

ORIGINAL MANUSCRIPT

What is Family in an Age of Plague? The *Liber Lynne* and the Urban Family in Late Medieval England

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Abstract

The *Liber Lynne*, a fifteenth-century manuscript in the archive of the City of London Corporation, is a puzzle. Catalogued among the City of London's collections of written custom (formerly Guildhall MS Cust. 15), it is generally defined as a cartulary. In this article, I study the *Liber Lynne* as a book that was both *about* family and *for* family. Its chance survival, a consequence of its acquisition by the Hanseatic Steelyard in London before the end of the fifteenth century, offers an unusual opportunity to explore the concept of family in the medieval English town. I situate the *Liber Lynne* in a distinct place and time, and argue that the book is a distinctively urban manuscript, the outcome of urban interests, ambitions, and anxieties. It also reveals the persistent and ubiquitous presence of plague, which exposed the fragility and precarity of families, but helped to give them different shapes. These shapes, or structures, were fluid because of the mutable nature of ideas about family and its voluntaristic qualities. Family, the *Liber Lynne* suggests, was a choice and a practice.

In September 1349, less than a year after the arrival of the Black Death in London,¹ a citizen and glover by the name of Hugh de Robury made his will. A parishioner of St. Magnus the Martyr, a church next to London Bridge, where he sought burial should he die in London, he had outlived his wife Agnes, his daughter Alice, his mother Agnes, and his father John. His will does not mention a son. To Hugh, the son of his sister Margaret, Robury left 10 marks, his second-best piece of silverware, all the chests that he kept in his shop for his work, and all the tools belonging to his craft. Upon Robury's death, Hugh, his nephew, was to inherit the business, if he were still alive (*si vivens sit*). Among the other beneficiaries of Robury's will was his brother William, to whom he bequeathed a further 10 marks, "if he may be living." Robury himself would be dead by January 1351, when his will was proved and enrolled in the London Husting Court for common pleas.² In November 1353, another London artisan, Simon Seman, deposited Robury's will at the London Guildhall for inspection by the city's mayor, chamberlain, and a London alderman.³ Their focus was a single clause in Robury's will: the gift of 10 marks to his brother William. If his brother were dead, and if his brother's children were living (*si idem Willelmus mortuus sit et habeat pueros viventes*), Robury had wished that the 10 marks be divided equally between them. In 1353, Simon

¹ The Black Death was in London by the beginning of November 1348: Barney Sloane, *The Black Death in London* (History Press, 2011), ch. 2.

² CLA/023/DW/01/078 (235), The London Archives [hereafter TLA], London.

³ For what follows, see COL/AD/01/007, fol. 11v, TLA.

Seman testified before the mayor, chamberlain, and alderman that “all of William’s children, except one, his son Robert,” were dead. Robert, who was now 13 years old, had come with Seman to the London Guildhall. On hearing this news, and on seeing the child, the civic officials made their decision. They placed the custody of Robert, together with the inheritance from his uncle to which he was entitled, in the hands of a London citizen and haberdasher, Alban de Appelby. Appelby, unrelated to Robert by blood or marriage, was to act as the child’s guardian until the child reached the age of majority. The story of Robury’s will exemplifies the essential plasticity of the family in the late medieval town, borne of the conditions and structures of urban life. Yet it is also suggestive of the changing vision and nature of the urban family within a society confronted repeatedly by plague.

Like so many others in the city of London, Hugh de Robury was a migrant; his brother William resided elsewhere, and Robury left money in his will to pay for William’s expenses should William come to London to receive his share of Robury’s estate.⁴ Like Hugh de Robury, Simon Seman was a citizen. In 1311, when he was serving a seven-year apprenticeship to John de Stoppesle, a tanner, he had the name Simon de Stoppesle, after his master.⁵ By 1339–40, he was Simon de Stoppesle “called Semen.”⁶ Had he reverted to a family name, the surname to which he had been born before he had entered the household of John de Stoppesle, or had he chosen his own name, on becoming a citizen? Webs of interdependence between the urban household and the urban family, the result of processes of urban migration and of urban practices of apprenticeship, illuminate and explain the intrinsically fluid conception of family in an urban setting. The only difference between London and other English towns and cities was that London, like Bristol, possessed a municipal system of guardianship for the children and heirs of deceased urban citizens.⁷

At the same time, the evidence of Hugh de Robury’s will, and the fact of its presentation and discussion in court, alerts us to the impact of plague demography on the family. Making frequent use of the subjunctive mood (*si vivens sit, si vivat*), the will captures grammatically, but no less movingly, the unpredictability of the present threat yet probable future prospect of sudden death. Robury could not be certain that a beneficiary had survived, or would survive, the outbreak of plague. When, two years after Robury’s death, Simon Seman entered the London Guildhall, armed with Robury’s will and accompanied by Robury’s young nephew, Robert, we can reasonably conclude that all Robury’s other relatives, who might have had a claim on the family inheritance, were dead. Robury was a citizen, and the mayor and aldermen did have responsibilities to safeguard the transmission of citizens’ property, land, and moveable goods from one generation of the family to the next.⁸ Although he was not the underage child of Robury, Robert was a minor, who likely qualified for assistance as a city orphan because he was Robury’s next of kin and the heir to his estate in London.

Existing scholarship on the relationship between plague and family is dominated by a research agenda about models, types, and sizes of family structure, and by the terminology of the “nuclear family” and the “extended family.” Embedded in modernizing narratives of the development of capitalism and the growth of civilization, the question of the origins of the nuclear family has directed, and at times monopolized, the historiography of the Western European family. Some scholars have argued vigorously for the longevity of the nuclear family, comprising a mother and father and their children, joined by a conjugal

⁴ CLA/023/DW/01/078 (235), TLA.

⁵ R.R. Sharpe, ed., *Calendar of Letter-Books of the City of London: Letter-Book D, 1309–1314* (London, 1902), 142.

⁶ R.R. Sharpe, ed., *Calendar of Letter-Books of the City of London: Letter-Book F, 1337–1352* (London, 1904), 49.

⁷ Adele L.R. Sykes, “The Medieval Foundations of the Court of Orphans: London and Wardship, c.1250–c.1550” (PhD diss., University of London, 2021); Susan Scott, ed., *Orphans, Widows and Guardians in Medieval and Early Modern Bristol: The Register of Recognizances, 1333–1594* (Bristol Record Society, 73, 2020).

⁸ Barbara A. Hanawalt, *Growing Up in Medieval London: The Experience of Childhood in History* (Oxford, 1993), ch. 6.

link. The late Middle Ages, in one view, was the period of its rise, triumph, and subsequent dominance. One factor was the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, at which the Church gave its blessing to the overarching principle of mutual consent in the formation of Christian marriage. The other cause was the “social and economic dislocation and reconstruction” after the Black Death in 1348–49, “a critical stage in an imagined evolutionary process from which nuclear conjugal households and modern bourgeois family practices and values would emerge.”⁹ Over thirty years ago, P.J.P. Goldberg contended that signs of a north-western European marriage regime, denoted by the relatively late age and reduced rate of marriage among women and men, were discernible in the city of York in the decades after the Black Death. Delayed marriage restricted fertility and hindered population recovery, while enabling women to take advantage of the new economic opportunities that arose in the wake of the plague.¹⁰ When townswomen and townsmen *did* marry, what did they marry into, and in what kinds of household did they live? From the turn of the millennium, historians and literary scholars uncovered the cultural norms behind a bourgeois model of family organization. An ideal of companionate marriage, nurtured by an ideology of domesticity and industriousness, made the nuclear households and conjugal families of urban citizens the foundation of civic government and urban social order.¹¹

The nuclear, or conjugal, family had a competitor. Its rival, the “extended family,” was its polar opposite.¹² In the English city of York, according to Sarah Rees Jones, “the desire to suppress the demands of the extended family and affinity underpinned the development of civic government before as well as after 1350.”¹³ In northern and central Italy, where the marriage pattern attested in England was seemingly not present,¹⁴ demographic crisis produced an inverse transformation. The decimation of families in the wake of the Black Death led, “where it is possible to prove, to the formation of extended families as opposed to nuclear families, composed exclusively of parents and children, typical of the preceding period.”¹⁵ In both city and countryside, the shift “from the narrow family to the wide family” was a defensive measure, designed to protect the family against fragmentation and destruction through the consolidation of family assets, the solidarity of family members in multigenerational households, and the cohabitation of family nuclei under a single roof. This new domestic group, as much a household as a family under the authority of a male head, was therefore “a complex structure.”¹⁶ Sam Cohn boldly deployed the evidence of last wills and testaments to make the case for “post-plague changes in family ideologies” in Florence and other Italian cities in Tuscany and Umbria. It was not only the elite but artisans who were motivated to commemorate their “lineage” in the aftermath of the Black

⁹ Sarah Rees Jones et al., “The Later Medieval English Urban Household,” *History Compass* 5 (2007): 113–14.

¹⁰ P.J.P. Goldberg, *Women, Work, and Life Cycle in a Medieval Economy: Women in York and Yorkshire c. 1300–1520* (Oxford, 1992). For an excellent review of the debate on the chronology, significance, and implications of the northern-European marriage pattern, see Judith M. Bennett, “Wretched Girls, Wretched Boys and the European Marriage Pattern in England (c. 1250–1350),” *Continuity and Change* 34, no. 3 (2019): 315–20.

¹¹ A key publication is Maryanne Kowaleski and P.J.P. Goldberg, eds., *Medieval Domesticity: Home, Housing and Household in Medieval England* (Cambridge, 2008). For parallels, beyond York, see Shannon McSheffrey, *Marriage, Sex, and Civic Culture in Late Medieval London* (Pennsylvania, 2006).

