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## Locating Childbirth Devotion in the English Parish Church, 1450–1580

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### Abstract

Childbirth in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century England was not simply a medical affair but a social and religious event, with an associated array of complex devotional practices. This article challenges the widely held view that such practices were generally confined to the home and shows how the English parish church accommodated public devotional childbirth customs and objects. Using the perspectives of space, materiality, mobility, and recycling, I investigate a set of mobile material culture associated with childbirth (namely prayer beads, linen, and girdles) which moved between the parish church and domestic spaces. The article explores the shifting devotional significance of these objects, not only as they moved through space but also through time, by examining their fate during the English Reformation. Highlighting the previously under-examined public presence of the childbearing woman in the English parish, the article demonstrates that attention to devotional spaces and objects can shed new light on the emotional experiences of childbirth and women's wider religious and social practices during a period which was simultaneously one of incremental change and intense upheaval.

In 1525, a woman named Dorothy Lawrence left three sheets and two pillows to her local parish church, St Andrews in Canterbury. The purpose of these sheets and pillows was, according to Lawrence's instructions in churchwardens' accounts, to be lent to the 'powr women beryng children dwellyng w'in the precynte of the parysshe'.<sup>1</sup> This bequest to support the local poor parturient women may, at first glance, appear unusual among routine entries concerning gutter repair, bell cleaning and pew mending that populate these parish church financial accounts. However, Lawrence's bequest, while specific in its instructions, was not unique. It is part of a significant array of under-examined

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Cotton, 'Churchwardens' accounts of the parish of St Andrew, Canterbury, 1483 to 1625: part III: 1524–1557', *Archaeologia Cantiana*, 34 (1920), pp. 1–46, at p. 7.

evidence that reveals the transmission of mobile material culture associated with childbirth and female devotion between the domestic and ecclesiastical spaces.

Childbirth was not solely considered a medical event, but also a social and religious occasion, during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Using an assortment of recipes and remedies intended to soothe the parturient body, women prayed with their birth attendants, interacted with devotional objects, and comforted themselves at a dangerous time through enacting familiar rituals. Medieval and early modern scholarship have characterized the lying-in space or birthing chamber as ‘mysterious’<sup>2</sup> and an emphatically closed female space.<sup>3</sup> This article disputes this characterization by examining how the public space of the English parish church also accommodated childbirth customs and objects, and highlights women’s devotion and their relationships with objects across the medieval and early modern period. It challenges the widely held view that the beliefs and practices of late medieval and early modern childbirth were generally confined to the domestic and the private spheres.<sup>4</sup> After an initial consideration of the spatial dynamics of the parish church with reference to childbirth furniture and visual culture, it examines materially significant objects given by, and lent to, women through the church. Churchwardens’ accounts and wills provide significant new evidence of the circular transmission of these objects between public and domestic spaces. Visitation returns, or reports on the standard of religious institutions generated from visiting church authorities (in this case early reformer bishops), also demonstrate that some objects were transported beyond the confines of the local parish to, and from, the pilgrimage sites visited by pregnant and post-partum women. Alongside this consideration of the interchangeable nature of public and private space, the article will investigate how the objects were adapted to the demands of the English Reformation. While some of these objects were destroyed, many more were recycled back into the household and continued their roles in childbirth practices. This evidence will contribute to wider scholarship around the continuities and changes of late medieval rituals in post-Reformation England, providing further evidence for a reconfiguration, rather than outright destruction, of customs in order to continue comfort and protection for sixteenth-century parishioners.

Drawing on recent scholarship on the English parish church, which has demonstrated the value of using parochial documents to understand a complex range of public and private devotional practices,<sup>5</sup> the article will use

<sup>2</sup> For example, David Cressy, in his work on Tudor lifecycles, names his chapter on childbirth ‘Childbed mysteries’. David Cressy, *Birth, marriage, and death: ritual, religion, and the life-cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford, 1997), p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> Gail McMurray Gibson, ‘Scene and obscene: seeing and performing late medieval childbirth’, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 29 (1999), pp. 7–24, at pp. 9–10.

<sup>4</sup> Alongside Cressy and Gibson McMurray, see Jennifer Wynne Hellwarth, *The reproductive unconscious in late medieval and early modern England* (New York, NY, 2013), for this perspective.

<sup>5</sup> See Eamon Duffy, *The stripping of the altars: traditional religion in England, c. 1400–c. 1580* (New Haven, CT, 1992); Katherine L. French, *The good women of the parish: gender and religion after the Black Death* (Philadelphia, PA, 2008).

churchwardens' accounts, wills, and visitation returns. These are complicated documentary sources, often noted for their limitations. Churchwardens' accounts, while useful in capturing the collective spending and customs of parishioners, are geographically uneven (few survive from the north of England) and often fragmentary in nature, so they must be supplemented by other sources.<sup>6</sup> The usefulness of wills as reflections of individual and familial lay devotion are tempered by disclaimers around public memory-making and scribal formulae.<sup>7</sup> Visitation returns, while often polemical in nature, are valuable resources for identifying lost pre-Reformation devotional objects and practices. These documentary sources will be used in conjunction with extant visual and material culture, with a focus on the relatively large numbers of objects and images that survived in East Anglia. Examined together, the sources build up a picture of repeated patterns of a 'circular passage of objects'<sup>8</sup> associated with childbirth across the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Therefore, the article uses new evidence to show the transmission of childbirth material culture between the domestic space and the parish church. Using this evidence, it also challenges the view of a Reformation divide, while providing new evidence for the fluidity of practice between the public and private sphere, particularly with regards to women. As we shall see, women could express even their most personal bodily experiences in a space generally associated with patriarchal customs.

Consideration of these objects through different paradigms can also yield new insights. For example, the study of material culture has been brought more into dialogue with history of emotions scholarship, a discourse on which this article builds.<sup>9</sup> Objects are, in this view, bound affectively to humans, in that they are produced and used to facilitate our emotional lives. The production and regulation of emotion have been emphasized in scholarship on medieval and early modern objects, both the sacred<sup>10</sup> and the everyday.<sup>11</sup> Childbirth was an emotionally heightened time for women, with their own and their child's life often hanging in the balance. The images, objects, and materials with which they engaged assuaged their anxieties, relieved

<sup>6</sup> For acknowledgements of the limitations and benefits of churchwardens' accounts, see Clive Burgess, 'Pre-Reformation churchwardens' accounts and parish government: lessons from London and Bristol', *English Historical Review*, 117 (2002), pp. 306–32.

<sup>7</sup> See Margaret Spufford, 'Religious preambles and the scribes of villagers' wills in Cambridgeshire, 1570–1700', in Tom Arkell, Nesta Evans, and Nigel Goose, eds., *When death do us part: understanding and interpreting the probate records of early modern England* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 144–57.

<sup>8</sup> Abigail Brundin, Deborah Howard, and Mary Laven, *The sacred home in Renaissance Italy* (Oxford, 2018), p. 306.

<sup>9</sup> See Stephanie Downes, Sally Holloway, and Sarah Randles, 'A feeling for things, past and present', in Stephanie Downes, Sally Holloway, and Sarah Randles, eds., *Feeling things: objects and emotions through history* (Oxford, 2018), pp. 8–24.

