An Honest Bed: The Scene of Life and Death in Late Medieval England

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Abstract: Our article explores the bed as an object that projects notions of status, aspiration, decorum, and morality. We are interested in the economic and symbolic values that accrue to the bed, bedding, and the bedroom in late medieval England, as described in wills and household accounts, and as evoked in literary and artistic imagery. We situate our analysis in relation to literal and represented household beds, those associated with birth and inheritance and also those portrayed in images of death. “Childbed” and “deathbed” are terms that frame the human lifecycle. They also invoke the most important item of furniture in the premodern household.

To Johan Bedell my servaunt... an honest whole complete bed and all other things therto belonging for a bedde.—John Goodwyn, 1522 (TNA Prob11/20/377)

Take here hede and lerne howe ȝou schalt make an honest bede and a good plesinge vnto god profitabel and worschipful vnto þi soule. (Take heed here and learn how you shall make an honest bed and a good [one] pleasing to God, helpful and honorable for your soul.)—Bonum Lectum, lines 2–4

Writing about her detention for heresy in Beverley in 1417, Margery Kempe notes with some satisfaction that she was given a “fayr chambyr & an honest bed therin.”¹ The same expression appears in Bonum Lectum, a fifteenth-century domestic allegory: readers are advised to make “an honest bed,” or a careful ordering of the soul.² In 1522, the phrase turns up again in the will of a London grocer, one John Goodwyn.³ The description of a bed as “honest” occurs in many contexts in relation to this familiar item of domestic furniture: it points to the bed as an object that has significant financial, social, moral, and esthetic value and resonance.
When Margery notes that an “honest” bed is part of the furnishings of a “fayr chambyr,” she indicates that the bed is appropriate in form, decoration, and the manner of its equipment to someone—herself—who is more than a common prisoner.4

This essay examines the bed as an object that projects notions of status, aspiration, decorum, and morality. For this study in interdisciplinarity, we chose a thing from the past that was both ubiquitous and ostensibly prosaic. As a necessary item of furniture, the bed turns up often in a wide range of imaginative narratives, pictorial images, and legal documents. We began our inquiry with questions about beds and gender, but came to focus principally on birth and death, life-cycle milestones that are well-documented in a range of disciplines and sources, and in which beds regularly have a function. What are the values that accrue to the bed, bedding, and the bedroom in late medieval England, whether the literal bed as described in wills and inventories, or represented beds as evoked in literary and artistic imagery?

As collaborators, we have approached this important household object from our three disciplines of English literature, history, and art history, bringing expertise with different kinds of sources: beds named in wills and probate inventories; beds described in dream visions, romances, and didactic texts; and beds pictured in English manuscript illustrations. Our analyses, grounded in the methods of our respective disciplines, have complemented one another, drawing out observations and insights that might otherwise have been missed: statistical data collected from multiple wills, for instance, can provide context for understanding a single object in a text or an illustration. Working together, we have avoided using literature and art as “illustrations” of documents and other historical material, and conversely, using documents (like wills, inventories, etc.) as “proofs” of the “truth” of images and literature. Instead, we present our varied forms of evidence as communicating sets of values. As the terms “childbed” and “deathbed” remind us, beds not only frame the human lifecycle, but also invoke a space rich in moral innuendo and social commentary.

An Honest Bed

What, indeed, is an honest bed? As Mary Carruthers observes, although the word “honest” began its life in antiquity as a “social and ethical category” and retained social and ethical resonance in the Middle Ages, it also acquired esthetic and even stylistic implications.5 The medieval Latin “honestare” means to ornament or adorn. Thus, to make something “honest” is to adorn or decorate it in a fitting manner, one that “people of honour . . . will appreciate and judge as appropriate for [its] purpose.”6 For something to be “honest,” it must conform to standards of taste; but of course only those who are worthy and who possess honor can distinguish
something that is honest—in good taste—from something that is ornamented in a manner that is neither beneficial nor fitting. When Margery Kempe uses the phrase “an honest bed,” as Carruthers observes, she is making a pointed remark about decorum. Clearly, Margery regards the bed as a morally and socially charged item of furniture, one that affirms in a fundamental way her status, standing, and reputation.

Beds accrued symbolic meaning because they were much more than places to sleep. Newlyweds (and others) consummated their relationships in them, postpartum mothers recovered in them, and people read, prayed, dreamed, and died in them. The principal artist of the first campaign to illustrate Omne Bonum, the massive alphabetical encyclopedia compiled and written by the London Exchequer scribe James le Palmer (d. c. 1375), appears to have well understood the social and ethical implications of beds and bedding. In the historiated initial for Eukaristia, a priest administering Communion to an ill or dying man lying under somber, dark blue covers. The initial for Cognoscere uxorem, or conjugal intercourse, shows a stern cleric admonishing an attentive couple lying in a bed outfitted with a peach coverlet and a striped curtain, bedding redolent of both privacy and status, whereas the bed inhabited by an adulterous couple in the initial for Adulterium features an intricately, even ostentatiously patterned, multicolor coverlet, its rich adornment—exceptional among the textiles portrayed by this artist—likely intended to signal the illicit, sensual nature of the couple’s relations.

There are few examples of medieval beds still surviving, and most, such as the newly identified marriage bed of Henry VII and Elizabeth of York, are from very elite contexts. Inventories and wills, however, provide evidence of beds and bedding from a broader range of social contexts. As lists and valuations of household goods, inventories help us understand the economic and situational value of beds and bedding within a household and tell us something of how owners valued and understood them both economically and socially. Moreover, occasional adjectives used to describe beds, as in John Goodwyn’s will, hint at a deeper emotional and ethical significance that these lists otherwise occlude. Read against manuscript illustrations and literary texts, the rich associations and meanings embedded in the phrase “honest bed” show us that these multiple connotations were not just literary or artistic conventions, but part of the experience of daily life in medieval households.

From both textual evidence and surviving examples, archaeologists argue for regional variations in bed styles, which in Roberta Gilchrist’s words, “underline their significance to the identity of the household.” This variety is more than regional, however: within a single household, the kind of bed one slept in reflected one’s identity and household position. The grandest and most adorned bed was for the householder, and more
modest or temporary beds accommodated children, servants, apprentices, and even tenants. The connection between one’s household role and the bed one slept in would have been as true for aristocratic households as for merchant and artisan households, and to a lesser extent, well-to-do rural households. Outfitted with the finest of linens and décor, royal beds were the birthplaces of dynasties and monarchs. For merchants and artisans, as repositories of both fiduciary and emotional value, beds helped create and perpetuate an identity that to their minds distinguished them from the laziness of the working poor and the ostentation of the aristocracy, even as their beds mimicked those of the elite in decoration and fittings.