¹² For the terminology of the bonds of kinship, see Barbara A. Hanawalt, *The Ties that Bind: Peasant Families in Medieval England* (Oxford, 1986), ch. 5.

¹³ Sarah Rees Jones, *York: The Making of a City, 1068–1350* (Oxford, 2013), 186.

¹⁴ Although, see the recent critique of Michelle Armstrong-Partida and Susan McDonough, “Singlewomen in the Late Medieval Mediterranean,” *Past & Present* 259 (2023): 3–42.

¹⁵ Alberto Luongo, *La Peste Nera. Contagio, crisi e nuovi equilibri nell'Italia del Trecento* (Carocci, 2022), 61.

¹⁶ Franca Leverotti, *Famiglia e istituzioni nel Medioevo Italiano. Dal tardo antico al Rinascimento* (Carocci, 2005), 137–9. An important study is Christiane Klapisch, “Declino demografico e struttura della famiglia: l'esempio di Prato (fine XIV sec. – fine XV sec.),” in *Famiglia e parentela nell'Italia Medievale*, ed. Georges Duby and Jacques Le Goff (Il Mulino, 1977), 169–84.

Death and its return in the early 1360s.¹⁷ Lineage was a vertical conception of the family, which extended its definition beyond the intimate encounters and lived experience of the coresidential group, “the everyday community of production and consumption” to quote Christiane Klapisch, to ways of thinking about family.¹⁸

One problem is that the chronicity of plague blurs the temporal separation of a time *before* and a time *after* the Black Death. In England alone, excluding the regional outbreaks and the localized plagues that affected certain English towns, there were “national” epidemics in 1348–49 (the Black Death), 1361–62, 1369, 1375, 1390, and 1399–1400; in the fifteenth century, plague on a national scale is recorded in England in 1405–06, 1411–12, 1413, 1423, 1428–29, 1438–39, 1467, 1471, 1479–80, and 1498–1501.¹⁹ The “continuing and ubiquitous presence of epidemic disease” across the late Middle Ages offers an alternative historiographical periodization.²⁰ Analogous to Bruce Campbell’s notion of the “Great Transition,” the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries can be described, more modestly but no less dramatically, as an “age of plague.”²¹ How, then, should we understand the relationship between family and plague, if plague can be considered both a variable and a constant?

A fifteenth-century English manuscript, the *Liber Lynne*, opens up a new line of inquiry about the concept, and reality, of the urban family in the late Middle Ages. The *Liber Lynne* both reveals and reimagines the intricate relationship between the subjective domain of the *perception* and the objective reality of the *structure* of family. In the *Liber Lynne*, the structure of family was not separate from the conception of family. The definition of family was determined less by the fixed bonds of family than by the meanings assigned to a set of interconnected social relations. Grounded in property, and in the legal and documentary practices that surrounded, protected, and even contested it, the concept of the urban family in the late Middle Ages was malleable, dynamic, and historically contingent.

This is, therefore, neither a story of the cultural hegemony of the nuclear household, as favored by historians in the field of late medieval English urban history, nor of the forging of new structures of family solidarity and cohesion in response to distinct periods of crisis, a theme found in the secondary literature on Italy. It is a story of choice, flexibility, and the consciousness of family in the chronic circumstances generated by plague. Patterns of mobility and migration into towns, and trends of high mortality, punctuated by incidents of random death, meant that choices about who or what was family were changeable. On the one hand, family formation, and awareness of familial relations, involved the making of choices. On the other hand, insofar as the family was an artifice, feelings of family were no less real and its ties no less meaningful.

The *Liber Lynne*

The *Liber Lynne* is a curious manuscript, which has either been ignored by historians or misunderstood. In a 1690 catalog of the corporation of London archives, it was listed as “A book

¹⁷ Samuel K. Cohn, Jr., “Two Pictures of Family Ideology Taken from the Dead in Post-Plague Flanders and Tuscany,” in *The Household in Late Medieval Cities: Italy and Northwestern Europe Compared*, ed. Myriam Carlier and Tim Soens (Garant, 2001), 173.

¹⁸ Klapisch, “Declino demografico e struttura della famiglia,” 169.

¹⁹ Robert S. Gottfried, *The Black Death: Natural and Human Disaster in Medieval Europe* (Collier Macmillan, 1983), 130–33.

²⁰ The quotation is from Mark Bailey, “Demographic Decline in Late Medieval England: Some Thoughts on Recent Research,” *Economic History Review* 49, no. 1 (1996): 1–19, at 1.

²¹ Bruce M.S. Campbell, *The Great Transition: Climate, Disease and Society in the Late-Medieval World* (Cambridge, 2016); Linda Clark and Carole Rawcliffe, eds., *The Fifteenth Century XII: Society in an Age of Plague* (Boydell & Brewer, 2013).

of *Charters and ffines etc. relating ad villam Lenn Episcopi*.”²² In *The Merchant Class of Medieval London*, published in 1948, Sylvia Thrupp designated the *Liber Lynne* a “book of deeds,” “the earliest family book of the kind that has come to light,” and a “family memorandum book.”²³ In the course of their research in the 1980s on London property ownership and the London property market, Derek Keene and Vanessa Harding thought that it was a fifteenth-century “cartulary.”²⁴ The best study of the manuscript is by economic historian Stuart Jenks in a 1988 article published in German.²⁵ Jenks wrote about the *Liber Lynne* because in the last quarter of the fifteenth century, the London Kontor, the main Hanseatic trading station in England, took possession of the book. The major waterside residence in the East Anglian town of Lynn, to which many of the documents in the first half of the *Liber Lynne* pertain, was acquired in 1475 by the Hanse, which also owned the London Steelyard. Jenks believed that the book started life as one thing and turned into something quite different. John Lawney, the London grocer and citizen who commissioned the *Liber Lynne*, conceived “the manuscript originally as a type of house book [*Hausbuch*],” but its function soon changed and it became a “cartulary [*Kopialbuch*].”²⁶ The differentiation between a “cartulary,” a register of title deeds collected and copied into a single manuscript for ease of reference and greater security, and a “house book” or “family book,” a store of miscellaneous household information typically for the practical use of present and future family members, imposes too hard a barrier between genres of writing, which would have been alien and inconsequential to Lawney and his contemporaries.²⁷ As we will see, for John Lawney, the author and original owner of the *Liber Lynne*, conceptions of family were primarily constituted by property.

I approach the *Liber Lynne* as a family book—that is, a book about family and for family—and as a distinctively urban manuscript, the outcome of urban interests, ambitions, and anxieties. There was nothing remarkable about the individual who instigated it. John Lawney was a “citizen and grocer of London,” as he declared in the opening line of the Middle English preface to the *Liber Lynne*.²⁸ Named as a grocer in the list of London taxpayers who were judged liable to the 1412 tax granted by the Commons in Parliament the previous year, John Lawney was said then to have an annual income of £4 in lands and rents from properties in the city.²⁹ He was in receipt of the livery of the London Grocers’ company in 1417, but this elevated status was temporary; in the list of liverymen his name is crossed through, and he does not surface again in the archives of the grocers.³⁰ We know something, but only indirectly, of Lawney’s business activities as a broker. In June 1421, following the appointment of a special tribunal into cases of usury within the city, Lawney repeatedly brought a suit against one John Sadiller, a London vintner.³¹ Sadiller was the

²² Stuart Jenks, “Der Liber Lynne und die Besitzgeschichte des hansischen Stalhofs zu Lynn,” *Zeitschrift des Vereins für Lübeckische Geschichte und Altertumskunde* 68 (1988): 21–81, at 31. For the manuscript, see COL/CS/01/015, TLA.

²³ Sylvia L. Thrupp, *The Merchant Class of Medieval London [1300–1500]* (Chicago, 1948), 123, 395.

²⁴ Derek Keene and Vanessa Harding, *A Survey of Documentary Sources for Property Holding in London Before the Great Fire* (London Record Society 22, 1985), 1.

²⁵ Jenks, “Der Liber Lynne,” 21–81.

²⁶ Jenks, “Der Liber Lynne,” 22, 26–27.

²⁷ On cartularies, see M.T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066–1307*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1993), 101–02; on family books, see below.

²⁸ COL/CS/01/015, fol. 1r, TLA. Please note that I have modernized all Middle English quotations in the article. A transcription of Middle English extracts from the *Liber Lynne* appears in the supplementary material.

²⁹ J.C.L. Stahlschmidt, ed., “Lay Subsidy, temp. Henry IV [London, 1411–12],” *Archaeological Journal* 44 (1887): 56–82, at 65.

³⁰ Compare the liverymen in J.A. Kingdon, trans. and ed., *Facsimile of first volume of MS. Archives of the Worshipful Company of Grocers of the City of London, A.D. 1345–1463*, 2 pts (London, 1886), I: 128, 141–42.

³¹ A.H. Thomas, ed., *Calendar of the Plea and Memoranda Rolls of the City of London*, vol. 4, 1413–1437 (Cambridge, 1943), 98–102.

moneylender, while John Lawney brokered the loans between creditor and debtor. Lawney himself was in several instances a co-conspirator with Sadiller, but Lawney, too, was among those who claimed to have been swindled by Sadiller.³² Before the court proceedings started in the London Guildhall, Sadiller was bound over for the sum of £300 not only to guarantee his appearance in court, but to ensure “that he keep the peace with John Lawney.”³³ As a London citizen, who never held civic office, and a merchant, whose secretive business practices induced criticism and provoked occasional hostility, John Lawney would hardly have stood out from his peers.