<sup>10</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian materiality: an essay on religion in late medieval Europe* (New York, NY, 2011); Caroline Walker Bynum, *Dissimilar similitudes: devotional objects in late medieval Europe* (Princeton, NJ, 2020).

<sup>11</sup> Tara Hamling and Catherine Richardson, eds., *Everyday objects: medieval and early modern material culture and its meanings* (Farnham, 2010).

their pain, and allowed them to express the joy or loss associated with parturient. Therefore, this set of material culture has an affective power which captures an emotional history of childbirth. I will also demonstrate how these objects became markers of emotional affiliation of childbirth, creating what Barbara Rosenwein refers to as 'emotional communities'<sup>12</sup> through acts of bequests, gifting, and lending. These objects were circulated between child-bearing women and their associated midwives, attendants, and family members. The circulation of materials created networks of memory, celebrating, and commemorating the childbirth experience across English parish communities.

## I

To track the shifting significance of these childbirth materials, we must consider first the public space through which they were transmitted. Both medieval and early modern scholars have long considered space to be a significant mediator in the identity and experience of their subjects.<sup>13</sup> Concepts of public and private space are a significant theme in this scholarship, with attempts to qualify these binary categories. Previously, this has led to an essentialist gendering of space, with the public sphere equated to male and the domestic or private sphere equated to female. More recently, there have been efforts to reject this essentialism in medieval and early modern contexts.<sup>14</sup> While women were more likely to work in the household, they were not strictly confined to the private domestic space.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, domestic space was a fluid and porous concept, highly adaptable to expressions of both personal and communal experiences. Building on this rebuttal of the essentialist perspective, I will demonstrate how even an event as supposedly private and gendered as childbirth, or 'lying-in', could be expressed in a public space. Certainly, women in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century England typically gave birth in the home, supported by their female attendants with associated therapeutics and devotional rituals. However, these fluid spaces were unbound by binary notions of the public or the private, and there was a conformity and continuation between the rituals performed in the public and domestic space.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Barbara H. Rosenwein, *Emotional communities in the early middle ages* (Ithaca, NY, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> Barbara A. Hanawalt and Michal Kobińska, eds., *Medieval practices of space* (Minneapolis, MN, 2000); Alexandra Walsham, *The reformation of the landscape: religion, identity, and memory in early modern Britain and Ireland* (Oxford, 2011).

<sup>14</sup> Sarah Rees Jones, 'Public and private space and gender in medieval Europe', in Judith Bennett and Ruth Karras, eds., *The Oxford handbook of women and gender in medieval Europe* (Oxford, 2013), pp. 246–59; Thomas Kuehn and Anne Jacobson Schutte, 'Introduction', in Thomas Kuehn, Anne Jacobson Schutte, and Silvana Seidel Menchi, eds., *Time, space, and women's lives in early modern Europe* (University Park, PA, 2002), pp. ix–xix, at p. xvii.

<sup>15</sup> Jeremy Goldberg, 'Space and gender in the later medieval English house', *Viator*, 42 (2011), pp. 205–32.

<sup>16</sup> See Diana Webb, 'Domestic space and devotion in the middle ages', in Andrew Spicer and Sarah Hamilton, eds., *Defining the holy: sacred space in medieval and early modern Europe* (London, 2006), pp. 27–48; Alexandra Walsham, 'Holy families: the spiritualization of the early modern household revisited', *Studies in Church History*, 50 (2014), pp. 122–60.

The nerve centre of a local English community during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was the parish church. Central events in the lifecycle like baptism, marriage, and funerals were conducted in this space. However, the parish church in this period loomed far larger, acting as a sacred community hub for the congregants, allowing them to worship and socialize through feast days, festivities, and other public events.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, the parish church provides an arena to observe the daily devotional and communal life of English people across the social strata. More specifically, it is a useful lens through which to consider middling and poor women's practices in a public space. The architectural sub-divisions had spatial significance: the sacred seclusion of the chantry, the bustling hub of the nave, or the liminal threshold of the church door. Scholars such as C. Pamela Graves and Andrew Spicer have shown how spatial identity helped form social practice in the medieval and early modern church respectively.<sup>18</sup> Where women positioned themselves in the church space, along with how and where they placed their gifts to the church, can provide insights into their social and devotional dynamics in the parish community.<sup>19</sup> The dynamism of the English parish church space allowed as much room for the newly postpartum mother as the baptized infant in its calendar.

Churching is the best-known public practice associated with childbirth. This was the ceremony during which a new mother was ritually absolved of the taint of childbirth. The new mother left her house with her attendants and midwife, was blessed at the entrance to the church by a priest and led by the hand into the church for mass.<sup>20</sup> She would then take a seat in the churching pew, also known as the childwife or childbed pew. The pew was generally near the altar, on the north side of the church. The presence and placement of a visible piece of childbirth-related furniture in the church space is significant, although often overlooked. The threshold of the church was important for the churching ritual. Led across this boundary by the parish priest, the new mother was welcomed back into the community after a prolonged absence. The procession of the new mother and the birth attendants to the churching pew was likely an impressive spectacle; a group created for domestic childbirth functions asserting its privilege and celebrating its success in the church space.

Women were generally seated on the north-facing side or at the back of the church.<sup>21</sup> The privileged placement of the churching pew near the altar emphasized the importance of using a prominent space in which women

<sup>17</sup> For a more in-depth discussion on the parish church facilitating festivities and local rituals, see Ronald Hutton, *The rise and fall of merry England: the ritual year, 1400–1700* (Oxford, 1994).

<sup>18</sup> C. Pamela Graves, 'Social space in the English medieval parish church', *Economy and Society*, 18 (1989), pp. 297–322; Andrew Spicer, "'God will have a house": defining sacred space and rites of consecration in early seventeenth-century England', in Spicer and Hamilton, eds., *Defining the holy*, pp. 231–50.

<sup>19</sup> Virginia Chieffo Raguin and Sarah Stanbury, eds., *Women's space: patronage, place and gender in the medieval church* (Albany, NY, 2005), p. 6.

<sup>20</sup> For recent summaries on these churching debates, see Adrian Wilson, *Ritual and conflict: the social relations of childbirth in early modern England* (London, 2016), pp. 133–81.

