

‘Things given and granted her’: Prayer Beads and Property in Late Medieval England

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ABSTRACT:

Prayer beads have often been associated with women or a gendered form of piety, but little work has been done on exploring why this assumption has been made, or why and how the link was perpetuated. This article not only uses statistics to substantiate the connection but also explores some of the reasons behind it. Using a sample of wills from Lincolnshire in the period 1505-1534, the article undertakes qualitative and quantitative analysis to explore this connection and to examine the importance of these objects for their owners. It explores the significance of prayer beads for women in life in order to understand better what a testamentary bequest of such objects might have meant both for testator and recipient. Ultimately this article demonstrates that wills were places where the gendered nature of these objects was recorded, created and reinforced and, more broadly, shows the significance of prayer beads as ‘women’s goods’.

KEYWORDS: (5-10) – wills, prayer beads, rosary, gender, women, men, kinship, paraphernalia, property

In his will of 1534, William Preste of Pinchbeck, Lincolnshire made a number of bequests to his daughter Margaret.¹ Among the items that he left to her was a set of prayer beads, which William described as ‘a pare of beades that was my wyffe moders’.² His description of the

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² *Lincoln Wills: 1532-1534*, ed. by Hickman, p. 309. This article interprets bequests of ‘beads’ always as ‘prayer beads’ rather than as necklaces or other jewellery. This is in line with contemporary uses of the term in works such as Thomas More’s *The Answer to the Fyrst Parte of the Poysened Booke*, in which he encourages ‘good christen readers [...] cast the bedys in the fyre’, by which he means prayer beads. More, *The Answer*, IV, ch. 12, p. 201v. Such an interpretation is supported by the frequent description of ‘a pair of beads’, which confirms that these objects were indeed rosaries. Some testators note that the beads had gauds, a crucifix, or an Agnus Dei attached, which similarly supports the idea that these objects were what we would call rosaries. The Latin ‘unum par preclarium’ is occasionally found, and this also indicates a rosary rather than a necklace. Bequests where the religious function is not explicit, such as gifts of ‘the beads’ or ‘my best beads’ are thus interpreted as bequests of prayer beads. This article refers to ‘prayer beads’ rather than ‘rosaries’ to reflect the terminology that was used by the testators themselves.

beads in terms of their female owner, or owners, raises important questions about property ownership and transmission, and how this applied to women in the late medieval period. This article explores how women fostered and extended social networks through bequests of beads. It argues that beads were part of a woman's paraphernalia, and as such played an important role throughout her life as inalienable possessions. This is not to say that men could or did not own prayer beads: they certainly did, and often passed them on in their wills. Yet as I will show, their construction of these objects has a gendered dimension to it, one which is coded female.

Henry Bracton's thirteenth-century treatise *On the Laws and Customs of England* states that a wife might use her will to dispose of items which she would have owned if she had survived her husband. Bracton is vague on the specific nature of such items, but indicates that these might include 'things given and granted her for personal adornment, as robes and jewels'.³ This article will consider prayer beads as prime examples of such items, and will suggest that they may well have been considered as being 'women's goods'. Prayer beads have frequently been seen as objects associated with women or a gendered form of piety.⁴ Susan James argument that beads were 'a woman's gift' draws on anthropological studies to substantiate her claim that beads generally were part of a feminine material culture.⁵ Jerome Bertram also notes this gendering of beads, identifying that when rosaries first appeared in monumental brasses their length reflected the sex of the owner, with women's sets being depicted as longer than men's. Bertram also notes that 'Ladies' rosaries are much more common [than men's]' in such depictions, implying an association between the two.⁶

³ Bracton, *On the Laws and Customs of England*, II, trans. by Thorne, p. 179

⁴ For a general background on beads, their production and use across a range of historical periods and cultures see Dubin, *The History of Beads*. Archaeological works have provided valuable evidence for the production of prayer beads in the medieval period, particularly Mead, 'Evidence for the Manufacture of Amber Beads'. Similarly Geoff Egan and Frances Pritchard's work on dress accessories has given insight into how beads may have been worn and used: Egan and Pritchard, *Dress Accessories*. David Hinton touches on the evidence of prayer bead bequests in Lincolnshire wills in his work on possessions, but this is largely limited to their use as evidence for continued Catholic beliefs and practices after the Reformation: Hinton, *Gold and Gilt*, pp. 258-259. Literary approaches have also proved fruitful. Anne Winston-Allen's work on the history of the rosary in the Middle Ages has provided a valuable background to the development of the rosary, with emphasis on associated texts and confraternities: Winston-Allen, *Stories of the Rose*. John D. Miller's work gives a useful overview of the history of the prayers used along with rosary beads, but is largely descriptive rather than analytical: Miller, *Beads and Prayers*. More recently, Anna Gottschall's PhD thesis has explored the connection between the *Pater Noster* prayer and the development of the rosary as a practice, which would ultimately combine the *Pater Noster* with the *Ave Maria* and *Gloria Patri*: Gottschall, 'The Pater Noster and the Laity'. In line with historians' recent interest in material culture, some have considered beads as evidence of pious practice, as in Lisa MacKinney's work on the household of John Baret: MacKinney, 'Rosaries, Paternosters and Devotion'. None of these works however take gender as a central concern.

⁵ James, *Women's Voices*, p. 80.

⁶ Bertram, "'Orate pro Anima'", p. 329.