Largely anonymous, Lawney moved within an urban world continually disturbed by the experience of plague and by high mortality rates, especially among children, between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.³⁴ Families were broken, truncated, dispersed, yet also remade. Isabelle Chabot has shown how the recurrence of plague in Florence in the second half of the fourteenth century led “those who had survived the plague to second or even third marriages,” a “pattern of remarriage” that reconstituted and “complicated” structures of family and inheritance.³⁵ John Lawney’s wife was Margaret, to whom he was married by August 1411 (see Figure 1).³⁶ What Lawney did not say in the preface to the *Liber Lynne* was that Margaret had been married before: her previous husband, with whom she had three children, was William Radwell, another London citizen, who had made his will in November 1410 and was dead by the first week of January 1411.³⁷ Margaret, therefore, was not long a widow. Two of her children, sons Richard and Thomas, had died between 1406 and 1410, perhaps from the outbreak of plague in London in 1407. A third child, Margaret, was only a year old on her mother’s remarriage in 1411.³⁸ Pamela Nightingale deduced that Lawney’s marriage to Margaret, the daughter of Philip Wyth of Lynn, was “a consequence” in the early fifteenth century of a “new direction in London’s trade,” towards the towns and ports of East Anglia,³⁹ but this was a marriage made in London, where Margaret lived. Margaret’s first husband, William Radwell, was a London stockfishmonger like his brother, Richard. William and Richard, parishioners of St. Michael Crooked Lane, where each asked to be buried, represented their ward, Bridge Street, as common councilors.⁴⁰ They were part of a community of stockfishmongers that clustered in the neighborhood of Bridge Street, in the parishes of St. Michael Crooked Lane and St. Magnus the Martyr, close to London Bridge.⁴¹ We do not have the data to calculate, reliably, the rate of remarriage in London, but “remarriage was more common” among widows with young children “than among widows in general,” and analysis of the guardians allocated by the city’s mayor and aldermen to London orphans whose fathers had died has concluded that “the demographically troubled

³² For further evidence of the relationship between Lawney and Sadiller, see COL/CC/01/01/1, fol. 7r, TLA.

³³ COL/CC/01/01/1, fol. 93r, TLA: *quod pacem gere versus Johannem Lawney*.

³⁴ Thrupp, *Merchant Class*, 200–01.

³⁵ Isabelle Chabot, “Seconde nozze e identità maternal a Firenze tra Tre e Quattrocento,” in *Tempi e spazi della vita femminile nella prima età moderna*, ed. Silvana Seidel Menchi et al. (Il Mulino, 1999), 493.

³⁶ *Calendar of the Close Rolls Preserved in the Public Record Office* [hereafter *Calendar of Close Rolls*], 1409–1413, 293, 295.

³⁷ The National Archives [hereafter, TNA]: PROB 11/2A/396.

³⁸ Cf. COL/CS/01/015, fol. 22r, TLA; and TNA: PROB 11/2A/396. On the age of the daughter, see TNA: C 1/40/275: the suit of Robert Isham and Margaret his wife, daughter of William Radwell, against Eudo Lawney, 1465x1473.

³⁹ Pamela Nightingale, *A Medieval Mercantile Company: The Grocers’ Company and the Politics and Trade of London 1000–1485* (Yale, 1995), 369.

⁴⁰ TNA: PROB 11/2A/396; and R.R. Sharpe, ed., *Calendar of Wills Proved and Enrolled in the Court of Husting, London*, 2 vols. (London, 1889–1890), II: 411–12; R.R. Sharpe, ed., *Calendar of Letter-Books of the City of London: Letter-Book H, 1375–1399* (London, 1907), 238, 281, 333.

⁴¹ On this community, see Justin Colson, “Commerce, Clusters, and Community: A Re-Evaluation of the Occupational Geography of London, c. 1400–c. 1550,” *Economic History Review* 69 (2016): 104–30, at 114, 126.

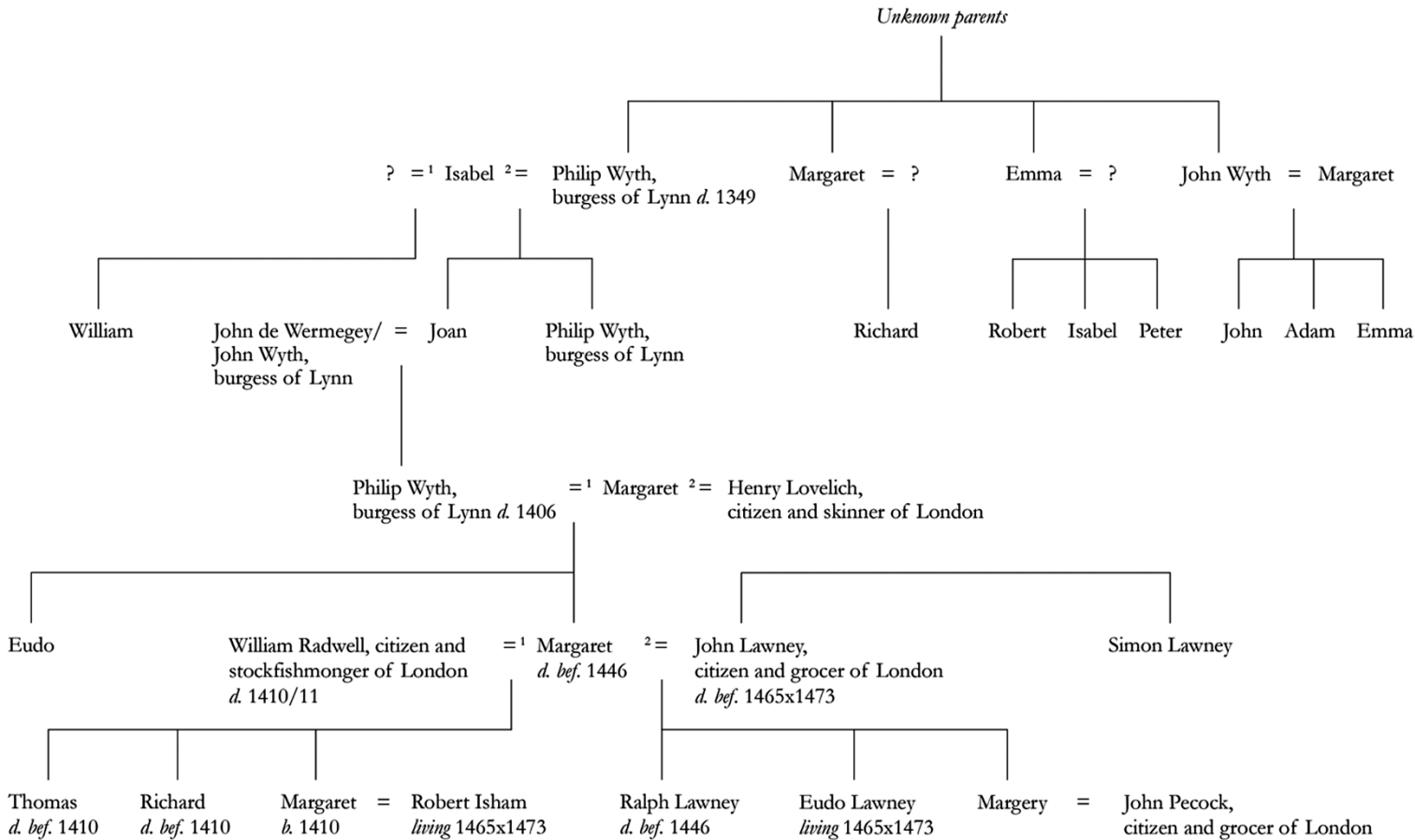


Figure 1. Family tree. Compiled by the author.

years of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century saw an upswing in remarriages.”⁴² The potential attraction of Margaret as a rich widow, and the fact and speed of Margaret’s remarriage to John Lawney, a London citizen and grocer, are not surprising.

The marriage was an investment. Like any investment, it represented a mixture of risk and reward. Lawney’s ambitions, which centered on Margaret’s family home in Lynn, were immediately apparent. By the terms of her father’s will, made in October 1405 and proved in April 1406, her mother was to retain possession of the family estate for the remainder of her life, after which the property would descend to her brother, Eudo, and to the heirs of his body, in perpetuity.⁴³ In August 1411, Eudo granted and surrendered to Margaret and John his title to the house in Lynn, which was to revert to him by his father’s will.⁴⁴ John Lawney paid Eudo 400 marks to relinquish his inheritance.⁴⁵ Simultaneously, Lawney gathered the necessary archival resources to substantiate his wife’s claims to outright and immediate ownership; he employed the services of a clerk and professional scrivener, Richard Claidich, who put his name and his seal to the documents he transcribed for inclusion in Lawney’s archive.⁴⁶ Also in December 1417, John Lawney made an agreement with Philip Wyth’s widow, Margaret, who by this point had herself remarried, her new husband the London skinner Henry Lovelich. Henry and Margaret surrendered to John Lawney and his wife Margaret their legal title to the house in Lynn, which Henry’s wife, Margaret, held during her life in accordance with the will of her first husband, Philip Wyth of Lynn.⁴⁷ Further charters, dating from January 1418 and copied into the *Liber Lynne*, endorsed the sale of Margaret’s life interest in the property, in return for which John Lawney, in his own words at the beginning of the *Liber Lynne*, paid 200 marks.⁴⁸ To remove any doubts as to the new ownership of the Wyth family home, John Lawney used the Wyth family archive to which he now had access to extinguish any residual claimants arising from an arrangement that Philip Wyth had made in 1393.⁴⁹ Then, from 1418 to 1424, John Lawney engineered and oversaw a variety of legal transactions, from charters of enfeoffment and re-enfeoffment that placed property in trust and quitclaims that renounced claims and released title to property, to letters of attorney, an official certificate from the mayor of the town of Salisbury, and a final concord registered in the royal courts at Westminster.⁵⁰ The culmination of Lawney’s enterprise was the act of commissioning the *Liber Lynne*.

