's wills despite many instances of executrices and beneficiaries being appointed with few or no males listed.³²

Simple wills may also indicate the individuality women were able to express through their final wishes. The final testaments of both Margaret, Duchess of Exeter, and Matilda Clitterow leave behind little information about their status, family, or religious sentiments. Both requested to be buried in a church, but beyond those simple instructions there is nothing to indicate the way in which they wished their funeral service to be held, nor any wish for the care of their soul following death.³³ It is difficult to uncover the degree to which they may have cared for these things in life, but it is also possible that they were less concerned about the fate of their souls either because they had made preparations during life as part of a longer personal practice of piety, or perhaps they were less concerned with matters of the soul, religion, or the afterlife and so chose to only concern themselves with the minimum necessary preparations for death. One clue that Matilda's concerns focused on death preparation rather than extravagance, whether she expressed personal piety in life or not, is the inclusion of her husband's suit of armor bequeathed to a couple.³⁴ This could have been an important part of her family's legacy that needed to be passed on, it could have been in payment of a debt, or it could have simply been a sentimental gift to a close friend or relative. Whatever the case, she did chose to settle the matter of one piece of property in her will, but did not include any other items or funds as gifts or donations to the church.

³² Kelsey Kate Staples, *Daughters of London: Inheriting Opportunity in the Late Middle Ages* (Boston: Brill, 2011), 13-16, 55-63.

³³ "Will of Matilda Clitterow" (8 October 1457) in *Testamenta Vetusta*, 1:288-9; "Will of Margaret Duchess of Exeter" (15 May 1458) in *Testamenta Vetusta*, 1:293.

³⁴ "Will of Matilda Clitterow" 1:289.

In comparison to the widows who were able to offer more definitive testaments as agents, Lady Maud Conyers, married to the knight Robert Conyers, wished to leave her dower to her son.³⁵ The decision to bequeath whatever would be left to the wife upon her husband's death, such as her dower, was a common practice because the dower was the closest to personal property that a married woman held.³⁶ A dower would likely be passed on to the children regardless, but women like Maud were able to specify how it should be distributed. It seems that Maud not only possessed a dower, but that she was distinguishing between the property she owned and was willing to her son, and the inheritance she was passing on to her son from her father via her husband (not included in her dower). The estates were her holdings in life, but she crafted a testament listing tapestries, approximately 200 sheep, and the lands she inherited from her father as separate items to go to her son. Interestingly, she identified her husband and his consent to the making of this will in the opening statement, but she did not mention him as a beneficiary. It seems as though she was preparing for the event of his death as well because the will reads, "I [Maud] will that all the manors which I have by inheritance, and gift of John Fitz Raufe, my father, after the death of Dir Robert, my husband, shall remain to John Conyers, my son, and to his heirs."³⁷ Following her death, assuming it would precede her husband's, her son would likely receive what would have been her

³⁵ "Will of Lady Maud Conyers" (28 March 1460) in *Testamenta Vetusta*, 1:298; Cordelia Beattie, "Married Women's Wills: Probate, Property, and Piety in Later Medieval England," *Law and History Review* 37, no. 1 (2019): 29–60, 31–3; Biancalana, "Testamentary Cases in Fifteenth-Century Chancery," 284–8; Richard H. Helmholz, "Married Women's Wills in Later Medieval England" in *Wife and Widow in Medieval England*, ed. Sue Sheridan Walker, 165–182 (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1996), 167–70.

³⁶ Sheehan, *The Will in Medieval England*, 25.

³⁷ "Will of Lady Maud Conyers" in *Testamenta Vetusta*, 1:298.

dower as an inheritance first. Then, following his father's death, he would have a right to the property formerly belonging to his maternal grandfather and passed down by his mother.

Widows' Exercises of Authority Over Property and Final Wishes

Widows' choices for their property and items, both sentimental and practical, reveal much about the women who bequeathed them. Examining the items they owned, it is obvious that these women possessed a variety of valuable wares, land, and certain obligations that would need to be continued after death. Some, like Ann Burgess, owned land, but also had to consider responsibilities to her tenants. In her will, an order of heirs is clearly outlined in case tragedy were to befall one of them. Though a succession of heirs is often considered when significant property is bequeathed, Ann especially gives great attention to the way her land will be divided and administered following her death. She legitimizes the claim her tenants have to their occupancy by naming them as tenants in the document. She also gives her son authority over these tenants by placing them in subordination to him. Her bequest demonstrates a desire to provide for the future, but also to develop the properties into sources of income and useful holdings. Ann designates which properties are to be used for tenants, who is to administrate them, and she outlines an order to be followed in the event one of her heirs will not be receiving his inheritance. Such dedication to her holdings reveals a woman who is conscious of the value of her possessions and desires for them to remain profitable. She exhibited stewardship and

mindfulness that comes from owning and administering properties. Anne's testament leaves behind more than just her wishes; it leaves a glimpse of her values and talents.³⁸

In many cases, there is strong evidence that widows were very knowledgeable and capable when it came to settling estates. Another example, in addition to Anne's, is the level of detail present in the testament left by Margaret, Lady Hungerford and Botreaux. Her final wishes include very detailed instructions for her land and the people living on it. It includes lands left by her father and her husband, which was a substantial holding.³⁹ Not only did she have an extensive account of what should be done considering her property and her own debts or incomplete transactions, but she also made arrangements to settle the debts of her husband and son who had passed before her. Interestingly, she is one of the only women surveyed for this study who requested that her wishes be carried out according to the will she has crafted, adding: "And so I requyre and charge theyme to do, as thei wull aunswere at the grete day ofjugement bifore the Moste High Juge."⁴⁰ It is clear that Margaret understood that not all final wishes were carried out by those charged to see them through, so in her inability to ensure or oversee the process following her death, she chose to invoke a higher power. In her incredibly extensive will, she also includes requests for the benefit of her soul as well as the souls of her late husband,

³⁸ "Will of Ann Burgess" (8 April 1458) in *Testamenta Vetusta*, 1:289-90; Barbara A. Hanawalt, *The Wealth of Wives: Women, Law, and Economy in Late Medieval London* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 163-9; Mate, *Daughters, Wives, and Widows After the Black Death* 156-9.

³⁹ "Will of Margaret Lady Hungerford" (8 August 1476) in *Testamenta Vetusta*, 1:310-11. In a footnote, editor Nicholas Harris adds that Margaret was the sole heir of her father's estate.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 312.

parents, and ancestors.⁴¹ Yet, relative to the other matters outlined, she spent very little time concerned with the wellbeing or future of her soul.

The absence of greater concern for piety or religious devotion is interesting because another unique feature in Margaret's will is the acknowledgement that she dictated it to her local bishop, who signed and used his seal to also provide a witness for the document.⁴² Perhaps she settled a great number of her personal affairs in life rather than in death, leaving instead the business concerns for others to sort out. It was common for the infirm and elderly to pass along complex situations to those with more energy to settle. As stated previously, there were many who would essentially harass those on their deathbed to get a commitment, verbal or written, for the settlement of debts or even just greedy requests for gifts. Perhaps having an extensive will recorded by the bishop, carrying his seal and therefore his authority, was an attempt by Margaret to avoid some of those uncomfortable situations. Whatever the case, her will not only referenced God's power and judgement as an incentive for honesty on the part of her executors, but it also carried with it the authority of the bishop who held power on earth. By drawing from these sources, Margaret was no doubt exercising all modes of agency at her disposal, whether secular or religious, to ensure that her final desires were fulfilled.

Debts and Distribution of Property

Widows were often concerned with the implications of their bequests. Items were passed down through families as a result of tradition or sentimentality. But they were also passed

⁴¹ Ibid., 316.

⁴² Ibid., 322.

on as a method of caring for the needs of family members following the widow's death. Most of the widows who left wills were wealthy aristocratic women, but some of them were not exceedingly wealthy and left behind debts and dependents in their wake. Even some incredibly wealthy women left behind debts because there was not time to settle them in life. Bequeathing expensive items was a chance for these women to settle debts and establish their children as members of the aristocracy, preserving the family's income and legacy. Arranging, before death, to pay debts through the will was also a way they could settle their estates without having to handle the actual process of paying debts. Additionally, listing churches or holy orders as beneficiaries was a way testators could arrange for the care of their souls and favored relatives' souls because it offered an opportunity to give large portions of the estate without actually distributing it in life and having to sacrifice comfort. Perhaps waiting may have been selfishly motivated, or perhaps it was just a result of women who were unable to personally oversee the gift giving when they were near death. Many of the widows emphasized multiple times that their estates should be settled and debts paid in full before distribution of their property to beneficiaries. They were not only concerned with their reputation, but with the wellbeing of those left behind to sort out the business affairs that had not been left. These provisions ensure that all would be settled and a greater burden would not fall on the heirs.

Other widows took it upon themselves to distribute their things in life rather than wait until death for their property to be parceled out. In cases where they donated their belongings previously, many widows were simply making a formal statement in regard to their remaining property, their souls, or their funeral arrangements and final resting places. Ann Vere, Lady Cobham, may have been one of the women who had taken care

of many of her goods previous to her decision to craft a will. She left behind little property, but she did gift a gown, some jewels, and a few other items to her close relatives. These items imply access to wealth, as does her title. Aside from requesting to be buried near her husband, her will contains little detail.⁴³ It can be assumed that she simply made more arrangements for her soul, her property, and her funeral during her life, or that she had great faith in her close relatives to carry out their responsibilities to her upon her death.

Yet there is much left to question. Sir Nicholas Harris, editor of the *Testamenta Vetusta*, states that Anne Vere's first husband was beheaded but she was not held accountable for his actions since she herself was not associated with his behavior by King Edward IV, evidenced by his decision to spare her the same fate.⁴⁴ She likely inherited nothing from her treasonous first husband, whose property was assuredly forfeited, that could have passed on to her children. Another indication that she inherited nothing is the lower station of her second (though much beloved) husband, a knight. If she had maintained any of the property likely held by the heir to the Earl of Oxford, she may have married a man of a higher position or her second husband would have advanced himself through marriage. That theirs was a marriage of affection and not one of political, social, or economic advancement can be inferred by the ways they refer to one another in their

⁴³ "Will of Ann Vere, Lady Cobham" (12 April 1472) in *Testamenta Vetusta*, 1:325.