The 1488 probate inventory of the possessions of stockfishmonger Thomas Cowper describes the variety of beds contained in a single house. The “chief chamber” in Cowper’s house held a “standing bed,” which presumably had posts, possibly a headboard and footboard, side rails, and maybe a wooden canopy. Underneath was a “running bed” or trundle bed. The inventory valued the two beds as a set. Also in the bedroom was a cradle. Cowper and his wife presumably slept in the standing bed, children or servants or both used the running bed, and an infant had the cradle. The standing bed was always out and visible to anyone entering the room. The running bed, an obstacle when not in use, was tucked out of the way. As a temporary bed, it marked its occupants as temporary members of the household: children who would grow up or servants who would leave for marriage or a new employer. Sometimes inventories describe a bed as nothing more than a “pair of bed boards” or a “form,” easily confused with forms that were benches for sitting. These modest beds, little more than a box for the mattress, would have been low to the ground and lacking posts.

Even the inventories’ language hints at how one bedstead differed from another. Differences lay in adornment and architecture. The wealthy London mercer Alexander Plymley, who died in 1533, furnished the “maydens chamber,” where his female servants slept, with “an old stonding bedsted of oke old, worn” [an old standing bedstead of old oak, worn]. The double use of the word “old” suggests that it was quite decrepit. In comparison, the bedstead in the “chapel chamber” was large, with carved posts, wainscoting, and rails. The implication in this case is that the maids’ bed had few embellishments. The newly identified oak marriage bed of Henry VII and Elizabeth of York shows us just how elaborate a bed’s decoration could be. Dated to the 1480s, it has carved posts and delicate filigree carvings on the headboard and footboard and across the foot of the wooden canopy.

Beds were items of significant expense. Indeed, a bed could be the most expensive piece of furniture in the house. The several beds listed in Robert Stodley’s 1536 probate inventory provide a sense of the range. A “trusse bed of Inglysshe oke wt selles to the same” [a trussed bed of...
English oak with stools to the same] was valued at 26s. 8d., and came with a trundle bed valued at 3s. 4d. Other costly beds in the house included a “joined bed” at 13s. 4d. and a “bed of waynscott,” valued at 10s. Stodley’s male servants, however, only had a “square bed of bordys” valued at just 10d., while his female servants slept in a “bed of boards” worth 12d.¹⁷

Whatever their cost, bedframes were not as valuable as the curtains, mattresses, and coverings that adorned them. Beds without posts and wooden canopies could have curtains attached to a frame suspended from the ceiling, enriching the bed’s appearance.¹⁸ Bed curtains were made out of a variety of materials, from common linen and wool to valuable silk, and out of a variety of weavings, from simple fustian and sey to elaborate velvets and damasks. Bedding not only provided much needed warmth but also satisfied the desire for esthetic display, even for those low in the household’s hierarchy.

Significant household capital was tied up in bedchamber textiles. The old and worn bedstead in Alexander Plymley’s maids’ quarters was tricked out with a selour “large . . . of saie yellow and grene paned and 3 large curtens of the same saie with a doble valance frengid” [large of yellow sey and green, paned and 3 large curtains of the same sey with a double valance fringed].¹⁹ The selour (or celour) was the canopy, which in this case was made of cloth, not wood. The testor (or tester) was a curtain that hung down at the head of the bed. Three curtains, some on rings so they could be pushed aside, surrounded the two sides and the foot of the bed. The canopy and curtains were finished off with a fringed valance. The entire ensemble was worth 13s. 4d.—eight times more than the 20d. of the bed itself. One suspects that this was a recycled bed, demoted to the maids’ quarters when Plymley purchased a fancier bed. The carved oak bedstead in Robert Stodley’s house was similarly outstripped in value by its bedding. Additional bed furnishings included curtains of yellow and red linen, a mattress, a feather bed for both the more elaborate bed and the trundle bed, down pillows, a quilt of linen, blankets, and two coverings, one with flowers and one with “imagery,” together valued at more than 54s., twice the value of the carved bed frame. Since the inventory does not mention a selour and testor, it suggests they may have been of wood.²⁰ The household’s napery included sheets and pillowcases that were changed more frequently than the quilts and blankets. The cost of all this bedding meant that owners kept them, even as they got tattered and moth-eaten. Although the linens in Richard Leman’s guest chamber were described as “sore woren,” the appraisers still valued them collectively at over 31s., far more than the pair of bed boards they covered.²¹ At the other end of the social scale is the most lavish of the sixteen beds “of gold and of silk” (“Litz dor et de soye”) listed in the 1397 inventory of the goods of Thomas of Woodstock, 1st duke of Gloucester. Described as “a large
bed of cloth of gold, comprising coverlet, tester and whole celour of fine blue satin worked with gold garters, and 3 curtains of tartarin ‘beaten’ to match, with 2 long cushions and 4 square cushions matching the bed,” it was valued at an impressive £182. 3s. 22

The display of a fully made-up bed encompassed not only the decorative carvings on the frame and the swaths of colored fabric, but also elaborate “tapestry work,” or painted, woven, or embroidered images that decorated the fabric. Decoration included coats of arms, foliage, flora and fauna, fertility symbols, or apotropaic images of the saints who were to protect the bed’s occupant. The carvings on the headboard of Henry VII’s marriage bed include two figures thought to represent Adam and Eve, progenitors of the human race, and, simultaneously, Jesus and Mary and Henry and Elizabeth. Adorned with acorns, grapes, and strawberries, all fertility symbols, as well as biblical imagery associated with temptation and redemption, heraldic imagery, and motifs signifying royalty, their once richly painted bed promoted the notion of Henry and Elizabeth as fecund, righteous founders of a new dynasty. 23 The promotion of lineage on a bed was not limited to the monarchy or even to armigerous families. London ironmonger Richard Fawkener had a “celor and curteyns stayned with fawcons” [falcons] on his bed, which he left to his son in 1463, 24 the birds hinting at the family’s surname in a manner reminiscent of some heraldic animal charges. Together these elements contributed to and expressed the esthetic value of an “honest bed” and satisfied standards of decorum.

The visual impact of linens was apparent in some of the inventory descriptions, and appraisers were at times clearly taken with the images and needlework found on beds and their associated textiles. The 1484 inventory for Thomas Gilbert includes “a celor and testor of Sandwyche bastard steyned wt herbage (leaves and vines) wt the salutation of our lady and 2 curteyns of blew bokram,” blue being the Virgin’s color. 25 Robert Otelby’s children slept under matching coverlets adorned with white lions. 26 So important was the visual impact of bedding that it could be a way of identifying a room. Robert Stodley’s “Green Chamber” took its name from the colors of the bed’s drapery. The testor was old, of green buckram, and the curtain of green sey. These were complemented by a covering with some imagery on it. 27

Just as the bed signified the occupants’ status within the household, so did its location within the house. Those wealthy enough to have their wills proven in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury lived in houses with separate sleeping and working quarters; their servants, however, often slept in the same room as their employers, making the ability to sleep away from one’s work a sign of status and wealth. 28 In the house of William Trynghman, a haberdasher, someone—likely not Trynghman
himself—slept in the “inner chamber,” where the cooking took place. Richard Johnson, an upholsterer, had beds in the hall, in the great and side chambers, in the garret, and possibly even in the cellar, although apparently not in the kitchen. As the room closest to the street and a place to receive visitors, the hall had much less privacy than the chief chamber, where Johnson slept.