<sup>21</sup> Katherine French, 'The seat under our lady: gender and seating in late medieval English parish churches', in Raguin and Stanbury, eds., *Women's space*, pp. 141–60.

could express their parturiency. These pews appeared in some churchwarden accounts, usually being installed or repaired. Most of them appeared in the mid-sixteenth century, suggesting that, even as the churching debates amongst reformers raged on, the parish community was utilizing new ways to allow the new mother publicly to express her parturiency. A 1511 entry from St Margaret's Westminster's accounts is among the earliest record of pew installation,<sup>22</sup> while St Michael's Spurriergate, York, recorded donations from 'gud wyffes' towards the making of a stall for women to be churched in.<sup>23</sup> Such a fundraising effort was significant; the women of the parish were, quite literally, creating a space for themselves within the church. There also appeared to be some attention paid to the comfort of the new mother in her churching pew. In 1545, the churchwardens of St Laurence in Reading paid 'for mattes upon the Church wifes seate'.<sup>24</sup> Fifty-two years later in the parish of Pitlington in Durham, one John Hardin made a similar mat for 'wyves to knele on when they come to be churched'.<sup>25</sup> These installations of mats for churched women reflected an awareness and concern amongst churchwardens and parish priests about the discomfort of a newly postpartum woman. While post-Reformation strictures had constrained forms of pious giving to the local parish church, resources were still being channelled into making new churching pews, with evidence of these pews being built and used throughout the seventeenth and into the eighteenth century.<sup>26</sup>

We do not know much about the actual appearance of these seats; they probably resembled other church pews. However, there are some surviving fifteenth-century bench end carvings which indicate possible churching functions. For example, the church of the Great Hospital in Norwich, which provided aid to the poor, contains a bench end depicting St Margaret of Antioch, the popular patron saint of childbirth in England. A similar bench end in Ufford's St Mary of the Assumption depicts both Margaret and St Katherine of Alexandria, another powerful saint who provided protection against, amongst other things, sudden death (Figure 1). This bench is at the front of the church, in front of the baptismal font with its well-known elaborate cover. The position of this pew, along with its bench ends depicting figures associated with childbirth devotion, strongly suggests it was a place where a new mother and her attendants sat.

There are other powerful visual symbols of the childbirth experience. Patterns of holy figures and objects associated with childbirth in the parish church indicate spaces where women could find and express a devotion associated with parturiency. It has been previously suggested that the south retable section of the famous fifteenth-century Ranworth rood screen in the

<sup>22</sup> City of Westminster Archives E1, fo. 380, in French, *The good women of the parish*, p. 63.

<sup>23</sup> C. C. Webb, *The churchwardens' accounts of St Michael, Spurriergate, York, 1518-1548* (York, 1997), p. 186.

<sup>24</sup> Joan Dils, *Reading St. Laurence churchwardens' accounts, 1498-1570* (Reading, 2013), p. 56.

<sup>25</sup> See James Barmby, ed., *Churchwardens' accounts of Pitlington and other parishes in the diocese of Durham from A.D. 1580 to 1700* (Durham, 1888), p. 43.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 274; Charles Cotton, 'Churchwardens' accounts of the parish of St Andrew, Canterbury, 1483 to 1625: part V: 1597-1625', *Archaeologia Cantiana*, 34 (1923), pp. 81-122, at p. 103





**Figure 1.** Church pew with bench ends depicting St Margaret and St Katherine, fifteenth century, Ufford, Suffolk, St Mary of the Assumption Church. Image: Britain Express.

Church of St Helen, Norfolk, was created with a concern for safe and successful childbirth and child rearing.<sup>27</sup> It depicts St Margaret of Antioch alongside the three Marys (the Virgin and her sisters Mary Salomé and Mary Cleophas), each holding their children. Along with the powerful intercessor for childbirth, the three Marys represent positive and comforting images of Christian maternity in which the laywomen of the parish could locate their childbearing experience. Iconography and images reflected and cemented hierarchal relations, segregation, and communal identity.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, local wives were charged with much of the maintenance and cleaning of the church nave.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, they had the most direct interaction and familiarity with these holy images and appreciated the significance of specific spaces within the church. It seems plausible that there were pockets of space in the parish church in which women could find imagery that simultaneously reflected their experience, assured them of saintly protection, and celebrated their parturientcy.

Examples similar to the Ranworth rood screen appear across late medieval visual culture. On a screen section in Wiggshall, St Mary the Virgin, in Norfolk, Margaret appears alongside Mary Magdalene (who had notable miracles associated with childbirth and infant death), St Dorothy (the patron saint

<sup>27</sup> Eamon Duffy, 'Holy maydens, holy wyfes: the cult of women saints in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century England', *Studies in Church History*, 27 (1990), pp. 175–96.

<sup>28</sup> Roberta Gilchrist, *Gender and material culture: the archaeology of religious women* (London and New York, NY, 1994), pp. 150–1.

<sup>29</sup> French, *The good women of the parish*.



**Figure 2.** Section of the Houghton St Giles rood screen depicting Elizabeth and John and St Anne teaching the Virgin how to read, fifteenth century, St Giles, Houghton St Giles, Norfolk. Image: Robin Peel.

of midwives), and St Scholastica (associated with the education of children). Another Norfolk screen in Houghton St Giles depicts the three Marys and their children, Elizabeth with her son John the Baptist, Emeria, the mother of Elizabeth and the sister of St Anne, and St Anne teaching a young Virgin Mary how to read (Figure 2).<sup>30</sup> These images of the Holy Kinship were central to late medieval Christian concepts of femininity, but they also stressed the

<sup>30</sup> Other examples of these possible childbirth-related spaces are the wall paintings in St Swithun's in Old Weston, Northamptonshire, which depict St Margaret and St Katherine side by side, or All Saints in Little Wenham, Suffolk, which contains now degraded images of the Virgin and Child, St Margaret, St Katherine, and Mary Magdalene.



importance of lineage through maternity, privileging, and giving space to the devout Christian mother.<sup>31</sup>

The presence of childbirth devotion in the church space was not only visual, but also aural and oral, informing the surrounding visual and spatial childbirth features. The Nativities of Christ, John the Baptist, and the Virgin Mary were read out from the pulpit on their relevant feast days, as well as the lives of childbirth saints, such as St Margaret, St Dorothy, and St Anne. These saints' lives, selected from widely circulated sermon and hagiographical material such as the *Legenda aurea*, *Speculum sacerdotale*, and John Mirk's *Festial*, contributed to the auditory experience. The parish priest frequently led his congregation in prayer for the safe delivery of a fellow parishioner. The 1509 publication of the popular *The lay folks mass book* outlined the typical form for such a prayer: 'we shall pray also for all women that be with chylde in this parysshe or any other, that god conforte them and sende the childe Chistendom and the moder Purificacion of holy chirche and releacynge of peyne in theyr traue-lynge'.<sup>32</sup> A 1526 publication of the English translation of the Sarum Missal included a 'Mass in honour of the glorious Virgin. On behalf of women labouring with child.'<sup>33</sup> In the Sarum Missal, labouring women were grouped with prayers at times of cattle plague, travel, imprisonment, or sea voyages. The 1552 edition of *The book of common prayer* removed mentions of Marian intercession, but still borrowed the same organizing formula from the Sarum Missal: 'That it may please thee to preserue all that trauallye by land or by water, all weomen labouryng of child, all sicke persons and yong children.'<sup>34</sup> Unlike the mass and blessings said during a woman's churching, these prayers were not said before or after, but during, birth. While a woman laboured at home, her fellow parishioners prayed on her and her child's behalf. Such prayers not only included her parturient experience in this public sacred space, but also spoke back to her domestic lying-in space, spiritually aiding and communally supporting the woman while she travailed.<sup>35</sup>

## II

Having established that childbearing women were afforded a public parish arena in which they could express, affirm, and gain support for their

<sup>31</sup> See Kathleen M. Ashley and Pamela Sheingorn, eds., *Interpreting cultural symbols: Saint Anne in late medieval society* (Athens, GA, 1990).