⁴⁴ *Testamenta Vetusta*, ed. Sir Nicolas, Nicholas Harris, 325.

respective wills. Ann described her husband as her “dear heart”⁴⁵ and he described her as his “most entirely beloved lady and wife.”⁴⁶

Ann and her husband’s close relationship is made even more complex by the realization that she retained the name of her first husband, Aubrey de Vere, even after marriage to her second husband. Her choice is an example of autonomy because Ann has established a relationship to both of her husbands, yet she has been able to cast herself as a separate individual, and display her status. She was not punished as her first husband was, and yet she kept his name even after remarrying. An example of agency as well, she determined how she would be remembered by her close relatives by declaring her love for her second husband while still carrying the name of her first. Without erasing her past, she was still able to establish her priorities in her will by requesting first to be buried near her husband, then for her goods to be distributed to her family, and asking nothing else. Though she may have had many reasons for her choices, the choices remain and have shaped the way she was perceived following her death.

Some of the language used to describe the widows within their wills is also indicative of the values and desires they held in regard to the way they wished to be remembered. Though wills were most often transcribed and edited to fit in the format typical of wills, there are some references that cannot be ignored. The will of Cecilia, Lady Kirriel, refers to her “pure widowhood” and instructs that she be buried “wherever [she] may happen to die.”⁴⁷ She gifts money to a woman (likely her daughter given the

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ “Will of Sir Thomas Cobham, Knt.” (2 April 1471) in *Testamenta Vetusta*, 1:323.

⁴⁷ “Will of Cecilia Lady Kirriel” (7 April 1472) in *Testamenta Vetusta*, 1:327

context) upon the occasion of her marriage, she gives property and jewels to her sons, and she indicates that one of the beneficiaries of her will is her late husband's bastard son. Married twice, she requests prayers for both husbands and lists four more children by name for whose souls she is requesting prayer.⁴⁸ According to the wishes presented by Cecilia, she was a pious woman who desired that her property be used for the benefit of her family and not for a lavish funeral. Her concern for the dead indicates that she was likely offering prayers or their benefit herself and now needs someone to continue her efforts. To her living children, she seems to provide both monetary support and sentimental gifts. Her mention of the bastard son, John Kirriel, includes a stipulation that he will inherit only if the legitimate son of the same name passes away. Yet, for the young woman who is presumably her daughter, the gift of money is likely a dowry or other provision for her future to ensure that a good match be found.

Conclusions

Concerns for the future of their families were common in medieval wills, especially in regard to the welfare of their unmarried children. It is through the bequest of property that the widows took matters into their own hands to ensure their families' success and to establish their legacies. The priorities held by the will makers demonstrates their choices and preferences in life. Some were able to craft wills that dispersed all property equally among close living relatives, some chose to give to greater causes as well as family, and some were concerned with the business aspects of their property, like the care of tenants. Whatever the widow was most concerned with is reflected in the strength of her wishes

⁴⁸ Ibid.

and the deliberate choices she made in leaving provisions for various family members, churches, situations, or circumstances.

It is evident that women were able to express agency and access a degree of public power through the legal system, especially in their access to will making. Through these channels, their ability to govern their own spirituality provided the opportunity to showcase their agency in several ways. Women used these final wishes to express the way they wanted to be remembered. Whether requesting masses and paying for decades of services on behalf of their soul, requesting pious deeds be done on their behalf, or requesting nothing but a location for their burial, many women determined the written record of their memory. Whether the will was upheld or contested, and even if the final wishes were not carried out, the final wishes expressed are significant. Crafting a will was one of the final actions a woman could take to preserve her memory, express piety, and determine the fate of her property beyond her own life. Control over legacy is tenuous regardless of gender, so the attempt to shape and preserve it is significant in the case of medieval Englishwomen because they had so many constraints on their ability to access public power.

Widows were capable managers and made informed decisions about their assets and legacies. Not only were wills methods for establishing their own personal piety, but they were also avenues that originated within the ecclesiastical law and are themselves grounded in the practice of piety and almsgiving. Decisions are made in these wills that indicate a desire to preserve legacies, influence others, and care for personal property. Widows were able to act as authority figures in distributing lands, possessions, and delegating to other family members. The actions of the unmarried women are established

through precedent and are not simply unique circumstances. Having a man as head of the household was common, but in the absence of a man a woman could act on her own and express herself and her wishes, and have them fulfilled. Single women and widows were not outliers or special cases, but they were simply acting separately from the recorded name of a man. Women's access to this power was not a usurpation of a man's role, but it was instead something that was open to them as unattached individuals. Their actions in the legal record give an indication of what life was like for wealthy women in medieval England, and further study will illuminate the ways in which they could express agency and authority.

CHAPTER IV

ADDITIONAL EXPRESSIONS OF PIETY IN PUBLIC SETTINGS

Introduction

Widows and single women had the opportunity to express their own religious devotion in many ways that elude the historian, both because they slip through the cracks by not appearing in the written record and because there is sometimes not enough quantifiable evidence to establish specific trends. Married women prove to be an even greater challenge when trying to uncover trends in women's actions of personal piety. However, there are still some expressions of religious devotion that support the argument that religious devotion was a mode of agency for many women who were perhaps limited in their access to public power. While not all examples prove larger trends in laywomen's piety, there is still much to be gleaned through the examination of women who carefully considered and expressed their personal convictions and values. By examining women's devotional practices of giving smaller donations of a sentimental nature, owning religious items, choosing or refusing to remarry after being widowed, and undertaking pilgrimage, their agency in making specific decisions is evident.

In this chapter, which is divided into four sections, I will discuss different ways women accessed public forms of piety to provide a greater context for their choices in making donations to religious institutions in life and death. Women's involvement in public actions of piety contextualizes the ways in which women used their religious devotion as a means to accomplish their goals, whether they were genuine or not. The second section, which addresses women's involvement in their local parishes and

engagement in their communities, gives examples of how they cultivated relationships with their communities and worship spaces that could allow them to gain influence over their personal networks. Marriage, and especially widows who remarried, are addressed in the third section of this chapter. Many women chose to remarry for any number of reasons following their husbands' deaths, but there were plenty of alternatives for widows who preferred to remain single. Finally, in the fourth section, I address women and pilgrimage as a method of shaping their own spiritual path. Throughout these sections, I will give examples of women not only cultivating their own individual experiences of religion, but also how they were able to use these experiences and opportunities to achieve their own aims whether they were spiritual or temporal.

Section I: Public Acts of Piety and Access to Public Expressions of Sentiment

Whatever the object of their devotional expressions, women who chose to undertake pilgrimages or engage in other public demonstrations of their faith were accessing a form of power in the display of their religious devotion. Women's personal piety was often connected to their femininity as well as their social status. The convergence of sentimentality and individuality in personal devotion with the public expression of an inward experience gave women a method of personal expression of faith that also allowed for their public expression of self. In their ability to give items to the local parish, women were able to make their personal preferences into public displays. As Nicola A.

Lowe states:

Devotional patronage has been much explored as a way of accruing both religious and social benefit. It was not only a spiritual investment but an opportunity for personal display and a means of constructing a public identity. The right sort of gift would establish the donor's pious credentials, enhance his or her social

standing within the parish and attract the community's all-important intercessory and memorial prayers. The wide array of textiles required by the church gave parishioners ample opportunity to achieve these ends, particularly women who were less able to make generous financial gifts but who could nonetheless donate items from their household stores.¹

Women's ability to create their own identities through their access to public actions of piety establishes women's agency in making their own public, pious personas. If women were able to control this through the things they chose to act upon, whether it was a simple gift of plain linens to the local parish or a long pilgrimage to the Holy Land, they were agents shaping the ways in which others perceived them.

Personal piety was an avenue for women of all classes to express agency and hold a place of significance in a space that was not completely dominated by men. The church was a place of relative equity for women in a culture dominated by norms like coverture, in which women had little access to a legal identity independent from their husband. But, in fact, women had a greater degree of agency and were able to express it within the bounds of religion and the church than they were in English common law.² Michael Sheehan made the case that women were able to exercise more agency over time through their increased ability to craft wills, but he also states that this precedent began with the church as women were initially making wills for the benefit of their souls. He goes so far as to say that the church had fought for women's ability to hold certain rights and forms

¹ Nicola A. Lowe, "Women's Devotional Bequests of Textiles in the Late Medieval English Parish Church, c. 1350–1550," *Gender & History*, Vol. 22 No. 2 August 2010, 413.

² Sarah Rees Jones, "Public and Private Space and Gender in Medieval Europe," in *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe*, eds. Judith M. Bennett and Ruth Mazo Karras, 246–61 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 247–9. Jones argues that women were able to express themselves and embody piety through their roles as wife and mother, especially within the home as managers of property and administrators of household needs.

of public power, like the right to remain a widow and decline to remarry, which was often not only a personal choice but was motivated by personal piety.³ Some women may have performed public actions of piety on behalf of others' souls as a result of being named an executrix in a will, though many widows performed these tasks on behalf of their late husbands even when not named executrix. It is also possible that some women would have offered alms or prayers on behalf of other relatives unprompted by any obligation other than familial closeness or religious sentiment. Late medieval women were increasingly associated with piety and spirituality, though it was perhaps was a social construction and not totally a feminine identity.⁴ Yet, it stands to reason that if women were associated with piety they would have been able to craft for themselves unique identities based upon their own personal preferences of expression as well as their acceptance or rejection of certain pious practices.

Widows found a special status within this system because they were associated with the poor and with piety (regardless of financial situation or devotion to faith) while

³ Michael M. Sheehan, *Marriage, Family, and Law in Medieval Europe*, ed. James K. Farge (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 24; Cordelia Beattie, *Medieval Single Women: The Politics of Social Classification in Late Medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 14-5. It is also likely that many women remained unmarried as widows under the guise of piety so that they could maintain control over their land and money without having to endure social pressures to remarry. In these cases, there is little evidence to suggest which women were genuine in their religious expressions, but there is still evidence that piety was not only a socially justifiable reason to remain single, but that it was also a means for women to exercise greater control over their property and finances.