Even for the householder, sleeping alone would have been rare. The pre-1540 London-area probate inventories, most of which list items by room, help us see these crowded sleeping conditions. Among the forty-seven inventories from London and its environs with rooms listed, there are some ninety rooms with beds in them. A third of these rooms (34 percent) included more than one bed. Even in rooms with only one bed, such as many servants’ chambers, we should not assume that people slept alone. As less than a quarter of bedrooms had fireplaces (18 percent), the warmth of another body might have been welcome.

For wealthy householders, bedrooms were specialized rooms, with furnishings only dedicated to sleeping and dressing. The house of John Skyrwyth, a leather seller to the king, had three bedrooms: the “Chief Chamber,” the “Paved Chamber,” and the “Bell Dames’ Chamber” (possibly named after a wall painting or other imagery in the room). These rooms had beds, linens, and some storage furniture such as cupboards or chests, but nothing else. In smaller households, bedrooms doubled as places to gather or work, or both. John Mowbrey, the parish priest of St Nicholas, Cole Abbey, lived in accommodations that included only a hall, a chamber, and a closet. His chamber contained not only his bed but also a “round chair” and a pair of gaming tables. Robert Lynton, the vicar of All Hallows London Wall, kept books by his bed. Servants sometimes slept among stored household items. Robert Stodley kept implements for cattle and some weapons in the room where his male servant slept.

Lacking other places to sit, the bed was not only the site of sleep but also the “principal seating” for any other activity that took place in the chamber, such as reading, prayer, and other forms of religious practice and expression. Indeed, the pattern of finger smudges on Netherlandish books of hours suggests that prayer in bed was a common habit, and that many readers fell asleep before finishing their devotions. The will of London widow Elizabeth Keynes tells us that she kept her “maten boke” [a service book or a book of hours or other prayer book] in her bedchamber, suggesting a similar habit of reading and praying in bed. Reading and writing in bed is also a literary trope, appearing widely in Middle English dream visions, which often take the narrator’s bed as a point of departure. Chaucer’s *Book of the Duchess* opens with the narrator lying in bed unable to sleep, finally turning to a story in Ovid as a way to pass the time. When he finally does fall asleep, it is after concocting an
imaginary bribe to Morpheus, the god of sleep. He gets sleep; Morpheus gets an elegant, dove-down feather bed covered with a gold-striped black satin coverlet, along with multiple pillows, all cased in cloth from Reims (lines 250–55).⁴⁰ Such fine bedding would indeed have been the stuff of dreams for most people, when they fell asleep.

As is well known, Annunciation scenes accompanying Matins of the Virgin in many late medieval books of hours show Mary reading or praying not in the traditional temple, but rather in a chamber dominated by a large, richly outfitted bed, when Gabriel appears to her. As Diane Wolfthal has noted, this iconographic development expresses, via the visual vocabulary of the lay domestic interior, the long-established idea that the space in which the Annunciation takes place is Mary’s “nuptial chamber,” the locus of her marriage to God.⁴¹ Yet in a few examples of the theme, it is not merely the chamber but the bed itself that is the site of the Virgin’s reading or prayer. In the Heller Hours, a mid-fifteenth-century manuscript that was apparently in the possession of the Morton family of Dorset in the sixteenth century, Mary sits on the foot of a bed equipped with a matching curtained, fringed selour or canopy (Figure 1).⁴² As in many depictions of the Annunciation, whether in manuscripts or panel paintings, the prayer book Mary holds is covered in red fabric

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Figure 1: Annunciation / First text page of Matins of the Virgin, Heller Hours, England, c. 1450 (Berkeley, University of California, Berkeley, Bancroft Library BANC MS UCB 150, fols 9v–10r). (The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley)
or leather, while the coverlet, bed curtains, and selour are made of some expensive red textile. Red was a popular color for book covers and bedding, as surviving examples and documentary references suggest. The bed that Lady Alice West bequeathed in 1395 to her son Thomas, for example, was “a bed of tapicers werk, with alle the tapites of sute, red of colour, ypouthered with chapes and schochôns, in the corners, of myn Auncestres armes” [a bed of tapestry work, with all the tapestries of the set, red, scattered with metal mountings and coats of arms, in the corner, of my ancestor’s arms].

To the affluent owners of the Heller Hours, Mary’s elegant, “complete” bed with its matching selour—a sign of honor, and a feature of the most valuable beds—was entirely appropriate to the status of the sacred personage to whom it belonged, and an affirmation of the family’s own honorable estate or aspiration and good taste.

Yet this image conveys far more than these social, economic, and aesthetic values. Not only the book but also the bed may be seen as redolent of the Eucharist and the Incarnation of Christ, the “Word made flesh” of John 1:14, associations made richer through the objects’ color and rich, fictive materiality, as well as their intimate association with Mary’s body. In the Heller Hours Annunciation, the Virgin seated on her bed holds her prayer book just above her womb, cradling it in her arms as if it were an infant (Figure 1). This and other Annunciation scenes offer Mary to the pious beholder as a model of solitary, private religious reading, contemplation, and prayer. Moreover, if imitating Mary’s “textual devotion” enabled book owners to “share” in the Incarnation and “conceive Christ in their souls,” as Laura Saetveit Miles has recently put it, then in the Heller Hours, it is the bed that is the locus of that “transformative” religious act.

As Margaret Goehring has shown, the border motifs in Franco-Flemish books of hours were often taken from textiles, a visual detail that may have reinforced, in a richly evocative manner, the connections among the material bed, social status, devotional practice, and religious transformation, and that demonstrates the ways in which various media can influence or reinforce one another in a kind of repeating loop.

The bed also provided conversational seating in the chamber. This function of the bed is evoked in a miniature in the lavishly illuminated presentation copy of John Lydgate’s Middle English Lives of SS Edmund and Fremund, probably made c. 1434–1439 in Bury for presentation to the young Henry VI. Here, the aged Aldare, retainer of the English king Offa of Mercia, and his aged, barren wife Tove, householders of modest means, as Lydgate’s poem informs the reader, are shown in their “smal cotage” [small cottage; line 2236], apparently engrossed in discussion while seated on the edge of their bed. This detail is unattested in the poem, which relates simply that the couple conceives a son, Thoua, a remarkable infant who prophesies the birth of Offa’s son, the future St. Fremund. The cov-
erlet on Aldare and Tove’s bed is green, a color suggestive of spring and growth that was perhaps perceived as affirming the couple’s miraculous fertility, while the tasseled cushion injects a note of luxury.