<sup>32</sup> Dan Jeremy and John Lydgate, *The lay folks mass book; or, The manner of hearing mass, with rubrics and devotions for the people, in four texts, and offices in English according to the use of York, from manuscripts of the Xth to the XVth century*, ed. Thomas Frederick Simmons (London, 1879), p. 79.

<sup>33</sup> Frederick E. Warren, trans., *The Sarum Missal in English* (2 vols., London, 1913), II, p. 161.

<sup>34</sup> Joseph Ketley, ed., *The two liturgies: A.D. 1549 and A.D. 1552, with other documents set forth by authority in the reign of King Edward VI* (Cambridge, 1844).

<sup>35</sup> This notion builds on Arnold Hunt's *The art of hearing: English preachers and their audiences, 1590-1640* (Cambridge, 2010), which considers this reciprocal relationship between the preacher and the community, emphasizing public prayer as an affective performance that requires an audience. Here, the audience within the church aids the preacher to speak to congregants who cannot come into the church space.

parturiency, it is appropriate to consider the material culture that moved between these porous domestic and ecclesiastical spaces. A subset of material objects, namely prayer beads, linen sheets, and girdles, created networks of childbirth devotion and practices. While recent scholarship on mobile objects and their female owners has focused on aristocratic women and their luxurious art,<sup>36</sup> these objects were also used by women across the social strata of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century England. Placed in the church space through women's gifts and bequests, they not only functioned as signifiers and memorials of the childbirth experience but were infused with the spiritual benefits afforded from placement in a sacred space. I do not wish to suggest that these objects functioned solely as expressions of childbirth devotion. The piety of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century women is too complex and multifaceted to distil into a single element or motivation. But in donating these personal effects associated with the body, the female owners not only inserted their identity into the church space but also expressed a bodily experience which generally involved parturiency.

Underpinning the analysis of these objects is Roberta Gilchrist's concept of medieval heirlooms,<sup>37</sup> which consider the biographies of objects, based on a theory pioneered by anthropologists Arjun Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff.<sup>38</sup> In this view, when objects are passed through generations and spaces, they accumulate memory, affect, and, sometimes, assume a spiritual power. Both Gilchrist and Ulinka Rublack emphasize that the value of the object is not only accrued through processes of exchange, but through its materiality.<sup>39</sup> The material of a late medieval or early modern object was not incidental to the object form; it was played with, interrogated, and assigned an agency in its possibilities and limitations.<sup>40</sup> While these beads and sheets gained further value in processes of exchange and bequest, they were selected by childbearing women, in part, because of the special material form from which they were composed; materials which were associated with the devotional and healing functions of childbirth.

Prayer beads, or paternosters, were used by most people across the social strata as mnemonic aids to physically count daily prayers and were often individually customized along gender lines for other uses by the owner. Coral, amber, and jet were the most popular materials for women's beads. They

<sup>36</sup> Tracy Chapman Hamilton and Mariah Proctor-Tiffany, 'Women and the circulation of material culture: crossing boundaries and connecting spaces', in Tracy Chapman Hamilton and Mariah Proctor-Tiffany, eds., *Moving women, moving objects (400-1500)* (Leiden, 2019), pp. 1-12.

<sup>37</sup> Roberta Gilchrist, 'The materiality of medieval heirlooms: from biographical to sacred objects', in Hans Peter Hahn and Hadas Weiss, eds., *Mobility, meaning and transformations of things: shifting contexts of material culture through time and space* (Oxford, 2013), pp. 170-82.

<sup>38</sup> Arjun Appadurai, 'Introduction: commodities and the politics of value', in Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The social life of things: commodities in cultural perspective* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 3-63; Igor Kopytoff, 'The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process', in Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The social life of things: commodities in cultural perspective* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 64-91.

<sup>39</sup> Ulinka Rublack, 'Matter in the material Renaissance', *Past & Present*, 219 (2013), pp. 41-85.

<sup>40</sup> Bynum, *Christian materiality*, p. 28; Bynum borrows her characterization of agency from Alfred Gell, *Art and agency: an anthropological theory* (Oxford, 1998).

were also vital lithic curative assistants which women employed during their parturient. According to contemporary obstetrical literature and lapidaries, when coral, amber, or jet was ingested or (more typically) worn, they served as powerful styptics and analgesics in childbirth. Red coral was regarded as one of the most important aids in preventing postpartum haemorrhaging. For example, the widely circulated gynaecological treatise *The sickness of women* recommended applying a plaster made of red coral, gum, vinegar, and rose water below the navel to purify and staunch postpartum bleeding.<sup>41</sup> Amber's lightness rendered the foetus less heavy in the womb, thus soothing the woman's contractions,<sup>42</sup> while jet sped up delayed births.<sup>43</sup> Both amber and coral were spiritually comforting and physically healthful, with long traditions in Europe as talismans that were capable of warding off evil.<sup>44</sup> To a spiritually vulnerable woman enduring Eve's sinful legacy of pain in childbirth, such materials were prized.

Beads are a staple of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century women's wills, with the bequest of 'my [coral, amber, or jet] best beads' to female relatives and friends appearing frequently. But the beads were not only donated to family members; they also adorned a specific holy image or statue of the woman's choosing in her local church. A typical bequest is recorded in 1531, when a Kateryn Robbys of Morebath left to a statue of our Lady 'a pere of bedis of curryll dubbyll gawdyd wt amber'.<sup>45</sup> These types of bequests frequently appear in women's wills and associated parish accounts. Kathleen Kamerick notes that women engaged in this practice more than men and were more likely to donate personal items such as clothing and beads, a phenomenon which Katherine French terms 'the gendered vocabulary of giving'.<sup>46</sup> In dressing these statues with their prayer beads, jewellery, and clothes, women not only generated prayers for their souls but constructed a public devotional identity.

Building on this theory, it can be argued that a combination of specific bead materials and the choice of adorned image could provide evidence of childbirth devotion. For example, churchwarden accounts in St Margaret's Westminster recorded a string of coral beads that was left to the church by a woman on her death in 1510. It instructed that the beads be placed on the church's statue of St Margaret 'everyday or else every haly day as the wardeyns

<sup>41</sup> Beryl Rowland, *Medieval woman's guide to health: the first English gynecological handbook* (London, 1981), p. 84.

<sup>42</sup> Rachel King, "'The beads with which we pray are made from it': devotional ambers in early modern Italy', in Christine Göttler and Wietse de Boer, eds., *Religion and the senses in early modern Europe* (Leiden, 2012), pp. 153–75, at p. 170.

<sup>43</sup> Mary S. Serjeantson and Joan Evans, *English medieval lapidaries* (London, 1933), p. 90.

<sup>44</sup> Joan Evans, *Magical jewels of the middle ages and the Renaissance: particularly in England* (Oxford, 1922), p. 71.

<sup>45</sup> Eamon Duffy, *The voices of Morebath: reformation and rebellion in an English village* (New Haven, CT, 2001), p. 10.