⁴ Mavis E. Mate, *Daughters, Wives, and Widows After the Black Death: Women in Sussex, 1350-1535* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 1998), 106; Lowe, "Women's Devotional Bequests of Textiles," 414; Christine Peters, *Patterns of Piety: Women, Gender and Religion in Late Medieval and Reformation England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 49. Peters argues that women expressed a male form of piety despite their association with piety as a result of their social status in addition to the expectations of their feminine role within the family as wife and mother.

they simultaneously experienced more freedom financially and socially than married women.⁵ This association with piety as a result of their husband's death sets them apart from never-married women in this discussion. While single women accessed a greater degree of freedom than married women, they were not respected and revered like widows, who were associated with poverty and piety.⁶ As a result, some public acts of piety available to single women were marriages or entrance into enclosed life. While single women could have made large donations to monasteries or their local parishes, it was unlikely that an aristocratic woman would never have married and equally as unlikely that a single woman of lower status would have been wealthy enough to give large sums or tracts of land to religious organizations. For many women, access to public actions of piety would have been the donation of small but visible items to their local parish church, care for the poor, or even journey on pilgrimage to local or faraway places.

Section II: Laywomen and Local Participation in Pious Acts

Whereas many women held specialized skills and worked trades, there were opportunities for charity and expressions of personal piety in their everyday lives. According to Matthew Davies, guilds and individual almspeople often provided alms to the poor that were not associated with the local parish or monasteries, but rather with a personal piety that extended through the organization. Women's involvement in these organizations and

⁵ James Brundage, "Widows and Remarriage: Moral Conflicts and Their Resolution in Canon Law," in *Wife and Widow in Medieval England*, ed. Sue Sheridan Walker, 17-31 (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1996), 18.

⁶ P.H. Cullum, "And Her Name was Charite': Charitable Giving by and for Women in Late Medieval Yorkshire," in *Woman is a Worthy Wight*, ed. P.J.P. Goldberg, 186-207 (Wolfeboro Falls: Allan Sutton Publishing Inc., 1992), 197-8.

guilds was common, thus providing them with another mode of expressing their agency. One of the many ways membership provided a connection to personal piety was the expectation of spiritual benefits as a result of adopting and venerating a patron saint for the group.⁷ According to Davies, women's admittance usually depended upon a husband's status or widow's commitment to continue his business, but "female members appear to have enjoyed the same rights as men."⁸ While these guilds gave a sense of security and community to their members, they were also a place where the members could express themselves, and they commonly expressed interest in personal piety.⁹

The connection between the laywoman's occupation or role in the family was directly tied to their choice of religious expressions, according to Nicola A. Lowe. She argues that women often donated items that were associated with femininity and feminine occupations. Items like special cloths or vestments given to the local parish were acts of devotion, but also expressions of femininity and the acceptance of their role within lay religious life. Because so many of these smaller items were donated by women of lower classes there is little information available about them. However, the patterns of female

⁷ Matthew Davies, "The Tailors of London: Corporate Charity in the Late Medieval Town," in *Crown, Government, and People in the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Rowena A. Archer, 161-190 (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995) 163-5, 167, 173.

⁸ Davies, "Tailors of London," 177. For more on women's involvement in trade and guilds, see Jane Laughton, "The Alewives of Later Medieval Chester," in *Crown, Government, and People in the Fifteenth Century*, ed. by Rowena A. Archer, 190-208, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995). She discusses mostly the process of brewing and the ways in which it was controlled by women, but she also discusses women's roles in production and public structures of power as a result of corruption or the need to defend their trade/practices. For more on guilds and their relationship with the parish, see Andrew D. Brown, *Popular Piety in Late Medieval England: The Diocese of Salisbury 1250-1550* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995). Especially Chapters 6 and 7 are informative on this topic. For information about single women and guilds, refer to Cordelia Beattie, *Medieval Single Women*.

⁹ Davies, "Tailors of London," 190.

giving demonstrate that women gave sentimental, personal, and handcrafted items more often than men. Women also gave items of lower value, indicating that they themselves likely purchased or crafted it rather than use their husband's money.¹⁰ In these situations, married women of lower classes are very difficult to observe in their expressions of agency. Wealthy widows' pious actions are a valuable resource in the broader examination of women's piety and how women could express agency through their observance of faith. Though wealthy widows do not give a complete portrait of women's lives, their actions were often reflective of larger trends in piety and gender roles.

One point of comparison in donations of sentimental items and commonalities between widows and other women is the donation of not only textiles, but personal sentimental items. According to P.H. Cullum, it was common for women (but uncommon for men) to give their clothes, jewelry, and other fabric items and garments. While clothes from a lower-status giver may have been redistributed to the poor, expensive and ornate garments were typically sold to fund ventures specified by the giver.¹¹ These gifts could be given in life or death, but many records of garment donations come from wills. For instance, Rose, Lady Cavendish, willed that her goods be distributed for the benefit of her soul.¹² Isabel, Countess of Warwick, among her many other instructions for her burial and memorial, gave a crown, chain, and broken gold jewelry in addition to her

¹⁰ Lowe, "Women's Devotional Bequests of Textiles," 410-1, 413.

¹¹ Cullum, "Charitable Giving by and for Women in Late Medieval Yorkshire," 192-3.

¹² "Will of Rose Lady Cavendish" (1419) in *Testamenta Vetusta: Being Illustrations From Wills, of Manners, Customs, &c. As Well As of the Descents And Possessions of Many Distinguished Families. From the Reign of Henry the Second to the Accession of Queen Elizabeth* ed. Sir Nicolas, Nicholas Harris (London: Nichols & Son, 1826), 1:201, available online at <https://archive.org/details/testamentavetust01nico> (accessed 27 April 2018).

wedding gown, another green gown, silks, furs, and velvet to various religious institutions.¹³ Giving items of great value, whether monetary or sentimental, shaped not only the individual experience of the woman's donation, but placed the pious act in a public forum. Whatever the item, it would either be sold for the benefit of the institution or employed in public observance of religious devotion. In either case, the women who chose to give their personal items were displaying their wealth, generosity, and devotion for others to observe.

The idea that women could freely express themselves in a religious setting is plausible, at least so far as she was behaving in a way that was socially acceptable. Thus Alcuin Blamires argues that women were able to express themselves best through the qualities that were admired by the men around them. For instance, he says, "It is interesting that prudence and piety were qualities connected with femininity in [medieval] scientific texts. Women's piety is usually asserted as a matter of experiential proof, against misogyny's lurid speculation that women use attendance at religious functions for sexual adventure."¹⁴ This paradox of accusation and then using the suspect behavior as evidence against an accusation reflects the medieval mind's ability navigate the same paradox that excluded women from some holy spaces while revering shrines to the Virgin Mary and other female saints. Blamires goes on to argue that medieval women were seen as being more pious as a way to offset the expected bad behavior of their husbands. It is possible that the religious devotion expressed by women was not always

¹³ "Will of Isabel Countess of Warwick" (1439) in *Testamenta Vetusta*, 1:239. Interestingly, she donated her items exclusively to institutions named for female saints.

¹⁴ Alcuin Blamires, *The Case for Women in Medieval Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 149.

genuine, but was actually an expectation imposed upon them; however, it is more likely that this realm of piety offered greater opportunities for women because they so devoutly wished to express their faith in God that they fought to have some semblance of equity to make donations, bequeath alms for their souls, and make pilgrimages.¹⁵

Section III: Marriage and Remarriage

Women in medieval England were sometimes able to choose their own husbands and own their own property. When women left their household as a single woman entering a trade or workforce, they were able to own property and their families were unable to control all of their decisions at this point. In fact, it was fairly common for single women to choose their own husbands if they chose to marry at all.¹⁶ Marriage was a sacrament and thus also as a public display of piety that provided women with an opportunity to

¹⁵ Katherine L. French “‘To Free Them from Binding’: Women in the Late Medieval English Parish,” *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 27, no. 3 (1997): 387-412. This article discusses some of the ways gender influenced perceptions of piety in the historical record in the context of holy day celebrations and the adoption of new practices. In her discussion of women’s “limited and complex equality” with their husbands in medieval canon law, Sara McDougall introduces the ways in which women’s abilities and agency are impacted by canon law. Sara McDougall, “Women and Gender in Cannon Law,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe*, eds. Judith M. Bennett and Ruth Mazo Karras, 163-78, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 163-4.

¹⁶ Mate, *Daughters, Wives, and Widows After the Black Death*, 31. In spite of the relative freedoms women living outside the household may have enjoyed, there were often stipulations in wills requiring a daughter marry before being able to inherit. Widows had even more discretion over their potential marriage partners than a never married woman. Even though many single women were subjected to stipulations that they marry before inheriting, others were not and in fact had the support of their families. 32, 37. Shannon McSheffrey, *Marriage, Sex, and Civic Culture in Late Medieval London* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 21, 26-33. McSheffrey explained that the marriage contract could take place anywhere at any time so long as the future husband and wife consented. It was often followed by a nuptial mass or priest’s blessing, though many were not.

decide for themselves who they would marry. While it was common to hold informal marriages that were not sanctioned by the church, those who went through formal marriages were displaying their personal piety and reverence for church authority.¹⁷ Public ceremonies ending in a nuptial mass marked the observance of the spiritual nature of marriage and brought a private decision to wed into the public forum. It also marked the new identity of a shared life in that everything from then on would be done in one name, the husband's, as long as they were united in marriage.¹⁸

Widows who chose to remarry did so for a variety of reasons, some of which were circumstantial needs for stability. Yet, many aristocratic or wealthy widows who could have easily supported themselves comfortably with their dower still chose to remarry. Some women even married a man of a lower station than themselves. Marriage was reaffirmed as a sacrament in the mid 1400s, so it is possible that widows chose remarriage as either a method of survival or a form of self-expression that defied the church's wavering stance on remarriage. While remarrying was highly debated as being acceptable or not within the church, it was common for individuals to remarry and they frequently petitioned their local priests to bless the marriage, giving it spiritual legitimacy.¹⁹ Whatever their motives, widows who chose remarriage knew that marriage

¹⁷ McSheffrey, *Marriage, Sex, and Civic Culture in Late Medieval London*, 122-7. McSheffrey observed that many remarriages were commonly contracted in the woman's home, requiring the man to come to her and thus allowed widows a degree of agency in the act of forming a marriage agreement as a result of their relationship to the space in which it took place. Throughout her study of marriage spaces and cultural contexts, she explores the role of other places where marriage contracts were often made, such as drinking houses and women's employers' homes.