Of course, prayer and conjugal conversations are not the only kinds of pillow talk that take place on beds in medieval representation. A notable example of conversational seating is dramatized in the bedroom scenes of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, a late fourteenth-century alliterative romance. Gawain’s bed in these episodes serves, of course, as the setting for his attempted seduction. It also defines or marks the kind of amorous talk voiced on its coverlets. When Gawain arrives at Hautdesert, he is brought into a fireplaced chamber, a “bryȝt boure” [bright bower] (line 853), whose “noble” bedding includes silk curtains and ermine-faced coverlets:

Of cortynes of clene sylk wyth cler golde hemmez
And couertorez ful curious with comlych panez
Of bryght blauumer aboue, enbrawded bisydez,
Rudelez rennande on ropez, red golde ryngez. (lines 854–57)

[With pure silk curtains hemmed in gold and sumptuous, embroidered bedspreads lined above in bright fur; curtains running on ropes, with rings of red gold.]

The bed and bedroom, picturing the very best in sumptuous late-fourteenth century style, soon becomes the site of a three-day temptation sequence, with his host’s wife fully exploiting bedchamber privacy in her assaults on Gawain’s chastity. He dozes under a coverlet; she lifts up a corner of the curtain, then “set hir ful softly on þe bed-syde” [sets herself softly on the bedside] (1193). For Gawain’s wellbeing, it is critical that the bed serve only for conversation: were Gawain to let down his guard and invite the lady under the coverlet, the game would be over. And while the bed’s most important function in the romance is as a place for private conversation (and possible sex), it is equally important as a courtly object whose elegance matches the adroit and courteous conversational parrying.

The illuminator of London, BL MS Cotton Nero A.X, art. 3, the sole surviving manuscript witness of the poem, appears to have understood the ethical stakes of this narrative sequence. Gawain feigns sleep on a rich red bed framed by blue curtains hung on gold rings, his vulnerability suggested by the drape of the striped coverlet, which is folded down to reveal his bare shoulders, and by the lady’s amorous “chin-chuck.” Yet although the poem describes the lady as “set[ting]” or even lying on the bed beside Gawain during her attempted seduction, the artist rendered her standing beside it. This artistic choice produced an image rich in dramatic tension. Yet it also likely reflects recognition of the impropriety of any man and woman other than a husband and wife “sharing” a bed, while also signaling the lady’s status as would-be seducer, and, perhaps, Gawain’s
resistance to her charms (although he accepts the gift of her girdle, he
concedes only a few kisses). A carefully-styled marker of the high stakes
surrounding verbal courtesy and sexual restraint in this English romance,
Gawain’s bed in both text and image remains compellingly “honest.”

Childbed

Where beds feature most commonly in late medieval representation is, of
course, in association with childbirth. The fact of biology, combined with
medieval childbirth practices, made the bed and its chamber temporarily
a female space. Even though women commonly gave birth on birthing
stools after the fourteenth century, expectant mothers spent time before
and after labor in their beds, and thus beds stood for the place where birth
happened. Elizabeth L’Estrange’s study of childbirth scenes in books
of hours argues that beds, their linens, and hangings had pride of place
in lying-in preparations, something we might expect given the financial
investment they entailed.

While bedrooms were usually decorated, many expectant mothers,
from queens down to more ordinary women, added to the décor with bed
linens and other drapery for the occasion. When Elizabeth of York gave
birth to Margaret Tudor in 1489, her room was hung with rich tapestries
and her “bed [was] made up of a wool-stuffed mattress, a featherbed, a
down-filled bolster and four down pillows, the finest linen sheets and
pillow cases, a linen quilt, and a coverlet of ermine and cloth of gold.”
In a similar gesture, in 1531, Elizabeth Pomfreitt, the widow of a wealthy
Westminster brewer, left to her goddaughter bed linens and a white cloth
canopy “to occupie when she shall lye in wyth child.”

Special childbed linens furthered social and family identity in ways that
actively involved women. Expectant families across Europe prepared the
birthing space or room. Ulinka Rublack found that in Germany, expectant
mothers commonly moved into the main room, where the fireplace was.
Since most bedrooms did not have fireplaces, London’s expectant moth-
ers would have had to move out of their usual sleeping quarters if they
needed extra warmth. For those fortunate enough to have a separate room
for childbed, staging their birth rooms could be an aspirational personal
statement. In bequeathing childbed linens, we see women’s involvement
in setting up other women’s birthing spaces and in promoting both af-
fective and familial connections.

Birth scenes, both holy and royal, appear with great frequency in late
medieval illuminated manuscripts, including service and devotional books
and literary works. Whether these lying-ins are set in comfortable cham-
bers or rustic mangers, depictions of the Nativities of Jesus, Mary, and
John the Baptist and of the Adorations of the Shepherds and Magi often
feature lavishly outfitted beds. Examples in the Sherborne Missal, made
around 1400 for the Benedictine abbey of St. Mary, Sherborne (Dorset), apparently at the behest of its abbot, Robert Bruynyng, and the Lovell Lectionary, made c. 1400–1410 on the order of John, 5th Lord Lovell of Tichmersh (Northants.) as a gift to Salisbury Cathedral, illustrate this point. Mary, Elizabeth, and Anna lie in beds covered in sumptuous, richly brocaded fabrics worked with gold, or perhaps made of “tapestry work,” and generously equipped with bolsters, cushions, and/or pillows. The rich colors and patterns of the fabrics mark these beds as appropriate settings for the lying-ins that attended these miraculous births, and, in addition, as pointed statements of their donors’ taste, status, and morality. The potential incarnational, eucharistic resonances of the Virgin’s bed, already noted in respect to the Heller Hours Annunciation (Figure 1), are figured forth with comparable subtlety in the initial depicting the Nativity that opens the Mass of the Nativity in the Sherborne Missal. Mary lies on a coverlet worked with gold “Ms” (for “Maria”), its rich, red color affirming the status of her body as the source of Jesus’ flesh and His humanity. Adorned with Jesus’ monogram, the deep blue selour and testor serve simultaneously to symbolize His divinity and to enclose the Virgin’s upper body in a kind of sacral, celestial frame.

The childbeds of the mothers of saints Fremund and Edmund as depicted in the presentation copy of Lydgate’s Lives of SS Edmund and Fremund also evoke a distinct set of values, including the material wealth of the household and the rank of its occupants. Exceptionally richly outfitted is the post-partum chamber of Siware, queen of Alkmund of Saxony and mother of Edmund, king and martyr, the principal protagonist of Lydgate’s text (Figure 2, next page). Siware’s bed includes a whole fringed selour adorned with a pattern of large flowers along with a matching testor, curtains, and coverlet, soft furnishings that call to mind Thomas Gilbert’s “celor and testor of Sandwyche bastard steyned wt herbage,” mentioned earlier, or the “bed of Lyn wt a hool silour’ and Courerlet of þe same wroght wt mapil leues and fret of .iij. foil, & iij. nettes of Silk grene for quirtayns for the same bed” [bed of linen with a whole canopy and cover of the same embroidered with maple leaves and an ornamental design of three leaves and three nettes of green silk for curtains for the same bed] that Thomas Tvoky, esquire, left at his death in 1418. Floral and vegetal patterns abound in Siware’s chamber: not only the bed but also the painted walls or woven wall hanging and small rug before the fireplace bear floral or foliate designs. For the manuscript’s royal reader/viewer, these motifs—along with the numerous gold cups and vessels and the tiled or paved floor—may have signaled not only the queen’s miraculous fertility, the bounty of new life, and the status of the new mother and child, but also the spiritual and material benefits to England.
generally and Bury specifically that attended the birth, life, martyrdom, and post-mortem miracles of the saintly king Edmund.61