Christine Peters has identified similar patterns, but attributes the length distinction to changes in fashion: men's beads were longer in brasses from the late fifteenth century, but by the 1520s it was women rather than men who were depicted with longer sets.⁷ It has also been suggested that beads were associated with life course, rather than gender. Roberta Gilchrist claims that prayer beads were among other artefacts depicted with old age and limited mobility, and this may have something to do with the perceived efficacy of beads in protecting their owner against sudden death.⁸ Whilst these studies note the gendered nature of beads, none has explored why such a connection existed. This article seeks to complement these studies by investigating what discourse in wills can tell us about the gendered significance of beads, in particular the ways in which these objects had particular importance for women, and how they were used by female testators to construct and maintain kinship networks.⁹

Male testators such as William Preste mentioned at the beginning of this article also owned and bequeathed beads, and men were the recipients of testamentary gifts of beads too. Material evidence from the wreckage of the *Mary Rose* shows that a number of sets of prayer beads were found on board, demonstrating that these objects were significant for men.¹⁰ The aim of this article is not to argue that men were somehow excluded from owning prayer beads, but instead to explore the ways in which testators constructed prayer beads as feminine, the reasons for this, and the possible implications. [Using a sample of wills from early sixteenth-century Lincolnshire, this article demonstrates how testamentary bequests of beads follow gendered patterns of inheritance. It demonstrates that prayer beads were probably considered part of a woman's paraphernalia and so may well have remained her own throughout her life, regardless of any marriages. Although the term 'paraphernalia' was neither contemporary nor used by any of these testators in their wills, the concept was however in circulation in this period and even earlier.](#)¹¹ Bracton, for example, made reference to 'maxime de rebus sibi datis et concessis ad ornatum, quæ sua propria dici poterunt sicut de robis et iocalibus' (things given and granted her for personal adornment, as robes and jewels,

⁷ Peters, *Patterns of Piety*, pp. 58–59.

⁸ Gilchrist, *Medieval Life*, pp. 36, 158.

⁹ For the purposes of this study no distinction is made between the will and testament: these terms are used interchangeably.

¹⁰ Prayer beads were found on all decks of the ship alongside other personal items, suggesting that these were carried by the owner at the time of the sinking. Redknap, 'Religious Items', pp. 117–23.

¹¹ Cordelia Beattie's work on married women's wills provides a thorough overview of the law surrounding female property ownership. Beattie is also of the opinion that prayer beads classed as paraphernalia. Beattie, 'Married Women's Wills'.

which may be said to be her own).¹² This article argues that the will was one place where the gendered status of these goods was created and reinforced. It surveys firstly the occurrences of prayer bead bequests in wills from Lincolnshire, exploring which testators left beads, who was identified as a recipient, and how inheritance practices shaped what was left in the will, and to whom. It demonstrates quantitatively the association between women and prayer beads both as testators and as recipients, and asks why these objects may have been particularly significant for women. A second section looks qualitatively at the bequests of beads, and considers the language of such bequests. It explores how these objects were described and what this enabled the testator to communicate of their own agency and preferences, as well as their hopes for the future. Ultimately this article argues that beads had special significance for women and that the will and testament was an important location where the gendered status and significance of beads was recorded, created and reinforced.¹³

Evidence

Wills and testaments are widely used by historians of the late medieval period as they provide valuable insight into the parish, material culture, relationships and devotional activities and other key topics.¹⁴ The wills which form the basis of this study were proved in Lincoln Consistory Court, Lincoln Archdeaconry Court and the Archdeaconry Court of Stow.¹⁵ The probate registers for these courts have been published in four volumes by Lincoln Record Society, spanning the period from 1271 to 1534. [These records are of course only those which survive, and we should be mindful that more wills and testaments were made but have been lost for one reason or another. The statistics here are therefore representative of the](#)

¹² Bracton, *On the Laws and Customs of England*, vol. II, trans. by Thorne, p. 179. Italics mine.

¹³ [Work by Elizabeth Salter in particular has demonstrated the ways in which the will provided testators with an opportunity to construct and represent their possessions. Salter, 'Being Dialogic'. Cordelia Beattie's work on the construction of the textual subject in chancery court records deals with similar issues, and also gives a clear guide to the historiographical inheritance of this topic. Beattie, 'Your Oratrice'.](#)

¹⁴ For work on the parish see Graves, 'Social Space'; Rentz, *Imagining the Parish*. Material culture has been explored using wills in a number of works, such as: Salter, *Cultural Creativity*; French, 'Genders and Material Culture'; Richardson, 'Household Objects'; James, *Women's Voices*. For wills as evidence of affection see, for example: Liddy, 'Affective Bequests'. Much work has been done on wills as sources of evidence of religious devotion and practice. These include but are not limited to: Swanson, *Religion and Devotion*; Burgess, "'By Quick and by Dead'"; Lutton, *Lollardy and Orthodox Religion*.

¹⁵ Although aspects of wills and testaments have often been described as 'formulaic', the same cannot be said of the personal names, place names and spellings contained therein. This study standardizes the spellings of place names. The transcriptions given in the *Lincoln Wills* volumes are silently expanded although the original spellings are given. Some wills in the collections have been translated from the original Latin. These volumes are useful, readily accessible and reliable as they omit little of the original content. *Lincoln Wills*, I, ed. by Foster, p. x.

extant records of these particular courts.¹⁶ The vast majority (99.3 per cent) of these wills date from 1505 onward, and so it is from this point that this study begins as prior to it meaningful quantitative analysis is not possible.¹⁷ The Lincoln Consistory Court, Lincoln Archdeaconry Court and Archdeaconry Court of Stow records contain a total of 1604 wills for the period from 1505 to 1534. Of these, 1455 were made by men and 149 by women. A total of seventy-five testators (twenty-eight female and forty-seven male) make reference to prayer beads in their wills in the period from 1505 to 1534. Of these, fifteen testators leave more than one set of beads.¹⁸ In total there are ninety-seven bequests of beads in this corpus. The following discussion makes statistical analysis both of the number of testators and the number of bequests made.¹⁹

