

Women's Last Wills and Testaments in Hull, England (c. 1450–1555)

Elisabeth Salter

Over the last fifty years, medieval and early modern cultural history has witnessed an important shift towards exploring the life stories of those individuals who did not belong to the cultural or political elite. This shift was foreshadowed by pioneering scholars such as Eileen Power, who was publishing works devoted to exploring the “labours and passions of the flesh and blood” of the “quite ordinary person” in the 1920s.¹ It is now acknowledged that not only is it possible to investigate the lives of those people who formed the majority of the population, it is also important and valuable for our understandings of the past.² Moreover, studying the lives of pre-modern women is a crucial element in this project of historical reconstruction.³

¹ See Eileen Power, *Medieval People* (London: Pelican, 1924); Margaret Spufford, *Contrasting Communities: English Villagers in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974); Marjorie K. McIntosh, *Autonomy and Community: The Royal Manor of Havering, 1200–1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); and John A. F. Thomson, ed., *Townspeople in the Fifteenth Century* (London: Sutton, 1988), esp. Rosemary Horrox, “The Urban Gentry in the Fifteenth Century,” 22–44.

² See Christopher Dyer, *Standards of Living in the Later Middle Ages: Social Change in England, c. 1200–1520* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

³ For pioneering studies of pre-modern women’s lives and work in urban and rural society see, for example, Judith M. Bennett, *Women in the Medieval English*

However, despite that pioneering work of an earlier generation of scholars and excellent ongoing work by many others—at all career stages—there remains a relative paucity of studies focusing specifically on how to find and use evidence to investigate the lives of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century women.⁴ Moreover, there remains some resistance to allowing women full entitlement to their histories, which includes their

Countryside: Gender and Household in Brigstock before the Plague (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); P. J. P. Goldberg, *Women, Work and Life Cycle in a Medieval Economy: Women in York and Yorkshire c. 1300–1520* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); Amy L. Erickson, *Women and Property in Early Modern England* (London: Routledge, 1993); Judith M. Bennett, *Ale, Beer, and Brewsters in England: Women's Work in a Changing World 1300–1600* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

⁴ For earlier work see Claire Cross, “Northern Women in the Early Modern Period: The Female Testators of Hull and Leeds, 1520–1650,” *The Yorkshire Archaeological Journal* 59 (1987): 83–94; and Caroline Barron and Ann Sutton, *Medieval London Widows 1300–1500* (London: A&C Black, 1994). For recent considerations of the methods used to reconstruct pre-modern lives see Elisabeth E. Salter, *Cultural Creativity in the Early English Renaissance: Popular Culture in Town and Country* (London: Palgrave, 2006); Frances Dolan, *True Relations: Reading, Literature, and Evidence in Seventeenth Century England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013); Cordelia Beattie, “‘Your Oratrice’: Women’s Petitions to the Late Medieval Court of Chancery,” *Women's Agency and the Law 1300–1700*, ed. Bronach Kane and Fiona Williamson (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2013), 17–30.

business dealings and acumen, occupational specialization, household management, creativity, and strategic vision.⁵ This article seeks to contribute to redressing this imbalance by presenting some findings about the lives of townswomen from the mid-fifteenth century to the mid-sixteenth century—a century of change and transition that lies somewhere on the cusp between our various definitions of “the late medieval”

⁵ I am indebted to my colleagues in the “Gender, Memory, and Place Research Cluster” at the University of Hull for insights into this field. This issue is discussed with reference to the role of women in innovative land management in Briony McDonagh, *Elite Women and the Agricultural Landscape, 1700–1830: Studies in Historical Geography* (London: Routledge, 2017), esp. the Introduction—on the historiography of studying women and the land. For evidence of women managing men’s estates, see Amanda Capern, “The Landed Woman in Early Modern England,” *Parergon* 19.1 (2002): 185–214. On the significant role of wives as well as widows, see also Jane Whittle and Elizabeth Griffiths, *Consumption and Gender in the Early Seventeenth Century Household: The World of Alice Le Strange* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). On the integral role of women in the late medieval working unit known as the “Burgess household,” see Felicity Riddy, “‘Burgeis’ Domesticity in Late-Medieval England,” *Medieval Domesticity. Home, Housing and Household in Medieval England*, ed. Marianne Kowaleski and P. J. P. Goldberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 14–36, esp. 26–29. On the changing opportunities for women to engage in work see Marjorie K. McIntosh, *Working Women in English Society, 1300–1620* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

and “the early modern.”⁶ The examples are drawn from one town, Hull, in the north of England and the starting point is one of the most valuable sources of evidence for the lives of townspeople, including women, often widows: the last will and testament.

Using the Evidence of Last Wills and Testaments⁷

Employing the will for the reconstruction of life stories may seem ironic because it is a document made in consideration of death. But in fact, late medieval and early modern wills are vibrant sources of information about women’s life experiences, as well as their hopes for the future. Recent studies of women’s lives, such as Susan James’s *Women’s Voices in Tudor Wills*, have prioritized the will; however, this study, as others have done, tends to gravitate towards women of higher status.⁸ This orientation results perhaps from the obvious reason that the wills of the wealthier often provide more extensive arrays of material goods, property, and wishes, alongside biographical details traceable in other, complementary sources of evidence,

⁶ For some of the tensions in this transition see David Aers, “A Whisper in the Ear of Early Modernists,” *Culture and History, 1350–1600: Essays on English Communities, Identities and Writing*, ed. Aers (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), 177–202; for a further rationale for taking this date range, see, for example, Salter, *Cultural Creativity*, 6–7.

⁷ The system for dating wills used in this article uses two dates where possible: “w” for the date the will was made and “p” for the date of probate (the date the testator died).