The birth scene in a lavishly illuminated collection of astrological treatises, astronomical tables, and political prophecies, probably produced in London around 1490 and intended for presentation to Henry VII, gives additional evidence of the rich semantic potentialities of beds as depicted in manuscript images (Figure 3).62 Book Nine of the manuscript’s central text, the Liber astronomiae of Guido Bonatti of Forli (d. c. 1296), concerns nativities, and the influence of the movements and positions of the planets and stars on the character and destiny of the newborn. In the historiated initial C that opens this portion of Bonatti’s treatise, a woman reaches out to receive her swaddled infant from a nurse or servant, a gold star above sending forth its rays onto the infant’s head visualizing the notion of celestial influence on the new child’s life. The hung bed, a luxurious affair, features a matching testor, curtains, and a whole, fringed selour. The new mother is propped up on at least one long and two square pillows, and the coverlet is made of some fine fabric worked with gold flowers and stars. While the richly outfitted bed suggests the household’s material

Figure 3: Historiated initial C with a birth scene, Opening of Book Nine, Guido Bonatti, Liber Astronomiae, probably London, c. 1490 (London, British Library MS Arundel 66, fol. 148r, detail). (© The British Library Board)
wealth, the blue testor, curtains, and selour and the golden stars adorn-
ing the coverlet evoke the heavenly canopy and heavenly bodies whose
movements will shape the child’s fate. This child clearly is starting out
well in life, yet his estate at the end of life will depend on the gifts and
benefits bestowed on him by the stars and planets.

The Deathbed and the Ars Moriendi

While birth scenes in literary and historical manuscripts often conform
to artistic convention in showing the chamber as a female space, and in
using textiles and bedding to convey ideas of rank, luxury, comfort, fer-
tility, and even destiny, deathbeds in literary manuscripts and historical
chronicles are more variable in their representation. It is perhaps as the
deathbed that the term “honest bed” resonates most deeply, for at the
moment of death the comforts and economic values associated with the
family bed confront the moment of judgment. While a bed in a scene of
dying may seem a natural or even an obligatory piece of furniture, its
appearance may be inflected by contingencies of value and morality sur-
rounding the “good death,” and even by the abstractions inherent in the
term. Just as “childbed” is a shorthand for birth and its attendant rituals,
“deathbed” is a shorthand for the approach of death and its associated
rituals, whether or not that death is taking place in an actual bed. Never-
theless, the concreteness of the term is a reminder that death takes place:
it is a situated, bodily event.

The fourteenth through sixteenth century witnessed a rich outpouring
or flowering of texts and images taking death and the deathbed as their
overt subject: meditations on the art of the good death, or the ars moriendi;
morality plays, such as Everyman and the Castle of Perseverance, in which
the pilgrimage of life is adjudicated by the inevitable deathbed reckoning;
the iconographic cycles and imagery of the Danse Macabre and the Leg-
end of the Three Living and the Three Dead; the image of the suffering
Christ on the Cross or Man of Sorrows; and perhaps most graphically,
cadaver or transi tombs featuring the image of the decomposing body.63
The Office of the Dead, a text for “private mourning” recited or chanted
by the clergy during funerals, became a frequent component of psalters
and books of hours made for lay owners, its recitation in the context of
personal devotion serving as a “key stratagem for dying a good death.”64
Dying, and dying well in a renunciation of the world while making a just
and charitable disposition of one’s worldly goods—a “good death”—de-
defines, at its end, a good life.

While women feature prominently in images and accounts of child-
birth, men tend to occupy the bed and fill the room in deathbed scenes
in manuscript images and in ars moriendi texts and morality plays. An
exception that perhaps proves the rule is the Dormition of the Virgin. In
the N-Town *Assumption of Mary*, a stage direction indicates, “hic erit de-center ornatus in lecto,” “here she shall be appropriately adorned in a bed,” with “ornatus” implying that the bed of Mary’s Dormition (not an actual death, of course) is an honest one, an appropriate point of departure for the Queen of Heaven. Most deathbed scenes, though, picture men. As Alan Fletcher notes, by the middle of the fifteenth century the “scene of the dying man on his bed had become a familiar and richly conceptualized one in art and literature.” The male world of the *ars moriendi* can be partly explained by English male gendering of pronouns and words for persons: “mankind” is a generalizing term that encompasses both men and women. Nevertheless, the predominance of men at the late medieval deathbed may also reflect the gendering of household economics, and in particular the dominant economic role of men in home ownership and testamentary bequests. As Amy Appleford observes, the medieval “lay deathbed” was a public space, “finely and socially articulated.” In the N-Town *Assumption of Mary* and in most artistic depictions of the Dormition, the Virgin is surrounded by the apostles: the “virgins” described in early apocryphal texts as present at this event are typically absent from pictorial representations. At the deathbed one might find attendants and members of the community—usually male—who had been gathered by the priest as he made his way to the house, ringing a hand bell and carrying a cross and Eucharistic host.

The dying person also had a role in the spectacle as he composed himself (or herself) for death, with part of good composure a repudiation of worldliness. A 1442–1443 drawing of the death of Richard Whittington, London merchant, and three-times Lord Mayor (d. 1423) shows a deathbed scene crowded with eighteen visitors that include beadsmen to pray for him, a priest, a physician, family members, and executors (Figure 4, next page). No women are present. As Appleford notes in her discussion of the frontispiece, it pictures an “emphatically lay” space. Whittington’s comfortable bed, covered with pillows and surrounded by curtains, supports him at the moment of a major charitable bequest, joining domestic wealth and profit with public service. Whittington’s death, no doubt, is pictured as taking place in an “honest bed.” Similarly, the lavishness of the bed occupied by Isabella Despenser, countess of Worcester and Warwick (d. 1439) in the early sixteenth-century *Founders’ and Benefactors’ Book of Tewkesbury Abbey*, may serve to suggest the status and munificence of the patron. In this unusual image of a noblewoman’s deathbed bequest, the countess lies in a bed equipped with a golden coverlet, a full green, fringed selour, and a tasseled cushion as she bestows on a kneeling Abbot William of Bristol a “document symbolizing both the reconfirmation” of the abbey’s privileges and the gifts made to the abbey in her will.
Yet worldliness can also be miserliness, with the material bed, a prop for the dying, a sign of the difficulties of relinquishing the world. The trope of death and the miser, alive today in annual performances of Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*, was widely familiar in late medieval England. A fifteenth-century sermon exemplum tells the story of a miser on his
deathbed who would not give away his treasure. After his death his widow and children find his bloody heart in his treasure chest, which is set “at [h]is beddes feete.” The juxtaposition would have been familiar to many medieval viewers, as beds were frequently accompanied by chests, even in sparsely furnished bedrooms. In the mid-fifteenth-century morality play, the *Castle of Perseverance*, the bed and chest that appear together in the staging diagram are likely to have dramatized these paired associations of bed and money: “Coveytyse copbord be the beddys feet / schal be at the ende of the castel.” [Greed’s chest by the foot of the bed shall be at the end of the castle.] This important diagram, one of the few original illustrations of the staging of a late medieval English play, suggests that the bed and chest have dramatic importance as life-cycle props. Mankind dies lamenting the disposition of his worldly goods. He cannot take them with him nor, after his death, guarantee his bequests (lines 2986–94).