¹⁸ J. H. Baker, *An Introduction to English Legal History* (Bath: The Bath Press, 2002), 481, 483-5; Barbara A. Hanawalt, *The Wealth of Wives: Women, Law, and Economy in Late Medieval London* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 70-1.

¹⁹ Brundage, "Widows and Remarriage," 23.

was a sacrament and serious undertaking. Barbara Hanawalt argues that the circumstances in which widows chose to remarry was highly varied and individualistic, but that there were often cases in which women wanted greater resources or companionship rather than being compelled by family.²⁰ Anne F. Sutton's examination of silkwomen and mercers in London gives several examples of women being widowed young and leveraging their positions to find a good husband. Sutton argues that many widows chose to remarry to someone who would help them to retrieve their dower if it was difficult to secure.²¹ In many cases, these women were young or unable to support themselves, which means that their marriages were for support and companionship rather than an obligation to a family's reputation or politically advisable marriage.

When women chose to remain a widow, they would often take vows of celibacy and pursue a deeper spirituality as a single woman. While they were seeking a holier lifestyle, vowesses did not join a monastic community. They occasionally formed semi-enclosed communities of their own, but generally remained active in their families and communities in the same ways they had previous to taking on these vows. Wealthy and

²⁰ Barbara Hanawalt, "Marriage as an Option for Urban and Rural Widows in Late Medieval England," in *Wife and Widow in Medieval England*, ed. Sue Sheridan Walker, 141-164 (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1996), 147-9, 152; Hanawalt, *The Wealth of Wives*, 107.

²¹ Anne F. Sutton "The Women of the Mercery: Wives, Widows, and Maidens," in *London and the Kingdom: Essays in Honor of Caroline M. Barron*, ed. Mathew Davies and Andrew Prescott, 160-78 (Donington: Shaun Tyas, 2008), 170-2. She also points out that women typically married within their trades because business was a family endeavor. Hanawalt, *The Wealth of Wives*, 98. Hanawalt argues that many widows, especially the wealthy, were capable and comfortable navigating the legal system and did so without the help of their second husbands or male relatives. See also Sue Sheridan Walker, "Litigation as a Personal Quest: Suing for Dower in the Royal Courts, circa 1272-1350," in *Wife and Widow in Medieval England*, ed. by Sue Sheridan Walker, 81-107, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1996).

noble widows often found this to be an attractive way to express their devotion to God, remain single and in control over their property, and to continue exercising influence in their communities. While some women who chose this route may have retired into monastic life in their old age, there were also widows who entered enclosed life much sooner.²² As stated previously, this study excludes women who sought to isolate themselves through monasticism, but many of the widows featured in this thesis did make vows of chastity and curated a their own spiritual journey with the infusion of some monastic practices. Individuals like Margery Kempe took vows of chastity and practiced a modified monastic lifestyle without entering a monastery.²³ Cecily Neville and Margaret Beaufort, both mothers of kings, were also notable vowesses.²⁴ Taking a vow of

²² For more information about laywomen who chose to retire to monastic communities in their old age, see Mary Erler, "Widows in Retirement: Region, Patronage, Spirituality, Reading at the Gaunts, Bristol," *Religion & Literature* 37, no. 2 (2005): 51-75. For an overview of the ways in which laywomen in northern medieval Europe, especially in continental Europe, experienced lay piety in ways that often led to communal living, both enclosed and as individuals banding together, consult Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker, "Devoted Holiness in the Lay World," in *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe*, eds. Judith M. Bennett and Ruth Mazo Karras, 464-79 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

²³ Kim M. Phillips, "Margery Kempe and the Ages of Woman," in *A Companion to the Book of Margery Kempe*, eds. John H. Arnold and Katherine J. Lewis, 17-34 (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004), 19. Phillips explains that Margery, like many medieval women, convinced her husband to take vows of chastity with her while still married to one another, but neither entered enclosed life in a monastery. Mary C. Erler, "Margery Kempe's White Clothes." *Medium Ævum* 62, no. 1 (1993): 78-83, 79. Erler argues that Margery broke precedents for married and widowed laywomen taking vows of chastity because she requested to be allowed to wear white, which was usually worn for marriages and virginal nuns who had taken vows of chastity. According to Erler, the common visual expression for married women or widows who took chastity vows was dark clothing, so Margery was hoping to stand out among others who shared her commitment. Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, trans. Anthony Bale, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 33. See also Peters, *Patterns of Piety*, 91-2.

²⁴ J. L. Laynesmith, *Cecily Duchess of York* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 81, 87, 90-1, 110-3. Laynesmith argues that Cecily exercised her piety as an obligation she felt as the king's mother rather than as a personal action of religious

chastity either to engage in or to display a heightened spirituality allowed widows a method for remaining independent while also finding honor and praise for their choice. The opportunity to take a vow of chastity and prevent the pressures to remarry was available to many women, provided they could support themselves. Consequently, this “double life” of chastity without enclosure was most popular among wealthy and aristocratic women who could not only support themselves, but had a vested interest in maintaining their personal property.²⁵ Whether or not the women who took these vows were being genuine in their religious devotion or using it as a tool to achieve their goals is debatable, but the reality that they found a means to secure their preferred lifestyle through an expression of personal piety cannot be denied.

Section IV: Laywomen and Pilgrimage

Pilgrimage was not limited to journeys to the Holy Land, but was a much broader experience that could be compounded with other tasks. A merchant and his wife traveling from town to town may make a pilgrimage during their long journey. Someone who simply lived in the outskirts of London may have taken a pilgrimage a relatively short distance to Canterbury. Perhaps it is key to identify pilgrimage as an experience as well

devotion. In addition, Laynesmith contends that Cecily remained unmarried so she could continue controlling her property and exerting influence that may have otherwise been attenuated by a husband. Michael K. Jones and Malcolm G. Underwood, *The King's Mother: Lady Margaret Beaufort, Countess of Richmond and Derby* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 144-5. According to Jones and Underwood, Margaret took her first vow of chastity while her fourth husband, Thomas, Lord Stanley, was still living.

²⁵ Mary Erler, “Three Fifteenth-Century Vowesses,” in *Medieval London Widows*, eds. Caroline M. Barron and Anne F. Sutton, 165-183 (London Hambleton Press, 1994), 167, 179-80.

as an expression of religious devotion based upon travel or visits to sites of spiritual significance. Not all pilgrimages began as routes sponsored by the Catholic church, but rather there were many adopted by the church after popularity had grown. Many developed as a “grass roots” effort of people who wished to experience miracles or other wonders reported in connection to a holy space. Other sites of interest to pilgrims were even rejected.²⁶

Susan Signe Morrison contends that the importance of the pilgrimage has nothing to do with distance but everything to do with the perception and inward transformation experienced by the individual. Whether traveling for days or for mere minutes, she argues that the perception of self is what lends power to the journey.²⁷ This supports the idea that women expressed agency by undertaking journeys in order to craft for themselves a significant experience or otherwise access public power by accessing these places of great power in a public display of piety. Diana Webb argues that many of the more popular pilgrimage networks were connected to seats of power or previously established routes, while some remained only locally significant because of the lack of appeal for tourism or trade. Webb states that Scandinavian holy sites were less popular but some experienced regular traffic as a result of their connections to the Holy Land. One example given was Saint Birgitta of Sweden, whose home in Rome became a popular destination and inspired other sites in her honor that garnered localized traffic. While many Scandinavians visited her burial place in Sweden, those who venerated her elsewhere

²⁶ For examples of this behavior, and a fun story about a dog, see Jean-Claude Schmitt, *The Holy Greyhound: Guinefort, Healer of Children since the Thirteenth Century*, trans. Martin Thom (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

²⁷ Susan Signe Morrison, *Women Pilgrims in Late Medieval England: Private Piety as Public Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 84.

often put up their own shrines in closer proximity (including the English Syon Abbey).²⁸ While planning and executing a pilgrimage was a highly personal undertaking requiring a great deal of fortitude to make a long journey, it is also evident that many who could not access long distance travel sought to simulate that experience through emulation. By venerating a faraway saint and integrating their cult with local culture, worshippers were taking their personal practices and public expressions of religious devotion into their own hands. By traveling to these local sites, more people could experience greater access to spiritual rewards that were not necessarily associated with their cultural identity, but yet also integrated them into their experiences. Women who engaged with cults of saints could express agency not only in the choice of saint, but also in the ways they sought to observe their devotion, whether it was local or distant.

Interestingly, Webb maintains that women experienced a relatively high degree of freedom while on pilgrimage that was only impeded by the difficulties common to travel, which were sometimes amplified for women. Most women traveled in groups with male relatives in order to protect themselves, and it was unusual for women to travel alone. One unusual case was Margery Kempe, who often found herself abandoned and seeking new traveling companions. Margery was certainly exceptional in many ways, but she was notable especially for expressing her individuality and agency through personal piety.

²⁸ Diana Webb, *Medieval European Pilgrimage, c. 700 - c. 1500* (Gordonsville: Palgrave Macmillan Limited, 2002), 119-20. Margery Kempe participated in Saint Birgitta's cult and was inspired by her life. Allison J. Spedding, "'At the King's Pleasure': The Testament of Cecily Neville." *Midland History* 35, no. 2 (August 31, 2010): 256-72. Interestingly, Birgitta had a significant following in England and even Cecily Neville willed an English copy of Birgitta's revelations to her daughter Anne, Prioress of Syon. Syon was an English monastery of the Bridgettine Order (established by Birgitta) and was a popular starting point for those on pilgrimage to her house and shrine in Rome.