<sup>46</sup> Kathleen Kamerick, *Popular piety and art in the late middle ages: image worship and idolatry in England, 1350–1500* (Basingstoke, 2002), p. 87; French, *The good women of the parish*, p. 41.

of the church see beste'.<sup>47</sup> Margaret's status as the patron saint of childbirth and the statue's adornment with coral beads made it a powerful symbol of parturientcy within the church space for local laywomen. The Virgin Mary, as the mother of Christ and the most powerful intercessor, was the most central holy figure for childbearing women. In 1511, a widow named Joan Harby left a 'pair of gret beide of Corell with gawdes of gold wych wer my sisters Dame Anne Bugges' to the great statue of Our Lady of Lincoln Cathedral.<sup>48</sup> These 'gawdes', or ornamental beads, allowed the wearer to customize their prayer beads according to their individual piety. In 2021, a fifteenth-century gold bead shaped as a bible depicting both St Margaret and St Leonard, another saint closely associated with assisting women in labour, was unearthed in Yorkshire (Figure 3). This gold bead was probably owned by a woman for whom childbirth was a central concern. Such an object shows also how personal these prayer beads were, and the identities and memories that could be forged through their ownership. Bequests between family members tied generations of women by memorializing and validating their experience, thereby creating emotional communities of maternity and childbearing.<sup>49</sup> Harby appeared to be trying to do something similar, affirming the beads as a site of female familial memory, treating Our Lady of Lincoln almost as an extended member of her family and passing on the beads just as her sister passed them to her. Through such an exchange, these bonds of holy friendship were incorporated into the lineage and the biography of an object associated with the domestic family unit and pushing it into a public space.

A striking example is provided by a 1523 will in which one Alice Carre of Norwich left her coral beads to an image of the Virgin Mary in her local church, giving specific instructions that the beads be moved to adorn images of St Margaret, St Katherine, and St Anne on each of their respective feast days.<sup>50</sup> From Carre's will and other similar bequests, these prayer beads were not intended to remain permanently on the statue; the statue, and by extension the church, owned the object. In doing this, women were performing post-mortem acts of charity, as English parish churches routinely lent out donated devotional objects to their parishioners. *The commonplace book of Robert Reynes of Acle*, written in the second half of the fifteenth century, advised the reader on the best use of their time in church, to 'take your beads in hand' and pray to the Virgin Mary. It also instructed that 'when you leave the church, leave the beads where you found them', confirming that communal beads were made available in the church.<sup>51</sup> Such practices appear to have continued well

<sup>47</sup> City of Westminster Archives SMW/E/1/1, fo. 386, in French, *The good women of the parish*, p. 252.

<sup>48</sup> C. W. Foster, *Lincoln wills, 1: 1271–1526* (London, 1914), pp. 44–6.

<sup>49</sup> Katherine L. French, 'The material culture of childbirth in late medieval London and its suburbs', *Journal of Women's History*, 28 (2016), pp. 126–48, at p. 136.

<sup>50</sup> Francis Blomefield, *An essay towards a topographical history of the county of Norfolk, IV: The history of the city and county of Norwich, part II* (London, 1806), p. 145.

<sup>51</sup> John Raymond Shinnars, *Medieval popular religion, 1000–1500: a reader* (Peterborough, ON, 1999), p. 369, in Gilchrist, 'The materiality of medieval heirlooms', p. 177.



**Figure 3.** Gold bead depicting St Leonard and St Margaret, fifteenth century, found in Yorkshire, England, in November 2021. Image: Max Wilcox, Bournemouth News & Picture Service.

into the seventeenth century. John Bargrave, a canon of Canterbury Cathedral, noted that an eaglestone belonging to the cathedral was transported by his wife Frances to local labouring women and it was ‘so useful that my wife can seldom keep it’.<sup>52</sup> The eaglestone, generally worn around the neck or thigh to prevent miscarriage and hasten delivery, was a well-known protective talisman in parturient women since antiquity and a regular feature of medieval lapidaries.

Therefore, it seems likely that coral, amber, or jet beads imbued with the proximal power of the Virgin Mary or St Margaret were borrowed by parturient women in their time of need. The parish church was not simply a makeshift storehouse for these objects, but an active agent and mediator. Coral, amber, and jet were understood to be particularly porous minerals. Italian labouring women were advised to drink wine in which an amber rosary had sat for some time,<sup>53</sup> while the English lapidaries advised that drinking the water in which jet soaked overnight would hasten delivery.<sup>54</sup> These minerals were also naturally linked as paternosters to the repeated prayers that they aided. In placing these porous materials in the church space, they were

<sup>52</sup> John Bargrave, *Pope Alexander the Seventh and the College of Cardinals, with a catalog of Dr. Bargrave’s Museum* (London, 1867), p. 125, in Mary Fissell, ‘The politics of reproduction in the English Reformation’, *Representations*, 87 (2004), p. 43.

<sup>53</sup> King, ‘“The beads with which we pray are made from it”: devotional ambers in early modern Italy’, p. 170.

<sup>54</sup> Serjeantson and Evans, *English medieval lapidaries*, p. 90.



surrounded by the continual sound of prayer.<sup>55</sup> This sound, coupled with an infusion of incense and the placement of the beads on a holy figure, rendered them powerful objects in the eyes of parishioners. They became charged objects, female devotional heirlooms that were materially activated and animated through their placement in the church and available to be transported back to the lying-in space as protective childbirth aids.

Linen, a ubiquitous fabric in the childbirth experience, was bequeathed by women to their local parish.<sup>56</sup> This was the material of the sheet that covered the woman's body, the towels that mopped her brow, and the cloth that swaddled her new-born, and thus was central to the woman's emotional experience of parturiency. Changing the linen, the 'upsitting' stage of lying-in, signified a time of celebration, visitation, and escape from the immediate dangers of childbirth. It was also an important ingredient in some obstetrical recipes, usually used as a binding agent or bag for pessaries aiding in post-partum uterine pain relief.<sup>57</sup> If these remedies did not work and a woman died in childbirth, linen sheets were used as her shroud. In cases of extreme poverty, these could be donated. In stark contrast to Dorothy Lawrence's donation of childbed linen to poor women, churchwardens' accounts of Stratton in Cornwall record the payment for 'iiij yerds of linclthe to shrewde a poore woman that dyed' as well as 'a shrewde for the childe'.<sup>58</sup>

With similar intent to prayer bead bequests, linen donations to a local church appear to have been an effort to highlight and commemorate the domestic achievements of a wife and mother in a public sacred space. Sometimes the bequests stipulated shared ownership between a person and the church; for example, Joan Pernaunt left to her friend her 'best coverlet under the condition that she shall lend it or cause it to be lent to the said church of All Hallows yearly at the feast of All Hallows'.<sup>59</sup> Women also contributed their textiles to the churching ceremony. One Alice Joye of St Werburgh's at Hoo in Kent donated a cloth 'to laye before women whan they be purified wt the picture of the purificacion of our ladie'.<sup>60</sup> These gifts to churching women allowed the testators to participate in these ceremonies posthumously; they publicly asserted their interest in the spiritual well-being of their childbearing neighbours, thus creating an emotional community of parturiency.

As with all gifts and bequests to a local church, there was an implicit expectation that such objects and the acts of charity they engendered were a means

<sup>55</sup> C. M. Woolgar, 'What makes things holy? The senses and material culture in the later middle ages', in Robin Macdonald, Emilie K. M. Murphy, and Elizabeth L. Swann, eds., *Sensing the sacred in medieval and early modern culture* (London, 2018), pp. 60–78.

