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English Medieval Probate Inventories

The Potential of Narratological Approaches

Abstract: Taking English medieval probate inventories as a case study this article introduces a methodological approach to inventories adapted from the narratological frameworks of Gérard Genette. Using this novel methodology this study explores how we might identify narrative elements within inventories and in so doing better our understanding of the objects and spaces of late medieval houses. It outlines how legal frameworks, the inventorying genre, and the organizational techniques of individual appraisers contributed to processes of narrativization. Moreover, it demonstrates how in praxis this narratological approach can recover traces of hidden objects, spaces, and the movement of appraisers, which have been preserved within the text of these documents. Finally, it highlights the potential of this methodology to be adapted in future work in order to examine systems of classification employed by appraisers, or the contexts of production for inventory corpora.

Key Words: narratology, material culture, household objects, domestic spaces, medieval inventories, narratives

Introduction

During the later Middle Ages, the number of inventories produced across Europe increased in both abundance and variety. Inventories of household goods were made in response to a myriad of legal contexts including the seizure of goods for insolvency or criminal offences, on the occasion of a marriage, or as a post-mortem inventory to document the division of an estate following a death.[1] These texts are invaluable

sources for material culture; however, it has long been acknowledged that this information is not perfectly recorded. Inventories occupy a liminal textual space where, to quote Giorgio Riello, they are "neither uncontaminated records of an objective reality, nor simply literary manifestations divorced from materiality".[2] The need to recognize and separate narrative elements from the historical information contained within inventories has underpinned methodological approaches to these texts over the last half century. Each geographic region, administrative framework, or inventory type had its own production context which shaped the form, content, and scope of these texts and their narrative elements. As a result, most inventory studies by necessity focus on discrete inventory corpora.[3] This study will also focus on one specific form of these texts; probate inventories from late fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England. This genre of inventory will serve as a pilot for a new methodological approach drawn from the narratological frameworks of Gérard Genette. The narratological approach to inventories introduced here offers a portable methodology which reconceptualizes the narrative elements in inventories from being problematic to being assets worthy of study.

In medieval England probate inventories were created following the death of a head of household to document and value the moveable goods and debts of the deceased. These inventories form part of a textual corpus, alongside grants of probate or administration, wills and testaments, probate accounts, and associated court records, which facilitated the transmission of wealth and property from the deceased to their beneficiaries and creditors. Probate was primarily administered by the Church through a network of diocesan and ecclesiastical courts.[4] Under this system the Archbishoprics of York and Canterbury enjoyed prerogative rights to administer the probate of any testator with goods in more than one diocese and it is from the records of their Prerogative Courts which the majority of extant medie-

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Morreale (eds.), The Documentary Archaeology of Late Medieval Europe, 2020, https://dalme.org (12 April 2021). Provides an overview and examples of the range of extant inventories from this period.

2   Giorgio Riello, Things Seen and Unseen, in: Paula Findlen (ed.), Early Modern Things. Objects and Their Histories 1500–1800, London 2012, 125–150, 125–127.

3   See for instance, Henri Bresc/Geneviève Bresc-Bautier, Une Maison de Mots. Inventaires de Maisons, de Boutiques, d'Ateliers et de Châteaux de Sicile XIIIe–XVe Siècles, 6 vols. Palermo 2014, which focuses on Sicilian inventories; Françoise Piponnier, Inventaires Bourguignons (XIVe–XVe Siècles), in: Ad Van Der Woude/Anton Schuurman (eds.), Probate Inventories. A New Source for the Historical Study of Wealth, Material Culture, and Agricultural Development, Utrecht 1980, 127–139, which explores inventories from Dijon; and Daniel Smail, Legal Plunder. Households and Debt Collection in Late Medieval Europe, Cambridge 2016, which employs inventories from Lucca and Marseilles.

4   Tom Arkell, The Probate Process, in: Tom Arkell/Nesta Evans/Nigel Goose (eds.), When Death Do Us Part. Understanding and Interpreting the Probate Records of Early Modern England, Oxford 2004, 3–13.

val probate inventories originate from.[5] There is a small cluster of fifteenth-century inventories, many from the Prerogative Court of York, which are now held by the Borthwick Institute for Archives and York Minster Library.[6] A larger run of a few hundred inventories registered under the Prerogative Court of Canterbury, primarily dating from the close of the fifteenth century, are now held in The National Archives and Lambeth Palace Library.[7] The peculiarities of these prerogative jurisdictions in the later Middle Ages have resulted in a wide degree of variance in the probate inventories produced within them. Whilst these inventories pertain overwhelmingly to wealthy elites, there is a great range in both the social statuses of the deceased and the amount of property which they owned. As a result, this corpus includes such disparate examples as the inventory of Henry Bowet, Archbishop of York, with goods valued at £1,842 alongside the inventory of widow Emmota Cowper with goods valuing just over £1, or the inventory of leatherseller John Skyrwyth containing thousands of entries recorded over twenty one folios juxtaposed with the inventory of squire John Teryngham with just twenty entries recorded on one small piece of parchment.[8] Despite this variance, English probate inventories are a recognizable genre of inventory with common features and constraints.[9] Firstly, the jurisdiction of the ecclesiastical courts meant that these inventories were only concerned with moveable objects, including household goods and utensils, crops and livestock, merchandise and debts: they do not include land, buildings, or fixtures.[10] Secondly, probate inventories conform to a standard structure. They begin with a preamble which names the deceased, their occupation and location, the names and occupations of the appraisers, and the date the inventory was made. The goods, chattels, and debts

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5   Irene Churchill, Canterbury Administration. The Administrative Machinery of the Archbishopric of Canterbury, vol. 1, London 1933, 380–412.

6   Philip Stell, The Probate Inventories of the York Diocese 1350–1500, York 2006. York's Borthwick Institute for Archives (hereafter BI) houses around 50 inventories dating from 1399–1500. York Minster Library (hereafter YML) has 21 probate inventories which have been securely dated between 1395–1500. The 1456 inventory of William Atkynson suggests that these inventories may previously have been part of one archival deposit. The first folio of this inventory is now held by the BI (D/C, Orig. Wills, INV William Atkynson 1456) whereas the second folio is held by YML (CY/ZC/L/1/17/1).

7   The National Archives, London, (hereafter TNA) has the largest number, with around 200 inventories dating from 1417–1500 in the PROB 2 series. London's Lambeth Palace Library (hereafter LPL) has just six probate inventories, but the scribal hands and named appraisers suggest that they were previously part of the same run of inventories now housed in TNA.