Lawney did not physically write the book, but he did perform the roles of author, proof-reader, and editor. The *Liber Lynne* was the work of several professional scribes, one of whom wrote in a book hand the Middle English preface as well as the preamble to the will of Philip Wyth (d. 1349), an ancestor of Lawney’s wife. The presence of an informal cursive hand in an interlineation on the verso page of the first folio was Lawney’s own handiwork, emphasizing his several parts in the book’s production.⁵¹

⁴² Caroline M. Barron, “Introduction: The Widow’s World in Later Medieval London,” in *Medieval London Widows, 1300–1500*, ed. Caroline M. Barron and Anne F. Sutton (Hambledon Press, 1994), xxv; Barbara A. Hanawalt, “The Widow’s Mite: Provisions for Medieval London Widows,” in *Upon My Husband’s Death: Widows in the Literature and Histories of Medieval Europe*, ed. Louise Mirrer (Michigan, 1992), 36.

⁴³ COL/CS/01/015, fol. 22r, TLA.

⁴⁴ *Calendar of Close Rolls, 1409–1413*, 293, 295.

⁴⁵ *Calendar of Close Rolls, 1413–1419*, 449–50, 452; COL/CS/01/015, fol. 1r, TLA.

⁴⁶ Charter of Eudo Wyth to John Lawney and Margaret his wife, 12 December 1417, 07.1-3/01, Anglicana 078, Archiv der Hansestadt Lübeck, Lübeck, Germany [hereafter, AHL]; release of Eudo Wyth to John Lawney and Margaret his wife, 23 December 1417, 07.1-3/01, Anglicana 080, AHL.

⁴⁷ COL/CS/01/015, fols. 25r–26r, TLA.

⁴⁸ COL/CS/01/015, fols. 26v–28r, TLA.

⁴⁹ COL/CS/01/015, fol. 21r–v, TLA.

⁵⁰ COL/CS/01/015, fols. 28r–43r, TLA.

⁵¹ COL/CS/01/015, fol. 1v, TLA. Thanks to my colleague Richard Gameson for conversations about the scribal hands.

The form and content of the *Liber Lynne*, however, complicate the idea of *personal* profit in exchange for individual labor. In striving to secure for his wife, Margaret, the inheritance of the Wyths' house, the conclusion was something altogether more interesting. It was the transformation of the property in Lynn into an inalienable, permanent family estate, "by fine at Westminster such as you shall find written in this book as clearly as it was done."⁵² In June 1424, John and Margaret Lawney made a settlement of the succession to Margaret's family home after their deaths, with the order of descent in the family entail organized as follows: first, Ralph their son and his heirs; second, Eudo, Ralph's brother, and Eudo's heirs; third, Margery, the sister of Ralph and Eudo, and Margery's heirs; if this direct family line died out, the house was to go to the heirs of John and Margaret; failing this line, it was to pass to Margaret, daughter of William Radwell, Margaret Lawney's first husband, and to Margaret's heirs; the next in line was Simon Lawney, John Lawney's brother, and Simon's heirs.⁵³ Lawney's account of his actions, and his motivations, in the Middle English preface to the *Liber Lynne* was less self-justification than clarification of his dynastic thinking.

The plans for the family transcended the town of Lynn in Norfolk. In the same preface, John Lawney charged that "all my children and their heirs that come from me John Lawney, citizen and grocer of London, and from Margaret my wife, daughter of Philip Wyth of Lynn," should find in the *Liber Lynne* an account "of the tenements in London and in Southwark that were belonging to Margaret my wife for the term of her life and, after her death, to be sold."⁵⁴ These two properties comprised her dower, derived from the estate of her first husband, William Radwell. The first was located in Thames Street in the parish of St. Magnus the Martyr next to London Bridge, which came equipped with its own wharf, and the second was in the parish of St. George south of the river, in Southwark. Lawney bought the reversion of the tenements, elevating Margaret's life interest into actual ownership, and then proceeded, through legal dealings conducted over several years partly in the London Husting court, to secure their inheritance for his family in perpetuity.⁵⁵ "And for the great love that my wife and I had to our children," Lawney wrote in the *Liber Lynne*, "we did entail" the London tenements "to our heirs, as you may see later in this book." The entail is no longer in the pages of the *Liber Lynne*, but two entails, dated less than two weeks after the entail of the house in Lynn, survive enrolled in the records of the Royal Chancery. Here we see an order of succession almost identical to that arranged for the house in Lynn, except that the house in Southwark was to pass *first* to Margery, the daughter of John and Margaret Lawney, and the house near London Bridge was *first* to go to Eudo, their son and Margery's brother.⁵⁶ The separate family provisions, in Lynn, London, and Southwark, were conceived as a unity. Partible inheritance could still prioritize a single line. Each child was to inherit a house, with the most substantial property destined for the eldest child, Margaret's and John's son, Ralph.

The intended audience of the *Liber Lynne* was family. The definition of so-called family books remains a source of contention, in part because the authors of French *livres de raison*, like those of Italian *libri di famiglia*, generally did not give their books a title.⁵⁷ The *Liber Lynne*, likewise, is untitled. The absence of a title has not deterred historians and literary scholars, who have named them, variously, "family books," "household books," "memory books," "family chronicles," "diaries," "autobiographies," "biographies," and "memoirs,"

⁵² COL/CS/01/015, fol. 1r, TLA.

⁵³ COL/CS/01/015, fols. 43r–44v, TLA.

⁵⁴ COL/CS/01/015, fol. 1r, TLA.

⁵⁵ CLA/023/DW/01/142, 12; CLA/023/DW/01/145, 60, 64; and CLA/023/DW/01/149, 41, TLA. For another version of these events, involving the forgery of a deed, see TNA: C1/40/275, the evidence of which is discussed below.

⁵⁶ *Calendar of Close Rolls, 1422–1429*, 148–49.

⁵⁷ Jean Tricard, "Les livres de raison français au miroir des livres de famille italiens: pour relancer une enquête," *Revue historique* 624 (2002): 993–1011, at 999.

depending upon structure and form. Some Florentine examples seem to have grown out of a mercantile practice of keeping ledgers and other account books.⁵⁸ The terminology of *livres de raison* reflects too their financial dimension and their origin in the writing and maintenance of personal accounts.⁵⁹ Some historians have disputed the validity of the term *libri di famiglia* because it exaggerates the degree of familial participation in the readership and circulation of these books.⁶⁰ In moving away from actual usage to potential readership, we can recognize commonalities between the *Liber Lynne* and family books in other parts of late medieval Europe. The *Liber Lynne* was not for the benefit of any named family member; it was “for all my children and their heirs.”

The book was composed after the family entails put in place by Lawney in the summer of 1424, at a time when John and Margaret had three children of their own. That he chose not to name them in the preface to the book, which was commissioned barely four years after an occurrence of plague in Norfolk,⁶¹ was itself acknowledgement of the precarity and fluidity of the urban family. How could John be sure which child might live to adulthood, and, indeed, how many other children he and his wife Margaret might conceive?

Beyond audience, the common thread of family books was their function. One of the main aims of the Florentine family books was didactic. Readers were to profit from the author’s actions, to absorb his knowledge, to appreciate his successes, and to avoid past errors.⁶² On the one hand, Lawney was a role model, an example of self-sacrifice for the greater good.⁶³ He might well have sold the estate in Lynn, but it was “for great affection and love of our children and descendants (*kynredin*) of my aforesaid wife” that he and his wife Margaret decided to make it a family entail. Having bought the reversion of his wife’s life interest in the tenements north and south of the river Thames, he was now their owner and had the freedom to “give” and to “sell” them. Again, he practiced self-denial and self-control to prioritize family: “for the great love that my wife and I had to our children, we did entail it [the reversion] to our heirs.” On the other hand, he was cognizant of his own limitations and weaknesses. He had regrets and unfulfilled wishes, one of which was the incomplete acquisition of “a place in Lynn that is in *hogge mannes wey* that is called Wentworths Place.” Lawney told his children, and their heirs, that they “shall find many deeds that are not written in this book” that gave them legal title to the property. Lawney confided that he could not convert legal right into material possession in his lifetime because he had spent so much money on obtaining the title and because he had been defrauded “by a false fellow of 2,000 marks.” It was the special charge of “you that come after me” to “complete (*parforme*) these good deeds that I have not done.” At stake was not so much family honor, but the mutual responsibility and participation of family, which bound generations, and which was more active than passive. This moral reciprocity was not intuitive; it had to be written down and learned.

The purpose of the *Liber Lynne* was to inform the children and heirs of John and Margaret Lawney of the family property in Lynn, London, and Southwark that was rightfully, and

⁵⁸ P.J. Jones, “Florentine Families and Florentine Diaries in the Fourteenth Century,” *The British School at Rome* 24 (1956): 183–205. The most recent study is Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Florence à l’écritoire: écriture et mémoire dans l’Italie de la Renaissance* (Éditions EHESS, 2023).

⁵⁹ Tricard, “Livres de raison,” 999.

⁶⁰ Giovanni Cherubini, “I ‘Libri di ricordanze’ come fonte storica,” in *Civiltà comunale: libro, scrittura, documento* (Società ligure di storia patria, 1989), 569–70.

⁶¹ “Annales de Bermundeseia,” in *Annales Monastici*, ed. Henry R. Luard, vol. 3 (Rolls Series, London, 1866), 485. I would like to thank Phil Slavin for this reference.

⁶² Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, “L’invention du passé familial à Florence (XIVe–XVe siècle),” in *Temps, mémoire, tradition au Moyen Âge* (Université de Provence, 1983), 97.