⁸ Susan James, *Women’s Voices in Tudor Wills, 1485–1603: Authority, Influence and Material Culture* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015).

including other legal documents, literary texts, and visual imagery.⁹ Wills made by women of all statuses, including the townswomen of Hull, demonstrate women's loyalty to places of current or past residence, occupational identity and status, and affiliation to religious and cultural groups. They also detail wishes for the prosperity and health of close family and for the wider networks of friends, family, and kin who have been important during their lifetime and who they hope will continue to play a part in the remembrance of their own lives and in the success of their families.¹⁰

I argue that testatrixes deployed last will and testament documents to assert or define these elements of their lives, rather than simply to report or record them. Women's wills, therefore, provide valuable details about their own perceptions of, and aspirations for, their own lives. They also contribute to our understandings of civic life, religious identity and its re-formation, and the transmission of ideas and occupational skills in late medieval and early modern urban society more generally.

Luckily, whereas many details of the lives of people of the "middling sort" that might have been recorded in writing are simply lost, thousands of wills do survive and they contain wonderfully revealing details of biographical information. Most women's wills were made by widows, as a married woman's property defaulted to her husband, and there are relatively few surviving will texts made by unmarried

⁹ James, *Tudor Women's Voices*, chap. 6.

¹⁰ On women's wills as repositories of memory, see Judith S. W. Helt, "Women, Memory and Will-making in Elizabethan England," *The Place of the Dead: Death and Remembrance in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Bruce Gordon and Peter Marshall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 188–205, esp. 189, 198.

women.¹¹ But this does not diminish the value of the surviving evidence. The richest information we can gather from any woman's will usually concerns the testatrix herself and her close family, but we can also gain insights into the lives of other people whose own wills either have not survived or who never had the chance to create one. Wills during this century were made by people from a broad social spectrum, although not by everyone. The poorest people would not have been in a position to create a written document, mainly because of its cost and the relative lack of items to bequeath.¹² Hopes for the future of those unable to make a will, and the bequest of any possessions they owned, would have been transmitted to the next generation orally.

Thousands of medieval and early modern wills survive for many places across the United Kingdom, and Hull is no exception.¹³ Most are written in Latin until about 1480; more are in English after that date. When dealing with fifteenth- and sixteenth-century lives, the details available in wills are so valuable that it is important to

¹¹ On the greater freedom of widows to express their individual interests, see Robert Lutton, *Lollardy and Orthodox Religion in Pre-Reformation England: Reconstructing Piety* (London: The Boydell Press, 2006), 51–53.

¹² On the presupposition that poor women did not leave wills, see Cross, “Northern Women in the Early Modern Period,” 83.

¹³ For Hull, the two main repositories are The Borthwick Institute, University of York and The National Archive at Kew in London; in addition, the Hull History Centre holds some original wills. Most of the material for this article is drawn from the Borthwick Institute, whose staff I would like to thank for their help with my various queries.

appreciate just how much such documents can add to our knowledge, even though the surviving records do not provide a full picture because much has been lost. In addition, it is important to remember that many of the documents survived because they were copied into the large volumes known as Bishops' Registers. When a handwritten document is copied, there is the possibility that the "scribe" might have made changes, or omitted sections, or misread particular words or phrases. Moreover, testators most often dictated wills to an amanuensis; such a procedure can lead to a slippage between what was dictated and what was written. These are factors always to bear in mind when reading wills. Although issues of method and interpretation have often been discussed in the past,¹⁴ the question of the reliability of wills as evidence does not need to undermine our use of this valuable source.¹⁵ As this article demonstrates, we can still clearly discern the individual's voice and his or her wishes,

¹⁴ On concerns about the role of scribal mediation in wills, see Clive Burgess, "Late Medieval Wills and Pious Convention: Testamentary Evidence Reconsidered," *Profit, Piety and the Professions in Later Medieval England*, ed. Malcolm A. Hicks (Stroud: Sutton, 1990), 14–33. For a full consideration of the methodological issues associated with using the last will and testament (including the case for their use as documents expressing individual views), see Salter, *Cultural Creativity*, chap.1 See also James, *Tudor Wills*, "Introduction," 1–12.

¹⁵ These ideas were first articulated at length in Salter, *Cultural Creativity*; and Salter, "Some Differences in the Cultural Production of Household Consumption in Three North Kent Communities, c. 1450–1550," *The Christian Household in Medieval Europe, 850–1550: Managing Power, Wealth and the Body*, ed. Cordelia Beattie, Anna Maslakovic, and Sarah Rees Jones (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003), 391–407.

requests and hopes. By their very nature as legal instruments, wills are formulaic and each individual text reflects a set of cultural norms, some of which also reflect local and regional customs; others are facets of the changing worldview across this century. Reading more than one document from any specific time or location is very valuable, therefore, in order to arrive at a sense of the customs and tone of the wills generated in a particular place. Once one is familiar with the style and specifics typical of a particular decade or in a particular location, the moment of a personal request that deviates from—or interrupts—the formulaic is all the more noticeable. These breaks can be very small nuances that may be missed unless the documents are read in detail as individual items that represent, at some level, a personal narrative with its own symbolic coherences, perspectives, and choices.¹⁶

To summarize, the last will and testament is formulaic but also reveals individual or personal wishes. Since those that survive do not represent a complete record, it is inadvisable to use them as a statistical sample that might involve counting the numbers of instances that a specific type of household object was bequeathed. It is therefore the premise of this article that the information derived from wills should be treated qualitatively rather than quantitatively.