8   YML CY/ZC/L/1/17/2; YML CY/ZC/L/1/17/25; TNA PROB 2/15; TNA PROB 2/13.

9   Chris Briggs/Alice Forward/Ben Jervis/Matthew Tompkins, People, Possessions and Domestic Space in the Late Medieval Escheators' Records, in: Journal of Medieval History 45/2 (2019), 145–161, 148. Briggs/Forward/Jervis/Tompkins identify a trifecta of medieval English household inventory genres: inventories of goods belonging to felons seized by royal officials, inventories produced by manorial courts in response to intestacy or seizure, and probate inventories.

10 John Moore, Probate Inventories. Problems and Prospects, in: Philip Riden (ed.), Probate Records and the Local Community, Gloucester 1985, 11–28, 12.

of the deceased are then listed and assigned values. In all but the smallest inventories objects are organized under locative headings relating to a property, individual room, or out-building, and may further be arranged into sections corresponding to types of goods such as crops or clothing. Most conclude by listing the outgoing expenses of the estate with debts owed to creditors and funeral costs. This shared context of production and common narrative structure makes English medieval probate inventories an ideal sample in which to pilot a narratological methodology.

Aside from a handful of notable studies of medieval material culture, English probate inventories are most frequently encountered in the historiography of early modern consumption.[11] Probate inventories were produced throughout the Middle Ages; however, a 1529 Act of Henry VIII concerned with the regulation of charges for probate often functions as the starting point for much of the scholarship concerning these documents.[12] This Act mandated the creation of inventories for testators with notable goods and so from 1529 onwards the number of surviving inventories significantly increases, with over one million probate inventories in English archives from the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries.[13] The use of probate inventories in English scholarship has resultantly been driven primarily by the preoccupations and interests of early modern historians. Studies using inventory evidence have ranged from the development of vernacular architecture, through the ownership of goods by different social groups, to identifying changing agricultural practices and calculating crop yields.[14] The scale of archival survival for the early modern period has also shaped the development of methodological approaches to inventories. The volume and geographical coverage of the extant material has permitted several large-scale quantitative studies which have significantly advanced our understanding of consumption patterns in pre-industrial England.[15] The very success of this scholarship has, until recently, crystallized methodological approaches to inventories.[16] As a result, many scholars have characterized probate inventories, to quote Overton et al.,

11 See P. J. P. Goldberg, The Fashioning of Bourgeois Domesticity in Later Medieval England. A Material Culture Perspective, in: P. J. P. Goldberg/Maryanne Kowaleski (eds.), Home, Housing and Household in Medieval England, Cambridge 2008, 124–144; Ben Jervis, Pottery and Social Life in Medieval England. Towards a Relational Approach, Oxford 2014, 33–48.

12 Nancy Cox/Jeff Cox, Probate Inventories. The Legal Background Part I, in: Local Historian 16/3 (1984), 133–145, 133; Statute 21 Henry VIII., c.5, in: Statutes of the Realm, vol. 3, London 1817, 285.

13 Moore, Inventories, 1985, 16–17.

14 Tom Arkell, Interpreting Probate Inventories, in: Arkell/Evans/Goose (eds.), When Death Do Us Part, 2004, 72–102. Provides a good overview of the key scholarship.

15 See Lorna Weatherill, Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture in Britain 1660–1760, London 1988; Carole Shammas, The Preindustrial Consumer in England and America, Oxford 1990; Mark Overton/Jane Whittle/Darron Dean/Andrew Hann, Production and Consumption in English Households 1600–1750, London 2004.

16 Wouter Ryckbousch, Early Modern Consumption History. Current Challenges and Future Perspectives, in: Low Countries Historical Review 130/1 (2015), 57–84, 68–74.

as being "inherently quantitative documents".[17] Analysed under a quantitative framework, the narrative elements of probate inventories are problematic: the omissions, errors, and linguistic distortions inherent within these texts are understood to hinder the extraction of the historical information needed for statistical analysis.[18] By supplementing established quantitative approaches with the methodology proposed here the case will be made that we might better understand the scale and nature of these narrative elements and so better appreciate the objects and spaces inventories record. Moreover, a narratological approach allows scholars to systematically move beyond the research priorities of quantitative studies, which seek to trace broad patterns in object ownership, and instead to ask new questions of inventory evidence more closely aligned with the interests of the narrative turn.

Almost twenty years ago Lena Orlin laid out the "fictions" of inventories and advocated for more work to be done on the "treacheries" of these documents.[19] Since then, the narrative turn has fostered new approaches to inventories which recognize that the fictive elements in these documents offer the potential for analysis as opposed to being merely problematic. For instance, Gerhard Jaritz and Michael Pearce recognize that the choices made about the inclusion or exclusion of objects, the presentation of space, and the financial value attributed to objects can reflect the socio-cultural priorities at work in the instance the inventory was made. For both, the fictions of inventories provide a window into the socio-cultural context of their production and this, to quote Jaritz, is what "makes their analysis worthwhile and exciting".[20] Similarly, Christina Normore argues that the placement of objects within the textual structure of courtly inventories reflects political structures in the ducal court.[21] Adrian Evans has proposed new theoretical approaches to the language of inventories as a means to reveal the stories inadvertently being told about embodied use of household objects and spaces.[22] Other studies have focused on the act of appraisal and inventory making itself and how this has shaped the textual inventory. Katherine Wilson has conceptualized the act of inventory making as one of

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17 Overton/Whittle/Dean/Hann, Production, 2004, 13.

18 Ibid., 31–32.

19 Lena Cowen Orlin, Fictions of the Early Modern English Probate Inventory, in: Henry Turner (ed.), The Culture of Capital. Property, Cities and Knowledge in Early Modern England, London 2002, 51–83.

20 Michael Pearce, Approaches to Household Inventories and Household Furnishing, 1500–1650, in: Architectural Heritage 26/1 (2015), 73–86; Gerhard Jaritz, The Stories Inventories Tell, in: Lucie Dolezalova (ed.), The Charm of a List. From the Sumerians to Computerised Data Processing, Newcastle 2009, 160–166, 166.

21 Christina Normore, On the Archival Rhetoric of Inventories. Some Records of the Valois Burgundian Court, in: Journal of the History of Collections 23/2 (2011), 215–227.