⁶³ The following discussion draws on COL/CS/01/015, fol. 1r–v, TLA.

lawfully, theirs. It was their collective inheritance, should John and Margaret die suddenly. One of the documents in the *Liber Lynne* was a copy of the 1349 will of a Philip Wyth of Lynn, from whom his wife was descended. The original, Lawney instructed “you that are our heirs,” was “enrolled in the Guildhall of Lynn,” to which he directed his heirs should they need to take legal action before a local court in Lynn.⁶⁴ Lawney’s authorial voice was properly that of a *paterfamilias* and tutor. A good father, he spoke to his anticipated readers in the solemn, sober tone of the prescriptive advice literature designed for the urban household. The culture of the household permeated the *Liber Lynne*. “And look closely (*seche well*) at this testament,” Lawney counselled, “and if you do so, it will be to your profit.” The copies of the deeds of the properties in Southwark, London, and Lynn within the *Liber Lynne* were to act “as a guide [*a kalender*] to all our heirs.” This phrase might categorize the *Liber Lynne* itself. It was less a legal narrative than an exposition of the values of duty, sacrifice, obedience, love, and moral integrity, which were to sustain the horizontal as well as vertical relations of the household and the family.

Perceptions and structures of family

The perceptions of family expressed in the *Liber Lynne* were not only the product of material possessions and of familial relationships structured and formed by marriage and blood. They were also the fruits of memory, omission, imagination, and representation. For all that they were curated, John Lawney’s emotional and spiritual bonds of family were no less genuine or powerful.

Lawney may have been the male head of household, but his power was not absolute. In the balance sheet of credit and debt that was the summation of a life, Lawney held himself accountable to his children and to his heirs, who were themselves ultimately beholden to God. God alone would make the final reckoning on the Day of Judgement:

And [we] charge all our children upon our blessing and all the heirs that it descends to, that you pray and do pray for me the aforesaid John and Margaret my wife and for all our good deeds. And say prayers for us in act of alms, each of you that it descends to, to the best of your ability, without fail or deception, as you will answer before God at the day of doom.⁶⁵

Remembrance of their good deeds was to be a stimulus to perpetual devotion. The multi-generational prayers of the children and their heirs were to ease the journey of the souls of John and Margaret through purgatory. In the *Liber Lynne*, we glimpse the family as an interactive and intercessory community of the living and the dead, whose existence was dependent upon action and belief. Familial relations were cooperative and conditional.

Lawney was thus angry with his mother-in-law, Margaret, whom he accused of “sinfully” selling the waterside property in Lynn to William Blakeneye, a mariner and merchant of Lynn, just as he was endeavoring to shore up the legal basis of his family’s entitlement to the house.⁶⁶ Margaret, Lawney wrote in the *Liber Lynne*, regretted greatly what she had

⁶⁴ The will was indeed enrolled in the Red Register of Lynn: *Red Register of Lynn*, I: 202–04. The codicil and probate (204–06) were also enrolled. The testamentary record in the town register was, properly speaking, the “last will,” which dealt solely with real estate; it omitted Philip Wyth’s “testament,” consisting of bequests disposing of personal property. The last will and testament survive as a single text in 07.1-3/01, Anglicana 040, AHL, written in one hand, the script consistent with a mid-fourteenth-century date. It was this document, inherited by John Lawney from the Wyth family archive, that was copied into the *Liber Lynne*: COL/CS/01/015, fols. 10r–14r, TLA.

⁶⁵ COL/CS/01/015, fol. 1r–v, TLA.

⁶⁶ COL/CS/01/015, fol. 9v, TLA. Blakeneye was a burgess of Lynn, where he was also a tax assessor, chamberlain, and an elector of the town’s MPs: Holcombe Ingleby, ed., *The Red Register of King’s Lynn*, 2 vols. (Thew, 1919–1922), II:

done.⁶⁷ In the content and in the language of the charter of January 1418 by which she and her second husband, Henry Lovelich, surrendered their legal right to John Lawney and Margaret his wife, she attempted to remedy the mistake. Its opening declaratory words (*pateat evidenter*) were to leave absolutely no doubt as to her daughter's and Lawney's claim to the property.⁶⁸ If there was perhaps a performative aspect to this contrition, for John Lawney, at least, it was a moral and a spiritual imperative. She had sinned, for which she might seek personal atonement, but it was the duty of "you all, my heirs, as you will answer before God" to right this wrong.⁶⁹ The errant behavior of one family member, Lawney's mother-in-law, would not undermine the common good, and frustrate the collective will, of the family.

Commemorative prayer was not only a path to salvation. It was a mechanism for the creation, and repeated re-creation, of a cohesive family identity. This process could be effective only if one first found affinity *with* family. The *Liber Lynne* is as illuminating for what it excludes as what it includes. John Lawney's conception of family was conspicuous less by absence than by omission, which is to say that he did not forget family; he ignored it. There is no mention in the *Liber Lynne* of his father or mother, or of his own grandparents. Which family, or families, did Lawney include?

Lawney assembled the fragments of a family history around a lineage. The family did not have a point of origin, but it was linear. Descent came through the female side, through Lawney's marriage to Margaret, who was named after her mother, Margaret, the widow of Philip Wyth, who died in 1406. It is tempting to read the family history in the *Liber Lynne* as a palimpsest, as the successive incorporation of different families into another family. To Lawney, by contrast, these families were links in a chain; they had a common history. When does the history of one family end and that of another begin? Lawney imagined himself, his wife, their children, and their heirs not as descendants of the Wyth family of Lynn but as continuators of the family line. One of his sons to Margaret was named Eudo, presumably after Eudo Wyth, Margaret's brother.

The Philip Wyth who died in 1349, the great-grandfather of Margaret, Lawney's wife, was central to the family narrative. It was "old Philip Wyth" who, according to Lawney, had entailed by his will "to all our heirs a fine house with a quay by the waterside" in Lynn.⁷⁰ The adjective did not distinguish two generations of Philip Wyths; it was a term of endearment that conveyed Lawney's affection for, and familiarity with, a notable family member. The assumption that family came to an end with the failure to produce male heirs is not only misogynistic, but factually incorrect.⁷¹

It is to the dualistic characteristic of the family, its fragility and mutability but also its capacity to remake and rebuild itself, that the *Liber Lynne* bears witness. To John Lawney, the single most vital document in the *Liber Lynne* was the will of Philip Wyth, the burgess of Lynn who died in 1349 (see Figure 1). We know that Lawney regarded it as foundational and authoritative because he wrote a foreword to it, in Middle English, extracts from which I have already cited. This will, and its afterlife, underscores the adaptability and continuity of urban families in an age of plague. Philip Wyth's will is dated Maundy Thursday, 9 April 1349. The date is pertinent. More than 14 percent of the total number of extant wills from

39; Dorothy M. Owen, ed., *The Making of King's Lynn: A Documentary Survey* (Oxford, 1984), 332; KL/C 6/2, 17 December 1400, KL/C 39/46, KL/C 6/3, m. 11r, Norfolk Record Office Norwich, England [hereafter, NRO]. My thanks to Susan Maddock for the archival references.

⁶⁷ COL/CS/01/015, fol. 9v, TLA.

⁶⁸ COL/CS/01/015, fols. 27r–28r, TLA.

⁶⁹ COL/CS/01/015, fol. 9v, TLA.

⁷⁰ COL/CS/01/015, fol. 9v, TLA. The emphasis is mine.

⁷¹ Anne F. Sutton, "‘Serious Money’: The Benefits of Marriage in London, 1400–1499," *The London Journal* 38, no. 1 (2013): 1–17, at 4.

the town of Lynn in the fourteenth century come from “a single six-month period between the end of March and the end of September 1349.”⁷² It was in these months that the Black Death reached the East Anglian port of Lynn. Philip Wyth’s will is very long, extending over four folios in the *Liber Lynne*, from which we can suppose that he was wealthy; he left many bequests because he had much to give. To his son and heir, named Philip, and to the heirs of his son, he assigned all his real estate in Lynn. To his wife, Isabel, he bequeathed the family home—the house on the riverfront—for the term of her life, after which it was to revert to their son Philip. Since the son was only a child, Wyth named Isabel his guardian, but on the condition that, should she remarry while their son was not yet an adult, the guardianship would transfer to John de Wermegey. Isabel and John were co-executors of Wyth’s will. John de Wermegey would turn out to be critical to the fortunes of the Wyth family, but in wholly unpredictable ways.

John de Wermegey, described in the will as a *famulus* (or servant), belonged to Wyth’s household. In April 1349, when Wyth made his will, Wermegey was very probably a journeyman who had completed his apprenticeship with his master, but not yet set up his own business and household. He was to receive £10 in his master’s will, as opposed to the bequests of £1–£2 directed to the other members of Wyth’s household. A little over two months later, on 15 June 1349, Wyth added a codicil to his will.⁷³ The codicil was required because several members of his family, among them his wife Isabel, were dead; we can infer that they had died from the Black Death. John de Wermegey was now appointed sole guardian of his son. All the testator’s property in Lynn was still to go to his son and to the legitimate heirs of his son, but if the son should die without an heir, the succession would pass to John de Wermegey and to Joan, John’s wife, who were to enjoy the family estate for the term of their lives. Joan was also Philip Wyth’s daughter. In short, John de Wermegey, the guardian of Wyth’s son and heir, was at once Philip’s former apprentice and his son-in-law.