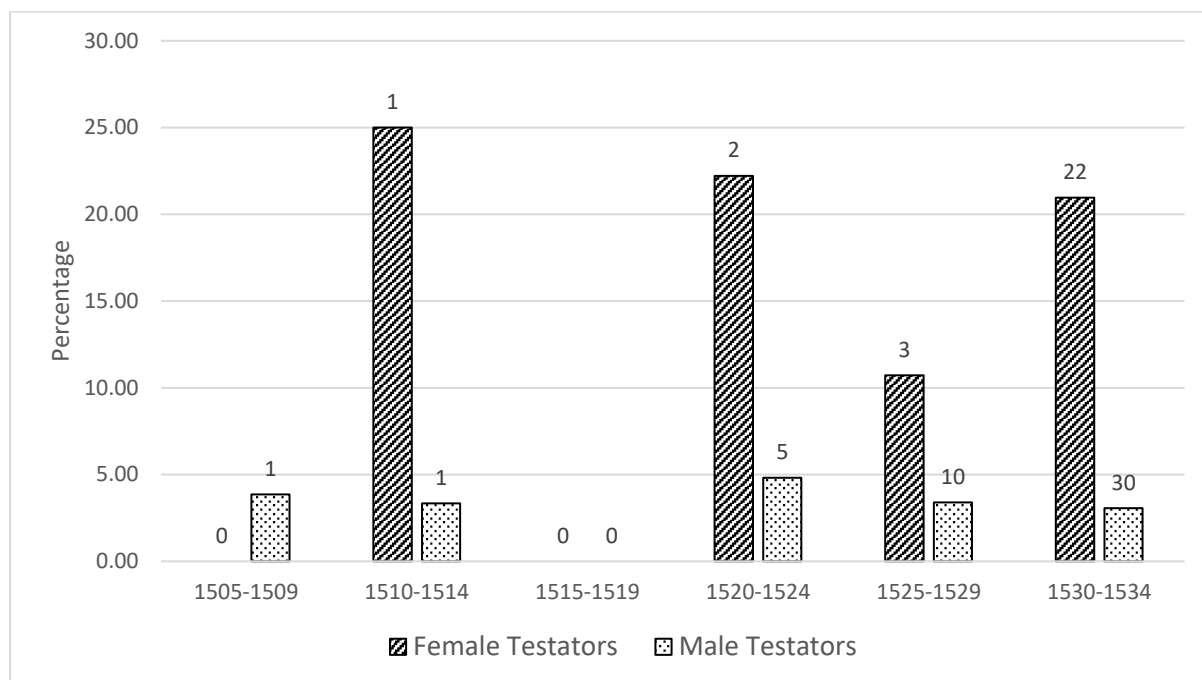


Figure 1. Proportion of male and female testators who bequeathed prayer beads as a percentage of total number of wills made by gender. The numbers of testators are indicated at the end of each bar. Lincoln Consistory Court, Lincoln Archdeaconry Court and Archdeaconry Court of Stow.

¹⁶ Takahashi, 'The Number of Wills', pp. 188–89. It should also be noted that this study does not take into account wills registered at the Prerogative Court of Canterbury (PCC), which was used to register wills made by testators who owned goods totalling £5 or more in more than one diocese. 191 PCC wills survive for testators from Lincolnshire in this period at The National Archives, Kew. Grannum and Taylor, *Wills and Other Probate Records*, p. 14.

¹⁷ *Lincoln Wills*, II, ed. by Foster, p. xxii.

¹⁸ Eight female and seven male testators leave more than one set of beads. These testators bequeath on average 2.5 sets of beads each.

¹⁹ Where necessary percentages are rounded to one decimal place.

This chart shows the proportion of male and female testators who left beads as a percentage of the total wills made by men and women respectively for each four-year increment. When comparing the percentages, we can see that the proportion of male testators leaving prayer beads in their wills remains fairly constant, at between 3 and 5 per cent of all male testators. The proportion of females leaving these objects is much higher, ranging between 10 and 25 per cent in the period after 1510.²⁰ We can therefore see that beads in wills were proportionally more frequently passed on by women than by men.²¹

Across the period from 1505 to 1534 the number of wills in which beads are mentioned increases with time. In the period from 1505 to 1509, only one testator leaves a set of beads, in comparison with fifty-two testators who leave beads in the four years from 1530 to 1534. This increase is proportional to the increase in the number of wills made in this later four-year increment, when a total of 1084 wills appear in these records. This compares to just twenty-seven from the period from 1505 to 1509. The increase over this twenty-nine year period follows widespread patterns of increased record keeping which have been identified across the sixteenth century.²²

In the period from 1515 to 1519 no testators left beads in their wills. The reason for this gap is unclear, but this particular span has the lowest total number of wills (twenty-three) for any of the four-year increments studied here. The absence of bequests is thus more likely related to the relative lack of extant wills for this four-year period than a sudden reluctance among testators to leave testamentary bequests of prayer beads. When we compare the gender of the testators who left beads we can see that a greater number of men did so than women. Male wills from this period greatly outnumber female wills: at any point, female wills never represent more than 11.8 per cent of the total number of wills during any four-year time span. A side-by-side comparison of the numbers of testators will therefore simply reflect the fact that more men made wills in this period. A comparison of the percentages of male and female testators who left beads, however, indicates that females were much more likely to consider beads to be sufficiently significant to leave in their wills (Figure One).

The special category of paraphernalia has been briefly discussed above, but it requires further exploration. Paraphernalia encompassed items which would automatically remain to a

²⁰ Only one woman's will is recorded for the period 1505-1509, and she does not leave any prayer beads.

²¹ It is beyond the scope of this article to explore the wealth or status of the testators considered here. Further research considering a wider range of sources would help to shed light on the social standing and affluence of these testators.