The Urban Context

The people of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Hull lived culturally vibrant lives. They were engaged in developing their city through new building projects; renovation of

¹⁶ Salter, *Cultural Creativity* “Introduction” and chap. 1. See also Salter, *Six Renaissance Men and Women: Innovation, Biography and Cultural Creativity in Tudor England*, c. 1450–1560 (Farnham: Ashgate, 2007), chap. 7, “Katherine Styles.”

homes, commercial properties, and civic buildings; and through construction and repair of roads and causeways. We can gain an excellent general sense of the economy, society, and cultural activity of Kingston Upon Hull from the wide range of records that survive, as well as from the buildings that remain. From the granting of its charter by Edward I in 1299, Kingston Upon Hull developed as a prosperous port during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Following its incorporation in 1440, Hull had a civic elite dominated by merchants, which meant that very strong connections existed between civic identity, decision-making, and the town's trading activities.¹⁷ During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Hull's economy significantly depended on overseas trade.¹⁸ The trade between Hull and ports in the Low Countries accounted for the greatest number of transactions during the medieval era; only London engaged in more.¹⁹

It is thought that in the mid- to late-fifteenth century, there was a general decline in the income received by Kingston Upon Hull.²⁰ This might be because new

¹⁷ *The Victoria History of the Counties of England: A History of Yorkshire East Riding* [hereafter: *VCH*], Vol. 1, ed. K. J. Allison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 26–41.

¹⁸ Jennifer Kermode, *Medieval Merchants: York, Beverley and Hull in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 217–19, 254–75; *VCH, York East Riding*, 1:59–61.

¹⁹ *VCH, York East Riding*, 1:65.

²⁰ Wendy R. Childs, "Introduction," *The Customs Accounts of Hull, 1453–1490*, ed. Childs, *The Yorkshire Archaeological Society, Record Series 144* (1984): i–xxvi, xxiii.

towns that were emerging at this time took monies away from the older towns. The picture that the wills present is not one of wholesale decline, however; indeed, at this time, the wills of the people of Hull seem to rival those of London in terms of the ownership of valuable items such as silverware, fine goods such as textiles, and fashionably new styles of furniture. While these kinds of goods do not tell a full tale about wealth and the economic fortunes of a town, they indicate a level of prosperity among a group of people who represent the commonality and their servants.

Women's Involvement in Mercantile Culture

Hull's identity as a port is a dominant feature in the occupational activities of its fifteenth- and sixteenth-century men and women. The "aliens" who visited from overseas, mainly the Netherlands, Germany, and other Hanse towns, as well as Iceland, sometimes settled in Hull.²¹ Port activity provided occupations for various people (some of whom are discussed here), but Hull also lost people who were away at sea. A number of Hull men were always away from their homes at any one time, leaving wives and dependents to look after home affairs, including business.

An example of such men is John Paynton, who became seriously ill while he was away from Hull while probably engaged in trade aboard the ship, the *Grace Dieu*, which he mentions in his will of 1474.²² His wife, who is not named, was clearly a resident of Hull. She was bequeathed all the goods, moveable and unmovable, pertaining to her and her household in Hull, but nothing of his "outward" goods,

²¹ *VCH, York East Riding*, 1:51–52; Kermode, *Medieval Merchants*, 248–52.

²² John Paynton (w 1474; p 1474) The National Archive, London [hereafter: TNA] PROB 11/6/91.

which we can assume included his trading wealth and any other property outside her domestic realm. No dependents are mentioned. The tone of this document leaves open the possibility that there was a certain level of estrangement between Paynton and his wife—who was not appointed as executrix. He was not entirely devoid of female company, however, as the “poor woman,” presumably a sick nurse, was caring for him; he bequeathed to her an extra 2 shillings and 6 pence above her wages. Although this woman resided in Sandwich, Kent, and therefore is not within this article’s geographical range, she is a useful reminder of one occupation women were able to pursue in port towns: care worker and host to traveling merchants.

Sometimes ships, or indeed part shares in ships, are identified as heritable property in Hull women’s wills. In 1438, Joan Gregg, the wealthy widow of John Gregg, bequeathed to Stephen Gildhouse and William Arnold, two of her key beneficiaries who had been apprentices to her husband, a 1/32nd part in her ship, *The George*. Joan’s husband had been a prominent and wealthy merchant of Hull, and Joan became a very wealthy widow after his death in 1437.²³ In 1455, John Herryson, a Burgess of Hull, bequeathed to his wife, Agnes, his shares in two ships, *The Anne of Hull* and *The Julian*.²⁴ The inclusion of ships as heirloom items in both of these examples indicates their importance to the people of Hull.²⁵ In both of these instances,

²³ John Gregg (w 1437; p 1437), The Borthwick Institute, University of York [hereafter Borthwick] 3/507r–508r; Joan Gregg (w 1438; p 1438), Borthwick 3/555r–56v. See Kermode, *Medieval Merchants*, 105.

²⁴ John Herryson (w 1455; p 1455), Borthwick 2/325 r–v. On women’s boat ownership see also James, *Women’s Voices*, 145–46.

²⁵ Kermode, *Medieval Merchants*, 186–87.

the ships were also shared, indicating a degree of coordination in the management of the Hull townspeople's involvement in the shipping economy. Joan Gregg's references to the 1/32nd part of the *George* passing to two people, for example, indicates the potential for a complex management of rights and activities that may have been managed by Joan herself during her widowhood. *The George*, *The Anne*, and *The Julian* are all recorded in the surviving Customs Accounts of this era.²⁶ In 1453, it seems that Stephen Gildhouse was making good use of his share in *The George* by importing several hundred gallons of wine as part of a shipment of wine and other goods for more than fifty merchants.²⁷

The Customs Accounts themselves are dominated by men's names: as owners of the ships that passed into and out of the busy port of Hull, as importers or exporters of goods, and as controllers of the custom fees. However, a few women appear in the record of 1453–90, such as Katerina Ratelyff, Mariona Kent, and Alice Dey (or Day).²⁸ Alice Dey served as Customs Official, in her capacity as her husband's executrix, for two periods: November, 1469, to August, 1470; and November, 1470,

²⁶ Childs, *The Customs Accounts*, 3; on April 26, 1453, the goods imported by John Harrison's boat called *The Anne* included hats, kettles, stockfish, wax, and hemp. TNA E122 61/71.