In some accounts the bed is even an object of abjection, repudiated by the person or corpse at the last moment. The “honest bed” for the dying is ashes or the ground, and no bed at all. For the soldier, dying in bed may be seen as shameful, as Ranulf Higden notes in the late fourteenth-century *Polychronicon*: “Englishmen . . . are cruel to their enemies, and hate subjection more than anything, and consider it very lazy if a man dies in his bed, and great honor if he dies in the field.” The body might be taken from bed immediately after death, or even before. A thirteenth-century death lyric that inspired versions up to the end of the fifteenth century describes such a process of descent. Mankind (“man”) would surely forsake sin if he knew how painful it is to go “from bed to floor” and downward from the floor to the pit and then on to the pain that will never end:

If man him biðocte
inderlike and ofte
Þu arde is te fore
fro bedde te flore,
up reuful is te flitte
fro flore te pitte,
fro pitte te pine
Dat nevre sal fine,
i þene non sinne
sulde his herte winne.

(If a man reflected, inwardly and often, how hard is the journey from bed to floor, how pitiful the flight from floor to pit, from pit to pain that never will end—I swear sin would not win his heart.)

According to Richard Newhauser, the poem reflects the practice of removing the corpse from the bed immediately after death. Nothing in the poem indicates that the person moving from the bed to the floor is
actually dead, however. In the context of death customs that advocate removal of the dying to the floor, the poem may refer to the lifting from bed of a person at the end of life. An early fifteenth-century English sermon describes the practice, or at least the ideal, of removing the dying from bed in the moments before death: “And when a man lies in his last sickness and draws near the hour of his death, he should be laid down on the ground on ashes or on chaff to signify that he is ashes and to ashes he shall return.” The repudiation of the comforts of bed gets explicit play in Hoccleve’s early fifteenth-century Lerne to Dye, a translation from Suso’s Horologium sapientiae. Image, the alter-ego of Disciple, proposes to “lerne to die” by amending his life (lines 771–73), with one of his first penitential acts the renunciation of his bed: “Now wole Y voide fethirbeddes softe,/ The pilwes nesshe and esy materas/ On which my careyne hath tymes ofte/ Walwid and leyn” [Now I will leave soft featherbeds, delicate pillows, and comfortable mattresses on which my body has often tossed and lain] (lines 778–81). A few lines later, Image begs for God’s mercy from a position on the ground: “See, beforne thee plat on the grownd y lye/ Weeypynge for myn excessyf folye” [See, I lie before you flat on the ground, weeping for my excessive folly] (802–03). He has left or “voided” the comforts of the easy mattress for the penitential floor.

The practice of removing the dying or dead from the bed to the floor, however performed, may well reflect practicalities in dealing with death and dying. It saves the bed from contamination. Yet in the context of the ars moriendi, moving to a bed on the floor from the bedstead not only denotes a shedding of worldly goods but also a change in identity. The dying person is no longer a householder or head of the family, but a servant or child of God. The bed on the floor, worth less than the bedstead and less adorned, is the bed of servants and children, temporary members of the household, something readers and practitioners of this part of the ars moriendi would have implicitly understood.

In manuscript illustrations, deathbed scenes tend to be sparer and more stripped-down, at least of furnishings, than scenes of birth, suggesting that the bed is part of a mortality symbolism. That the designers and artists of medieval manuscripts were attuned to the bed as a gendered shorthand for the end as well as the beginning of life, and to the moralizing, ethical implications of textiles and bedding, is suggested in two of the fifty-five pen drawings for the Pageants of Richard Beauchamp, a Middle English account of the life of Richard Beauchamp, earl of Warwick (d. 1439), produced after 1483, possibly for the earl’s daughter, Anne, countess of Warwick. The earl’s birth is represented by a depiction of the lying-in of his mother, Margaret Ferrers, who is attended by several female servants. The new mother lies in a lavish bed whose whole selour is made of fabric worked with flowers and ornamented with a fringed valance. Beauchamp’s
death, by contrast, is an all-male affair, with the earl receiving Extreme Unction from a bishop and attended by his grieving male servants. The dying earl’s bed itself is sparer, devoid of all obviously luxurious soft furnishings, with the exception of the pillows on which the earl is propped up. Perhaps the relative sparseness of the bed in this deathbed scene was meant to convey to the beholder that the earl approached judgment with nothing to hide.

Indeed, while the lavish textiles portrayed in images of childbed invoke fertility, domestic comfort, social status, material wealth, and even destiny, in deathbed images, these same textiles, along with other details of the scenes’ representation, may carry strikingly different connotations, foremost among them being the spiritual distance between the protagonist’s death and an ideal, “good” death. In the historiated initial opening the Office of the Dead in the Macclesfield Psalter, probably produced in Norwich in the 1330s, the dying man’s grieving wife looks on as the grinning figure of Death, who has hopped up on the man’s covered legs, claims his victim with a blow of a lance to the chest (Figure 5, next page). Both the presence of his wife at the man’s bedside and the luxury of the soft furnishings, including the ample white sheets and the richly patterned coverlet and matching tasseled cushion, may suggest that the dying man has not sufficiently renounced either material or emotional attachment—although the appearance in the foliate roundel at upper left of Christ, who observes the scene in the initial and blesses the dying man and offers him absolution, injects a note of hope. The vignette in the bas-de-page of a man falling from his horse—a visual topos for Pride from the early medieval period that appears directly above the incipit for Psalm 129, De profundis, “Out of the depths I have cried to thee, O Lord”—would have encouraged the beholder to read the death in the initial as something other than a “good death,” and would have enhanced the imagery’s efficacy as a reminder of the importance of making “an honest bed” and putting one’s moral, spiritual house in order. Variants of this vivid image, with a monk or other male figure rather than a grieving wife attending the dying man, illustrate several later allegorical and ars moriendi texts. A striking example—particularly arresting in regard to Image’s vow to “voide fethirbeddes softe”—is found in a c. 1430 copy of Hoccleve’s Lerne to Dye. Image’s lavishly outfitted bed dominates the otherwise spare picture, and the overstuffed pillows and almost lurid red and gold curtains, selour, testor, and coverlet convey as urgently as does the approaching figure of Death, the spiritual necessity of making “an honest bed” at life’s end.