We might wonder how Philip Wyth conceived of “family” in the wake of the Black Death. In the summer of 1349, Wyth had other close male kin, including his brother John, to whom he could have entrusted the education and upbringing of his son. However, he chose a member of his household, who was married to his daughter; or did he choose a son-in-law, who was also part of his household? It is impossible to disentangle these threads. Rather, we see here the interaction of the ties of craft and of family. Philip Wyth was a merchant and burgess of Lynn,⁷⁴ but he was also involved in the manufacture and sale of iron. John de Wermegey, an ironmonger and burgess of the town, followed in his master’s footsteps. Networks of family and craft were not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, they might coexist and reinforce each other. These interactions could, and did, furnish new familial relations. Even if not strictly biological, these structures nevertheless allowed the family to reinvent itself, to survive, and to endure.

Some time before 1359, and after the death of his master and father-in-law in 1349, John de Wermegey purchased the Wyth family property from his ward, the young Philip Wyth, who had become a burgess of Lynn like his deceased father. The circumstances of the purchase are not known. What we do know is that already by 1349, John and Joan had named their own son Philip after Joan’s father.⁷⁵ Very soon, John de Wermegey would change his family name. In 1349, John was John de Wermegey; Wermegey was a toponymic name, and Wormegay, as it is called today, is a village situated about seven miles south of the town of

⁷² Jacques Beauroy, “Family Patterns and Relations of Bishop’s Lynn Will-makers in the Fourteenth Century,” in *The World We Have Gained: Histories of Population and Social Structure*, ed. Lloyd Bonfield et al. (Blackwell, 1986), 27.

⁷³ COL/CS/01/015, fols. 14r–16r, TLA.

⁷⁴ See, for example, TNA: SC 8/77/3850: petition of Peter Wake, Robert Braunch, Philip Wyth, and William de Bedewyk, merchants of King’s Lynn, to the king and council, 1337.

⁷⁵ By 1349, John de Wermegey and Joan had two sons, Philip and John, both mentioned in the codicil to Philip Wyth’s 1349 will: COL/CS/01/015, fol. 15r, TLA.

Lynn. In 1359, John had become John Wyth of Wermegey; in 1377 he was John de Wermegey “called Wyth” (*dictus Wyth*); by 1388, at the latest, he was just John Wyth, burgess of Lynn.

That a master, whether merchant or craftsman, might name his apprentice as his son and heir in the absence of a direct heir, is evident from the fifteenth-century Middle English poem “The Childe of Bristowe.”⁷⁶ The poem is a peculiarly urban story of the son and heir of a country gentleman, who oscillates uncomfortably between the competing demands and loyalties of his country-based father and of his surrogate-father, a Bristol merchant, to whom he is apprenticed. The biological father interprets family as the blood tie between parent and child, between father and son, for the inheritance of lands and lordships. The merchant, likewise, converses with the apprentice as “his son.” Impressed by the full extent of the apprentice’s filial duty, which leads him to sell off his inheritance to secure his father’s salvation, and without a child of his own to inherit, the merchant chooses to make the apprentice “now my heir.” This final act of munificence was the true meaning of family.

What was different with John de Wermegey is that it was John, not his master, who made the decision to adopt a new family name. In fashioning for himself a new family identity, the social and political capital of the Wyths in fourteenth-century Lynn must have proved too enticing to resist. In Lynn, the Wyths had a concentration of family property near Tuesday Market, where Philip (*d.* 1349) and John, his brother, were neighbors.⁷⁷ Although never mayor or Member of Parliament, Philip Wyth was a leading burgess of Lynn, where he held the municipal offices of jurat and consul in the first half of the fourteenth century.⁷⁸ John Wyth, *né* Wermegey, was similarly a jurat.⁷⁹ Philip Wyth, John’s son, would be a chamberlain of Lynn in 1377.⁸⁰ While Lynn was not Florence, the name of Wyth carried weight in the English town in similar ways to family names in towns in northern and central Italy.

One more point can be made about the actions of John de Wermegey. They exemplify the historically contingent character of family, which, in conditions of considerable social instability, cannot be restricted to modern paradigms of family as either a natural grouping or a social and cultural construct. In 1349 John and Joan were to have temporary care of the family inheritance until Philip Wyth’s son, Philip, attained his majority. Ten years later, the young Philip Wyth gave up his inheritance to his sister, Joan, and to Joan’s husband, John de Wermegey. Disinheritance, if that is what it was, was not the extinction of the Wyth family. John was increasingly calling himself, and being called by others, John Wyth;⁸¹ he named his son Philip after his father-in-law. This Philip Wyth not only “inherited” the name of his grandfather, he also succeeded to the patrimony. In April 1377, two years after another national outbreak of plague, but foreshadowing the family strategy of John and Margaret Lawney, John and Joan Wyth granted to their own son their life interest in the properties in Lynn bequeathed to them in 1349 in the event of the death of their ward.⁸² Then, as “sole surviving executor of the will of Philip Wyth late ironmonger and burgess of Lynn,” John Wyth separately enfeoffed them to his son. In spring 1378, again presaging Lawney’s

⁷⁶ Barbara A. Hanawalt, “‘The Childe of Bristowe’ and the Making of Middle-Class Adolescence,” in *Bodies and Disciplines: Intersections of Literature and History in Fifteenth-Century England*, ed. Barbara A. Hanawalt and David Wallace (Minneapolis, 1996), 159–60. For the poem, see Clarence Hopper, ed., “The Childe of Bristowe,” in *The Camden Miscellany* (Camden Society, 4th series, 1859), 9–27.

⁷⁷ COL/CS/01/015, fol. 13r, TLA.

⁷⁸ *Red Register of Lynn*, II: 182–3.

⁷⁹ *Red Register of Lynn*, II: 116, 120, 125.

⁸⁰ *Red Register of Lynn*, II: 132. For a little more information on the civic career of this Philip, who died in 1406, see Kate M. Parker, “Lordship, Liberty and the Pursuit of Politics in Lynn, 1370–1420” (PhD diss., University of East Anglia, 2004), 96–98.

⁸¹ In 1374, for example, John Wyth was one of the burgesses chosen locally to assess the contributions of individual townspeople to a parliamentary tax in Lynn: *Red Register of Lynn*, II: 114.

⁸² For this, and the following, see COL/CS/01/015, fols. 16r–18v, TLA.

skillful use of legal devices to legitimize and to confirm proof of ownership, John and Joan Wyth were parties to a final concord with their son that gave the latter rights in perpetuity. It was their son, Philip Wyth, who was the father of John Lawney's wife, Margaret (Figure 1). In disrupting the "natural" order of things, that is, in severing a father-to-son succession to redirect the Wyth inheritance, John de Wermegey/Wyth was pivotal to the family's continuity and longevity.

The Wyth family's reinvention was a contrivance, but one that was not mechanical or devoid of emotional attachment. Whatever John de Wermegey's initial motivation, his association with the Wyths of Lynn was both substantive and substantial. Its repercussions would be felt in the fifteenth century. When he made his first will on Maundy Thursday 1349, "old Philip Wyth" requested burial in the cemetery of the chapel of St. James in Lynn. Two months later, he had changed his mind. In the codicil to the will, Philip asked to be buried in the church of the Dominican friary, before the small cross.⁸³ More than 50 years later, when his eponymously named grandson contemplated his funeral arrangements, Philip Wyth stated that he wished "to be buried in the church of the preaching friars of Lynn next to my children (*iuxta filios meos*)."⁸⁴ He may not have been a direct descendant in the male line, but he respected the Dominican friary as a family mausoleum; and the friary was a place of burial for at least three generations of the Wyth family. Genealogical memory was neither natural nor preordained. It was the consequence of deliberate, human investment and intervention.

Could one choose family? John Lawney, the fifteenth-century London citizen and grocer, did. In the decades after the Black Death, so did John de Wermegey, a member of the household of Philip Wyth, the merchant of Lynn. Choice is not synonymous with free will; we cannot always choose how we feel. Yet to choose is to select one thing over another, however limited one's options; it is a preference. Like all acts of choice, it means ignoring, even rejecting, other possibilities. John Lawney's preference was for the family members with whom he now had ties through marriage, and through his wife, Margaret.

Even Lawney's perception of *this* family's past was partial. It had little to no place for John's stepdaughter, Margaret, the daughter of his wife's first marriage to William Radwell, the London stockfishmonger (Figure 1). We can assume that John Lawney had been acting informally as Margaret's guardian because of his marriage to Margaret's mother in 1411, but he procured official recognition of his responsibility only in 1422,⁸⁵ a timing that was convenient to Lawney's designs for the family estate in London, Southwark, and Lynn in favor of his own children and their heirs. Margaret, a one-year-old child on her mother's remarriage in 1411, had married a Northamptonshire gentleman, one Robert Isham, by 1427.⁸⁶ At some point between 1465 and 1473, Margaret and Robert petitioned the royal chancellor and Bishop of Bath and Wells, Robert Stillington, to rectify an injustice. The perpetrator, John Lawney, was now deceased, but it was alleged that he had deprived Margaret of a London property in the parish of St. Magnus the Martyr that her father, William Radwell, had bequeathed her.⁸⁷ Lawney had hired William Broun, a London scrivener, to write a "false deed," which set in train a sequence of property transactions that culminated in the appointment of John's and Margaret's son Eudo as the next heir. William Broun, like Richard Claidich, the scribe who copied deeds for Lawney prior to the commissioning of the *Liber Lynne*, was a member of the London Scriveners' company. Claidich and Broun joined the scriveners' guild within a short time of each other, and it is very likely that they were not

⁸³ COL/CS/01/015, fols. 10r, 15r, TLA.

⁸⁴ COL/CS/01/015, fol. 21v, TLA.

⁸⁵ R.R. Sharpe, ed., *Calendar of Letter-Books of the City of London: Letter-Book I, 1400–1422* (London, 1909), 268.

⁸⁶ *Letter Book I*, 268.