22 Adrian Evans, Enlivening the Archive. Glimpsing Embodied Consumption Practice in Probate Inventories of Household Possessions, in: Historical Geography 36 (2008), 40–72.

performance and theatre, and Donald Spaeth has studied the textual construction of inventories in one English town as a window into the mentality of the appraisers.[23] Current scholarship therefore appears acutely aware of the narrative qualities of inventories and the potential that studying this narrativity offers.[24] This article seeks to compliment and build upon these approaches. Whilst none of these scholars might recognize their work as being explicitly narratological in nature, their shared underlying focus on identifying and exploring narrative elements in these texts speaks to the concerns of narratologists. The field of narratology, being largely concerned with the systematic analysis of how narratives are constructed, offers useful methodological insights and frameworks for advancing this vein of scholarship. Further, a narratological approach to probate inventories introduces analytical categories and terminology which has the potential to synthesize previously disparate, albeit methodologically similar, strands of inventory scholarship which focus on the narrativity of these texts.

A narratological model

Narratology had been historically confined to what might be termed traditional literature. The focus of early classical, or structuralist, narratological analysis was primarily on identifying narrative typologies in post-1700 novels, fables, and plays.[25] More recent work, dubbed transgeneric and transmedial narratology, has expanded the field to include non-textual and non-verbal narratives, alternative media, and texts without human or anthropomorphic protagonists.[26] This new postclassical narratology has also shifted its focus from cataloguing and ordering narrative forms, to instead destabilizing and interrogating narratives in their historical contexts.[27] This study takes the latter approach: seeking to explore how narratological analysis might add to our understanding of probate inventories, rather than expounding new narratological categories. Eva Von Contzen advocates that medievalists embrace narratology to analyse the medieval textual corpus, but cautions that "the texts themselves [should] take precedence in identifying and developing a useful and flexible set of

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23   Katherine Wilson, The Household Inventory as Urban 'Theatre' in Late Medieval Burgundy, in: Social History 40/3 (2015), 335–359; Donald Spaeth, 'Orderly made.' Re-appraising Household Inventories in Seventeenth-Century England, in: Social History 41/4 (2016), 417–435.

24   The scope of this collection stands as testament to this statement.

25   For instance, Vladimir Propp, Morphology of the Folktale. 2nd edn., Austin 1968; Franz Karl Stanzel, A Theory of Narrative, Cambridge 1979.

26   Ansgar Nünning, Narratology or Narratologies?, in: Tom Kindt/Hans-Harald Müller (eds.), What is Narratology. Questions and Answers Regarding the Status of a Theory, New York 2003, 239–275, 250.

27   Mark Currie, Postmodern Narrative Theory, Houndsmills 1998, 1–6.

narratological tools".[28] In essence, narratological models should be chosen or shaped to fit the texts under analysis. English medieval probate inventories are a recognizable genre of texts, but there is little external evidence for how they were produced. Any analysis of these texts must therefore rely almost exclusively upon the internal evidence of the texts themselves. These inventories demand a deductive methodology which allows for an examination of how these texts were constructed and the relationship between this narrative construction and the objects and spaces they record.

The work of classical narratologist Gérard Genette offers valuable methodological frameworks which breach the limits of structural narratology.[29] Genette's narratological analysis is deductive and his taxonomies are unstable and permanently evaluated with each new text, which makes his methodologies portable.[30] They are not therefore confined to the classical texts of narratological inquiry and are, I believe, particularly suited to the analysis of inventories. Genette, writing in 1972, did not believe "archaeological documents" should be considered as narratives proper, lacking as they do a narrator.[31] The work of Hayden White on historical narrativity has overturned this ontological position. In his study of medieval annals White opposes the presumption that all narratives must contain "full narrativity" and recognizes a range of alternative historical narrative forms.[32] Subsequent work by scholars such as Natalie Zemon Davis and Jeremy Goldberg has expanded the repertoire of historical narrative forms to include administrative records.[33] Inventories are one such alternative narrative form. They are narratives about the possessions of an individual because they do not simply, nor objectively, relay this information. The socio-cultural or institutional context of production and the inventory as a genre of text impacted both the collection and the communication of this information. Choices were also made by appraisers and authors about how the text of an inventory was structured, which order these goods should appear within this structure, and how these objects were described. In short, inventories tell stories.

28   Eva Von Contzen, Why We Need a Medieval Narratology. A Manifesto, in: Diegesis 3/2 (2014), 1–21, 7.

29   Genevieve Lively, Narratology, Oxford 2019, 7.

30   Florian Sedlmeier, The Paratext and Literary Narration. Authorship, Institutions, Historiographies, in: Narrative 26/1 (2018), 63–80, 63–64.

31   Gérard Genette, Narrative Discourse. An Essay in Method, Ithaca 1983, 29; cf. Gérard Genette, Narrative Discourse Revisited, Ithaca 1987, 14–15, in which Genette recognises that the writing of history is a form of narrative.

32   Hayden White, The Content of the Form. Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation, Baltimore 1987, 4.

33   Natalie Zemon Davis, Fiction in the Archives. Pardon Tales and their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France, Stanford 1987; Jeremy Goldberg, The Priest of Nottingham and the Holy Household of Ousegate. Telling Tales in Court, in: Richard Goddard/Teresa Phipps (eds.), Town Courts and Urban Society in Late Medieval England, 1250–1500, Woodbridge 2019, 60–76.

Genette's triadic model of narrative form was outlined in his formative book *Discours du Récit,* translated into English as *Narrative Discourse,* in 1972. Following Genette's model, narratives consist of three elements: the events of the story being told (*histoire),* the act of narrating (*narration),* and the narrative as text or speech (*récit).*[34] The latter two together form what Genette terms the narrative discourse, or the means by which the story is told. We can map these categories onto inventories in the following manner. The *histoire* of an inventory is the assemblage of objects and how they were encountered by the appraisers on the day the inventory was taken. The *récit* is the medium of the inventory and the restrictions, both due to legal frameworks and the inventorying tradition, which this genre of text places upon the narration of the story. The *récit* determined which objects and spaces were recorded, how they were valued, and how the text of the inventory was structured. The act of *narration* becomes the act of appraisal and the production of the final inventory. The *narration* includes the decisions made about how objects were described, and where and when they were included within the text. For Genette, a narratological analysis using his triadic model is fundamentally a study of the relationships between these three elements. The focus on exploring the relationships between the story and its telling, combined with its deductive methodological approach, makes Genette's model a particularly appropriate and portable framework for a narratological examination of inventories.