<sup>56</sup> Nicola Lowe has demonstrated how women used bequests and mending of textiles to highlight their devotion in the church space: 'Women's devotional bequests of textiles in the late medieval English parish church, c. 1350–1550', *Gender & History*, 22 (2010), pp. 407–29.

<sup>57</sup> Eucharius Rösslin and Thomas Raynalde, *The birth of mankind*, ed. Elaine Hobby (Farnham, 2009), p. 133.

<sup>58</sup> Joanna Mattingly, ed., *Stratton churchwardens' accounts, 1512–1578* (Exeter, 2018), p. 185.

<sup>59</sup> Lowe, 'Women's devotional bequests of textiles', p. 415.

<sup>60</sup> Leland L. Duncan, ed., *Testamenta cantiana: a series of extracts from fifteenth and sixteenth century wills relating to church building and topography. West Kent and East Kent* (London, 1906), pp. 39–40.

to generate prayer for the donor. In her bequest of bed linen to poor childbearing women, Dorothy Lawrence, through her sheets and pillows, was remembered by her community and able to assist in lying-in events after her death. Like Alice Carre and her coral beads, Lawrence sought to create a circulation of childbirth objects which were not enclosed in a domestic space but publicly affirmed and generating a wider reach for prayer on her behalf. Therefore, some of the most powerful aids in birth were provided by the community's dead, potentially transforming the lying-in space into a site of memory and prayer for the donor's soul.<sup>61</sup> The childbed could easily become a woman's deathbed. Women of this period were all too aware of the close relationship between birth and death and these bequests tied generations of parturient bodies together, memorializing their experiences.

Like coral, amber, and jet, linen was considered to be a porous material and a powerful conduit through which holiness could be transmitted. Gregory of Tours, in his account of pilgrimage to St Peter's tomb, recorded the practice of placing cloth directly on the tomb for a night to gain blessings or healing from the saint.<sup>62</sup> The cloth was then removed and weighed and, infused with grace, found to be heavier. While linen sheets could soak up the various fluids of parturient, the absorptive properties of linen extended beyond the commonplace and the material was considered an ideal conduit for 'holy radioactivity'.<sup>63</sup> Linen was also the material of the chrisom cloth, a particularly important piece of fabric that was laid on the forehead of new-borns when they were anointed with the chrisom oil during baptism. When the newly baptized child was brought home, the church warned of the importance of returning the chrisom cloth. A 1549 prayer rubric advised godparents at the baptism to communicate the warning to new mothers: 'The Minister shall command that the Chrisoms be brought to the church and delivered to the Priests.'<sup>64</sup> This anxiety around the retention of the chrisom cloth was heightened in cases of emergency baptisms. If a newly born baby was in danger of dying, a baptism was quickly performed, usually by the midwife. In York, St Michael Le Belfry's register paid close attention to these births, with at least twenty-seven recorded between 1571 and 1585.<sup>65</sup> Bishop Nicholas Shaxton, in his 1538 injunction to midwives, advised the priest to 'instruct his parishioners, and especially the midwives...to have a vessel of clean water ready'.<sup>66</sup> These vessels were donated by women to their parish churches to be lent out for home baptisms. Agnes Wyngar of St Mary Woolchurch donated a basin and

<sup>61</sup> Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass, *Renaissance clothing and the materials of memory* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 14, evocatively refers to such bequests of clothes as 'material forms of haunting'.

<sup>62</sup> Raymond Van Dam, ed., *Gregory of Tours: glory of the martyrs* (Liverpool, 1988), p. 25.

<sup>63</sup> The phrase 'holy radioactivity', referring to the sacred power emanating from a holy object, is borrowed from Ronald C. Finucane, *Miracles and pilgrims: popular beliefs in medieval England* (London, 1977), p. 26.

<sup>64</sup> Ketley, ed., *The two liturgies: A.D. 1549 and A.D. 1552*, p. 113.

<sup>65</sup> Francis Collins, ed., *The registers of St. Michael Le Belfry, York*, I (Leeds, 1899).

<sup>66</sup> Walter Howard Frere, *Visitation articles and injunctions of the period of the Reformation*, II: 1536-1558 (London, 1910), p. 58.

ewer of silver parcel gilt, noting that it could be used in 'further christening'.<sup>67</sup> This suggests that the object had previously been used for emergency baptisms in the home. During an emergency baptism, a piece of linen, which was probably part of the childbed collection, was anointed with chrism. This would have left a visible and lasting stain on the cloth. By infusing this profane childbed linen with a blessing and holy oil, the chrism cloth became the most powerful sacred object inside a domestic space. Ecclesiastical authorities emphasized the importance of transporting this makeshift chrism cloth to the local parish church as soon as possible, fearing that cloths retained in the domestic space might be defiled or used for less than holy purposes.<sup>68</sup> Once mundane linen came into contact with a sacramental substance, the church was less amenable to the free circular exchange of objects between the domestic and ecclesiastic space.

### III

A key theme that emerges in the circular transmission of beads and linen is mobility, and the shifting significance of these objects as they are transported through space and time. This theme becomes even more apparent in childbirth pilgrimage and relic culture, moving beyond the confines of the local parish to the surrounding religious houses. Pregnant and postpartum women went on pilgrimage to sites such as Walsingham in Norfolk, prized for a relic of the Virgin's breastmilk which was said to help with reproductive problems.<sup>69</sup> A labouring woman who was unable to go on pilgrimage could also be helped by pilgrim badges or ampullae containing holy water and a drop of the Virgin's milk which were brought back to her. These objects functioned as secondary relics, 'efficacious simulacra of the potent experience of the pilgrim'.<sup>70</sup> Much like beads and linen, they were infused with power of the sacred space and could transmit their spiritual and healing benefits into the home. If used for childbirth purposes, these souvenirs belonged to a wider relic cult in England which reached its peak in the late fifteenth century. Walsingham was not alone in possessing a relic to aid women in their parturiency. Visitation returns, produced mainly in the spring of 1536 during the Dissolution of the Monasteries, documented a wide range of seized relics purporting to help women in childbed.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>67</sup> French, 'The material culture of childbirth', p. 138.

<sup>68</sup> Sophie Oosterwijk, 'Swaddled or shrouded?: the interpretation of "Chrysom" effigies on late medieval tomb monuments', in Kathryn M. Rudy and Barbara Baert, eds., *Weaving, veiling, and dressing: textiles and their metaphors in the late middle ages* (Turnhout, 2007), pp. 307–48.

<sup>69</sup> Susan Signe Morrison, *Women pilgrims in late medieval England: private piety as public performance* (London and New York, NY, 2000).

<sup>70</sup> Cynthia Hahn, 'Loca sancta souvenirs: sealing the pilgrim's experience', in Robert Ousterhout, ed., *The blessings of pilgrimage* (Urbana, IL, 1990), pp. 85–96, at p. 93.