²⁷ Childs, *The Customs Accounts*, 10. TNA E122/61/71.

²⁸ Childs, *The Customs Accounts*, 142, 148, 159, 167, 172, 179. Mariona Kent (w 1488; p 1500), Borthwick 3/320r–21r. The will of Mariona's husband, John Kent (w 1466; p 1468) is Borthwick 4/53r. For Mariota Kent's gifts to York guilds, see David J. F. Crouch, *Piety, Fraternity and Power: Religious Gilds in Late Medieval Yorkshire, 1389–1547* (York: York Medieval Press, 2000), 153.

to February, 1471.²⁹ Alice's will is lost, but her husband, John, bequeathed to his widow a number of properties from his estate, including his house, with a newly-built extended back entrance, together with three tenements and a garden in Blackfriar Street, Hull, and a close "in the territory of Newland near Cottingham."³⁰ These properties may have been used as storage spaces for the cloth business that Alice continued on John's behalf in her widowhood.³¹ John's other property, in York, was bequeathed to a network of merchants (merciers) and high-status individuals (knights and armigers) in a manner that tied together merchants in York, London, and Hull through gifts of pieces of silver gilt, property, and the provision of prayers for John and his widow, Alice.³²

Mariona Kent's importance in this article is a passing one, as she was not a Hull townswoman, and her story will be continued elsewhere. However, her will gives a useful indication of a working household run by a woman in the last years of the fifteenth century. Mariona's text bequeathed to the women and "*famuli*" in her service at the time of her death a gift of two shillings on the tenth day of her obituary prayers. References to apprentices in women's wills provide a valuable indication of their management of business households. As Felicity Riddy has discussed with reference to "burgeois" domesticity, *famuli* were a part of the household sometimes

²⁹ Childs, *The Customs Accounts*, 126–34. TNA E 122/62/12. John Day (w 1470, p 1472), Borthwick, 4/79.

³⁰ Newland is now a suburb of Hull. Cottingham is a village about a mile from Newland, now across the county boundary and in the East Riding of Yorkshire.

³¹ Kermode, *Medieval Merchants*, 337.

³² John Day (w 1470; p 1472), Borthwick, 4/79v.

accommodated under the same roof, as well as working with and for their master and/or mistress.³³ In her will of 1547, Anne Mathewson of Hull identified her obligations to her apprentices as specified in their indentures, and to ensure that her executors take up the responsibility of these obligations as much as possible. This request comes alongside, and is distinct from, Anne's bequests to household servants. For her apprentices, she stipulates that:

Item I will that myne Executoures shall give unto and everye myne apprentices which are nowe in my *service* and will be contented to do suche and the same since unto them or unto one of them as they oughte and sholde have done unto me by their indentoures from tyme to tyme duryng their assigned yeres suche sumes of money as upon like *deservynges* I stand charged to paie unto theme at th'ende of their termes expressed in their saide Indentoures and to the residue of my saide apprentices so moche money at th'ende and terminacion of their yeres as to the wisdomes and descrecions of my saide Executoures shalbe thought mete.³⁴

What were these apprentices doing in their service to Anne Mathewson, and how substantial was the scale of the commercial operation?³⁵

The will of Anne's husband, George Matthewson, a merchant of Hull, sheds some light on these issues. In his will made in 1541, George bequeathed to his wife various properties that include mills and holding yards, perhaps indicative of

³³ Riddy, "Burgeis' Domesticity," 17–18.

³⁴ Anne Mathewson (w 1547; p 1547), Borthwick 13/360v–61v, at 361v.

³⁵ On women's inheritance and use of apprentices, see James, *Women's Voices*, 138.

manufacturing. It may be that Anne was running a business that required milling of grain or storage of goods, and that the apprentices assisted her in these activities. Anne's stipulations regarding the continued service of her apprentices, under the authority of her executors, implies that she had a role in coordinating a trading activity associated with those people. The mention of the indentures in this bequest also suggests that Anne was involved with, and had knowledge of, the detail of the written agreements between her as the "Master" and them as her apprentices.

Beer brewing, an important trade in many places during this century, is specifically identified as involving women.³⁶ It seems from the evidence of individuals' names that there was a population of people identified by the ascription "Dutchman" who had settled in Hull and whose occupation was identified by the phrase "beer brewer." A cluster of testamentary evidence relating to the beer brewers survives for this period that includes men and women such as the Adryansons, Williamsons, and Johnsons discussed below. This evidence shows the ways in which the alien beer brewers had become part of the community of Hull through marriage. For example, the will of Isabel Wylton of Hull, written during her widowhood in 1486, identified her daughter, Marion, as the wife of the "berebrewer," Brand Adryanson.³⁷ Adryanson had clearly become fully involved in the business

³⁶ On single women and widows as brewers, see Bennett, *Ale, Beer, and Brewsters*.

³⁷ Brand Adryanson (1502) Borthwick 6/64v–65r.

community of Hull by the time of his death, given the extent of his property ownership in the town and surrounding area.³⁸

Adryanson's will, made in December, 1502, hints at the community of beer brewers to which he belonged and that included townswomen. Some may have been non-alien residents of Hull who married men in this occupation, such as his wife, Marion, née Wylton. Others, such as Alison Johnson, the wife of beer brewer Cornelius Johnson, may have either been naturalized with their husbands or married into the Dutch beer-brewing trade. In his will, Adryanson requested to be interred in St. Mary's church in Hull "under the stone where one Florien berebrewer was buried." He identified Alison Johnson, widow, late the wife of Cornelius Johnson, "berebrewer," to assist with the money he donated to the church for mourning vestments. Adryanson's fellow beer brewer, Cornelius Johnson, the former husband of Alison, had made his will three months earlier in August, 1502. He also requested to be buried in St. Mary's, specifically before the image of St. Salvator.³⁹ It is possible that this community of men and women, who were associated with the beer-brewing trade of Hull, used the church of St. Mary, rather than the main alternative church, that of Holy Trinity, favored by many merchants, as a key point in the formation and maintenance of their community.