Webb also discusses the unfortunate limits placed on female pilgrims as they were often not allowed to enter holy sites, and could only occasionally receive special dispensations to be allowed inside. As a result of both the difficulties of traveling and the limits on accessible spaces, Webb argues that local pilgrimages were more commonly undertaken by women since they were more accessible for a variety of reasons. Still there were great numbers of women, especially widows, who visited popular destinations like the Way of Saint James in Spain, sites in Rome, and of course the Holy Land.²⁹ The freedom widows experienced to travel as far and as long as they wished without the permission necessary for a married woman allowed for a greater expression of agency through their choices. It is especially notable that many widows forewent the safety of traveling with a husband, but traveled to some of the more potentially dangerous sites. There were many itineraries commonly followed by pilgrims, but often adapted to suit their schedules and preferences. This highly individualized expression of personal devotion provided many women with the chance to determine for themselves not only their destinations, but their values as they assessed the risks and rewards of the itineraries they chose to follow.

Despite Margery Kempe's uniqueness, Clarissa W. Atkinson argues that she should be viewed as a "participant" in a centuries old tradition of piety that allowed a deeply emotional connection and encouraged the outward expression of it.³⁰ Morrison explains that Margery's own descriptions of herself and her journey give evidence that

²⁹ Webb, *Medieval European Pilgrimage*, 91-6, 98. Webb also makes a difference between laywomen and nuns because the movement of nuns was of greater concern to the church.

³⁰ Clarissa W. Atkinson, *Mystic and Pilgrim: The Book and the World of Margery Kempe*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 129-31; R.N. Swanson, *Religion and Devotion in Europe, c.1215-1515*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 193, 203, 210.

Margery presented not only an odd portrait of the female pilgrim, but a threatening one. Since she wandered without real supervision and engaged in very public displays of religiosity, such as crying and screaming, Margery represented a woman who asserted herself in her devotional practices and invaded pious spaces that may have otherwise been off limits for her. Resulting in her gaining a greater degree of control over her own spiritual journey, Margery's rejection of norms sets her apart from many pilgrims while also demonstrating the degree of autonomy they could possess. The scorn and rejection she experienced as a result of her outbursts, though painful to experience, were part of her goal as a mystic who sought to remove herself from society while still participating in it.³¹

The height of Margery's personal religious expressions were her experiences on her pilgrimage and the lessons or encounters she carried with her upon her return. While on her trip, she gave away possessions and money to a variety of religious houses while she was traveling. In one instance, she gave away all her money under the inspiration of her faith and devotional experiences. What followed this donation was a spiritual revelation from Jesus Christ that her financial sacrifice brought her closer to him and he promised her physical as well as spiritual rewards.³² Margery's experiences and

³¹ Morrison, *Women Pilgrims in Late Medieval England*, 129-31, 135, 137. Morrison also discusses the "performance" of pilgrimage and spirituality as piety requiring an audience. Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England c.1400-c.1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 261. According to Duffy, Margery's weeping was a common practice when venerating certain images, like Our Lady of Pity, and that many others engaged in this type of public reaction.

³² Kempe, *Margery Kempe*, 85. For more on Margery's personal spiritual encounters with Jesus Christ and the Marian influence on her spiritual self-perception, see Georgiana Donavin, *Scribit Mater: Mary and the Language Arts in the Literature of Medieval England* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2012).

sentiments in regard to these spiritual practices, like undertaking a pilgrimage and giving donations, were also experienced by other women of her time.³³ Wealthy laywomen, including widows and married women, would have been able to undertake pilgrimages if only to local religious sites. Yet, many more women would have been able to give sacrificially of their earthly possessions to experience spiritual rewards. These actions demonstrate engagement with religious devotion that was significant to the ways in which women lived their lives. Forgoing comfort in order to garner spiritual benefits was a method of expression agency through control over their own personal comforts and lifestyles.

Margaret Paston, another fifteenth century woman of notoriety, together with her family, demonstrate through their correspondence just how typical it was to undertake local pilgrimages in the fifteenth century.³⁴ In a letter to her husband, Margaret expresses her great relief at the news of his recovery from a severe illness. She credits several pilgrimages she had undertaken, as well as one still planned, on his behalf for his recovery. One of the most notable things about the pilgrimages she referenced is that they were undertaken or orchestrated by her and her mother. In one case they went to a local shrine very near to their home, and they dispatched several men to travel locally to make

³³ Swanson, *Religion and Devotion in Europe*, 154-5.

³⁴ Helen Castor, "The Dutchy of Lancaster and the Rule of East Anglia, 1399-1440: A Prologue to the Paston Letters," in *Crown, Government, and People in the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Rowena A. Archer, 53-78 (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995). Helen Castor argues that the Paston family documents may skew perception of the norms of their community and class because there are so few case studies with which to compare them since they have an exceptional set of documents and letters. Yet, this does not necessarily diminish the value of comparison because Margaret likely bears similarities to other women in wealthy families and to wives in general.

a pilgrimage on John Paston's behalf as well. As a part of their efforts, Margaret and her mother brought wax in the weight of his body to a shrine to ask for his healing.³⁵

These actions were a deliberate exercise of religious devotion on the part of women to enact change in the life of their loved one. By not only petitioning the divine, but by spending time and intention on planning a pilgrimage, and then through the physical execution of a pilgrimage, they were carrying out an action with an expected response. Acting in this way is an expression of agency because they are independently accessing a form of power that is not restricted from them in any way. Traveling to local sites where they can petition a saint, or have someone petition on their behalf, allowed these women to participate in the pursuit of a higher purpose without necessarily encountering gendered limitations. Some holy spaces may have been off limits, but women's visits to Our Lady of Walsingham provide an example of women calling on the power of another woman (the Virgin Mary) for help.³⁶ In undertaking this task with the intention of effecting significant change, Margaret Paston deliberately pursued access to a

³⁵ Margaret Paston, "To John Paston I 1443, 09, 28," *The Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century, Part I*, ed. Norman Davis, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 218-9. Webb, 52-4. Webb gives several examples of people seeking healing for themselves or as a proxy by visiting popular shrines. Some of the most popular in Europe were related to St. Julian and St. Martin, especially if the sites pertained to their relics or important life events. Of course, there were also many biblical precedents for pilgrimages taken to receive miracles, such as individuals who chose to travel to the Holy Land and bathe in the Jordan River. For more information about trends in medieval women's visits to healing shrines, see Anne E. Bailey, "Wives, Mothers and Widows on Pilgrimage: Categories of 'Woman' Recorded at English Healing Shrines in the High Middle Ages," *Journal of Medieval History* 39, no. 2 (June 1, 2013): 197-219.

³⁶ Duffy, *Stripping the Altars*, 385. Duffy demonstrates the importance of Our Lady of Walsingham to the English people through his description of its destruction following the English Reformation. Not only was it highly profitable, it was attached to the wellbeing of the family as it was associated with women's health, childbirth, and fertility. Sites such as these were places of hope and represented the desires of those who traveled there, according to Duffy. Walsingham will be addressed in greater detail below.

public space of power that would allow her to achieve her goal of seeing her husband healed by divine intervention.

While Margaret certainly displayed many characteristics of the typical ideal wife, there are arguments that she was fulfilling a social obligation more than expressing a personal, individual religious devotion. Joel T. Rosenthal argues that Margaret's piety was rather her fulfillment of the minimum social and spiritual requirement that "she followed the rules."³⁷ Even if this were the case and Margaret is not an example of women's expressions of piety as agency, she still serves as a model for this study. If Margaret chose to limit her religious expressions to the expectations society imposed upon her as a woman, a wife, or a mother, then she was still exhibiting her individuality. Without public actions of piety, she was not displaying her individuality nor was she asserting her agency through these means. Her lack of action in this context could mean that she was less religious than some women, or simply that she had a greater degree of self-expression available to her through some means not available to more women. Whatever the case, Margaret Paston does serve as an example of women who were able to determine the degree to which they engaged in public acts of piety and how those actions related to their personal religious devotion and experiences of faith.

The idea that a goal's achievement is the significant element in a pilgrimage harkens back to Morrison's argument that it is the experience or achievement and not the location or distance itself that matters. Perhaps it is significant also that the soul belongs to the individual and therefore they ought to be recognized as such for undertaking a

³⁷ Joel T. Rosenthal, *Margaret Paston's Piety*, The New Middle Ages (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 81.

journey on their own behalf for the purpose of reaping spiritual benefits as well as for the purpose of logistics. In the mid-fourteenth century the king ordered the mayors and bailiffs of Dartmouth and Plymouth to prepare an available ship to take Sir Andrew Luttrell and his wife Elizabeth to Spain, so they might participate in the Way of Saint James.³⁸ Not only does this mention Elizabeth by name several times, it includes other people who are not mentioned by name. Perhaps there were some practical reasons for naming her, but it also seems that there is respect being paid to her in this document. There is a certain reverence for pilgrimage expressed in the phrasing. Additionally, the inclusion of a woman's name and her action in traveling on a pilgrimage would have been very individual in the collection of items like an indulgence or a pilgrim badge. When traveling for spiritual purposes, each person is significant. This may not be reflected in all documents but it is certainly a prevalent theme in the records that have been left behind.

Popular portrayals of women can also be revealing in the ways they demonstrate stereotypes or other norms, such as the Wife of Bath in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. In the pages of this work of fiction are caricatures and stereotypes of people from many walks of life. One of them, the Wife of Bath, brags about her wit and her ability to outsmart her husbands (and outlive them).³⁹ She certainly expressed herself as well as exercised agency through her tales and her travels. Sheehan, in a chapter entitled "The

³⁸ "The Projected Pilgrimage of Sir Andrew Luttrell and His Wife Elizabeth to Santiago de Compostella, 1361," in *Women of the English Nobility and Gentry, 1066-1500*, trans. Jennifer Ward, 219, (New York: Manchester University Press, 1995), 219.

³⁹ Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, ed. D. Laing Purves (Auckland: The Floating Press, 2012), 214; Morrison, *Women Pilgrims in Late Medieval England*, 112. Morrison gives examples of stereotypes of women on pilgrimage being "wayward women" developing in literature well before Chaucer's use of the trope.