For most historians it is the *histoire* of probate inventories which is of primary concern. Inventory evidence is most often analysed in view of the ownership, use, and meaning of domestic material culture; yet, much ink has been spilt lamenting the problems with inventories as sources for this very information.[35] For instance, the narrativization of the house and its objects into the text of a probate inventory might omit objects or spaces which were present in the house at the time of appraisal, and the way objects were recorded can occlude our understanding of their position and use. These narrative qualities are seen to be barriers to the story of the house and its objects which inventories contain. It is in this regard where the deductive methodology of Genette proves the most useful. Genette too concedes that our knowledge of the *histoire* can only ever be indirect. For him, however, the narrative discourse of a text acts as a mediator, not a barrier, to the story. Genette posits that "the events [which] are the very subject of that discourse and the activity of writing leaves in it traces, signs or indices that we can pick up on and interpret".[36] The narrative discourse itself therefore contains the key to understanding how it acts to mediate. A

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34 Genette, Discourse, 1983, 26–27; Genette, Discourse, 1987, 13–15.
35 Margaret Spufford, The Limitations of the Probate Inventory, in: John Chartres/David Hey (eds.), English Rural Society, 1500–1800, Cambridge 1990, 139–174, 142–150.
36 Genette, Discourse, 1983, 28.

Genettean reading of an inventory assumes that we can deduce how the *histoire* was narrativized from the internal evidence of the text alone, and that once we have done this we can better understand both the original *histoire* and the processes of *récit* and *narration* which produced the final narrative. Analysis of probate inventories using this methodological framework therefore has the potential to offer new insights into both the domestic spaces and objects they detail and the inventorying process itself. In praxis, this approach entails conducting close qualitative readings of individual inventories, looking for textual traces of the impact that the appraisal process had on the recording of the goods of a household, and how the inventorying genre shaped this into the textual narrative of the inventory itself. The case study which follows focuses on how this narratological approach can be applied to English medieval probate inventories in order to better understand their *histoire*. It should be noted, however, that this is far from an exhaustive application of this methodology. Future work might productively use this methodological approach to focus instead on the *narration* of an inventory corpus in order to reveal the priorities of appraisers and the systems of classification, or folk taxonomies, they employed.[37] A focus on the *récit* of an inventory sample would allow for the reconstruction of their context of production in the absence of surviving institutional records. Moreover, the adaptability and portability of this narratological methodology allows for its future application to a variety of inventory corpora beyond the geographic, chronological, and ontological limitations of this present study.

Récit: recovering hidden objects and spaces

One of the foremost criticisms of probate inventories as evidence for houses and domestic material culture is their omission of some objects and spaces.[38] Probate inventories were a legal instrument tasked to record and value only the notable moveable goods of the deceased and this fundamentally shaped their *récit*. Objects belonging to other household members, objects already bequeathed in the will, objects of relatively low value, and immoveable objects such as fixed furnishings should not therefore have been recorded by appraisers.[39] We should be cognisant, however, that much of the source critical scholarship on probate inventories has been

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37   See Mary Beaudry, Words for Things. Linguistic Analysis of Probate Inventories, in: Mary Beadury (ed.), Documentary Archaeology in the New World, Cambridge 1993, 43–50; Smail, Plunder, 2016, 31–88 for examples of studies of systems of classifications in inventories.
38   Rachel Garrard, English Probate Inventories and their Use in Studying the Significance of the Domestic Interior, 1570–1700, in: Van Der Woude/Schuurman (eds.), Inventories, 1980, 55–81, 61–64.
39   Spufford, Limitations, 1990, 144–150.

grounded in the early modern material and relatively little work has been under-taken on the peculiarities of medieval inventories.[40] Medieval probate inventories do not appear to consistently omit objects and spaces. A number of inventories include relatively low-value objects such as earthenware pots.[41] Many also include references to objects which had been bequeathed to others. For instance, the 1438 inventory of Robert Connyg includes an unvalued entry for clothing which the appraisers record had been given away as a gift during Robert's lifetime.[42] The appraisers of Elizabeth Sywardby's goods in 1468 routinely note whom objects had been bequeathed to throughout the text of her inventory.[43] The 1486 inventory of husband and wife John and Alice Holgrave has an entire section appended to the end of the text which records each individual bequest contained in both of their testaments.[44] The inclu-sion or exclusion of objects, in the medieval inventories at least, appears less proscri-bed and consistent than the source critical scholarship might lead us to believe. That is not to say that these probate inventories do not omit objects and spaces; they do. Medieval appraisers, however, appear to have exercised more narrative license than their early modern counterparts. Therefore, each probate inventory warrants a full reading with its individual nuances in mind.

Whilst it is impossible to ascertain with any certainty the extent of the voids, omissions, and silences in the medieval corpus more generally, there are examples in which we can reasonably conclude that items not recorded in individual invento-ries were present in the house at the time of appraisal. For instance, whilst probate inventories do not mention fixed furnishings, such as bench seating, cupboards, and shelving, or architectural features, such as windows, doors, and fireplaces, the moveable objects associated with these features did fall within the legal remit for inclusion. Objects such as *bankers*, which were coverings for benches, seating, or chairs, cushions which sat upon such seating, linen for shelves or cupboards, metal-ware for fireplaces, and even window coverings are all recorded and valued by appraisers. Architectural features or fixed furnishings are perhaps most obvi-ously preserved directly within the descriptions of a moveable object. For example, the 1476 inventory of Matthew Phellyp records "iij brokyn carpettes on the wyn-dows" in the parlour of his house.[45] In the buttery of Thomas Robynson, invento-

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40 Van der Woude/Schuurman (eds.), Inventories, 1980. For example, only one paper in this volume addresses pre-sixteenth-century inventories.
41 BI, D/C, Orig. Wills, INV Henry Thorlthorpe 1426. Includes a jar valued at one penny; TNA PROB 2/19. Includes two pots valued at half a penny each.
42 YML CY/ZC/L/1/17/19.
43 YML CY/ZC/L/1/17/47.
44 TNA PROB 2/16; TNA PROB 11/8/63 Testament of John Holgrave; TNA PROB 11/8/64 Testament of Alice Holgrave.
45 TNA PROB 2/8.

ried in 1490, there are dozens of metal vessels listed alongside three shelf-cloths, suggesting this space had three shelves affixed to a wall.[46] The 1423 inventory of Henry Bowet includes two references to a chimney in his chamber, the first being two andirons for this chimney, and a further entry for an old screen standing in front of the same chimney.[47]