The Florien mentioned by Adryanson identified himself as "*Burgensis et Berebrewer*" in his Latin will, made in December of 1476, and the probate records

³⁸ Ibid. Further references to Isumbrand Adrianson's property ownership and dealings are given in Rosemary Horrox, *The Changing Plan of Hull, 1290–1650* (Kingston Upon Hull: Kingston Upon Hull City Council Report, 1978), 149.

³⁹ Cornelius Johnson (1502) 6/49r.

note that he died in January of the same year (probably 1477). Florencius's wife, Elen, also recorded as having made her will in 1476—although she did not die until September, 1477—was the sole executrix for Florencius's estate. However, his brief will does not delineate the goods that she received from him, nor—unlike the more detailed will of George Mathewson—the arrangements for how and where the business will be run.⁴⁰ Elen Williamson's will, in which she requested to be buried “at the head of Florencius, some time my husband,” includes gifts of clothing and other items to a number of people beyond those identified as immediate family. This document provides no direct information about a beer-brewing business run by Elen in her widowhood, but it does refer to a number of people identified as “*famuli*.” In fact, gifts to people identified as *famuli* dominate her bequests, and, like Anne Mathewson, *famuli* are distinguished from “servants.” These *famuli* included Isabelle and Christiane, who received a gift of money (12*d*) to share between them; Margaret Hanson, who received 3*s*4*d*; and Johanne, the wife of John (“*famulus*”), who received a petticoat. The gifts Elen distributed to servants—actually identified as “former servants”—are not that different from those given to the *famuli*: Johanne and Alice were each bequeathed an item of clothing. It is possible, however, that the *famuli*, some of whom were evidently married, may have been assistants in running the beer business and may have lived in Elen's household.⁴¹ The only trade that is mentioned

⁴⁰ On George Mathewson's service as Mayor of Hull and Auditor for the Guild of St. Mary in Hull, see Crouch, *Piety, Fraternity, Power*, 211, 213.

⁴¹ On gifts to servants and *famuli* and the different status, and the relative infrequency of gifts given to apprentices, see Kermode, *Medieval Merchants*, 103–4; and Riddy, “‘Burgeis' domesticity,” 17–18.

directly in this will is that of “Wright.” One Stephen Thornson, Wright, is given a best russet gown that formerly belonged to Florencius. Elen’s few references to direct family members include the mention of her two daughters as co-executrices and also a brother, Richard Bellardy, to whom she bequeathed a gown of “musterdevilers,” a type of high-quality woolen cloth, possibly originating from Montivilliers in Northern France; to his wife she bequeathed to a new kirtle of violet.⁴²

Material Goods

The flow of people and goods from overseas and other parts of England, as well as Scotland, Ireland, and Wales, contributed to the diversity of possessions and clothing bequeathed by Hull’s townswomen; this flow also contributed to the transmission of new ideas about fashionable consumption as well as, for example, about religion.⁴³

Many women, often widows, gave a variety of goods to family, kin, servants, friends, and business contacts in ways that offer details about the item’s history, such as its significance to the testator (and beneficiary), its value, and its style. The details themselves sometimes give insight into the visual and material culture of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century domestic interiors.

Katherine Ewerby, who made her will in 1504, gave many items as assemblages of bequests contained within chests that she variously describes as

⁴² Elen Williamson (w 1476; p 1477), Borthwick 5/18v–19r.

⁴³ See, for example, David M. Gaimster and Paul Stamper, eds., *The Age of Transition: The Archaeology of English Culture, 1400–1600* (Oxford: Oxbow, 1997).

“[s]pruce chest,” “war chest,” and “coffer.”⁴⁴ To her son-in-law Richard Marley and her daughter his wife, Margaret, she left a coffer “with these *parcelles* folowyng in it”: a plain piece of silver with a gilded cover and a “litile” maser (a style of drinking cup with ornamental value) with a great band of silver gilt, a girdle with knots of gold; a pair of coral beads with gilded gauds and a “knotte” of pearl; a piece of cloth of gold with two gold rings in it, and an item of black velvet with seven great pearls and other smaller pearls, and a tippet of sarcenet; half a dozen silver spoons, her kerchief of fine linen cloth, and two new smocks. In addition to bequests of hall and chamber furniture, such as cupboards and presses, she also gave Richard and Margaret a “gret war chest”.⁴⁵

The earlier Latin wills often describe the use of particular material goods, and in doing so, they give us access to the sounds of the words people were using to convey the rich descriptions of these evocative material goods. Agnes Bedford’s will (made in 1459), which contains many gifts of beautiful items, often uses English within the context of a Latin document to describe specific items: for example, her bequest to kinswoman, Agnes Swan, includes: *meam zonam nigram* vocat Cristenyngē gyrdell barred through oute et deauriat [?] . . . di dozen coclia cum

⁴⁴ Katherine Ewerby (w 1504, p 1505), Borthwick 6/123r–v. For an excellent recent consideration of the evidence for object assemblages, and what these tell us about fifteenth- and sixteenth-century consumption patterns, see Lisa Liddy, “Domestic Objects in York, c. 1400–1600: Consumption, Neighbourhood and Choice” (PhD diss., University of York, 2015).