⁸⁷ TNA: C 1/40/275.

only contemporaries, but colleagues.⁸⁸ John Lawney was prepared to break the law, and to exclude one branch of the family, to do what he thought was right for the enactment and perpetuation of his own vision of the family. Family was essentially elective.

Family was, and is, as much a question of identity as a bodily matter of blood and reproduction. We do not need to read the sociology of the family to learn that the complexities of family cannot be smoothed out and limited to a few genetic facts. We speak routinely not only of the “structure” of family, but of the “sense” of belonging to family. The former, the realm of the objective and tangible, is suitable for quantitative, longitudinal research into the history of population and social structure. To approach family as feeling, as a “culture of relatedness,” to use the formulation of the social anthropologist Janet Carsten,⁸⁹ is to confront another constellation of methodological issues. Subjective, and reliant upon supposition, inference, and reading between the lines, it is a study of the evanescent, the mutable, and the sometimes ineffable.

Extant only because it entered an institutional archive relatively early in its history, the *Liber Lynne* is valuable because it gives details on perceptions and receptions of family that are rare in surviving English sources.⁹⁰ It provides the very thing that, over 25 years ago, Jenny Kermode thought was absent from late medieval English towns but present in “some European towns,” namely “direct evidence ... of explicit attitudes towards the family.”⁹¹ In the *Liber Lynne*, these attitudes were influenced by laws and customs concerning inheritance and succession, which in towns applied typically to urban citizens who were predominantly male and engaged in artisanal work or trade. They materialized through the role of writing in the transfer of property, the making of wills, and the execution of other testamentary practices.

In Lawney’s exclusion of his stepdaughter from the plans for his family, decisions about how a male householder expanded his chosen family, and even the choice of family member, responded to a legal framework that was itself profoundly gendered. Although recent scholarship has queried and qualified the full extent of its impact in English towns, the English common law of coverture prescribed that married women could not hold property and that a husband would become the guardian of his wife’s lands on their marriage.⁹² In the ego-centered way in which he enumerated the estate in Lynn as “my rent” (*mon rente*), “my house” (*mon hostell*), “my tenements” (*mes tenementz*), Lawney’s language in fact conflated possession and ownership.⁹³ It is tempting to envisage John Lawney, unproblematically, as the patriarchal head of household. Addressing “all my children and their heirs” in the opening sentence of the *Liber Lynne*, Lawney’s status as a father and as the potential head of a dynasty was the genesis of his male authority. However, power relations within the urban family were far from straightforward.

On closer inspection, the repetition of the first-person possessive adjective has an anxious timbre, as if Lawney’s manliness constantly had to be asserted, precisely because it

⁸⁸ Francis W. Steer, ed., *The Scriveners’ Company Common Paper, 1357–1628* (London Record Society, 4, 1968), 58, 60; Richard Firth Green, “The Early History of the Scriveners’ Company Common Paper and its So-Called ‘Oaths,’” in *Middle English Texts in Translation: A Festschrift Dedicated to Toshiyuki Takamiya on his 70th Birthday*, ed. Simon Horobin and Linne R. Mooney (York Medieval Press, 2014), 12–13.

⁸⁹ Janet Carsten, *After Kinship* (Cambridge, 2004), ch. 1.

⁹⁰ On the acquisition of the *Liber Lynne* by the London Kontor of the Hanse before the end of the fifteenth century, see Jenks, “Der Liber Lynne,” 30–31.

⁹¹ Jenny Kermode, “Sentiment and Survival: Family and Friends in Late Medieval English Towns,” *Journal of Family History* 24, no. 1 (1999): 5–18, at 6.

⁹² Cordelia Beattie, “Uncovering the Femme Couverte: Married Women and the Law in Late Medieval English towns,” in *La familia urbana: Matrimonio, parentesco y linaje en la Edad Media*, ed. Jesús Á. Solorzano Telechea et al. (Instituto de Estudios Riojanos, 2021), 219–39.

⁹³ COL/CS/01/015, fols. 21r, 28r, 29v, 30r, 31r, 33v, 34r, 34v, 36r, 36v, 40v, 42r, TLA.

was not assured. If we look again at the Middle English passages, Lawney seems to anticipate what Martha Howell has identified, a century later, as a “mercantile masculinity.”⁹⁴ His virtues were those of loyalty, diligence, and selflessness in the face of adversity. His was not a masculinity of domination. John did not govern his wife; they governed together. It was “we John and Margaret my wife,” who made the family entail that was the *raison d’être* of the *Liber Lynne*; of the house in Lynn, “we did entail it to our heirs.” The prayers, which were to be said for the souls of John Lawney “and Margaret his wife,” were incumbent upon “our children.”⁹⁵ The results of their common labor did not rest upon any one individual; they were a mutual effort. Business, too, was a shared domain. In March 1414, three years after her marriage to John, Margaret Lawney came in person before the mayor of Lynn to seal a bond “by her own hands” (*manibus suis propriis*) to a Lombard merchant. Fearing that her own seal was insufficiently known to guarantee repayment of the debt, Margaret made a personal request (*ad instanciam et personalem requisicionem predictae Margarete*) that the mayor affix his official seal to the credit instrument.⁹⁶ Margaret’s awareness of her vulnerability, publicly, before the law, did not preclude collaboration with her husband and participation in her husband’s business.

Gender relations shaped, and were shaped by, class. John Lawney was a property owner. Consciousness of patrimony, of property passed down from one’s ancestors, was not only a source of family identity, but a stimulus to the connectivity of family members and to the actual *formation* of family. What, and who, was family, without the feeling of family? Real estate and the issue of inheritance, which motivated the retention, transmission, and copying of property deeds and the keeping of family archives, activated ideas about the meaning of family and whom it included. If this conclusion does not surprise, it is worth reiterating because so much of what we know about the urban family in the late Middle Ages pertains to the propertied classes, a bias whose probable distortion is often not made explicit. Lawney was privileged to possess opportunities denied others, but he faced certain pressures, too.

John Lawney was also a merchant, whose interpretation of family was both mercantile and urban, in the sense that it reflected the uncertainty and risks of urban life. Like so many townspeople in this period, Lawney was an incomer, an outsider, a migrant. A London grocer, he sought to put down roots for himself and his family in the East Anglian town of Lynn. This was no easy task. In the *Liber Lynne*, Lawney entreated his children to be watchful, assiduous, and productive. Despite his own determination and resourcefulness, Lawney did not achieve his ambitions for the family home in Lynn. Documents numbered 45 and 46 in the *Liber Lynne*, dating from 1 May 1430, gave Ralph Lawney possession of the estate for the term of the lives of his parents, John and Margaret.⁹⁷ Document 47, from 30 November 1446, by which date both Margaret and Ralph were dead, invested Eudo, Ralph’s younger brother, with formal legal title of the property.⁹⁸ Yet five years later, in November 1451, John and Eudo sold the waterfront estate, after which the *Liber Lynne*, John Lawney’s deeds, and the property itself came into the hands of the new owner, the London grocer Stephen Broun.⁹⁹ Whether Lawney was suffering financial problems, we cannot say for sure: the records are silent. However, if this were the case, Lawney’s story is not exceptional. Let us return to “The Childe of Bristowe.” In a slightly later version of the Middle English poem known as “A Gode Mater of The Marchand and Hys Sone,” the father, a country gentleman, reacts

⁹⁴ Martha Howell, “Merchant Masculinity in Early Modern Northern Europe,” *Cultural and Social History* 18, no. 3 (2021): 275–96.

⁹⁵ The quotations are from COL/CS/01/015, fol. 1r–v, TLA; the emphases are mine.

⁹⁶ KL/C 10/2, fol. 22r, NRO. I would like to thank Susan Maddock for this reference.

⁹⁷ COL/CS/01/015, fols. 45r–46r, TLA.

⁹⁸ COL/CS/01/015, fol. 46r–v, TLA.

⁹⁹ COL/CS/01/015, fol. 47r, TLA.

furiously to the news that his son and heir wants to choose his own path and to become a merchant instead of a man of law:

“If you are a merchant,” my son William, “truly I can tell you,
I have seen men both rise and fall, it is but chance!”¹⁰⁰

The lesson of the land-based father was simple, but unsettling: in towns, success was unpredictable, the outcome of luck, good fortune, fate.

Comparable to Sarah Knott’s reformulation of motherhood—less a stable identity or a single condition than a congeries of activities and practices of mothering—family was a “verb,” not a noun.¹⁰¹ Lawney exhorted his children, and their heirs, not only to remember, but to exceed, the “good deeds” of John and Margaret on their behalf. Family, we might say, was defined by *doing*, not being. The *Liber Lynne* was an act of writing, and it was writing that made family, just as the various actions that the book recorded (of buying, bequeathing, and inheriting property, of going to court, of marrying and having children, even of dying) were also the verbs that made family in this time and place.

Conclusion

The fifteenth-century *Liber Lynne*, and the Wyth-Wermegey-Lawney relationship it records, offers insights into the continual making and remaking of the urban family in late medieval England. This process was visible *before* the Black Death, when we catch sight of it, fleetingly, in the fluidity of surnames of London apprentices, who might bear their masters’ last name.¹⁰² It was *accelerated* by the continual demographic onslaught of the plague. Anyone who has sought to investigate their own family history and learned of the ostracization of relatives in the past, or anyone who has tried to research a family tree only to discover, very quickly, the dilemma of who to include and who to exclude, will recognize the fallacy of the claim that “you can’t choose your family.” In exposing the fragility and precarity of families, the recurrence of plague in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries paradoxically increased the range of choices about types and degrees of genealogical closeness. Who counted as family, and what constituted a familial bond? Above all, a new consciousness of familial relations eroded the distinction between biological relatedness and socially constructed kinship.