In other instances, architectural features or fixed furnishings are not directly referenced, but we can deduce their presence from the moveable objects which have been listed. For instance, the contents of the hall of William Edward as recorded in his 1488 inventory were seven wall hangings, three *bankers*, ten cushions, and a folding spruce table with a counter.[48] We can therefore definitively conclude that this space had wall hangings, a table, and a counter. We can also infer, however, that this space probably also had three fixed benches upon which the *bankers* and cushions were placed, and which were used as seating by those using the table. These moveable objects are akin to textually preserved imprints of the furnishings and architectural features themselves. Their presence reveals a form of mould to the fabric of lost architectural houses and allows us to better appreciate their spaces and objects. Similar object assemblages reoccur throughout medieval probate inventories. The 1456 inventory of Walter Eston records just a set of linen hangings, seven cushions, and two *bankers* in the hall of his house in Chichester.[49] In the inventoried hall of John Bowton in 1489 were three wall hangings, three *bankers*, a cupboard, a table board, and a board for pressing cloth.[50] Similarly, four wall hangings, three *bankers*, two tables, a chest with mail sleeves, and an old board are listed in the parlour of John Barnys in his 1489 inventory.[51] In all of these examples the presence of textile coverings for seating but absence of any seating itself suggests that this furniture was fixed and that these spaces contained integrated bench seating. The hall of Robert Rychardes in 1492 also appears to have contained fixed seating; a hanging, two *bankers*, six cushions, a board with trestles which likely functioned as a table, and a cover are recorded in his inventory.[52] This inventory additionally records the presence of five basins, one ewer, two chafing dishes, four quart-pots, and four pots for wine in the same hall. The presence of so much tableware but absence of any moveable storage furniture suggests that this space also had either shelving or a built-in cupboard at the time of appraisal. Fixed furnishings such as these were present in the original

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46 TNA PROB 2/43.
47 YML CY/ZC/L/1/17/2.
48 TNA PROB 2/20.
49 LPL CM XVIII/6.
50 TNA PROB 2/27.
51 TNA PROB 2/28.
52 TNA PROB 2/57.

histoire of the house, but removed from the narrative of the inventory due to the legal constraints of the *récit*. By recognizing the *récit* of these texts and actively looking for evidence of its impact we are able to recover elements of the *histoire* which might otherwise have been lost.

We must, however, exercise caution in inferring from the absences within these texts and it is here that paying close attention to the *récit* of individual inventories as opposed to the wider *récit* of the genre is imperative to any narratological reading. The 1488 inventory of John Ingler contains traces of how its particular *récit* impacted the creation of this text. The appraisers of Ingler's inventory record that his hall contained two hangings, one of red say and one stained with green flowers, two green tapestry *bankers*, and six cushions.[53] Following the process outlined above it would appear that we can probably infer that this hall also contained fixed seating; however, this may not have been the case. The entire inventory lacks any mention of moveable furniture. There are no tables, chests, chairs, stools, or benches mentioned; the only objects valued are textiles, clothing, plate, and livestock. That is not to say that this house was devoid of all furniture, nor that every piece of furniture was fixed, instead it appears as though both the fixed and moveable furniture in this house did not belong to the deceased. The inventory records that Ingler owned two horses, valued at 20 shillings, which were "seisid for heriottes to my lord of Winchestre".[54] A payment of heriot suggests that Ingler held land under customary tenure. The lack of recorded furniture in the inventory of his house may then be explained by the fact he did not own it. In some manorial contexts, moveable household furniture and utensils, or *principalia,* remained with the holding upon the death of the tenant. They belonged to the lord, not to the deceased.[55] Similarly, the 1492 inventory of Richard Yseham contains a section titled his chamber in London, which records only clothing, bedding, books, and two chests.[56] Yseham's inventory names him as a "gentilman of lyncolnes inne," one of London's Inns of Court, and records that he owed the steward of the inn nine shillings and six pence at the time of his death. Yseham appears to have been a student or apprentice lawyer staying at Lincoln's Inn. The absence of furniture such as beds, tables, or chairs in this chamber was likely because it was rented, not because it contained no furniture. In these instances, therefore, we cannot infer whether the absent furniture was fixed or moveable, neither would have been recorded for the purposes of inventory taking.

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53 TNA PROB 2/24.
54 Ibid.
55 Chris Briggs, Manorial Court Roll Inventories as Evidence of English Peasant Consumption and Living Standards, c.1270–c.1420, in: Antoni Furió/Ferran Garcia-Oliver (eds.), Pautas de Consumo y Niveles de Vida en el Mundo Rural Medieval, Valencia Forthcoming, 1–32, 2.
56 TNA PROB 2/58.

Recognizing the individual context of each inventory is imperative for a narratological analysis. Only by conducting thorough qualitative readings of inventories in their entirety can we safely make conclusions and inferences about how the *récit* of these texts has mediated our view of the *histoire*.

In addition to the legal frameworks in which these documents were constructed, the textual genre of inventories also contributed to their *récit*. Probate inventories draw upon an older polysemous inventorying tradition in western Europe. In the eighth and ninth centuries rulers of the Carolingian polities impelled the production of detailed inventories of church and royal property, which set the template for the genre.[57] These estate inventories, or *polyptychs*, recorded and valued land, buildings, objects, tenants, and other assets and functioned to ratify or stand as testament to the legal ownership of the recorded property.[58] One such text, now named the *Brevium Exempla,* was produced around the start of the ninth century and details the assets of St Michael at Staffelsee, the benefices of the monastery of Wissembourg, and surveys five royal estates. Instructions for inventory production are embedded throughout this text suggesting that it might have functioned as a model or template for the inventory genre.[59] The *Brevium* follows a distinct organizational logic which can be recognized in inventories up to the modern day. Its contents are divided into different sections relating to the location of the items, such as individual demesnes, or sections relating to the type of goods, such as books or garden plants. The *mise-en-page* of the *Brevium* serves to structure this organization of the material into discrete visual sections with the start of each section emphasized by a combination of *littera notabilliores*, capitals, majuscule script, or outdenting. The division of the information and its presentation in this manner speaks to the purpose and perceptions of inventories: they are lists which serve to simultaneously organize and communicate information. As Lucie Doležalová notes, "one does not *read* but only *uses* a list: one looks up the relevant information in it, but usually does not need to deal with it as a whole".[60] The *mise-en-page* of medieval probate inventories shows a continued engagement with the function of earlier inventories, helping both to structure the text and to assist the reader to easily navigate its contents.

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57 Joseph Salvatore Ackley, Re-approaching the Western Medieval Church Treasury Inventory, c.800–1250, in: Journal of Art Historiography 11 (2014), 1–37, 6.

58 Rosamond McKitterick, The Carolingians and the Written Word, Cambridge 1989, 160–163.

59 Herzog August Bibliothek Wolfenbüttel, Cod. Guelf. 254 Helmst., ff. 9r–12r. For instance, "et sic cetera de talibus rebus breviare debes" (and this is how you should record other items of this kind) f.10v; "et sic de ceteris omnibus, praeteritis et praesentibis vel reliquis numerabis" (and so on, for all the other items you will give past, present, and owing figures) f.12r.