²² Goose and Evans, 'Wills as a Historical Source', p. 39.

woman on the death of her husband if they were still in his possession.²³ There was some debate about which items constituted paraphernalia under common law, and it is unclear whether this covered just the essentials of clothing, as evidence from Bracton suggests, or whether it also extended to bedroom furniture and bedding.²⁴ Canon law was similarly ambiguous: although William Lyndhurst argued for the testamentary capacity of married women to bequeath paraphernalia, it was never made clear what this category encompassed.²⁵ Some evidence suggests that under canon law ‘paraphernalia’ covered the items which a woman used about her person, including her dresses and personal ornaments.²⁶ In Janet Loengard’s consideration of widows’ goods in medieval England, ‘paraphernalia’ covered clothing, girdles and beads, and perhaps also jewels such as rings and brooches. Cordelia Beattie has also argued for the classification of beads as items of paraphernalia in a recent article.²⁷ As Ann Kettle has shown, paraphernalia technically belonged to a woman’s husband during marriage, and he could alienate it during his lifetime. At his death, however, local custom likely played a part in what a wife would receive, and she could expect to keep her paraphernalia as husbands were not allowed to dispose of this in their wills.²⁸ Building on this evidence, Natasha Korda has argued that women’s expectation of ownership of their paraphernalia led them to act as if it were their own during the time of their marriages.²⁹ It is therefore possible that items such as clothing and prayer beads were considered by husbands and wives as belonging solely to the wife throughout the duration of their marriage. Testators made reference to these patterns of ownership in their wills. Robert Porter of Belton left to his wife Agnes in 1526: ‘all hyr clothyng that *longes to hyr bak*, with all the lynnyn cloth as kerchyffes, aporns, bendys, neckorchyffes, with hyr bedys and hyr arche and her gerdyll’ (my emphasis).³⁰ Whilst technically these items did belong to John, he clearly identified them as being Agnes’ own property.

Furthermore, if we consider beads to be jewellery and therefore part of a woman’s clothing, we can see how gifts of prayer beads in their wills had a particular resonance for women. In a study of individualism in sixteenth-century France, Natalie Zemon Davis has

²³ Bracton, *Laws and Customs*, p. 179; Kermode, *Medieval Merchants*, p. 93.

²⁴ Spufford, ‘The Limitations of the Probate Inventory’, p. 145.

²⁵ Helmholz, ‘Married Women’s Wills’, pp. 166, 168.

²⁶ Vleeschouwers-Van Melkebeek, ‘Separation and Marital Property’, p. 80.

²⁷ Loengard, ‘“Which May Be Said to Be Her Own”’, pp. 167–68; Beattie, ‘Married Women’s Wills’, p. 21.

²⁸ Kettle, ‘Marriage and Property’ p. 91. It was for example customary in the provinces of York and London to allow a woman to keep her bed and chest. It is reasonable to expect that other areas of the country would have had similar arrangements. Butler, *Divorce in Medieval England*, p. 99

²⁹ Korda, *Shakespeare’s Domestic Economies*, p. 152.

³⁰ *Lincoln Wills*, I, ed. by Foster, p. 165.

shown how testamentary gifts of clothing and jewellery (described by Davis as ‘gifts from the body’) enabled women to express their individuality. Not only could such bequests facilitate self-expression, Davis argues, they demonstrated women’s kinship and neighbourhood networks as part of an act which she conceptualized as ‘giving themselves away’. If women saw giving gifts from the body at least in part as ‘giving themselves away’, this may have increased a sense of ownership over their own bodies, speaking to their action and agency.³¹ Renata Ago has also identified that objects such as beads had special significance for women as they provided some guarantee of stability, both in life and after death. Once passed on to a new recipient, she argues, items such as prayer beads preserved and transmitted something of their previous owner to future generations.³² The implications of this are significant for the present study because it reinforces the importance of bequests of beads for women. By bequeathing prayer beads in her will, a woman expressed her autonomy over property which was truly hers, and maintained her presence within friend- and kinship networks even after she had died. This perhaps explains why bequests of prayer beads were proportionally more frequent in women’s wills.³³

Recipients

To explore testators’ attitudes to their prayer beads it is also important to consider who the intended recipients of such bequests were. A majority of all bead bequests – 71.1 per cent in all – were made to a female, often a family member, whereas bequests of beads to men only account for 8.3 per cent of bequests.³⁴ This certainly seems to point toward a strong association between women and prayer beads, given that women were the intended recipients of more than two-thirds of these gifts. Looking at the relationships between testators and recipients, over a quarter of all bequests of beads were made by fathers to their daughters, which represents 44.9 per cent of the total number of all male bequests. Mothers’ bequests of

³¹ This is in contrast to the practice of ‘giving away’ a woman at the point of her marriage. Davis, ‘Boundaries and the Sense of Self’, pp. 61–62.

³² Objects such as prayer beads provided stability for women in life as they could be sold for cash. Ago, *A Gusto for Things*, p. 225.

³³ Davis’s work also raises questions about the limits of the self, and the role played by objects in such a definition. Davis, ‘Boundaries and the Sense of Self’, p. 63.

³⁴ The remaining bequests of beads went to Lincoln Cathedral (13.4 per cent), while a further 6.2 per cent of bequests were made to more than one recipient (for example to the wife then to the daughter). The final bequest, accounting for the remaining 1 per cent comes from the will of Sir Thomas Gybson (Boston, 1533), which requests that ‘every gylde preste and every syngyng man within the churche of Boston have a pare of beades of dogeyon [boxwood] [...] for a remembrance’. *Lincoln Wills: 1532-34*, ed. by Hickman, p. 212). Post-mortem commissions such as these often refer to black gowns to be worn at the funeral, but similar requests for the purchase and distribution of prayer beads are not unheard of, as in the case of will of John Baret of Bury St Edmunds. MacKinney, ‘Rosaries, Paternosters and Devotion’, p. 99.

beads to their daughters conversely account for 25.6 per cent of female bequests. This might initially seem at odds with the argument which has been presented here, and one might expect that women, with whom prayer beads were closely associated, would pass such gendered objects on to their female offspring. It has however been noted that women tended to recognize a greater range of kin in their wills than their male counterparts, which fits in with broader patterns of women playing an important role in maintaining kin networks.³⁵ A woman might have ties to a great many more family groups than a male contemporary: she would be born into one family and at marriage enter into another one, with subsequent marriages further expanding her kinship networks. Women's testamentary bequests to this broad range of kin **have** been characterized as 'horizontal', encompassing siblings, nieces, nephews and godchildren.³⁶ This also goes some way to explaining the much higher frequency of women bequeathing items to other women of unclear relationship to them, such as Elizabeth Abraham (Sutterton, 1524), who left 'to the wife of John ordynge off kirton my best bedys'.³⁷ Perhaps such individuals were sisters-in-law from prior or current marriages, with the change of surname masking any overt familial connection. Although women's bequests of prayer beads to their daughters are not necessarily as common or indeed as obvious as gifts by men, this fits within a framework of female recognition and maintenance of connections to a wider network of women more often than male contemporaries.