Wife of Bath and Her Four Sisters,” seeks to outline the ways in which the women of this story were able to express themselves in reality according to the details provided about their lives by Chaucer.⁴⁰ Sheehan really only uses the female characters from the as a model for the stereotypes of the typical Englishwomen of the late fourteenth century, so that he can address broadly what life was like and how each woman of varying classes could maneuver through the legal system. Yet, this speaks to the fact that what Chaucer wrote was typical, and that Alice, the Wife of Bath, perhaps had a true counterpart in reality who was very similar. It also indicates how typical pilgrimages were, and how women could exercise independence on the road to holy places. But, the choices made by the Wife of Bath do not necessarily reflect well on medieval women and are not necessarily true of every pilgrim’s experience.

The main takeaway from Chaucer’s depiction of a woman on pilgrimage, especially when considering the Wife of Bath’s choices in regard to expression of personal piety, is the pure individuality of those choices. She is not assuming the role of a pious wife making up for her husband’s misdeeds by attending church, but she is choosing to express herself as an individual. Irreverent and over the top, she has chosen the identity she wants to personify and she embodies it fully. Sheila Delany introduces

⁴⁰ Michael M. Sheehan, “The Wife of Bath and Her Four Sisters: Reflections on a Woman’s life in the Age of Chaucer” In *Marriage, Family, and Law in Medieval Europe: Collected Studies*, ed. James K. Farge, 177-98 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 177-198. For more on the ways Chaucer’s work expressed archetypes, specifically of enclosed women and their values or concerns, see Felicity Ruddy, “Women Talking About the Things of God’: A Late Medieval Sub-Culture,” in *Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature: Women and Literature in Britain, 1150-1500*, ed. Carol M. Meale, 104-127, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

her argument about self-expression and economic standing of medieval women with this comparison:

Few individuals in the Middle Ages occupy our attention as commandingly as two women – one fictional, one real – from the decline of that era. One is Chaucer’s Dame Alice, the Wife of Bath; the other is Margery Kempe, the fifteenth-century gentlewoman from Lynn, author of the first autobiography in English. Both women were curiously ‘modern’, inasmuch as both were of the middle class; both travelled extensively in Europe and the Middle East; both were of an independent and robust nature; both preferred the autobiographical mode; and both were deeply concerned with sexuality, though from different perspectives: the one to enjoy, the other to renounce.⁴¹

Beyond just the expression of or choices made in the realm of sexuality, the individualism on display from the Wife of Bath and Margery Kempe are both set against the backdrop of religion and pilgrimage. Despite the fact that the Wife of Bath was not real, she was able to do more within religious contexts than outside of them. In the name of piety she could travel freely through the countryside, socializing and enjoying herself, with a religious goal in mind but with the added benefit of enjoyable stops to be made along the way. Delany goes on to argue that not only are the Wife of Bath and Margery Kempe counterparts of some kind, but that Margery is a real life representation of what opportunities would have been afforded to the Wife of Bath.⁴² Much like Sheehan’s approach, Delany offers a real connection to the fictional experiences of a woman to whom many of her contemporaries could have no doubt related.

Other documents that relate to the execution of pilgrimages are the provisions for these journeys found within testaments. According to Webb, wills played a significant

⁴¹ Sheila Delaney, “Sexual Economics, Chaucer’s Wife of Bath and The Book of Margery Kempe,” in *Feminist Readings in Middle English Literature: The Wife of Bath and All Her Sect*, ed. Ruth Evans and Lesley Johnson (London: Routledge, 1994), 1.

⁴² Delaney, “Sexual Economics,” 5; Hanawalt, *The Wealth of Wives*, 104.

role showing the *intent* of embarking on a pilgrimage for the good of the soul, though there may have been other motives in bequeathing money for someone to undertake a pilgrimage. She states:

Wills, then, had more to do with pilgrimages intended than with pilgrimages that had actually taken place, although occasionally a testator remembered a pilgrimage actually performed by himself in life, perhaps leaving a bequest for a travelling companion, or bequeathing an object which he took with him on the journey. Taken together, they illustrate what may be termed the mental map of pilgrim sites that the testator (or his spiritual advisers) carried in his or her head.⁴³

The reference to the pilgrim sites “carried in his or her head” might also refer to imagined pilgrimage, like the ones experienced by Matthew Paris and his brothers at the monastery, or the experiences referenced by Margery Kempe.⁴⁴ Intentionality in desiring to perform a pilgrimage seems to be a recurring theme for medieval penitents, as

⁴³ Diana Webb, *Pilgrims and Pilgrimage in the Medieval West* (New York: I. B. Taurus Publishers, 2001), 134.

⁴⁴ It is important to note that not all experiences of pilgrimages were strictly physical, but that they were also imagined. Kempe, *Margery Kempe*, 70. Kempe quotes God’s voice expressing to her saying, “Daughter, as often as you say or think, ‘Worshipped be all those holy places in Jerusalem in which Christ suffered bitter pain and Passion’ you will have the same pardon as if you were physically present there, both for yourself and for all those to whom you wish to give it.” Matthew Paris, Chronicler of Saint Alban’s Monastery in the thirteenth century, compiled a beautifully illustrated pilgrim itinerary map, written in the vernacular Anglo-Norman. According to Daniel K. Connelly: “The itinerary maps (at least the Monastic version) were made by a man who did not take the journey, for a group of men [his brothers] who would themselves not take the journey. Made up of seven pages, Paris’ itinerary map is filled with pictures and texts that excite both visual and, as we will see, aural senses. By creating multi-sensorial experiences of these pages, Matthew essentially created an experience of virtual travel for his fellow brethren. The pages thereby helped to create the devotional experience of an imagined or spiritual pilgrimage to Jerusalem” (170). Meditation on holy spaces and the interaction with them on some level is a recurring theme in the literature surrounding pilgrimages. The experience of a pilgrimage and the benefits of meditation on holy things seems to be the most significant factor in the execution of a spiritual journey, whether it was physically real or imagined. See Daniel K. Connelly, “Copying Maps by Matthew Paris: Itineraries Fit for a King,” in *Book of Travels: Genre, Ethnology, and Pilgrimage, 1250-1700*, ed. Palmira Brummett, 159-332 (Boston: Brill, 2014).

examples of their need to be absolved of vows to go on pilgrimage were also a concern.⁴⁵ That their intentions in and of themselves were of spiritual value speaks to the experientiality of the pilgrimage in a holistic sense. It was not the physical action of walking a designated trail that necessarily constituted a pilgrimage in the medieval mind, but it was the entirety of the experience that brought the potential pilgrim closer to the divine. Though it may not have been dependent upon the completion of an intended pilgrimage, the action of making a vow and beginning the preparations to make a pilgrimage were a significant display of personal piety. Observing this in wills allows for insight into what may have been a transformative experience for the testator that he or she wished to relive vicariously through someone else, or perhaps it was more relevant to indulgences and the connection of holy sites, pilgrims, and saints to the soul in transit to heaven that drew people to make these types of bequests. It was frequently the case that the bequest was made in hopes that it would satisfy the testator's previously made, yet still unfulfilled, vow to make a pilgrimage. According to Duffy, bequests for people to take proxy pilgrimages on behalf of the testator were common in medieval England, and experienced a fairly consistent degree of popularity.⁴⁶

Oddly, there is only one woman in Sir Nicholas Harris' *Testamenta Vetusta* who chose to bequeath money for people to undertake a pilgrimage on behalf of her soul.⁴⁷ As

⁴⁵ "Absolution from Performing a Vow of Pilgrimage," in *The Bishop's Register: a Translation of Documents From Medieval Episcopal Registers Designed to Illustrate Their Contents As Well As Various Phases of Medieval Episcopal Activity*, ed. Clifford Jesse Offer, 163-4 (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1929), 163.

⁴⁶ Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, 193-4.

⁴⁷ Several men in the *Testamenta Vetusta* chose to will money for local pilgrimages, like William Ponte who crafted his bequest in 1471. "Will of William Ponte" (1471) in *Testamenta Vetusta*, 1:326. He wished for a pilgrim to visit not only Our Lady of Walsingham, but also Canterbury. Not only were his choices within the bounds

the former Queen of England, first wife to Henry VIII, and likely unmatched in wealth among women in England, Catherine of Aragon is not representative of the general population. It is likely that having people go on pilgrimage solely for the benefit of souls of the deceased was a great luxury. However, there were likely many relatives or other loved ones who would purchase indulgences or pray for the souls of loved ones while they were on pilgrimages for themselves. One thing that stands out about Catherine's will is that the pilgrimage destination is not the Holy Land or Rome, but it is Our Lady of Walsingham.⁴⁸ This pilgrimage site is one of the most famous in all of England, and is referred to as "England's Nazareth."⁴⁹ As a favorite destination for noblewomen seeking to conceive an heir, this local pilgrimage would have been convenient and poignant for Catherine who only bore one daughter, Mary. Though it was famous nearly from the

of England, his will indicates that he died in Canterbury. "Will of Sir Richard Arundel, Knt." (8 July 1417) in *Testamenta Vetusta*, 1:196. The pilgrimages willed by these men were not limited to the Holy Land and English sites, as Sir Richard Arundel's testament demonstrates that he wishes a man go to the Holy Land for his soul, but also to the Church of the Holy Blood in Germany, and to the Court of Rome. (The church he referred to may be St. Nicholas' in modern Bad Wilsnack, Germany. Interestingly, it was not sanctioned by the church until after it grew in such popularity that infrastructure was needed to manage the great number of visitors flooding the region on pilgrimage.) "Will of William de Beauchamp" (1268) in *Testamenta Vetusta*, 1:50-1. Others who willed pilgrimages be taken for the benefit of their soul did mention the Holy Land by name, one being William de Beauchamp who died in the mid-thirteenth century. It seems his son had taken up the call to go on crusade, so it is unclear if it was for the benefit of William's soul or as a gift to his son that he willed a pilgrimage to the Holy Land be taken. "Will of William de Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick," (14 September 1296) in *Testamenta Vetusta*, 1:52. It is also unclear if going to the Holy Land as a soldier and as a pilgrim were synonymous for these two because the son, also called William de Beauchamp, willed that two soldiers go to the Holy Land in his place should he die.

⁴⁸ "Will of Katherine of Arragon" (Undated) in *Testamenta Vetusta* 1:36-7.