<sup>71</sup> Corporeal relics such as Leiston Abbey's finger of St Stephen and Syningthwaite Priory's arm of St Margaret were both 'lent to lying-in women', while non-corporeal relics like St Mary Darby's shift of Thomas Becket and Durham Priory's cross of St Margaret were also noted specifically as childbirth relics. James Gairdner, ed., *Letters and papers, foreign and domestic, Henry VIII, X:*

Girdles, belting pieces integral to late medieval dress, were among the most prominent relics recorded in these returns. Like linen and prayer beads, girdles were part of the armoury of domestic medicine employed by women during their parturientcy. They were commonly used to help anchor a woman to her birthing stool, or as leverage for a squatting position. Contemporary medical treatises also advocated the wearing of girdles during labour, tying a girdle directly under the breasts to help reposition a foetus in the breech position or stimulating breastmilk production.<sup>72</sup> The *Trotula*, a well-known twelfth-century Salernian gynaecological work which was used in England until the sixteenth century, advised birth attendants to tie a girdle made of snakeskin around the labouring woman's stomach to facilitate a delayed birth.<sup>73</sup>

Girdle relics were generally associated with the Virgin Mary, who was said to have dropped her girdle to Doubting Thomas, thus providing him with proof of her Assumption. Throughout Europe, relics of the Virgin's girdles were valued highly as childbirth aids.<sup>74</sup> The most famous English girdle relic, held by Westminster Abbey, was extremely popular judging by the number of extant badges and rings bearing its image. It was lent out for only the highest status childbirth events in England, used by Henry III's queen, Eleanor of Provence, and was probably the girdle noted in Elizabeth of York's 1502 expenses before her last confinement.<sup>75</sup> The priories of Haltemprice, Kirkham, Calder, and Conised all held the Virgin's girdles purported to aid in childbirth.

While it seems likely that only elite women could use a girdle relic, there is evidence of the construction of makeshift holy girdles at the local parish level. As with previous examples of prayer beads and linen, women donated their girdles to local holy images, infusing the material of the donated object with the sacred power afforded by church surroundings. In wrapping girdles around representations of Mary, they became the Virgin's girdles, with all of the associated childbirth benefits. Numerous instances of these girdle bequests appear in wills and parish accounts. In 1527, a Somerset woman named Joanne Champneys left 'a girdle of blue velvet with silver and gilt' to a statue of Mary.<sup>76</sup> A statue of Mary in the Holy Trinity Church in Long Melford, was

January-June 1536 (London, 1887), pp. 135-60, *British History*, [www.british-history.ac.uk/letters-papers-hen8/vol10/pp135-160](http://www.british-history.ac.uk/letters-papers-hen8/vol10/pp135-160).

<sup>72</sup> Alexandra Barratt, *The knowing of woman's kind in childing: a Middle English version of material derived from the Trotula and other sources* (Turnhout, 2001).

<sup>73</sup> Monica H. Green, *The Trotula: an English translation of the medieval compendium of women's medicine* (Philadelphia, PA, 2002), p. 102.

<sup>74</sup> The girdles discussed here are dress girdles and are different to the textual birth girdles in the form of prayer rolls which are beyond the scope of this article. See Mary Morse, "'Thys moche more ys oure Lady Mary Longe': Takamiya MS 56 and the English birth girdle tradition', in Simon Horobin and Linne R. Mooney, eds., *Middle English texts in transition: a festschrift dedicated to Toshiyuki Takamiya on his 70th birthday* (Woodbridge, 2014), pp. 199-219.

<sup>75</sup> Mary Morse, "'Girde hyr wythe thys mesure": birth girdles, the church, and Lollards', in Costanza Gislon Dopfel, Alessandra Foscati, and Charles Burnett, eds., *Pregnancy and childbirth in the premodern world: European and Middle Eastern cultures, from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance* (Turnhout, 2019), pp. 135-70, at p. 136.

<sup>76</sup> Frederic William Weaver, ed., *Somerset medieval wills, II: 1501-1530* (London, 1903), p. 262.

presented with a fine silver and green girdle from one Madam Broke in 1460. In the same year, a 'Madam Tye' left the same statue a red girdle with a cross on it. A 1529 parish record list noted that these girdles were missing, perhaps never returned from a loan.<sup>77</sup> Women could enjoy the benefits of a mobile relic girdle by taking part in this custom, gifting their own girdles to a sacred public space and thus transforming them into powerful childbirth aids.

#### IV

This emphasis on the giving of prayer beads and linen sheets to local churches and relic cults of healing raises questions around the status of such practices during the Reformation. Henry VIII's reformer bishops destroyed the girdle relics in the early stages of the Dissolution of the Monasteries. For example, Dr Richard Layton, in his 1536 correspondence with Thomas Cromwell, stated that he sent back a seized 'our Ladie's girdle of Bruton, red silk; which is a solemn relick, sent to women travailing, which shall not miscarry *in partu*'.<sup>78</sup> Pious bequests and gift-giving had all but ceased due to the parochial strictures of Edward VI's reign.<sup>79</sup> Some scholars have used such events to argue that there was a clear division between the spiritual comfort of late medieval women's devotional childbirth and the suffering of post-Reformation women condemned in their parturiency to the sins of Eve.<sup>80</sup> This view is challenged by my examination of late sixteenth-century churching pews, childbirth prayers, and emergency baptisms, which suggests that these late medieval practices continued through the ways in which women integrated the childbirth experience in both the church and domestic space.

Reformation scholars such as Alexandra Walsham have recently utilized the concept of recycling to reframe the fate of objects subject to iconoclasm and stripped from local churches. The girdles, beads, and linen were small, inconsequential, and common items due to their domestic origins and, for Protestants, fell into the category of *adiaphora*, or 'things indifferent'.<sup>81</sup> As *adiaphora*, they could be legitimately reconfigured by Protestant parishioners.<sup>82</sup> Joe Moshenska, reflecting on the phenomenon of iconoclastic conversions of holy objects into playthings for children, posits a tension between two possible

<sup>77</sup> William Parker, *The history of Long Melford* (London, 1873), pp. 94–5.

<sup>78</sup> John Strype, *Ecclesiastical memorials*, I (London, 1816), p. 405. Other non-Marian girdles purported to help in childbirth included those held by St Bernard's in Mewse, St Robert's in Newminster, St Francis's in Gracedieu, St Aelred's in Rievalux, St Werburga's in Chester and 'St' Thomas, duke of Lancaster, in Pontefract.

<sup>79</sup> Eamon Duffy, 'The end of it all: the material culture of the medieval English parish and the 1552 inventories of church goods', in Eamon Duffy and Clive Burgess, eds., *The parish in late medieval England: proceedings of the 2002 Harlaxton Symposium* (Donington, 2006), pp. 381–99.

<sup>80</sup> Fissell, 'The politics of reproduction', p. 73.

<sup>81</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, 'Are things "indifferent"? How objects change our understanding of religious history', *German History*, 34 (2016), pp. 88–112.

<sup>82</sup> Alexandra Walsham, 'Recycling the sacred: material culture and cultural memory after the English Reformation', *Church History*, 86 (2017), pp. 1121–54, at p. 1121.



intentions of this practice.<sup>83</sup> It could have been intended to make an object trivial, to tame it of its power, or to simply keep it available by absorbing it into the fabric of the household. Moshenska's examples, limbless Christ figurines and wooden doves that had never left the church space, were certainly objects that demand such a debate. However, considering the domestic origins of women's prayer beads, linen, and girdles, their return into the household by Protestant parishioners was not so much an incidental absorption but a process of intentional re-absorption.