60 Lucie Doležalová, The Potential and Limitations of Studying Lists, in: Doležalová (ed.), Charm, 1–8, 1 (original emphasis).

The textual genre of inventories encouraged the placement and organization of their recorded information into a standard narrative structure. Much like a play conforms to acts and scenes or novels are split into chapters, English probate inventories are divided into sections corresponding to the location of the recorded goods, or sections relating to the type of object.[61] The usual *mise-en-page* of these inventories physically separates each section with their headings enlarged and emboldened. The compulsion to distinguish between goods in this manner appears to have been persistent and even copies of probate inventories entered into larger codices attempt to preserve this narrative structure. The 1479 inventory of Thomas Smith has been entered into a register of the Archbishop of York as a block of text without any spacings, but the headings *aula* (hall), *camera* (chamber), *animalia* (livestock), *grana* (crops), and *debita* (debts) have been added in the left-hand margin next to their corresponding lines of text.[62] Other inventories copied into the same register embed the titles of individual sections within the body of the text and instead highlight them with underlining.[63] The most common section headings used in probate inventories reflect the architectural categorizations imposed by the built structure of the house: halls, parlours, butteries, pantries, kitchens, store-rooms, chambers, shops, barns, and stables. The legal constraints of inventories and their expected narrative structure had two impacts upon how the spaces of the house were narrativized. Firstly, as the rooms of the house are only preserved in locative headings spaces which were devoid of moveable objects, such as hallways or corridors, would not be recorded. In other instances, rooms and spaces might be named, created, or simplified in order to fit the inventoried objects into a standard narrative structure. These adaptations of the *histoire* into the narrative of the inventory do, however, leave textual traces and it is possible to recover some of the missing or obscured spaces.

One such example of an adaptation prompted by the *récit* is the simplification of complex spatial divisions within the house. In the 1410 inventory of Hugh de Grantham his household goods are divided between five sections headed *aula*, *camera*, *celarium* (storeroom), *coquina* (kitchen), and *brasirium* (brew-house).[64] On paper the Grantham house appears to have had five discrete rooms, but the entries within these sections point towards a more complex spatial arrangement within the house. Under the goods listed in the hall the last entry is for a small table and

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61   Briggs/Forward/Jervis/Tompkins, People, (2019), 146. cf. Escheator inventories which rarely separate objects into sections.
62   BI Archbishops' Register 22, f. 354v.
63   BI Abp. Reg. 22, f. 321r, 1479 inventory of William Haley; BI Abp. Reg. 22, ff. 319r–320r, 1479 inventory of Peter Legh.
64   YML CY/ZC/L/1/17/40.

four benches "*in aula esturali*" (in the summer hall) and the objects in the chamber include a chest described as *"in alia camera"* (in another chamber). This implies that there were at least two halls and two chambers within the Grantham house. A similar effect can be observed in the 1452 inventory of John Kexby; the section titled kitchen includes an entry for a shelf in the boulting house.[65] The appraisers of both of these inventories appear to have adapted the *histoire* of the house into simpler narrative structures and have resultantly subsumed architecturally defined spaces under one heading.

Some probate inventories contain textual traces of more ephemeral spatial complexities, notably the subdivision of architectural rooms within the house. The 1492 inventory of Robert Rychardes records the goods of a chamber which appears to have been subdivided by a fabric partition.[66] The objects listed under this section begin with the assemblages for two beds and end with a barrel of salt and a barrel of preserved fish. In between these two discrete types of objects a red cloth, a rope, and a coverlet are recorded. The appraiser of this inventory describes the rope as a "tye". Tyes were ropes or chains used to hoist the sails of ships.[67] This linguistic choice suggests that the rope was being used in a similar context; namely to hoist the red cloth vertically so that it served as a room divider between the sleeping and storage areas of this space. The second suggestion that this cloth was dividing the room in this manner is the inclusion of the clause "*le pric*" to end the entry for the rope. In some probate inventories this clause, signalling the assigned monetary value of the objects listed, is used to conclude every single entry before the numerical valuation is given. In this inventory, however, the clause "le pric" is only present in the first entry listed in each section. Its presence here halfway down the list of objects in the second chamber suggests therefore that it inadvertently marks the start of a new space. Subdivided spaces such as this are not likely to be reflected overtly in inventories which take the architectural layout of the house as their organizational principle. However, they do appear to have been recognized as distinct spaces by appraisers and have resultantly left less obvious traces of their existence within the constraining *récit* of these documents.

There are also instances where the use of architecturally defined spaces as an organizing principle masks these less permanent spatial divisions within the house in the opposite manner: by recording these spaces as though they were architectural rooms. In the 1492 inventory of John Veysy there is a section titled "in the chamber at the

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65 BI, D/C, Orig. Wills, INV John Kexby, 1452.
66 TNA PROB 2/57.
67 Frances McSparran, et al. (eds.), Middle English Compendium, Ann Arbor 2000–2018, http://quod. lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/ (18 April 2020), sub verbo tye.

Beddis hede".[68] There are only five entries in this section: one spruce chest, one flat chest with partitions, a table with trestles, an alabaster St John's Head, and an "old shete hangyng ouer the bedde hed in the withdrawght with oder lumbor". There is no bed recorded in this section of the inventory, the only beds listed appear in the chief chamber. The naming of this space as a chamber at the bed's head in the title and as a withdraught in the body of the entry suggests that this space was actually part of the architecturally defined chief chamber. A withdraught can refer to a private chamber or it can mean a private recess or closet within a larger space.[69] The old sheet hanging over the bed head refers, I believe, to a piece of fabric being used as a partition. The bed in the chamber appeared to abut this partition, which is why the appraisers textually connect two objects in seemingly different spaces. Another section in this inventory also appears to be a smaller space separated by textiles from a larger architecturally defined room. Following the sections listing the textiles, clothing, and valuables which appear to have been kept in the chamber of this house and prior to the entry for the goods in the kitchen there is a small discrete section which lacks a heading. The objects in this section are strikingly similar to the ones listed in the chamber "at the Beddis hede". In this case it begins with a sheet, followed by two small chests, a little table with trestles, and a bench.[70] The sheet in this section is the only object in this inventory listed but not valued by the appraisers. It is described instead as "plegge for", meaning it had already been promised to a new owner or was acting as a surety at the time this inventory was taken. This is unusual for two reasons. Firstly, the sheets in this household are not high-value objects; the other sheets in this inventory are valued at an average of just thirteen and a half pence each, so the use of such an object as a guarantee seems to be unlikely.[71] Secondly, in other inventories which record pledged objects their value is still assessed and included.[72] I believe that this aberrant instance of an unvalued pledge in this inventory instead represents an acknowledgement by the appraisers that this sheet was not in fact seen as a moveable good. The sheet was pledged to remain with the architectural house as an internal division and as such was not valued as it fell beyond the scope of the inventory's remit.