⁴⁹ "The Shrine," The Catholic National Shrine of Our Lady: The Basilica of Our Lady of Walsingham, (Accessed 18 December 2018), <http://www.walsingham.org.uk/minor-basilica>. Much of the shrine, especially the statue that made it famous, were destroyed during the English Reformation.

beginning of its establishment, the shrine was constructed in the eleventh century following a vision in which the Virgin Mary visited a noblewoman, Richeldis de Faverches, in a vision and asked her to build the shrine. It later developed into a chapel and eventually became a “minor basilica,” but in Catherine’s time it would have been a chapel that housed a statue of the virgin and child on a throne, and perhaps had some cloistered men attached to it. In the four hundred years between its conception and Catherine’s mention of it, it had become one of the most highly trafficked pilgrimage routes in England and a site to which many miracles were attributed.⁵⁰

Some women, though admittedly of high ranks and not necessarily indicative of the common experience, were also interested in bequeathing sums to provide for soldiers going to the Holy Land, and one explicitly expressed it was for the benefit of her soul. Elizabeth de Burgh, Lady of Clare hoped to find: “to find five armed men for the Holy Land c marks, to be spent in the service of God and destruction of his enemies, if any general voyage be made within seven years after my decease.”⁵¹ She listed this for the benefit of her soul, as well as for a few of her loved ones who had preceded her in death. One of the most interesting aspects about this expression of piety, however, is that she indicated the money be used if anyone happened to be going in the general direction of the Holy Land with the intention of some sort of defense of the Christian faith in mind.

⁵⁰ J. C. Dickinson, *The Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 4-12. Morrison, *Women Pilgrims in Late Medieval England*, 73-5. Morrison gives several examples of women traveling or paying for a proxy pilgrimage to Our Lady of Walsingham, typically for the wellbeing of their children, healing, or childbearing. It was especially favored by noblewomen, including Margaret Beaufort and Elizabeth of York (wife of Henry VII). Interestingly, they both had a special attachment to Saint Birgitta.

⁵¹ “Elizabeth de Burgh, Lady of Clare,” (25 September 1355) in *Testamenta Vetusta*, 1:57.

Elizabeth was known for building her estate and creating relationships with those in power around her as a way to achieve her goals, according to Frances A. Underhill.⁵² Elizabeth did the same in her spiritual life as she did in her public life. Through pilgrimage, donations, sponsoring a chapel and masses on her property, and even supporting women who chose to pursue monastic life Elizabeth exhibited many qualities of a pious benefactor. So, in keeping with her spiritual concerns, Elizabeth was very focused not only heavenward, but also toward the Holy Land on earth.

Not only does this suggest that the Holy Land and access to it were on the minds of women, but that there was a large enough cultural significance attributed to holy warfare and its association with pilgrimage that caused people to include consideration of it for the benefit of their souls. Even when they themselves would not have been eligible to participate in these affairs, it seems as though it has maintained a significant hold over people in their expressions of piety.⁵³ The desire to see the Holy Land returned and Jesus Christ's homeland be held by those who revere him most must have weighed on the minds of many. We see the result of the close connection between crusading and pilgrimage; each was connected by vows, special permissions, and holy purpose.⁵⁴ Yet,

⁵² Frances A. Underhill, *For Her Good Estate: The Life of Elizabeth de Burgh* (New York: Pan Macmillan, 1999), 136.

⁵³ Constance M. Rousseau, "Home Front and Battlefield: The Gendering of Papal Crusading Policy (1095-1221)," in *Gendering the Crusades*, eds. Susan B. Edgington and Sarah Lambert, 31-44, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) 32, 35-7. Keren Caspi-Reisfeld discusses women in both active and supportive roles in her article, "Women Warriors during the Crusades, 1095-1254" in *Gendering the Crusades*, eds. Susan B. Edgington and Sarah Lambert, 94-107 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

⁵⁴ James A. Brundage, *Medieval Canon Law and the Crusader* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), 30-3.

pilgrimage had a broader definition that could include very short, local journeys or even virtual, imagined experiences.

Conclusion

Not all women had the ability to donate money or property, undertake pilgrimages, or even leave behind a testament. In these cases, laywomen from poorer classes or lower social standing are excluded from many studies due to lack of rich source material though they did play a vital role in the life of parishes and monasteries. Many women would have been able to make short local pilgrimages to observe relics. Even more would have been able to donate small items of personal, sentimental value to their local parishes and monasteries, most of which would be easily be excluded from their documentation and financial records. Their absence in the record does not diminish the importance they had in the daily life of their communities and local religious institutions. Especially considering the freedoms women could find in the church, there was likely a trend of women from lower stations expressing themselves in their own ways, though they may not have been able to afford burial endowments or other more notable instances of piety or charity.

The choice to undertake a pilgrimage, or to express personal piety in another form, was a deliberate choice. The spiritual realm is a unique place where women could sometimes be excluded, but also perhaps had the greatest mobility. The expression of individuality and agency through the experience of religion is difficult to examine, but is nevertheless present. Intention and imagination, especially in the case of pilgrimage, make it difficult to gauge the validity of the expression of piety. Conflations of crusading

and pilgrimage also make it hard to determine what the parameters of a spiritual journey should be, as well as the subjective nature of experience. Perhaps further study can better illuminate the differences between the experience of pilgrimage, the perceptions of pilgrimage, and the ways in which gender frame those. Regardless, it is clear at least that gender contributes greatly to the medieval religious experience and that women were able to use the church as a vehicle for furthering their interests in one way or another.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Implications of Research

Despite the many legal, social, and ecclesiastical constraints placed upon them, women have shone through medieval records that sometimes sought to remove traces of feminine presence or otherwise discounted the value of women's roles. Women employed a wide variety of means to establish their identities and legacies not only for their contemporaries and families, but for posterity. As a result of their efforts to establish themselves, medieval Englishwomen defied expectations. The use of pious expressions presented an avenue of access to methods of exercising agency, such as crafting a public persona and facilitating genuine encounters with their spirituality. Curating an identity resulted not only from their use of piety, but from their true beliefs, wishes, concerns, and values. Expressions of agency and power often included these qualities. As a result of women's efforts to speak for themselves, a glimpse of their lives peeks through for the historian to see and interpret not only women's history but also the history of family dynamics, religious piety, and legal change.

Widows were not simply acting in accordance with social norms or familial obligation, but they were making informed decisions and looking to accomplish goals. Whether their goals included the salvation of their souls, the curation of their legacies, or the duration of their families' wellbeing, women were able to establish precedents for their actions and engage in slowly widening avenues of access to power. Through their ability to act independently from the men in their lives, widows present an indication of

what women's lives were like as they not only tended to their households, but engaged in public life. Many widows and never married women carried out lives very similar to their married counterparts, who are unfortunately often hidden within historical records as a result of coverture and gendered social norms. The significance of single women in this context is not their exceptionalism, but rather the normalcy that gives a glimpse into the lives of other women of the same social and economic standing. A deeper understanding of women's lives is made more attainable through the examination of the avenues of agency available.

Further Research

While speaking to a young man about what I study, he responded to me with great perplexity. He assumed that medieval women had not done anything of note, or rather that they were not allowed to do anything. I asked him if he personally knew any women who did nothing important or valuable, but he still contended that medieval women's lives weren't enriching, fulfilling, or lastingly meaningful because "they weren't allowed to do things." I have encountered this misconception about medieval women in many conversations with men, women, adults, children, students, and scholars. Although medieval women were limited in their ability to accomplish certain things, their experiences are still meaningful and necessary to explore. Without their stories, achievements, and actions, history is incomplete and the reality of the true experience of medieval life would never be known.

Through the analysis of the Patent Rolls, selected cartularies, wills, as well as personal correspondence and reflective works this thesis has demonstrated many

instances in which women displayed agency through their actions of piety. In the first chapter, donations of land and money showed widow's desires to remain connected to their local religious institutions in life and death. The movement of their property often resulted in increased influence for the patroness in addition to the spiritual rewards garnered by such generosity. Similarly, the testaments examined in the second chapter provided a demonstration of widows' personal values and individual concerns. The means by which widows could access agency through personal piety were made clear through their ability to curate their legacies and establish their desires for the money, land, and therefore influence they left behind. In the third chapter of this thesis, women's access to public actions of piety was placed in a larger context to better understand how piety was often integral to a woman's lived experiences.

While Englishwomen's wills and donations still hold many unanswered questions, there are also opportunities to expand research on personal piety as an avenue for agency in other historical evidence. Some documents that may still provide understudied medieval women's actions and sentiments may include churchwarden's accounts, cartularies, and an assortment of family documents. Ecclesiastical court records also still leave much to be gleaned about the ways in which women used church authority to not only appeal to spiritual causes, but temporal ones as well. Though much groundwork has been laid by feminist scholars, there is still much to build. A better understanding of the gendered experiences of those in the history we study is a step toward understanding all experiences.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources

- “Absolution from Performing a Vow of Pilgrimage.” In *The Bishop's Register: A Translation of Documents From Medieval Episcopal Registers Designed to Illustrate Their Contents As Well As Various Phases of Medieval Episcopal Activity*. Edited by Clifford Jesse Offer, 163-4. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1929.
- Breay, Claire, and Chatteris Abbey. *The Cartulary of Chatteris Abbey*. Rochester: Boydell & Brewer, 1999.
- Calendar of the Patent Rolls Preserved in the Public Record Office*. London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1891.
- Kempe, Margery. *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Translated by Anthony Bale. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Nicolas, Nicholas Harris, Sir. *Testamenta Vetusta: Being Illustrations From Wills, of Manners, Customs, &c. As Well As of the Descents And Possessions of Many Distinguished Families. From the Reign of Henry the Second to the Accession of Queen Elizabeth*. London: Nichols & son, 1826.
- Paston, Margaret. “Letter to Unidentified Lawyer.” In *The Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century, Part III*. Edited by Richard Beadle and Colin Richmond. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Paston, Margaret. “To John Paston I 1443, 09, 28.” In *The Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century, Part I*. Edited by Norman Davis. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971.
- The Cartulary of Haughmond Abbey*. Edited by Una Rees. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1985.
- “The Projected Pilgrimage of Sir Andrew Luttrell and His Wife Elizabeth to Santiago de Compostella, 1361.” In *Women of the English Nobility and Gentry, 1066-1500*, Translated by Jennifer Ward, 219. New York: Manchester University Press, 1995.