These acts of sacred recycling privilege the materiality of the object. While prayer beads were no longer valued as paternosters, they were still made from coral, amber, and jet, lithic materials which continued to retain curative properties for parturiency throughout the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The beads, now 'heirloom rosaries',<sup>84</sup> were passed down as pieces of jewellery instead. This seems to be supported by will evidence, where the far scarcer references to beads usually place them alongside other pieces of jewellery. In 1569, the Durham widow Elizabeth Claxton left to her goddaughter a 'paire of curell beads wth a hart of golde at them' along with other jewellery pieces.<sup>85</sup> The addition of the gold heart, something that would not be present in an orthodox pre-Reformation paternoster, indicates that the beads had been modified. But, as in the past, these redefined coral beads were passed down to female family members. They remain infused with dynastic and sentimental significance as material mnemonics.<sup>86</sup> As objects, they held the memories of successful childbirth events, thriving babies and surviving mothers, providing evidence of a familiar emotional community. Their familial emotional weight persisted; therefore, the loss of their paternoster significance did not compromise these beads as possible sites of parturient memory and childbirth functions.

Linen also retained many of its associations with purity and cleanliness post-Reformation. The relationship between fabric and gynaecological issues could be found by Protestants in scripture through the account of a woman with an 'issue of blood' being immediately cured after touching the hem of Christ's robe. Church linen, more than most other seized objects, was reincorporated into the domestic fabric of the household. Parish accounts recorded how vestments, altar clothes, and various donated sheets were transformed into a wide assortment of objects. In 1565 in the parish of Pickworth, the wife of Thomas Lambson bought two towels from the church and put them to 'profane vse', indicating that she had incorporated these fabrics into her

<sup>83</sup> Joe Moshenska, *Iconoclasm as child's play* (Stanford, CA, 2019).

<sup>84</sup> Rachel King, 'The reformation of the rosary bead: Protestantism and the perpetuation of the Amber Pater Noster', in Suzanna Ivanic, Mary Laven, and Andrew Morrall, eds., *Religious materiality in the early modern world* (Amsterdam, 2019), pp. 193–210, at p. 198.

<sup>85</sup> James Raine et al., eds., *Wills and inventories illustrative of the history, manners, language, statistics: &c., of the northern counties of England, from the eleventh century downwards: part 2* (London, 1835), p. 311.

<sup>86</sup> Jones and Stallybrass discuss worn things as having an animating power and holding material memories for their subjects in *Renaissance clothing and the materials of memory*, particularly pp. 245–68.

everyday household stock.<sup>87</sup> Two linen sheets in the parish of Burton were cut into pieces and distributed to three poor women, while a 'crosse cloth' in Croxby was sold cheaply to a poor woman in 1566.<sup>88</sup> They were also sometimes modified into clothing; in 1565, the wife of Robert Bellamy created a stomacher and a purse out of the vestments bought from the parish church at Braunton.<sup>89</sup> The stomacher, or small piece of fabric worn as a panel on the front of gowns, was an item of women's clothing that was constantly being altered and remade due to pregnancy. This recycling of vestments into stomachers seems to have been a common phenomenon, with another woman recorded as buying a pillow which had lain on the altar of the parish church of Ownedbie, Lincolnshire, to make herself a stomacher.<sup>90</sup> These materials were literally shaping the childbearing body.

Girdles also continued to be important devotional props in post-Reformation England.<sup>91</sup> While they no longer had particular devotional Marian significances, they remained sites of memory for female relatives, still used to assert a feminine identity and as part of the array of curative assistance employed in the lying-in space. In order to illustrate her assertion of the break between pre- and post-Reformation childbirth practices, Mary Fissell notes, in a reference to Thomas Lupton's 1579 *Book of a thousand things*, that 'girdles of the Virgin were replaced by snake skins'.<sup>92</sup> However, this snake-skin remedy was not a late sixteenth-century invention. As we have seen, the snakeskin girdle of the twelfth-century *Trotula* appeared continuously in different adaptations throughout the middle ages until the early sixteenth century. This example illustrates that even in what appears to be a sharp break between pre- and post-Reformation childbirth practices and a strong current of change, there were tendrils of continuity as childbirth objects were used and reused in various forms and fashions. There was an affective weight to these recycled objects;<sup>93</sup> they were still both sites of comfort and tools for remembering and reimagining parturient experience. Women were aware of both the household origin of these beads, linen, and girdles, and their placement in a public sacred space. In this act of recycling, childbearing women were still taking part in the circular exchange of objects between the domestic and the ecclesiastic, still asserting their parturientcy through the adaptation and use of significant materials.

<sup>87</sup> Edward Peacock, *English church furniture, ornaments and decorations at the period of the Reformation, as exhibited in a list of the goods destroyed in certain Lincolnshire churches, A.D. 1566* (London, 1866), p. 123.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 50, 65.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>91</sup> See Tara Hamling, 'Old Robert's girdle: visual and material props for Protestant piety in Post-Reformation England', in Alec Ryrie and Jessica Martin, eds., *Private and domestic devotion in early modern Britain* (Farnham, 2012), pp. 135–64.

<sup>92</sup> Fissell, 'The politics of reproduction', p. 74.

<sup>93</sup> Alexandra Walsham, 'Domesticating the Reformation: material culture, memory, and confessional identity in early modern England', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 69 (2016), pp. 566–616, at p. 574.

## V

The patchwork of evidence brought together in this article offers only a brief glimpse of the complex devotional practices associated with childbirth in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century England. However, these fragments suggest that childbirth was not an entirely closed and domestic affair. Childbearing women engaged with, and were accommodated in, the parish church space. Through features like churching pews, rood screens, and public childbirth prayers, women were afforded public spaces which reflected their experience, assured them of saintly protection, and celebrated their parturiency.

Within these spaces were a group of highly mobile objects: prayer beads, linen, and girdles. Their transmission challenges the notion of a binary divide between the private and the public. These objects were primary material markers for fifteenth- and sixteenth-century English female devotion across the social strata, gifted to a space to highlight and memorialize their identities. However, the materiality of these objects also afforded them special significance as curative aids in parturiency. Imbued with the power afforded by their proximity to sacred spaces, as well the parturient memories of their previous owners, they could be lent back into the parishes as aids to local parturient women. This circular exchange of objects seems even more apparent when situated alongside highly mobile relic girdles which were routinely lent out to labouring women. In both local churches and surrounding monasteries, public childbirth devotional networks were constructed, creating highly visible customs outside the lying-in space.

These networks and customs were significantly affected by the Reformation. The Virgin Mary was stripped of her intercessory powers, swathes of childbirth relics were destroyed, and the circular passage of objects was interrupted by royal strictures on gift-giving and bequests to local churches. But through acts of recycling at the local parish church level, there were narratives of the survival and adaptation of these small and common childbirth objects. While childbirth devotion was inevitably transformed by the Reformation, this did not lead to an outright destruction of traditional practices. Women were still afforded a space in their churches to express their parturiency and used, and reused, a range of childbirth objects infused with curative functions and parturient memories.

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