A repository of identity, lineage, and wealth for the living, for whom the bed was a fundamental object in setting up a household, the bed nevertheless needed to be discarded at death, first by the dying leaving the bed and then by the executor, who bestowed the bed and its bedding
Figure 5: Death Strikes, Opening page of the Office of the Dead, Macclesfield Psalter, East Anglia, probably Norwich, 1330s (Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum MS 1-2005, fol. 235v). (Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge, UK / Bridgeman Images)
according to the deceased’s will. The moral weight given to beds informed the decisions testators made when disposing of their beds. Many wills were made close to the end of life, with some testators even referring to the bed in which they were lying as they dictated their will. The place of bed and bedding within the process of will-making becomes richer for reading these administrative texts alongside literature and art.

Bequeathing patterns hint at what beds, as symbolic objects, meant in practice. A quantitative survey of beds in wills suggests that however much men might have dominated the deathbed in *ars moriendi* texts and images, in real life women took active roles in the transfer of beds across generations. Among the testamentary bequests from a sample of the lay Prerogative Court of Canterbury wills spanning 1392–1542, over half (56 percent) left some sort of household goods, with nearly a quarter of these testators (24 percent) bequeathing beds or bedding. Women were both more likely than men to leave goods and also to leave beds and bedding in their wills (54 percent compared to 31 percent). The law of coverture meant that married women did not typically write wills, so the pool of female testators largely comprises widows, while male testators could be married or widowed. As a result, when widows made up their wills, they were generally breaking up a household, while many men were often still married and might, therefore, be providing for their widows and underage children.

Looking only at the wills of widowed men and women, who would both theoretically be disbanding households, controls for the different family circumstances in which men and women made their wills. Both male and female widowed testators (56 percent) were equally likely to leave beds or bedding, but they did not bequeath them in the same way nor in the same quantities. Of the fifty-nine beds bequeathed by these twenty-five widows and sixteen widowers, most were bequeathed by widows (69 percent compared to 31 percent). Widowers, however, were more likely to leave beds to their children than widows (17 percent of beds left by widowers compared to 7 percent left by widows). Additionally, widowers were more likely than widows to leave their beds and bedding to relatives broadly defined: children, siblings, and cousins (44 percent of beds left by widowers compared to 22 percent left by widows).

Widowers did not explain their relationships to recipients of beds as frequently as widows, so our percentages are incomplete. Adding clerical wills somewhat compensates for this situation, because the clergy, too, were disbanding households. Clergy were also overwhelmingly likely to leave their beds and bedding to family members (although not to their own children). Of the sixteen beds and bedding bequeathed by seven clergy, 74 percent went to family members: cousins, parents, nieces or nephews.
Taken together, then, men disbanding households were much more likely than widows to leave beds and bedding to their family members.

Another stark difference is that 50 percent of the beds or bedding left by widows went to their servants, compared to only 11 percent of those left by widowers, while only two of the beds left by the clergy went to servants, and in one case the servant was also a nephew. Widows and widowers were also equally likely to leave their beds to males and females, but the clergy were overwhelmingly more likely to leave beds to women, all of whom were family members.

The differences in bequeathing suggest that while both men and women valued beds, they held differing views on that value. The association of a bed with family and lineage appears stronger for men than for women. Widows, moreover, appear to have given their beds and bedding principally to young people who were not their relatives, suggesting that for women the association of beds with setting up a household and bearing children was stronger than the association with lineage. For both men and women, beds had material and esthetic value, but they situated these values within their own gendered household and social experiences. We can see the temporary gendering of the bed in childbirth reproduced in women’s preference for giving beds and bedding to young people, who would be setting up their own households and bearing their own children.

While practicalities of provisioning a young person, careful husbanding of household wealth, and ties of affection often dictated the logic of a testator’s bequests, the larger symbolism of beds, as analyzed in this paper, was not lost on some testators. For example, when she made her will in 1487, Joan Kent articulated the ties of bed to family and family heritage in her very detailed bequest to her daughter and son-in-law. She left them

\[\text{to have my soule in ther goode remembraunce . . . my best bed of aras to have and to occupye to them and to the longest of their leving and aft’ the decease of the lengst of them leving I will that the same . . . bed of aras remayne to the heyres of ther bodies laufuly begoton from heyre to heyre aslong as any such heyre shall be for a remembraunce to pray for my soule and the soules of ther ancestors.\]

\[\text{[to have my soul in their good memory . . . my best bed of Arras [cloth] to have and to occupy them for the rest of their lives and after the death of the last of them, I will that the same bed of Arras [cloth] remain to the heirs of their bodies lawfully begotten from heir to heir as long as any such heir shall be, to remember to pray for my soul and the souls of their ancestors.]}\]

In a world where London’s merchant families rarely lasted into the third generation through the male line, this bequest signals alternative ways of understanding family and the role of beds in that vision. Joan Kent’s bed of Arras tapestry is explicitly an heirloom, an object of “remembraunce” linking her soul with her descendants “as long as any such heyre shall be.”
Conclusion

John Goodwyn, the grocer who had his will proven in 1522, and with whom this paper opened, left to his servant Joan Bedell his “honest whole complete bed and all other things thereto belonging for a bedde” not only “for hir [her] good and diligent service” to himself and his wife, but also so that Joan would “praie for [his] soule.”92 The description of this honest bed, coupled with Goodwyn’s desire for prayers for his soul, well illustrates the significant, intricately interwoven moral, ethical, economic, and spiritual expectations that beds carried. Not only does the use of the term “honest” reinforce the notion of the bed as an ensemble, but it also references the household’s reputation, as well as the testator’s expectation that the bed will continue to be used in an “honest” fashion. The “honest whole complete bed” invoked in John Goodwyn’s will and the wills of other merchant and noble testators may seem, at first blush, worlds apart from the ideal versions of beds depicted in the images of holy and noble births and deaths in illuminated literary, religious, and devotional manuscripts, or as evoked in romance or devotional literature. Yet in their insistence on the economic, social, moral, and esthetic value of beds and bedding, and in the subtle references they contain to the range of familial, emotional, and spiritual valences that accrued to this item of furniture, these testamentary references offer rich affirmation of the centrality of the bed to medieval social life in a manner that aptly complements the picture painted in their literary and artistic counterparts.

Notes

7. For the bed as a site of a range of activities, see Stacy L. Hahn, “The Enigmatic Contours of the Bed in Yale 229,” in Essays on the Lancelot of Yale 229, ed. Elizabeth Moore Willingham (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 69–88; Diane Wolfthal, In and Out of the Marital Bed: Seeing Sex in Renaissance Europe (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2010); Glenn Burger, “In the


11. Ibid., 128.

12. TNA, Prob2/23.


14. TNA Prob2/487.


16. Margaret Spufford has questioned the consistency of valuation on probate inventories, and while there is good reason for her concerns, the prices do provide some immediate sense of the relative value of goods in a house. “The Limitations of the Probate Inventory,” in *English Rural Society, 1500–1800*, ed. John Chartres and David Hey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 139–74.

17. TNA Prob2/500.


19. TNA Prob2/487.

20. TNA Prob2/500.

21. TNA Prob2/98.


24. TNA Prob11/5/2.

25. TNA Prob2/12. “Bastard” may refer to a coarse cloth of inferior quality or unusual make or size; see *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “bastard” († 5.a.). While the term “buckram” in its medieval variants sometimes designated a fine, expensive, typically linen or cotton cloth, it also was used to describe a coarser cloth “impregnating” with stiffeners; see Mark Chambers and Elizabeth Coatsworth, “Buckram,” in *Encyclopedia of Medieval Dress and Textiles*, 102.

