

Katherine L. French, *Household Goods and Good Households in Late Medieval London. Consumption and Domesticity after the Plague* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021). 416 p. ISBN 9780812253054.

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Although the subject of the newest book by Katherine L. French, i.e. consumption and domesticity after the plague in the urban context of later medieval London, is by no means new, the angle with which she broaches the theme and the research question certainly is. First of all, the book and its sources start very early in time, which is quite remarkable especially for this topic of research, but it enables the author to paint a good picture of the pre-plague London housing stock and domestic furnishings, which French subsequently uses as a kind of benchmark for the rest of her story. Secondly, the book's main question revolves around the impact of the high levels of mortality after the Black Death on people's domestic culture – even though scholars have already for a long-time debated how much responsibility should be given to the plague as a catalyst for cultural and social transformations, this particular aspect of daily life was largely left untouched. That is somewhat remarkable, because indeed, as the author herself indicates, 'material culture provides a witness to change and continuities after the plague in ways that textual narratives and economic sources do not' (p. 4). And thirdly, *Household Goods* is not only about changing consumption habits and increasing numbers of objects in houses, but it is also about changes in domestic behaviour, identity and gender roles that emerged from these material changes. In her book, French states that 'the fourteenth century's increase in consumption had social repercussions: this book seeks to understand what London's merchants and artisans learned as they learned to buy, use, and live with more stuff not only right after the plague, but in the generation that followed' (p. 3).

The sources French uses are not novel either. She analyzed wills and inventories of London's merchants and artisans, just like many researchers in material culture studies would do, though these sources have a remarkable age, dating back to the fourteenth century – something a researcher of material culture in the Low Countries can only envy. But her approach and the way in which she obtains information, especially from the probate inventories, is innovative, perhaps a bit bold, but certainly inspiring. What I myself have only tentatively assert-

ed in my own book, French declares as an established fact. In the author's own words: 'we can still infer what spaces these people lived in and how they used them by the order and grouping of their possessions' (p. 25). This gives the story a much deeper layer of meaning and it ensures that the author succeeds in getting through to assessing changes in domestic behavior, identity and gender roles.

Changes in gender roles and especially the gradual materialization of these roles in the households of the Londoners under scrutiny is one of the common threads through many of the chapters. According to French, more (and more diversified) objects made it possible to (further) rationalize the management and the ordering of the household, including the caring for those who lived in the house. And this went hand in glove with a gendering of the roles men and women took up in day-to-day life, especially indoors. The increased consumption after the plague gave women the opportunity to express their own priorities and concerns in the care of their households, according to the author. These priorities include family, childcare, memory and piety all of which were catered for by London's bursting markets. The increasingly diversified material culture for housekeeping made women skilled and knowledgeable housewives, a particular set of skills that needed to be promoted and memorized through wills. This focus makes the book not only a valuable contribution to debates on material culture, but also an interesting addition to discussions about gender roles and the changing position of women at home.

One of the most interesting findings in 'Household Goods', in my opinion, is that although economic differences between all social layers of urban society continued to exist, London's merchants and artisans did develop shared domestic habits around a shared material culture. Furthermore, and contrary to common belief in emulation of elite consumption practices, these merchants and artisans were inspired by elite possessions, but they adapted them to suit their commercial and urban lives, making their own choices more than mere mimicry.

To conclude, I could not agree more with Kate Giles, that this book 'makes a powerful contribution to wider historical and sociological discussions about the relationship between people and their things'.

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