Blood and ancestry were never attributes unique to the biological family in the Middle Ages. In Florence, “similar patterns of thinking about biological descent” subsisted among groups as diverse as the family, the nobility, and the city between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. With a collective history, the urban community of citizens was an “extended family,” whose members carried heritable group traits.¹⁰³ Larger, ostensibly “family,” groups, such as the *linajes* of Castilian towns, the Florentine *consorterie*, or Genoese *alberghi*, were also artificial entities, only sometimes bound together by networks of inter-marriage and more often acting as political factions.¹⁰⁴ However, the resemblance between the family and the guild was something different.

¹⁰⁰ James O. Halliwell, ed., *Nugae Poeticae: Select Pieces of Old English Popular Poetry, Illustrating the Manners and Arts of the Fifteenth Century* (John Russell Smith, 1844), 23.

¹⁰¹ Sarah Knott, *Mother: An Unconventional History* (Viking, 2020).

¹⁰² For examples, all drawn from London Letter Books D and E, see COL/AD/01/004, fols. 53v, 64v, 65v, and COL/AD/01/005, fols. 137v, 154r, TLA.

¹⁰³ J.M. Andrés Porras, “Ancestry, Blood, and Heredity. Attitudes towards Biological Descent in Late Medieval Tuscany, c. 1250–1400” (DPhil diss., University of Oxford, 2022), 29, 179.

¹⁰⁴ On the *alberghi*, and similar family groups, see Jacques Heers, *Family Clans in the Middle Ages: A Study of Political and Social Structures in Urban Areas* (North-Holland Pub. Co., 1977).

In their words and in their deeds, guilds were analogues to family.¹⁰⁵ Although guilds were not an exclusively urban phenomenon, they flourished in towns and cities. Critically, too, whether they were craft-based associations or fraternities, they emerged in the second half of the fourteenth century at a faster rate and in far greater number than ever before.¹⁰⁶ Some urban migrants came to live as apprentices in households with whom they had prior family connections,¹⁰⁷ but most lacked the support of kin. If guilds were not a direct replacement for family, according to Gervase Rosser, they fulfilled some of the functions that we might associate with family. In an urban environment marked by uprootedness and vulnerability, townspeople found comfort, and value, in the stability and security of membership of a guild. Fraternities were “surrogate families” (*familles de substitution*), which reproduced the fraternal ideal self-consciously and deliberately in a familiar, and familial, discourse of “fictional kinship.”¹⁰⁸ Guild members were to behave towards each other, at all times, *as if they were brothers and sisters*.¹⁰⁹

Historians have understood the correspondences and convergences between the guild and the family as purely metaphorical. To Rosser, there was a “crucial difference” between the family and the guild: guilds were “voluntary” associations, and membership was a conscious choice.¹¹⁰ A person *joined* a fraternity or craft, whereas an individual *belonged* to a family. Rosser’s eloquent exposition of “the artifice of the guilds” is convincing, but to propose that there was “nothing natural about the community of the guild” is to leave unspoken common assumptions about the urban family *and* to miss the common dynamic between membership of the guild and of the family.¹¹¹ The *Liber Lynne* allows us to see that the “natural” family—delineated by blood, ancestry, and biology—was also an artifice. The sharp increase of crafts and fraternities, which coexisted with the proliferation of blended families and other kinds of chosen family derived from the ties of blood and marriage, was a manifestation of more expansive, and more nuanced, modes of thinking about family in an age of plague.

Indeed, the experiences of one London artisanal family—the Mosehaches—show how the loyalties and structures of family and guild might coalesce and combine in such a way as to be indivisible. The Mosehaches resided outside the city walls, not far from Newgate and Smithfield, in the parish of St. Sepulchre, where many fellow tanners lived and worked. When Walter Mosehache died in 1349, his will devised to his daughter Margery £10 and two “leaden troughs,” doubtless used for the tanning of animal skins, with the stipulation that she marry a member of Walter’s craft.¹¹² When Walter’s son, William, made his will in 1369, he bequeathed to his wife Johanna his table in the Tanners’ Seld, a permanent market

¹⁰⁵ Hanawalt, *The Ties that Bind*, 262–66.

¹⁰⁶ On the chronology, see Caroline M. Barron, “The Parish Fraternities of Medieval London,” in *The Church in Pre-Reformation Society: Essays in Honour of F.R.H. Du Boulay*, ed. Caroline M. Barron and Christopher Harper-Bill (Boydell Press, 1985), 13–37.

¹⁰⁷ Susan Maddock, “Margery Kempe’s Home Town and Worthy Kin,” in *Encountering The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. L. Kalas and L. Varnam (Manchester, 2021), 163–84.

¹⁰⁸ Gervase Rosser, “Solidarités et changement social. Les fraternités urbaines anglaises à la fin du Moyen Âge,” *Annales. Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 48, no. 5 (1993): 1127–43, at 1129. For a similar argument, see Laura Crombie, “Charity and Neighbourly Communities among the Guilds of Late Medieval Ghent,” in *The Experience of Neighbourhood in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Bronach C. Kane and Simon Sandall (Routledge, 2022), 135–48.

¹⁰⁹ Gervase Rosser, *The Art of Solidarity in the Middle Ages: Guilds in England 1250–1550* (Oxford, 2015), 59.

¹¹⁰ Gervase Rosser, “Guilds and Confraternities: Architects of Unnatural Community,” in *De bono communi. The Discourse and Practice of the Common Good in the European City (13th–16th c.)*, ed. É. Lecuppre-Desjardin and A.-L. Van Bruaene (Brepols, 2010), 222.

¹¹¹ The quotations are from Gervase Rosser, “Guilds and Confraternities,” 218, 222.

¹¹² *Calendar of Wills Proved and Enrolled in the Court of Husting*, I: 574.

for the selling of animal hides situated in Cheapside, London's principal commercial district.¹¹³ Johanna was to keep possession of the table for as long as she lived, but her rights were not automatic: she either had to stay a widow or marry another tanner in order to retain proprietorship. On Johanna's death, the table was to pass to William's son, Richard, but he too would inherit the market stall only if he practiced the craft of tanning. If Richard did not, William atte Felde, another London tanner who was perhaps William's apprentice, would succeed to the property. Like John Lawney's *Liber Lynne*, the two wills testify powerfully to the constructed nature of family; the male testators aimed to establish the rules and order of inheritance, which made succession repeatedly contingent and the continuation and reality of family performative. In the cases of father and son, Walter and William, multifaceted and intergenerational interactions rendered family and guild almost a single group. Should a family member fail to provide masses for William in return for ownership of the stall in the Tanners' Seld, the tanners' fraternity would inherit the estate.¹¹⁴ In the dense social network of the tanners, where personal and professional entanglements blended and thickened relationships between family and guild, the craft and the fraternity were imagined as integral components of the family line.

Two final examples, this time from York, underline the significance of choice in relation to family formation. The York merchant Robert de Howom was a twice-married mayor of the city, who outlived both his wives, Katherine and Margaret, beside whom he wished to be buried in the family chantry chapel in 1396. His only surviving child, his son and heir, also called Robert, to whom he left his main residence in York and 1,000 marks in cash, was conceived by neither wife. Robert, the son, was a bastard, his mother one Beatrice Forden, who received £10 in the will.¹¹⁵ His illegitimacy did not prevent him from becoming a citizen of York a short time before his father's death. He is named in the city's freemen register as "Robert de Howom, son of Robert de Howom, merchant," a wording indicative of his admission to the citizenry by inheritance.¹¹⁶ Nearly thirty years later, William Selby, another York merchant and mayor of the city, drew up his will. He desired burial in the cathedral church next to his ancestors (*iuxta corpora antecessorum meorum*). His greatest worry was reserved for his wife Hawisia and for the child that she might, or might not, conceive. Should Hawisia die without producing an heir, then all Selby's properties, including the large house in Petergate where he lived, were to pass on his own death to Hawisia's brother, William Mowbray, and to Mowbray's heirs. The gift, however, was conditional. In this eventuality, William Mowbray, Selby's brother-in-law, and Mowbray's heirs, were to change their surname and to take on a new identity: they were to bear the name of Selby (*gerant hoc cognomen Seleby*).¹¹⁷

Fungible, mutable, and selective ideas of family, such as those expressed in the Robury, Mosehache, Howom, and Selby families, as well as in the *Liber Lynne*, were occasioned and facilitated by the relative authority of family members inside and outside the urban household. Yet the persistent and ubiquitous presence of epidemic disease also gave different shapes to, and created flexible ideas of, family. Senses of family belonging and family formations were therefore intensely pliable in the late Middle Ages. In interrogating the concept of "chosen family," we should now ask: who could choose, what could they choose, and what were the historical contingencies that both enabled and structured these choices?

¹¹³ *Calendar of Wills Proved and Enrolled in the Court of Husting*, II: 135. On the Tanners' Seld, and its special importance to the tanners, see Derek Keene, "Tanners' Widows, 1300–1350," in *Medieval London Widows*, ed. Barron and Sutton, 1–28.

¹¹⁴ *Calendar of Wills Proved and Enrolled in the Court of Husting*, II: 135.

¹¹⁵ Probate Register 1, fols. 100v–103v, Borthwick Institute of Historical Research, York, England.

¹¹⁶ Francis Collins, ed., *Register of the Freemen of the City of York* (Surtees Society, 96, 1896), 1: 95.

¹¹⁷ Dean and Chapter Probate Register 1, fol. 229r, York Minster Library, York, England.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2025.10123>.

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Cite this article: Christian D. Liddy, "What is Family in an Age of Plague? The *Liber Lynne* and the Urban Family in Late Medieval England," *Journal of British Studies* 64 (2025): e61. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2025.10123>