Similarly, the compulsion to record objects within a defined section might also have led some appraisers to artificially create architecturally defined spaces in order to accommodate the objects they recorded. One instance of this can be observed in the 1439 inventory of Robert Tankard. This inventory arranges his household goods

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68 TNA PROB 2/53.
69 Middle English Compendium, s.v. withdraught.
70 TNA PROB 2/53.
71 Nineteen individual sheets with a combined valuation of £1 1 s 4 d.
72 For instance TNA PROB 2/23; LPL CM XVII/9.

into an expected narrative structure under the headings shop, *camera*, *aula*, *coquina*, and *stabulum* (stable).[73] Superficially this inventory would appear to record a four-roomed property with a stable. Yet, the only item entered under *stabulum* is a lone horse. This appears discordant with the usual array of materials, normally tack and feeding apparatus, commonly listed in other inventoried stables. For instance, the 1488 inventory of William Bradwey records a stable containing two horses, saddles, bridles, ropes, harnesses, and hay.[74] The inventoried goods in the stable of William Pethood in 1493 included horses, two carts, ladders, and a barrow.[75] The stable recorded in the 1497 inventory of Robert Rider contained a horse, six oxen in stalls, two dung-forks, two shovels, and a whip.[76] The overall scribal quality of Tankard's inventory, precisely arranged and neatly written, suggests that the heading *stabulum* may reflect a fastidious appraiser or clerk keen to comply with an expected narrative structure who needed to account for a horse kept elsewhere rather than a physical structure. Once again, conducting thorough qualitative readings of probate inventories within the framework of narratological analysis allows us to identify traces of narrativization. By paying careful attention to the idiosyncrasies of individual inventories within the context of their wider *récit* we can identify narrative elements in these texts and better recognize how they mediate our view of the inventoried house. In doing so we are able to recognize and explore instances where the narrative elements of these texts artificially create, inadvertently obscure, or irretrievably occlude the objects and spaces of inventoried late medieval houses.

Narration: recovering the act of appraisal

Whilst the *récit* of inventories largely dictated their expected structure and the scope of their content, the appraisers of inventories were able to exercise choice within these constraints about the narrative they constructed. Taking the *histoire* as incorporating the movement through the house by the appraisers on the day the inventory was made, we might expect the narrative to follow a straightforward chronological and spatial trajectory; beginning at the point the appraisers entered the house and concluding at their exit. This is not always the case. Some probate inventories begin with jewels, treasure, and money; valuable objects which would likely have been stored in the least accessible area of the house. Others begin in a chamber, the most private space within the house, which was often situated on an

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73 BI, D/C, Orig. Wills, INV Robert Tankard 1439.
74 TNA PROB 2/21.
75 TNA PROB 2/63.
76 TNA PROB 2/142.

upper floor.[77] Most probate inventories end by listing the debts of the deceased. This information would have been gleaned from written accounts, which much like valuable objects, were more likely to have been stored in an upper chamber, not adjacent to the exit to the house. Both the sequencing structure of inventories and the listing of objects within each section are elements of their *narration;* the choice by the appraisers and perhaps the clerks who produced the finished inventory to re-sequence the story and shape the narrative. Or, to return to Genettean terms, these elements are another narrative layer which mediates our access to the *histoire.* Unravelling the *narration* of an individual inventory can potentially be much more difficult than recognizing the impact of *récit*. The *narration* of probate inventories could be highly individualistic and many appraisers seem to have had their own techniques and organizational logic which are rarely explicitly revealed. A close qualitative reading of the entire text of the inventory enables us to identify traces of these narrative techniques and to understand the extent to which they have obfuscated the *histoire*.

One way in which appraisers might shape the narrative of an inventory was to artificially group certain types of goods into their own discrete sections rather than recording them under locative headings. The decision to extract these objects from their spatial positions in the house to be listed and appraised separately is a familiar form of *narration* used by medieval appraisers. The most common objects singled out to be recorded separately in probate inventories mirror the objects traditionally recorded in earlier church inventories. Church treasure was typically split into four categories when it was inventoried: books, vestments, liturgical textiles, and liturgical objects, most often made from precious metals.[78] These categories were translated onto domestic material culture and probate inventories often include separate sections for books, gowns, textiles, and plate with other jewels. Larger inventories might further include separate sections for different types of textile, such as sheets, napery, towels, and board cloths; sections for individual types of metal-ware such as brass, latten, and lay metal; or novel object groupings, such as harness. In many probate inventories not only have these objects been excised from their original spatial location within the house, they have also been subjected to further reorganization within the text of their object-focused sections. For instance, the 1490 inventory of Thomas Robynson includes separate sections for latten, pewter, lay metal, napery and diaper, sheets, and plate with other jewels.[79] The section for napery and diaper contains seventeen entries, beginning with six for diaper board cloths, then five for

77   Hollie Morgan, Beds and Chambers in Late Medieval England. Readings, Representations and Realities, York 2019, 15–20.
78   Ackley, Church, (2014), 24.
79   TNA PROB 2/43.

towels, two for napkins, three for plain cloths, and a final entry for a cupboard cloth. These textiles have not only been grouped together by type; their recorded values reveal that within these groups they have been additionally arranged in order of descending financial value. This assemblage seems unlikely to represent how these objects were stored within the house. In most instances the use of this narrative technique creates a significant barrier between the reader and the *histoire* of the house. Material culture recorded within object-centred sections has often been irretrievably shorn from its original object assemblages by the *narration* of appraisers.