It is perhaps the case that fathers' gifts of beads to their daughters and granddaughters anticipate their future roles as wives. Evidence put forward by Sharon Teague suggests that paternal gifts of beads might be related to the possibility of the recipient's future marriage.³⁸ Teague has argued that fathers were more likely than mothers to leave legacies for their offspring's weddings, claiming that men saw it as a paternal responsibility to provide for their children's futures, whether that be their marriages, careers, or education.³⁹ **A father's gift of**

³⁵ Peters, *Patterns of Piety*, p. 42.

³⁶ James, *Women's Voices*, pp. 1, 60.

³⁷ *Lincoln Wills*, I, ed. by Foster, p. 129. 35.9 per cent of female bequests go to a woman of unclear relationship. Female testators in this sample always clarify the nature of the relationship between them and male recipients of beads. Gifts of beads by male testators to individuals (both male and female) of an unclear relationship conversely account for 17.2 per cent of bequests.

³⁸ Men left beads to a range of recipients, most frequently daughters, but also to their granddaughters, sisters, and to other women of unknown relationship. Sometimes the marital status of these women is implied in bequests such as Sir Thomas Gybson's gift of jet beads to 'Margaret Felde, daughter of Nicholes Felde': it is assumed that Margaret is unmarried as she shares her father's surname. In fourteen cases where a woman other than a daughter is named as the recipient of the beads, three are married, because they are referred to as 'wife of' or are the testator's own wife; four are likely single women, as they are referred to as 'daughters' of named men, and in the remaining seven cases, no marital descriptors are given. *Lincoln Wills, 1532-1534*, ed. by Hickman, p. 211.

³⁹ Teague, 'Patterns of Bequest', p. 188.

beads to his daughter may well have been an act of provision for her future, in which she was expected use them to teach prayers, or indeed pray for her family. The evidence of the Lincolnshire wills goes some way to supporting this idea, as fathers frequently noted that the daughters to whom they left their beads were not yet of age, or that they were unmarried.⁴⁰ Additional evidence comes from the wills of testators who sought to identify future owners of the beads after the initial recipient had died. This phenomenon occurs in eight wills: two made by female testators, and six by male testators. All six of the male testators who did this left the beads to a woman who was then to pass the objects on to another individual.⁴¹ This implies that the female recipient would indeed be able to pass on the objects regardless of her (re-)marriage. In the case of John Pynchbeck of Butterwick (1529), this was particularly clear: ‘To Agnes my wyff [...] a pare of gret beadys with sylver gawdys the terme of her lyff, and aftyr hyr decease to remayn to Margaret my doughter and to her heyres’. John noted later on in his testament that Margaret was under the age of twenty-one, and that she was not yet married.⁴² We do not know whether it was John or Agnes who owned the beads before their marriage, or whether they were purchased afterwards. As such, we cannot tell whether they comprised part of Agnes’s paraphernalia, or whether they were John’s and regularly used by him. More importantly we can see that John was able to leave his beads to his wife to pass on to his daughter for her to pass on to future generations. His bequest demonstrates his confidence that Margaret could own and bequeath beads to her heirs without concern that they would be alienated by any potential future spouse. Further evidence for (real or perceived) female autonomy with regard to the future movement of prayer beads comes from the will of William Pakker (Boston, 1530), in which he left his daughters:

Dorothe Cappe and Margaret her syster the gerdyll and beades that was ther mothers, and to be equally shyftyd betwyxte them aftyr the deceasse of Catheryne my wyff and yff it please my wyff to have the sayd gyrdyll and bedes, then I will she gyff either of

⁴⁰ For example William Preste (Pinchbeck, 1534) left ‘To Margaret my doughter a pare of beades that was my wyffe moder’s [...] delyveryd at the age of xx^{ty} yeres.’ The age of discretion seems to vary between testators, ranging from sixteen to twenty-two. *Lincoln Wills: 1532-1534*, ed. by Hickman, p. 309. Any bequests made to a married woman would immediately pass to her husband. Loengard, “‘Plate, Good Stuff, and Household Things’”, p. 328.

⁴¹ The two women who seek to govern the beads’ future movements are the only two testators who do not leave their beads initially to another woman. Jane Harby left her beads to Simon Stalworth, subdean of Lincoln Cathedral, and then on to the Cathedral fabric. *Lincoln Wills*, I, ed. by Foster, p. 44. Elizabeth Dykes left a pair of beads to Thomas Warthe, an individual of unspecified relationship, who was then to pass them on to Emote Lincoln who may have been Elizabeth’s granddaughter. *Lincoln Wills: 1532-1534*, ed. by Hickman, p. 152.

⁴² *Lincoln Wills*, II, ed. by Foster, p. 138.

them xxxs., and she to have the sayd gyrdyll and beades *to her owne use to do withall what she please* (my emphasis)⁴³

Beads were thus objects which a woman could own, which would be considered to be hers during the time that she was married, and would be likely to return to her should her husband predecease her. Moreover, at the end of her own life she would be able to pass them on as she wished.

