



Women's Voices in Tudor Wills, 1485-1603: Authority, Influence and Material Culture

Susan E. James

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Contributing an original dimension to the significant body of published scholarship on women in 16th-century England, this study examines the largest corpus of women's private writings available to historians: their wills. In these, female voices speak out, commenting on their daily lives, on identity, gender, status, familial relationships and social engagement. Wills show women to have been active participants in a civil society, well aware of their personal authority and potential influence, whose committed actions during life and charitable strategies after death could and did impact the health of that society. From an intensive analysis of more than 1200 wills, this pioneering work focuses on women from all parts of the country and all strata of society, revealing an entire population of articulate, opportunistic, and capable individuals who found the spaces between the lines of the law and used those spaces to achieve personal goals. Author Susan James demonstrates how wills describe strategies for end-of-life care, create platforms of remembrance, and offer insights into the myriad occupational endeavors in which women were engaged. James illuminates how these documents were not simply instruments of bequest and inheritance, but were statements of power and control, catalogues of material culture from which we are able to gauge a woman's understanding of her own reality and the context that formed her environment. Wills were tools and the way in which women wielded these tools offers new ways to look at England in the 16th century and reveals the seminal role women played in its development.

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