Returning to the most common narrative structure in probate inventories, the recording of objects by their spatial locations, it is important to recognize that here too goods might be subjected to *narration* by their appraisers. Locative sections do not necessarily record object assemblages as they existed in the *histoire* of the house: objects might still be rearranged according to a variety of narrative techniques. For example, the pots in the inventoried kitchen of John Bowton in 1489 have been recorded in size order; beginning with two-gallon pots, then one-gallon pots, "pottles" (half gallon pots), and finally quarts.[80] Similarly, the vessels in a storeroom in the 1490 inventory of John Dygonson have been grouped by material; pewter, latten, brass, old brass, and lead.[81] Objects listed within architecturally defined sections could also be mediated by multiple levels of *narration*. For instance, the objects recorded in the inventoried house of Katherine Bowden in 1492 have been subjected to two phases of reorganization by their appraiser, John Wroo.[82] Firstly, objects of a similar type have been gathered together to create a number of distinct groups within the entries for each space. For example, the list of goods recorded in the chamber begins with an entry for bedsteads, two entries for mattresses, then three for sheets, one for a blanket, two for coverlets, three for chests, two for wool, and two for clothing. Secondly, the groups of objects in this inventory have all been further internally arranged in descending piece value. So, the group of pans in the inventoried kitchen begins with one valued at six shillings, one valued at four shillings, and finally four pans valued together at one shilling each. By tracing these distinct forms of *narration* in inventories we can appreciate the instances in which these narrative processes were perhaps not at play and the filter of *narration* between us and the *histoire* is less opaque. Some appraisers chose to record at least some of the objects in the spaces of the house as they encountered them. If the list of objects in a recorded room presents as having no inserted logical reordering we might reasonably conclude that these objects were probably recorded as the appraisers encountered them within the space of the medie-

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80   TNA PROB 2/27.
81   TNA PROB 2/36.
82   TNA PROB 2/54.

val house. In these instances, the narrative we find in the extant inventory offers us a vignette into one aspect of the *histoire* of an inventory: the movement of the appraisers through domestic spaces and their interaction with domestic objects.

The 1490 inventory of Richard Scoule appears to preserve the objects recorded within it as the appraisers visually encountered them within the house.[83] The entry for the hall begins with a table, before listing a corner chair, hanging, and six cushions. The next objects in the list are a Flemish cupboard, a container for oysters, a corner chair, and five old cushions. This section appears to preserve the gaze of the appraisers along one wall of the hall. This wall had seating in each corner with one corner also having a table, and between these two areas of seating there was a cupboard and a container for oysters. This portion of the hall appears therefore to have been used for dining activities. The inventory then goes on to list more seating, being a bench and six stools, before a number of objects belonging to a fireplace and a standing laver. This section of the hall is harder to unpick visually. It is possible that the seating represents objects against another wall of the hall with the fireplace the focus of the third wall. Equally likely, however, is that this seating was arranged in the centre of the space in front of a fireplace. Intriguingly, the ordering of objects amongst the fireplace assemblage in this inventory preserves the visual set-up of the fireplace itself. It begins with a pot-hook, a fire-fork, a pair of tongs, and a water chaffer. It then lists six "wyfols" (likely axes), five helmets, and an old red hanging. The list of objects in the hall then finishes with a ladle and fire irons. The ordering of these objects appears to reflect the gaze of the appraisers from one side of the fireplace, from pot-hook to water chaffer, to above the fire-place, the hanging and armour, to the other side, the ladle and fire-irons. Reading the text in this way suggests that the fireplace in Richard Scoule's hall was decorated with a hanging on the wall above it and had items of armour either affixed to the same wall or paced upon a mantle above the fire. The mantle itself would not appear; as a fixed-furnishing it would have been excluded by the constraints of the *récit.*

In other instances, probate inventories preserve traces of the physical interaction of the appraisers with objects within the house. The 1476 inventory of Matthew Phelyp includes an entry for an old piece of tapestry "lying undr the gret carpet" in the chief chamber.[84] We might imagine William Maryner and George Page, the appraisers of this inventory, lifting up the carpet in this chamber in order to value its underlay. The 1449 inventory of Thomas Morton includes a section titled "*magna cista in camera domini*" (in the large chest in the lord's chamber) which contains

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83   TNA PROB 2/40.
84   TNA PROB 2/8.

a long list of linens measured by the *ell*.[85] Again, the tactile nature of appraisal is invoked and the text of this inventory preserves the action of the appraisers; their opening of this chest, removal of its contents, and measurement of each piece of linen. In the inventoried first chamber in the 1492 inventory of Robert Rychardes there are two assemblages reflecting two separate beds.[86] The first assemblage begins with the bed's exterior fabrics – the "silour", "tester", and curtains, then moves on to list coverlets, then blankets, then the feather bed, then a mattress, before finishing with the bedstead. The second retains the same order but instead of a mattress includes pillows and a quilt immediately before the entry for the bedstead. The second chamber in this inventory contains two further beds following a similar linguistic ordering, albeit without any expensive exterior hangings. Both beds begin with a coverlet, then a pair of blankets, then a mattress, before again concluding with an entry for the bedstead. Preserved in the linguistic hierarchies of this inventory are both the stratigraphy of the beds and the actions of the appraiser, Hugh Radley, in these chambers in June of 1492. He first noted the exterior hangings of the bed and its cover before peeling back the layers of fabrics, textiles, and bedding, listing each in turn before finally valuing the bedstead; the solid wooden frame upon which these textiles were set. By analysing probate inventories with their narrative construction in mind, we are able to encounter some objects and spaces as their appraisers did. Their narrative qualities in certain instances have inadvertently preserved traces of domestic action over five hundred years ago. In applying a narratological methodology we are able to move beyond questions of object ownership and to think instead about object use and significance.

Conclusion

The deductive methodological approach drawn from the narratological models of Gérard Genette and introduced here offers a fruitful analytical framework for inventories. Fundamentally, a narratological reading of an inventory transforms the narrative qualities of these documents from being impediments into assets whilst providing terminology and categories which might synthesize an emergent body of inventory scholarship borne from the narrative turn. As demonstrated through a case study of English medieval probate inventories, identifying the effects of *récit* and *narration* allows us to recognize how the narrative elements of an inventory act to mediate between ourselves and its *histoire*. Consequently, we are able to recover

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85   YML CY/ZC/L/1/17/44.
86   TNA PROB 2/57.

objects, such as fixed furnishings, architectural features, such as mantles and windows, spaces, such as smaller internal subdivisions, and actions, such as the movement of appraisers, which had been excised from the text of these documents. We are also able to better recognize the instances in which narrativization has irretrievably obscured our understanding of the house and its objects, such as the reorganization of listed goods by appraisers. As a result, we are better able to use probate inventories in order to analyse the objects and spaces of late medieval houses. Future work may productively adapt and apply this approach to other inventories beyond the geographical and chronological limitations of this case study. Beyond this, a deductive narratological approach to inventories may instead focus specifically on the *récit* of an inventory corpus to explore institutional contexts of production, or their *narration* in order to investigate systems of classification or folk taxonomies employed by their appraisers and authors. Giorgio Riello characterized inventories as "*neither* uncontaminated records of an objective reality, *nor* simply literary manifestations divorced from materiality".[87] Narratological frameworks might alter our perceptions of inventories into being *both* records of objective reality *and* literary manifestations, with each element worthy of analysis in its own right.

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87   Riello, Things, 2012, 125–127 (my emphasis).