In sum, the statistical data which this research has yielded confirms the close association between women and beads found in other sources. Women were overwhelmingly identified as the recipients of beads, with fathers frequently passing these objects on to their daughters. Yet female patterns of distribution encompass a much wider range of relationships than their male counterparts, and women often leave beads to other women without defining their relationship. This speaks to a woman's life experiences and roles: she may have belonged to multiple families, and may be involved in maintaining networks of kin. Beads, as objects which probably remained to a woman throughout her life as part of her paraphernalia, are given away in women's wills as acts which express their autonomy over that which was theirs. In so doing, these testators were able to give something of themselves to the individuals who were part of their kin- and friendship networks. Further development of this qualitative approach in the following section will help to shed more light on contemporary understandings of female prayer bead ownership.

The Language of the Wills

Testators' descriptions of their beads reinforce the interpretation that these were items which had a gendered status, and I will argue that the will was one place where this gendered status could be created, reinforced and recorded. Of a total of forty bequests made by female testators across the period from 1505 to 1534, eighteen employed the possessive pronoun 'my'.⁴⁴ This is demonstrated in the following example from the will of Isabel Alyn: 'To Margare my doughter [...] my ambre beades'. Isabel's will is rich with bequests of animals and household goods, and she often used the possessive 'my' in relation to those items which she considered the best, including 'my ij best oxen [...] my best beades [...] my best gowne [...] my amber beades [...] my best hate [hat] [...] my best cappe'. Three other bequests were described in this way, but were not distinctly the best: 'all my yerne [...] my violet gowne

⁴³ *Lincoln Wills*, II, ed. by Foster, pp. 57-8.

⁴⁴ This approach draws on the methodologies of other scholars who have investigated the significance of specific descriptions as evidence of value and meaning. See Richardson, "A Very Fit Hat"; Salter, *Cultural Creativity*, pp. 75-94.

[...] my crophe in the grond [ground]'.⁴⁵ It is perhaps significant that many of these items were 'gifts from the body' akin to those described by Natalie Zemon Davis: the possessive here emphasising ownership and individuality with regard to objects which were worn close to the skin. For Isabel, beads were part of this category.

Looking at the same criteria for male testators, the proportion is considerably smaller. Of fifty-eight bequests of beads, just eight of these were described by male testators as 'my beads' to demonstrate ownership. Terms such as 'a pair of beads' or 'one pair of beads' were preferred by many male testators.⁴⁶ Sir Thomas Gybson, priest of Boston left four pairs of beads, described as follows: 'a pare of blake jette beades [...] a pare of whyte beades of bone [...] a pare of beades gawdyd with awmor [...] a pare of beades of dogeyon'.⁴⁷ Perhaps women identified themselves more often as the owners of beads because they felt a stronger sense of ownership, or because they felt that a need to assert it. Male testators whose property rights rarely changed with marriage or the death of a spouse perhaps did not feel the need to assert their ownership through the language of their will. Equally it is also possible that, given the clear association between women and beads, these men were passing on objects that had belonged to their wives, and so did not feel such a strong sense of possession over these objects. Whatever the case, women clearly more often wanted or needed to assert themselves as the owners and distributors of these objects.

Testators were also able to ascribe a variety of other kinds of descriptions to their prayer beads. These vary greatly, from details about the beads' constituent materials and the number of gauds, to information about previous owners.⁴⁸ Catherine Burton (Haconby, 1530) left to 'our Lady of Lincoln a pare of bedes of jette with v rynges of sylver', indicating something of the appearance of this particular set.⁴⁹ By describing her beads in this way, we can see that Catherine may have been communicating something about them: perhaps she owned more than one pair, and needed to describe them in detail in order to distinguish between them.⁵⁰ Some of the testators, particularly those who left multiple sets of beads in

⁴⁵ *Lincoln Wills: 1532-1534*, ed. by Hickman, p. 132.

⁴⁶ 65.5 per cent of male testators used phrases such as these to describe the beads.

⁴⁷ Thomas's descriptions of his household possessions and clothing were however often described using the possessive form. His bequests to his nephew William Gybson included 'my leather dooblet and one of my beste worstyd dooblettes'. Other household items ('my cupborde [...] my cheiar table, my gret chyste') received similar treatment, so it is a notable contrast that the beads are not described in this way. *Lincoln Wills: 1532-1534*, ed. by Hickman, p. 212.

⁴⁸ Gauds are the large beads which separate the decades in a rosary. For further information about the construction of rosaries, see Boyd, 'Chaucer's Prioress'.

⁴⁹ *Lincoln Wills*, III, ed. by Foster, p. 77.

⁵⁰ Catherine leaves only one set of beads in her will, but this does not necessarily mean that she owned no others.

their wills, may well have used description as a method of telling them apart; indeed, even those testators who only bequeathed one set of beads may well have had other sets which were not perceived as valuable enough to be mentioned in the will. Testators may also have employed description of objects in their wills in order to communicate that these aspects were of importance to them. Indeed, these possibilities are not mutually exclusive, so the description might serve a dual function.⁵¹ Yet if the purpose of description was distinction alone then we should question why many testators gave lavish information about the colour, construction and materials of their beads: much more than was necessary for the purpose of identification.⁵² Exploration of some of the descriptions ascribed to prayer beads will support and add interpretive detail to the statistical impression that they were indeed gendered.

One strategy of description found in these wills was inclusion of the genealogy of the beads which the testator was bequeathing. *This is a technique most commonly employed by male testators, eight of whom make bequests which are framed in this way. In all of these cases the beads' genealogies relate to previous female owners. Only two female testators included this kind of description: in both cases the beads were once the property of a sibling.*⁵³ This suggests a greater frequency of bead giving by women to family members than the statistical evidence of the Lincolnshire wills indicates, and could point to non-testamentary practices of giving by married women, who may well have entrusted the distribution of their personal goods to their husbands upon their deaths. *Even if we could be certain that we had all of the testamentary documents that were produced, a large proportion of the population in this period were not permitted to make a will at all. Objects must have been passed on in other ways and by alternate means: that is perhaps what we are seeing here.*

John Gell (Toynton, 1523) left his daughter Isabell 'a payre of whit ambre bedes *that was her moders*' (my emphasis).⁵⁴ This reflects the familial significance of these beads to their new owner, and also the importance which John himself considered not only the beads

⁵¹ Salter, *Cultural Creativity*, p. 77.

