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Living a Good Death in Final Wishes: Lay Sanctification and Testamentary Practice at the Turn of the Fourteenth Century

Inquiries into testamentary practice are not new to the field of medieval studies. The study of wills allows for greater understanding of family wealth and their changing patterns of devolution, with all their tensions, from feudal to bourgeois economies. But testaments were also, and perhaps foremost in the medieval culture, vehicles to secure one's passage in the afterlife, a paramount consideration that significantly occupied the will-maker's mind. As we are facing ourselves, at the turn of the twenty-first century, major cultural developments regarding the right to die with dignity, especially in Canada, one might want to seek larger understanding set into historical perspective. Indeed it was at the turn of the fourteenth century that ordinary lay people also claimed the right to die with dignity: not of the physical kind, however, but the spiritual. What lies at the heart of my study is that women and men, once they acquired the means to express themselves publically by words of last wishes, thanks to a very slow, historical process of cultural democratization, similarly yearned for a quality of death. They did so with a clear understanding that nuncupative (oral) testaments were foremost communication tools apt to advertise spiritual values they meant to embody for their own spiritual gain, but also as exemplars for the benefit of their family, friends and neighbours to emulate. In other words, understanding this popular phenomenon, which had considerable cultural implications in the late Middle Ages, will add perspective to our own collective experience at the conjunction of social media, human dignity in death and cultural authority.

This project rests on 560 unedited wills from Marseille (that I have spent 30 years transcribing), dated 1248-1350, the oldest corpus known in France. My goal is to produce a critical, historically contextualized, edition of wills. When will-makers called a notary to record their last wishes, most testators were admittedly ailing (75%). Especially in the context of the late thirteenth-century spiritual renewal, this meant that last wishes were a calculated means to prepare for a "good death" following, one hoped, what contemporary preachers admonished: a life well lived according to evangelical values and purgatorial beliefs. Testators produced arguably the best snapshots that help historians decode the commoners' frame of mind when approaching death or considering the world they were about to leave behind, and the world they contemplated ahead. Marseille provides an exceptional case study in support of this assertion: at the turn of the fourteenth century, the city's pervasive evangelical culture stimulated in unprecedented ways testamentary production among both women and men. My project--warranted given the steady state of deterioration of these archives---begins with an analytical introduction arguing that these legal acts, which in Marseille were produced in greater number by women than men, served as narratives to display a didactic model of spiritual behavior. Intertextual analysis allows to connect new findings on theological teaching at the end of the thirteenth century---and its correlated devotional practice specifically geared to northern elite women---with Marseille "middle class" women. The latter revealed in their testamentary dispositions a keen awareness of these developments, such as a carpenter's wife in 1299 who ordered a priest to perform the *absolvere corpus*, which is the earliest evidence ever recorded of the ritual of the absolution of the dead. This will, among the 35-40 pieces to be selected for the edition, epitomizes the active relationship lay people in Marseille had with the sacred, echoing the latest evangelical and theological developments of their times.