⁴⁵ Katherine Ewerby (w 1504; p 1504), Borthwick 6/123r–v, at 123r.

akehornes.”⁴⁶ And, in a gloriously descriptive mixing of Latin, English, and French words, Agnes Patrington, in her will of 1474, left to her son, the chaplain Thomas Sproxton, “unum craterem stant & cooptorem cum rosie & unum falconis super lez knoppes.”⁴⁷ Agnes also bequeathed two beds described in this Latin text as “arrasbeds,” thus demonstrating the ways in which words denoting overseas origin were employed to describe the style of some items, in this case, Arras in France.

The will of Isabel Wylton (1486),⁴⁸ the mother-in-law of beer-brewer Brand Adryanson, shows how choice could be built into the bequest of some items, as well as the ways in which the stories of these items influenced that process. To her daughter, Marion (wife of Adryanson), Isabel bequeathed one spruce coffer, “the best that she woll chose of three.” She also gave to Marion the harness (girdle) that was her father’s, which he had given to Isabel. In a bequest to another woman, Agnes Porter, Isabel gave a pair of beads “which Marion leves untaken.” Isabel’s will provides a number of stories associated with specific items, demonstrating that some testators chose (or were able) to identify their goods through memorial or emotive descriptions. To Johannet Scoles, besides various silverware including a maser cup with a print of St. George in the bottom, Isabel gave a number of more practical items, including brass pots and iron spits kept in the chimney, one of which, a “shorte foted

⁴⁶ Agnes Bedford (w 1459; p 1459), Borthwick 2/418r–19r. “my black girdle caked a Christening Girdle barred throughout and gilded with silver, half a dozen spoons with acorns.”

⁴⁷ Agnes Patrington (w 1474; p 1482), Borthwick 5/64r. “a standing bowl covered with roses and a falcon on top of the handles.”

⁴⁸ Isabel Wylton, (w June, 1486; p 1487), 5/297v–98r.

pott,” is described alongside “the pott we made our mete in.” Here, Isabel provides an evocative reference to shared occasions of eating and domestic activity. Isabel Wylton’s bequest of goods and items also implies some involvement with materials—in her case, lead—that might have been used for trade. To her son-in-law, Brand Adryanson, for example, she gave two half-hundred weights of lead.

These examples of material goods described in wills indicate the range and variety of possessions that townswomen owned in this era. More significantly, these examples show the extent to which testatrixes could convey the personal values and histories of their objects through the use of detailed descriptions. I am also suggesting, here, that the act of producing the detailed description for the will text is part of the testatrix’s process of formulating an object’s aesthetic value.

Christianity and Worldly Goods

Scholarship on the pre- and early Reformation parish frequently employs the will as a central source of evidence.⁴⁹ Testaments from this era express a central concern with the soul, and these documents from Hull are no exception. Most wills begin by funding masses and obituary prayers, alongside a request about the place and conditions of burial. One of the fascinating aspects of wills is the ways in which they at once celebrate material goods while acknowledging the danger of overindulgence

⁴⁹ See, for example, with specific reference to women and material culture in the parish, Katherine L. French, *The People of the Parish: Community Life in a Late Medieval English Diocese* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000).

in worldly goods. Many goods bequeathed in the wills of this period have a connection to religiosity, either because they are repurposed for use in churches, they relate to devotional practice (such as rosary beads), or have a decorative content that employs religious iconography.

Some corpuses of will evidence seem to indicate an increase in the parishioners' commitment to funding parochial religion during the fifteenth century; other corpuses seem to document the rise of "parsimonious piety" connected with the increasingly heterogeneous landscape of pre-Reformation religious practices.⁵⁰ Sometimes money was given for casting new bells, such as Agnes Patrington's gift, in 1474, of 6s8d to St Mary's Church (where she wished to be buried). In other bequests, household items were given to be repurposed as bells: in 1486, Isabel Wylton bequeathed a brass pot and two copper kettles for the making of the bells at St. Mary's. The wealthy widow, Joan Thurcrosse, in her 1524 will, characteristically raises the stakes in terms of the household items she proposes for "up-cycling." She specified that if her beneficiary, William Vicars, died before reaching the age of twenty, then the money and the silver gifted to him should be repurposed for St. Mary's in Hull where she was to be buried. She left £20 to purchase two silver

⁵⁰ For the view that the fifteenth century was a period of lavish giving to the parish church, see Beat A. Kumin, *The Shaping of a Community: The Rise and Reformation of the English Parish, c. 1400–1560* (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1996), 185–86. On the rise of "parsimonious piety" amongst some groups, see Lutton, *Lollardy and Orthodox Religion*, chap. 4.

candlesticks for the high altar and plate to make a “goodly chales” to remain in the church perpetually.⁵¹

Agnes Ellis’s 1505 will provides details about gifts of small precious items to churches: to Holy Trinity in Hull, she left a pair of coral beads that, she stipulated, must hang on the altar cloth and must not be removed or sold. The bequest by wealthy widow, Joan Thurcross, to her beneficiary, William Vicars, of “my best feather bed . . . with a covering of *Ares* having the picture of our lady riding into Egypt,” also indicates how religious iconography created and enriched domestic life.⁵²

Women’s Books and Literate Culture

Wills also offer a great deal of information about the ownership and circulation of books by women. The evidence is quite voluminous and cannot be fully discussed here, but references to books in the wills give a good sense of the general trends and permit some tentative conclusions. In 1459, Agnes Bedford, the mother of John Dalton (w 1496), gave books to her kinswoman, Agnes Swan, including her new primer and a book with prayers that once belonged to her son, a chaplain.⁵³ Agnes Patrington’s 1474 will also gives an idea of how she supported literate culture through her parish church; she gave 3*s*4*d* for the placing of a “legend” at St. Salvator in addition to other bequests. The rich bequests of Joan Thurcross in 1524 include several references to literate culture and education: she left 40*s* to the nuns of Grimsby “to write my name into their mortilage book and so to pray for my soul.”