26. TNA Prob11/1/114.

27. TNA Prob2/500.

29. TNA Prob2/467.

30. TNA Prob2/512.


32. This assessment is based on the appearance of fireplace tools in the inventory—not a foolproof method of determining the contents of a room.


34. TNA Prob2/119; his inventory also includes “buttery stuffe and kechynne stuffe,” implying that he had access to a kitchen and buttery, but they were shared rather than exclusively his.

35. TNA Prob2/22.

36. TNA Prob2/500.


39. TNA Prob11/8/634.


41. Wolfthal, In and Out of the Marital Bed, 18.

42. Berkeley, University of California, Berkeley, Bancroft Library BANC MS UCB 150, fol. 9v, for which, see http://vm133.lib.berkeley.edu:8080/xf22/search?mode=digscript;smode=basic;shelfmark=UCB%20MS%20150;docsPerPage=1;startDoc=1;fullview=yes. Mary is
also apparently seated on the foot of her bed in San Marino, Huntington Library, MS HM 1086, fol. 36r, a mid-fifteenth-century Sarum horae perhaps made in Bruges and originally owned by the Kyffin family of Shropshire; for this manuscript, see http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/digitalscriptorium/huntington/HM1086.html; accessed February 7, 2017.


51. Elizabeth L’Estrange, Holy Motherhood: Gender, Dynasty and Visual Culture in the Later Middle Ages (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), 82–86.

52. Ibid., 85–86.

53. Westminster Archive Centre, Bracy fos. 20–23.


58. London, BL MS Add. 74236, fol. 36r.


60. For rugs and carpets, see Eames, “Documentary Evidence,” 45. For additional analysis of the chamber portrayed in this image, see Morgan, “Between the Sheets,” 29–31. For Thomas Tvokey’s will, see *Medieval Dress and Textiles in Britain*, ed. Sylvester, Chambers, and Owen-Crocker, 36–37.

61. The beds in the scenes of royal and saintly births in another illuminated copy of Lydgate’s text—this one made after 1461–c. 1475 for an affluent East Anglian family, a volume that came into the possession of Margaret Fitzwalter, second wife of Sir John Radcliffe of Atteleborough (d. 1496)—are nearly as lavish as those in the presentation manuscript; for this manuscript—London, British Library Yates Thompson MS 47—see the British Library’s Digital Catalogue of Illuminated Manuscripts, at http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/record.asp?MSID=8132&CollID=58, accessed February 7, 2017; and Drimmer, “Picturing the King or Picturing the Saint.”


63. The fifteenth-century interest in practices of dying and in the figure of Death has often been described as a quixotic and morbid fascination, a cultural post-traumatic stress response to outbreaks of the plague. Recent studies, however, focus on lay piety and mercantile ethics. See Amy Appleford, *Learning to Die in London, 1380–1540* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015); and Ashby Kinch, *Imago Mortis: Mediating Images of Death in Late Medieval Culture* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).


67. Appleford, Learning to Die, 43 and 53.


69. Appleford, Learning to Die, 38.


71. Appleford, Learning to Die, 58.

72. Ibid., 55–57. The illustration is on the frontispiece to the earliest copy of the English translation of the ordinances governing the almshouse funded by his bequest.


74. Fletcher, “Covetyse copbord,” 309. The Book of the Craft of Dying, a c. 1430s Middle English translation of Tractatus de arte bene moriendi, notes that a particular deathbed temptation for “carnall men & seculer men” is the preoccupation with “her wyfes, her children . . . and worldly riches”; The Book of the Craft of Dying, and Other English Tracts Concerning Death, ed. Frances M. M. Comper (London: Longman Green, 1917); http://archive.org/stream/bookofcraftofdyi00caxtiala/bookofcraftofdyi00caxtiala_djvu.txt15; accessed February 7, 2017; and for the text, see Appleford, Learning to Die, 12–16.

75. The Castle of Perseverance, ed. David N. Klausner, TEAMS (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Medieval Institute Publications, 2010). http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/klausner-castle-of-perseverance; accessed February 7, 2017. For the staging diagram on fol. 191v of Washington, DC, The Folger Shakespeare Library, MS V. a. 354, the fifteenth-century manuscript containing the Castle of Perseverance (at fols 154–91), see http://luna.folger.edu/luna/servlet/FOLGERCM1-6-6-283020-120742:The-Castle-of-Perseverance?qvq=q%3Acastle+perseverance%3Bsort%3Acall_number%2CAuthor%2Ccd_title%2Cimprint%3Blic%3AFOLGERCM1-6-6&cic=FOLGERCM1-6-6&sort=call_number%2CAuthor%2Ccd_title%2Cimprint&mi=40&trs=41; accessed February 7, 2017. For word order in the stage instructions, see Fletcher, “Covetyse copbord.”


83. London, BL MS Cotton Julius E.IV, art. 6, fols 1r, 26v; for the manuscript, see The British Library’s Images online database at https://imagesonline.bl.uk/?service=search&action=do_quick_search&language=en&q=beauchamp+pageants; accessed February 7, 2017.

84. Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum MS 1-2005, fol. 235v; for the manuscript and the image, see Panayotova, *Macclesfield Psalter*, 71–73.

85. Oxford, Bodl. MS Selden Supra 53, fol. 118r, for which, see http://bodley30.bodley.ox.ac.uk:8180/luna/servlet/detail/ODLodl~1~1~49710~120870:Various-poems?qvq=w4s/who/Thomas%20Hoccleve;lc:ODLodl~29~29,ODLodl~7~7,ODLodl~6~6,ODLodl~14~14,ODLodl~8~8,ODLodl~23~23,ODLodl~1~1,ODLodl~24~24&mi=16&trs=18; accessed February 7, 2017; for this manuscript of Hoccleve’s poems, see, most recently, Kinch, *Imago Mortis*, 69–105. For a similar illustration for the text known as the *Desert of Religion* in the later fifteenth-century Carthusian Miscellany (London, BL MS Add. 37049, fol. 38v), see Kinch, *Imago Mortis*, 58–68; the manuscript is fully digitized at http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Add_MS_37049; accessed February 7, 2017.

86. This sample comprises 377 wills, all the wills (TNA Prob11) in a given year in ten-year increments, starting in 1392 and ending in 1542. Of these wills, 211 left household items. In the early decades, there were few wills, so wills on either side of the sample year were added to provide a usable number of wills.

87. While all the women leaving household goods in their wills (twenty-five) were widows, only sixteen of out 171 men were widowers.

88. Of the beds that they bequeathed, widowers explained their relationship to the recipient only 56 percent of the time, compared to women’s 76 percent of the time.

89. TNA Prob11/20/323.

90. TNA Prob11/9/211.


92. TNA Prob11/20/377.
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