⁵² William Peerson for example left 'j payre of beddes or redde corall with xx gaudes of sylver and gylte [...] a payre of beedes of awmber with viij gaudes of sylver, j crusifix of sylver with one broken ryng of goolde [...] j payre of bedes of blak jett with vj gaudes of sylver and gylte, with ij rynges of silver'. *Lincoln Wills*, I, ed. by Foster, p. 142. If distinction between sets was all that was needed, perhaps 'coral', 'amber', and 'jet' beads would have sufficed.

⁵³ Joan Harby left the beads that belonged to her sister, and Jozian Cooke returned to her brother the beads which belonged to him. *Lincoln Wills*, I, ed. by Foster, p. 44 and *Lincoln Wills 1532-1534*, ed. by Hickman, p. 60.

⁵⁴ *Lincoln Wills*, I, ed. by Foster, p. 120. A further five male testators left beads to their daughters which were described in terms of their late mother. William Preste's bequest of his 'wiffe moder's' beads to his daughter (i.e. her grandmother) is discussed below. With regard to the statistics, these bequests are considered as fathers' gifts to their daughters, because technically these objects did now belong to these men after their wives had died.

themselves but the relationship between his daughter and his late wife. The fact that he bequeathed them to Isabell in his will shows that he kept the beads after his wife's death rather than selling them. His bequest furthermore suggests that he valued the relationship between mother and daughter, and by describing the beads as having belonged to his wife he perhaps fulfilled his deceased wife's wish for them to go to Isabell after his own death. The exact circumstances of this bequest are unknown and I am speculating as to John's course of action, but his gift should be considered in the context of the other items which he left to Isabell. These bequests included household objects such as brass, pewter, pans and dishes, as well as a gown, all of which are described in terms of John or his late wife, reinforcing the notion of familial value.⁵⁵ For John, and perhaps for Isabell too, the value of these beads lay not only in their intrinsic worth but also the relationship between mother and daughter which they represented. It is also of note that John, along with the other male testators who noted the genealogy of the beads omitted themselves from such lists, even though after their wives had died they were technically the owners of these objects.⁵⁶ Whilst these men constructed a specifically female history for these items, this was not a neutral act in terms of their own gender. These descriptions speak to ideas about authority, history and memory. These male testators played a role in telling stories of ownership from which they omitted themselves, which served to perpetuate the gendered histories of these items.

Descriptions of beads such as those given by John Gell demonstrate an understanding of these objects as having value beyond their economic cost, and so ideas about inalienability may be helpful here. Whilst inalienability is often associated with gifts to institutions such as the church, and frequently relates to immovable property, as Janet Hoskins explains: '[i]nalienability is a characteristic of any object that becomes steeped with biographic significance'. Renata Ago has similarly shown that by identifying a series of owners of an object serves to transform an object from mundane item to inalienable treasure.⁵⁷ Biographical significance is hinted at in many descriptions of prayer beads. Like John's bequest above, a history of inheritance of beads down the female line is demonstrated by the description of the beads left in William Preste's will of 1534, mentioned in the introduction to this article: 'To Margaret my daughter a pare of beades that was my wyffe moder's'.⁵⁸ That

⁵⁵ For example he left to 'Isabell and Alice my daughters [...] either of theym have a gowne, the best that was ther moders.' *Lincoln Wills*, I, ed. by Foster, p. 120.

⁵⁶ In contrast, John noted that he was the owner of various other household items: 'all my bras, pewter, pannes, disches and all myne inward stuf that was myne owne unset to my wif' (italics mine). *Lincoln Wills*, I, ed. by Foster, p. 120.

⁵⁷ Hoskins, *Biographical Objects*, p. 195; Ago, *A Gusto for Things*, p. 6.

⁵⁸ *Lincoln Wills: 1532-1534*, ed. by Hickman, p. 309.

William was bequeathing the beads to his daughter shows that they first passed to his wife, rather than being transmitted directly from grandmother to granddaughter. Again, William's ownership of the beads is omitted here, perhaps speaking to his concern to frame their provenance in terms of women alone and conveniently distancing himself from their history. Indeed describing beads – indeed any object – in terms of its previous owners may have helped to increase the absolute value of the object in the eyes of its recipient. By doing so, testators not only placed these objects above exchangeability, but also transformed the recipients into custodians, and in so doing may have helped to keep these objects within the family or another order of succession for future generations.⁵⁹

Other kinds of description which were accorded to beads included noting the materials from which they were made. Testators' descriptions of the beads in terms of their constitutive materials give useful insights into their experience of the beads, as well as hinting at a possible need to distinguish between multiple sets.⁶⁰ In the case of prayer beads in particular, their materials needed to withstand frequent physical usage as the hands of the user touched each bead as they prayed. Amber, jet and coral beads all appear frequently in this corpus, alongside gold, silver and gilt.⁶¹ Whilst materials such as ivory, bone and wood also appear, references to such sets of beads are infrequent, suggesting especially low or high value or their status as unfashionable items. Yet all of these objects had sensory appeal, regardless of the luxuriousness of the materials used.⁶² It is impossible to ascertain exactly why testators described their beads in terms of their constitutive materials, but by doing so, they tell us much about what they valued and what would last. We can therefore see that by describing beads in terms of previous owners, or indeed by noting their materials, testators communicated their hopes that these items would remain in the hands of the recipient throughout their lives. Describing beads using the language of heirlooms encouraged the recipients to keep hold of them.⁶³ This may well have been particularly significant for women, whose beads likely comprised part of her paraphernalia, and so occupied a special status among the goods she brought with her to any marriages. I would like to suggest that the

⁵⁹ Ago, *A Gusto for Things*, p. 6; Weiner, *Inalienable Possessions*, p. 33.