⁵¹ Joan Thurcross (w 1523; p 1524), Borthwick 9/ 272r–73r.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Agnes Bedford (w 1459; p 1459), Borthwick 2/418r–19r.

She also donated 20s to her godson, Thomas Langton, “to help him towards his school.” In general, these types of reference to book ownership and sharing and to the uses of written text indicate that townswomen participated in literate culture.

Reconstructing Women’s Views and Experiences of Family and Identity

Last wills and testaments are very valuable for understanding the nature and construction of families, and women’s wills are a particularly important part of this evidence. Much of the purpose of the will is to define and ensure the continuation of family: inheritance of wealth and property, as well as family tradition, belief, and custom. Yet sometimes women did not have the option of bequeathing to their children, due to the death of offspring (exceedingly common in the late medieval and early modern world) or because of childlessness.

In her work on women’s wills of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Hull and the surrounding area, Claire Cross noted that childless widows tended to bequeath larger amounts of money and property to other causes; she gives the example of Joan Thurcross (w 1524), whose gifts “towered over all other female donors . . . in the extent of her generosity.”⁵⁴ Some of her more extravagant gifts make sense in the light of her identification of herself in her will as a “vowess”: she extensively endowed religious houses in the region, including Sixhills and St. Leonard’s in Grimsby, the Hull Charterhouse, and Kirkstall Abbey in Leeds. Despite this self-identification, Joan clearly lived a secular life; she was married (and widowed) three

⁵⁴ Cross, “Northern Women,” 92.

times, and maintained her secular status in her funeral arrangements, requesting to be buried in the Church of Holy Trinity.⁵⁵

Joan's funerary arrangements were very ornate and carefully choreographed: in addition to requesting thirteen bondmen to attend her funeral—"every of them to have a white gown"—and cloth for thirteen poor women—"to make every of them a white kirtle"—she also describes the decoration she desired for the traditional covering to her coffin:

Also I will my executors to cause a bawdkyn or a parcel of black velvet to cover the herse withall in our lady church and thereupon I will have an image of the blessed trinity wrought and a deadman lying before him in a winding sheet and at the sides I wil have iv angels wrought with gold and needlework with candlesticks in their hands as though they gave remercie to the trinity and my name written under the feet of the dead man for a memorial.⁵⁶

The fifteenth-century example of Joan Gregg is also pertinent here. This very wealthy widow of a Hull merchant had no living children at the time she made her will. She gave very generously to many civic and religious causes, including a bequest of lead to mend the roofs of both the Carmelite and Augustinian Friars' houses to the value of £10 each,⁵⁷ as well as a gift of £20 for the maintenance of the

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Joan Thurcross (w 1523; p 1524), Borthwick 9/ 272r–73r.

⁵⁷ Joan Gregg (w 1438; p 1438), Borthwick 3/555r–56r. On the civic significance of pious gifts and the idea of "corporate Christianity," see Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400–1580* (New Haven,

conduit of sweet water in Hull.⁵⁸ In her unusually long list of saints' lights, guilds, and altars, Joan pointedly specified that she was not giving to St. Anne as the patron saint of motherhood and maternity.

The Case of Katherine Henryson

Sometimes a woman's will is particularly interesting, or specifically valuable in understanding townswomen's lives and familial identities, not only because of the details it contains, but because of the ways that it can be used as one piece in a jigsaw of fragments. This is the case with Katherine Henryson, who made her will in 1541 and died the same year. Katherine's will clearly identified her as part of a group of individuals that includes two families: the Daltons and the Henrysons (sometimes written as Harrison or Herrison). Both families expressed distinctive pious affiliations in their wills. John and Katherine Dalton had nine children. Katherine's second marriage was to Robert Henryson (d. 1520); this marriage must have taken place late in Robert's life and quite late for Katherine as well, although she survived him for twenty years. It most probably occurred after Katherine's childbearing years were over, since no mention is made of any Henryson children or any other members of the Henryson family in Katherine's will.

Katherine Henryson identified herself very strongly in her will with her first husband, John Dalton, next to whom she wished to be buried in the "Trinitie Church

CT: Yale University Press, 1992). For a careful assessment of the intricacies of identifying the individual and communal motivations for giving to the parish, see Lutton, *Lollardy and Orthodox Religion*, 8–10.

⁵⁸ Joan Gregg (w 1438); p 1438), Borthwick 3/555r–56r.

. . . in the quere under the through [sic] wher my husbande John Dalton liethe.”⁵⁹

According to the family tree in Jenny Kermode's study of late medieval merchants of the region, this John Dalton died in 1496; his will, along with that of his brother, Thomas (d.1503), contains an extremely interesting pious preamble.⁶⁰

The very unusual pious preambles in the testaments of John Dalton and John's brother, Thomas, are almost identical. Two other examples of this preamble survive: one of which is that of Katherine's second husband Robert Henryson. The preamble's fourteen lines diverge from the customary formulaic content of the opening section of such document (the testament) with its intense devotional focus:

I considering and remembering think in my heart that the days of men in this mortal life be but short and that the number of death is in the hand of Almighty God; and that he hath ordained the terms that no man may pass; remembering also that God hath ordained man to die and there is nothing more certain than death and nothing more uncertain than the hour of death.⁶¹

It is plausible to attribute the preamble to an affiliation with the guild (or religious fraternity) of Corpus Christi, given the other details these three documents contain.

⁵⁹ Katherine Henryson (w 1541; p 1541) Borthwick 13/43r. I take the unusual word “through” to indicate a passageway.

⁶⁰ Kermode, *Medieval Merchants*, 89.

⁶¹ This version of the preamble is taken from the will of John Dalton (w n.d.; d. 1496), Borthwick 5/483r–84v. This usage is discussed in Peter Heath, “Urban Piety in the Later Middle Ages: The Evidence of Hull Wills,” *The Church, Patronage and Politics in England and France in the Fifteenth Century*, ed. R. Barrie Dobson (Gloucester: Sutton, 1984), 209–34, 213–14.

