Perhaps the most dominant gender construct in medieval society was that of a man’s activity and a woman’s passivity. This even entered the economic sphere, as women in most of medieval Europe were expected to be passive agents in financial affairs. If women were married, their husbands often controlled their property, and in court cases involving sales, debts, and property disputes, women usually needed men to represent them. Yet, this generalization is too broad. An analysis of the wills enrolled in the Hustling Court of London reveals women as active economic agents in the real estate market: managing tenements, acting as proprietors, and owning their own businesses, potentially independent of male control. This chapter explores the inheritance of real estate by daughters in the Hustling wills and challenges current scholarship that argues that in the Middle Ages, daughters were more likely, even in towns, to receive money and goods and thus were denied an active role in economic matters.

The 3,081 wills enrolled with the Hustling Court of London indicate intentions of fathers, and sometimes mothers, for their daughters to own and control domestic and commercial real estate, either on their own or with their husbands. Late medieval Londoners presented their daughters with various prospects of economic power. These daughters often inherited real estate such as houses, shops, and land along with their brothers, and were not always limited to legacies of movable property. From these wills it becomes clear that their fathers and mothers viewed these women as viable heirs to real estate and gave them many opportunities to own, rent, and manage property. In addition, many of these parents equipped their daughters with the tools to conduct business and to pursue a livelihood.

Legacies of Real Estate

Archaeological evidence and property records attest to the continual division of and additions to urban property as well the common
practice of subletting. Such evidence reveals a sophisticated medieval understanding of the land market and profits to be gained through property ownership. The high value placed on real estate is likewise reflected among London testators. Since late medieval Londoners outlined in detail in their wills the devolution of their real property, including land, houses, and rental properties, it is clear that such real estate was very significant in the consciousness of Londoners and had the potential to benefit women inheriting in late medieval London.

When one considers all types of property bequeathed in these 3,081 wills, it is perhaps unsurprising that between 1300 and 1500, more moveable property was bequeathed to daughters than to their brothers, while more real property was bequeathed to sons than to their sisters. It was common for daughters to receive movable property; for instance, Isabella Tiffeld received a variety of household goods from her father in 1355, including cups with representations of Saints Katherine and Mary Magdalen, basins and ewers, her father’s best blankets, and pewter platters. It was also common for sons, like the three sons of Reginald Conduit in 1344, to receive landed property such as tenements. Despite this general pattern, daughters did receive a remarkably high amount of real property during this period in London. Seventy-eight percent of all daughters represented in the wills received some amount of real property compared with eighty-six percent of all sons mentioned in the wills.

The Husting wills, like all medieval records, are not without their challenges. In most wills, testators did not list the individual pieces of property in their legacies, nor did they include the value of the property. Instead, they bequeathed types of property often in groups.

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2 Isabella Tiffeld also received her father’s brewery and utensils; Sharpe, Calendar of Wills, I:689; CLRO, HR 84(48).

3 Sharpe, Calendar of Wills, I:498; CLRO, HR 74(173).