⁶⁰ Salter, *Cultural Creativity*, p. 77.

⁶¹ Weiner, *Inalienable Possessions*, p. 37. Consultation of medieval English lapidaries demonstrates that each of the more commonly referenced stones commanded not only economic but cultural and magical value, and could be used in a range of applications, from controlling blood loss to driving away serpents. *Medieval English Lapidaries*, ed. and trans. by Evans and Serjeantson, pp. 61, 53, 32.

⁶² Cooper and Laven, 'The Material Culture of Piety', p. 348. Amber in particular had a range of sensory properties (such as scent) which became especially noticeable when handled as a set of prayer beads. See King, 'The Beads with Which We Pray Are Made from It'.

⁶³ Ago, *A Gusto for Things*, p. 223.

gift of beads, particularly those described in terms of their previous owners, connected the recipient to her birth family, even when she moved between the different kin groups that would doubtless be part of her future.

We have already seen that many more female testators used the term ‘my’ to describe beads than their male counterparts, and this demonstrated the significance of these items for this demographic. There are other ways in which testators demonstrated personal value. One of these is the description of a pair of beads as their ‘best’ set. [Fourteen](#) female bequests identify that the set of beads is the best set, [compared with just four bequests by men. Four further male testators note that the beads were the best set of a previous female owner.](#) This suggests that more women than men owned multiple sets of beads, or that women more than men cared enough about them to have a preference that was known to their kin.⁶⁴ Indeed, two female testators from this corpus left beads which they described as ‘second best’ – no men make such bequests. A total of fifteen testators (seven men and eight women) left more than one sets of beads in their wills. This represents 14.9 per cent of male testators, compared with 28.6 per cent of female testators. Of course, this overlooks those beads which were not left in the will, but arguably this strengthens the argument put forward here, as only those beads which commanded value, be it personal, familial, or economic, would be mentioned specifically. [As already noted](#), proportionally more women than men bequeathed multiple sets of beads, which reinforces the idea that women particularly felt that these items were of value in some way. As this discussion has demonstrated, however, the power to own and to bequeath beads may have been more significant for women than it was for men for a number of reasons. It is therefore quite possible that ownership of more than one set of beads was not necessarily more common among women than men, but that women owned more pairs of beads which were in some way significant to them. This would also help explain why more women describe their beads as their ‘best’ set than their male counterparts, for whom prayer beads were a less important part of their property portfolio. Such a pattern reinforces the idea that beads were valuable to women as items which were considered exclusively theirs, and which they could pass on as they wished.

⁶⁴ Catherine Richardson has written about descriptions of objects as the ‘best’ and she argues that such an identification draws attention to the fact that the testator owned more than one of that item. Richardson, *Household Objects*, p. 442.

Conclusion

This study has corroborated and developed our understanding of the association between women and prayer beads more fully, as well as enriching what we know about inheritance practices, female piety, and female agency more broadly. The wills in the present study show that proportionally a larger number of women left testamentary bequests of prayer beads. Women, especially testators' daughters, were also much more frequently identified as the recipients of prayer beads. Wills were legal documents, but they were also texts which offered testators an opportunity to create narratives of attachment to objects: female testators identified beads with the possessive pronoun 'my', or reflected on their subjective value through the use of 'best' as a descriptor much more frequently than their male contemporaries.⁶⁵ These descriptions – and their relative frequency – reflect the special significance that these objects had for women. This article has argued that beads likely belonged to the hard-to-define category of 'paraphernalia' – goods which remained to a wife on the death of her husband – which wives may well have considered more closely their own than other objects within the household.⁶⁶ Beads, like other items of jewellery or ornamentation may well have provided some measure of stability for women as assets which could be liquidised in life, but also which could be given away upon death as personalised tokens of the individual.⁶⁷ As such, we should consider the implications of women's testamentary gifts of beads as being significant in and of themselves, in line with Natalie Davis's notions of women 'giving themselves away'.⁶⁸

The association between women and beads is also well supported by the genealogies given to these objects in the wills of male testators. These descriptions provide a fascinating insight into the historic ownership of beads and their subsequent passing on to future generations of women. Yet these genealogies also excluded these male testators as owners of these objects, serving to reinforce the gendered aspects of prayer-bead ownership. The idea of the construction of an object as 'inalienable' has been used to demonstrate that in describing the beads in this way testators were able to endow them with yet more value. This demonstrated their regard for the recipient and their hope that they would remain within some kind of order of succession for future generations. This study raises questions for those working in the field of late medieval female piety, and how it may have been distinct from

⁶⁵ *Lincoln Wills: 1532-1534*, ed. by Hickman, p. 374.

⁶⁶ Korda, *Shakespeare's Domestic Economies*, p. 152.

⁶⁷ Ago, *A Gusto for Things*, p. 5.

⁶⁸ Davis, 'Boundaries and the Sense of Self', p. 62.

male piety in this period. The male wills which have been explored here also offer fertile ground for further investigation into male attitudes to potentially gendered religious practices. Examination of a greater number of wills from different locations would help to test the hypothesis put forward here. Ultimately this research has demonstrated that not only were prayer beads closely associated with women, but has also shown the ways in which wills facilitated a textual construction of these objects as gendered. Beads were an important aspect of women's property: William Pakker's bequest to his wife of beads 'to her owne use to do withall what she please' [speaks to women's agency as owners of these objects and their freedom to do as they wished with them.](#)⁶⁹

⁶⁹ *Lincoln Wills*, II, ed. by Foster, pp. 57-8.

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