Secondary Sources

- Atkinson, Clarissa W. *Mystic and Pilgrim: The Book and the World of Margery Kempe*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983.
- Baker, J. H. *An Introduction to English Legal History*. Bath: The Bath Press, 2002.
- Beattie, Cordelia. "Married Women's Wills: Probate, Property, and Piety in Later Medieval England." *Law and History Review* 37, no. 1 (2019): 29–60.
- Beattie, Cordelia. *Medieval Single Women: The Politics of Social Classification in Late Medieval England*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Bennett, Judith M. and Christopher Whittick "Philippa Russell and the Wills of London's Late Medieval Singlewomen" *The London Journal*, 32:3 (2013): 251-269.
- Biancalana, Joseph. "Testamentary Cases in Fifteenth-Century Chancery," *Tijdschrift voor rechtsgeschiedenis*, Vol. 76, Issue 3-4 (2008): 283-306.
- Blamires, Alcuin. *The Case for Women in Medieval Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Brundage, James A. *Medieval Canon Law and the Crusader*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1969.
- Brundage, James. "Widows and Remarriage: Moral Conflicts and Their Resolution in Canon Law." In *Wife and Widow in Medieval England*. Edited by Sue Sheridan Walker, 17-31. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1996.
- Burgess, Clive. *'The Right Ordering of Souls': The Parish of All Saints' Bristol on the Eve of the Reformation*. Studies in the History of Medieval Religion. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2018.
- Burgess, Clive. "Chantries in the Parish, or 'Through the Looking-glass'." In *The Medieval Chantry in England*. Edited by Julian M. Luxford and John McNeill, 100-129. Wakefield: Charlesworth Press, 2011.
- Butler, Lionel and Christ Given-Wilson. *Medieval Monasteries of Great Britain*. London: Joseph, 1979.
- Castor, Helen. "The Dutchy of Lancaster and the Rule of East Anglia, 1399-1440: A Prologue to the Paston Letters." In *Crown, Government, and People in the Fifteenth Century*. Edited by Rowena A. Archer, 53-78. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995.

- Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Canterbury Tales*. Edited by D. Laing Purves. Auckland: The Floating Press, 2012.
- Cobban, Alan B. "English University Benefactors in the Middle Ages." *History* 86, no. 283 (2001): 288-312.
- Cook, G. H. *Mediaeval Chantries and Chantry Chapels*. London: Phoenix House Limited, 1963.
- Cullum, P.H. "'And Her Name was Charite': Charitable Giving by and for Women in Late Medieval Yorkshire." In *Woman is a Worthy Wight*. Edited by P.J.P. Goldberg, 186-207. Wolfeboro Falls: Allan Sutton Publishing Inc., 1992.
- Davies, Matthew. "The Tailors of London: Corporate Charity in the Late Medieval Town." In *Crown, Government, and People in the Fifteenth Century*. Edited by Rowena A. Archer, 161-190. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995.
- Delaney, Sheila. "Sexual Economics, Chaucer's Wife of Bath and The Book of Margery Kempe." In *Feminist Readings in Middle English Literature: The Wife of Bath and All Her Sect*. Edited by Ruth Evans and Lesley Johnson. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Dickinson, J. C. *The Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- Duby, Georges. "Women and Power." In *Cultures of Power: Lordship, Status, and Process in Twelfth-Century Europe*. Edited by Thomas N. Bisson, 69-88. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995.
- Duffy, Eamon. *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England c.1400-c.1580*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992.
- Erickson, Amy Louise. "Coverture and Capitalism." *History Workshop Journal*, no. 59 (2005): 1-16.
- Erler, Mary C. "Margery Kempe's White Clothes." *Medium Ævum* 62, no. 1 (1993): 78-83.
- Erler, Mary. "Three Fifteenth-Century Vowesses." In *Medieval London Widows*, Edited by Caroline M. Barron and Anne F. Sutton, 165-183. London Hambleton Press, 1994.
- Goldberg, P.J.P. "'For Better or for Worse': Marriage and Economic Opportunity for Women in Town and Country." In *Women in Medieval English Society*. Edited by P.J.P. Goldberg, 108-25. Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 1997.

- Hanawalt, Barbara A. *The Wealth of Wives: Women, Law, and Economy in Late Medieval London*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Hanawalt, Barbara. "Marriage as an Option for Urban and Rural Widows in Late Medieval England." In *Wife and Widow in Medieval England*. Edited by Sue Sheridan Walker, 141-164. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1996.
- Harris, Barbara J. *English Aristocratic Women and the Fabric of Piety, 1450-1550. Gendering the Late Medieval and Early Modern World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018.
- Harris, Barbara J. "Defining Themselves: English Aristocratic Women, 1450-1550" *Journal of British Studies*, Volume 49, No. 4 (2010): 734-752.
- Helmholz, Richard H. "Married Women's Wills in Later Medieval England." In *Wife and Widow in Medieval England*. Edited by Sue Sheridan Walker, 165-182. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1996.
- James, Susan E. *Women's Voices in Tudor Wills, 1485-1603: Authority, Influence, and Material Culture*. Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2015.
- Jamroziak, Emilia. "Spaces of lay-religious interaction in Cistercian houses of Northern Europe." *Parergon* 27, no. 2 (2010): 37-58. *Academic OneFile* (accessed 1 June 2019).
- Jones, Michael K. and Malcolm G. Underwood. *The King's Mother: Lady Margaret Beaufort, Countess of Richmond and Derby*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- Korpiola, Mia, and Anu Lahtinen. *Planning for Death: Wills and Death-Related Property Arrangements in Europe, 1200-1600*. Leiden: Brill, 2013.
- Laynesmith, J. L. *Cecily Duchess of York*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017.
- Lowe, Nicola A. "Women's Devotional Bequests of Textiles in the Late Medieval English Parish Church, c. 1350-1550." *Gender & History*, Vol. 22 No. 2 August 2010: 407-429.
- Luxford, Julian M. *The Art and Architecture of English Benedictine Monasteries, 1300-1540: A Patronage History*. Studies in the History Medieval Religion. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2005.
- Mate, Mavis E. *Daughters, Wives, and Widows After the Black Death: Women in Sussex, 1350-1535*. Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 1998.

- McHardy, A. K. "Patronage in Late Medieval Colleges." In *The Late Medieval English College and its Context*. Edited by Clive Burgess and Martin Heale, 89-109. York: The Boydell Press, 2008.
- McSheffrey, Shannon. *Marriage, Sex, and Civic Culture in Late Medieval London*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006.
- Morrison, Susan Signe. *Women Pilgrims in Late Medieval England: Private Piety as Public Performance*. New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Ogle, Arthur. *The Canon Law in Mediaeval England*. New York: Lenox Hill Publishing and Distribution Company, 1971.
- Peters, Christine. *Patterns of Piety: Women, Gender and Religion in Late Medieval and Reformation England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Phillips, Kim M. "Margery Kempe and the Ages of Woman." In *A Companion to the Book of Margery Kempe*. Edited by John H. Arnold and Katherine J. Lewis, 17-34. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004.
- Rantala, Tuula. "Monastic Donations by Widows: Morning Gifts as Assets in Planning for Old Age and Death in Fifteenth-Century Sweden." In *Planning for Death: Wills and Death-Related Property Arrangements in Europe, 1200-1600*, Edited by Mia Korpiola and Anu Lahtinen, 66-87. Leiden: Brill, 2013.
- Rosenthal, Joel T. *Margaret Paston's Piety*. The New Middle Ages. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- Rosenthal, Joel T. *The Purchase of Paradise: Gift Giving and the Aristocracy, 1307-1485*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972.
- Rousseau, Constance M. "Home Front and Battlefield: The Gendering of Papal Crusading Policy (1095-1221)." In *Gendering the Crusades*. Edited by Susan B. Edgington and Sarah Lambert, 31-44. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.
- Sheehan, Michael M. "The Influence of Canon Law on the Property Rights of Married Women in Medieval England." In *Marriage, Family, and Law in Medieval Europe: Collected Studies*. Edited by James K. Farge, 16-30. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997.
- Sheehan, Michael M. "The Wife of Bath and Her Four Sisters: Reflections on a Woman's life in the Age of Chaucer." In *Marriage, Family, and Law in Medieval Europe: Collected Studies*. Edited by James K. Farge, 177-98. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997.

- Sheehan, Michael M. *The Will in Medieval England: From the Conversion of the Anglo-Saxons to the End of the Thirteenth Century*. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1963.
- Silber, Ilana F. "Gift-giving in the Great Traditions: The Case of Donations to Monasteries in the Medieval West." *European Journal of Sociology* 36, no. 2 (1995): 209-43.
- Skeel, Caroline A. J. "Medieval Wills." *History*, New Series, 10, no. 40 (1926): 300-10.
- Spedding, Alison. "'I Shalle Send Word in Writing': Lexical Choices and Legal Acumen in the Letters of Margaret Paston." *Medium Ævum* 77, no. 2 (2008): 241-59.
- Staples, Kelsey Kate. *Daughters of London: Inheriting Opportunity in the Late Middle Ages*. Boston: Brill, 2011.
- Stöber, Karen. *Late Medieval Monasteries and Their Patrons: England and Wales, c. 1300-1540*. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2007.
- Swanson, R. N. "Will the Real Margery Kempe Please Stand Up!" In *Women and Religion in Medieval England*. Edited by Diana Wood, 141-165. Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2003.
- Swanson, R. N. *Religion and Devotion in Europe, c.1215-1515*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- "The Shrine," The Catholic National Shrine of Our Lady: The Basilica of Our Lady of Walsingham, (Accessed 18 December 2018), <http://www.walsingham.org.uk/minor-basilica>.
- Underhill, Frances A. *For Her Good Estate: The Life of Elizabeth de Burgh*. New York: Pan Macmillan, 1999.
- Webb, Diana. *Medieval European Pilgrimage, c.700 - c.1500*. Gordonsville: Palgrave Macmillan Limited, 2002.
- Webb, Diana. *Pilgrims and Pilgrimage in the Medieval West*. New York: I. B. Taurus Publishers, 2001.
- Wood-Legh, K. L. *Perpetual Chantries in Britain*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965.