For example, Robert Henryson bequeathed the “table of oversea worke” to the Trinity Church for the Corpus Christi Altar, “price the same xxxli sterling and the story to be of corpus Xti.”⁶² Even so, the preamble was not commonly used by others of this affiliation.

Having access to a group of wills such as this Henryson/Dalton group can help to make sense of the nuances of individual texts. We can gain greater understanding of the significance of a particular phrase in one will when we have deciphered the specific interests of closely aligned testators. Using the evidence found in men’s wills therefore can prove important for understanding more about a woman’s wishes. For example, we can infer from this cluster of documents that Katherine Henryson was deeply involved with the distinct religious affiliation shared by her first and second husbands, although the same distinctive preamble is not used by Katherine. It is possible that as a woman she was not able to use the words belonging to this fraternity. However, these family connections and this intense expression of religiosity in the men’s wills of her group directs attentions to one small phrase in Katherine’s own testament: “Also I will that all the prestes within the towne aforesaide to be at my buriley and to be buried under stole as a *faithful christen woman*” (my emphasis). The meaning of the unusual reference, to being buried under a stole, is not entirely clear, and may refer to the priest’s garment. It must relate to some part of the medieval funerary tradition, which Katherine’s text identifies as being appropriate for a “faithful Christian woman.” Here, she appears to be stating her

⁶² Robert Henryson (1520) PRO 11/19/250v–51r. The “table” is a probably a decorative board, perhaps commemorating the names of this testator and others, alongside the “story” of Corpus Christi.

allegiance to an era that is, by the early 1540s, passing away. Considering her marital history, Katherine may have been quite old at this point because she seems to be asserting what we usually associate with late medieval piety, between the eras we usually think of as pre- and post-Reformation. Here she is perhaps demonstrating concern about the changes being wrought by the Reformation.

These small glimpses into Katherine's own distinctive piety become evident because we have access to the testaments of men closely affiliated to her. But there is one further piece to the jigsaw puzzle, which helps to confirm Katherine's involvement in the continuation, and perhaps the transmission, of the distinct and intense family piety of the Daltons and the Henrysons. This is found in the will of one of her sons, Thomas Dalton, which was made in August, 1556. It reproduces verbatim the distinctive preamble, produced in the late fifteenth century by Thomas's father, John; his uncle, Thomas; and his stepfather, Robert, in 1520. This includes the lines strongly reminiscent of late medieval Catholic piety:

[B]eseeching Almighty God that I may die the true son of holy kirk, of heart truly confessed, with contrition and repentance of all my sins that ever I did since the first hour I was born of my mother into this sinful world unto the hour of my death; of which offences I ask god forgiveness & in this I beseeche the blessed Virgyne Marie and all the companye of heaven to praye for me.⁶³

Katherine Henryson's son, Thomas Dalton, made his will during Mary Tudor's reign, which is probably why it was possible for him to express this sentiment so openly. The timing is fortunate in terms of the evidence Thomas leaves because during this brief Catholic reign he was able to document the continuation of this familial piety in his will text. It also helps to confirm his mother's desire to continue a distinct pious

⁶³ Thomas Dalton (w 1556; p 1556), Borthwick 136r–37r, at fo. 136r.

tradition against the tide of change in the 1540s. Thomas Dalton is also mentioned in the will of Joan Thurcrosse in 1524. She identified him simply as her “godson Thomas Dalton,” and bequeathed him just ten shillings. From what we know of Joan’s religious interests, we can infer that she would not have discouraged her godson in his pursuit of a distinctively intense, pre-Reformation devotional outlook.

Conclusion

Investigating fifteenth- and sixteenth-century townswomen’s wills enhances our understandings of the lives and experiences of these people. This article has shown how the last will and testament provides evidence for townswomen’s—and particularly widows’—involvement in trade and commerce; their awareness of the aesthetics of material goods, their attention to matters of style and fashion; and their involvement in the rich visual, material, and spiritual culture of pre-Reformation religiosity. The wills also demonstrate the ways that a particular geographical context, the busy and well-connected pre-modern port of Hull, could shape the lives and activities of women as well as men.

More significantly, however, I have sought to demonstrate the value of the nuances of evidence contained within these women’s testamentary statement, and the ways in which we can observe townswomen themselves in the act of creating these nuances through the manipulation of descriptive language: for example, gifts of precious heirloom goods as individual items or object assemblages are used to convey something of the life story of the testatrix and the beneficiary. The language used to describe material items additionally gives us access to the rich sound worlds of material consumption and the potential for multiple languages to leave resonances of the preciousness of objects and the relationships they convey. The nuances in

Katherine Henryson's document help, therefore, to give us greater understanding of an extended family with very particular ideological interests on the eve of the Reformation. Whereas most of the evidence for these beliefs and practices is found through records left by men from this belief community, the addition of Katherine's side of the story gives a fuller picture of how the beliefs and practices of the Daltons and the Henrysons were nurtured and encouraged by this woman's influence.

Bringing together Katherine Henryson's will with the more overtly phrased religiosity found in her kinsmen's documents demonstrates the ways that a woman's implicit references can help us understand more clearly a shared community of belief and practice.

Elisabeth Salter is Professor of Medieval Studies and Cultural Creativity at the University of Hull where she is currently serving as an Associate Dean in the Faculty of Arts, Cultures and Education. Interdisciplinary and informed by ethnography, her research examines the lives and experiences of men and women below the level of the elite in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, focusing on the kinds of literary texts that townspeople read and encountered as well as the records of their lives. Her forthcoming monograph centers on the literary and material religious culture of men and women in England c. 1400–1550 with a view to accessing the poetics of popular religion.