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Kathleen E. Kennedy

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KATHLEEN E. KENNEDY

- Soldier: Where did you get the coconuts?
Arthur: Through. ... We found them.
Soldier: Found them? In Mercia. The coconut's tropical.
Arthur: What do you mean?
Soldier: Well, this is a temperate zone.
Arthur: The swallow may fly south with the sun or the house martin or the plover seek hot lands in winter, yet these are not strangers to our land.
Soldier: Are you suggesting that coconuts migrate?
Arthur: Not at all. They could be carried.
Soldier: What? A *swallow* carrying a *coconut*?
Arthur: It could grip it by the husk...
Soldier: It's not a question of where he grips it, it's a simple matter of weight-ratios ... a five-ounce bird could not hold a one-pound coconut.¹

IN THE ICONIC opening scene of the film, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975), King Arthur attempts to explain how the coconuts carried by his servant came to be found in Mercia, an Anglo-Saxon kingdom. The humour of these explanations lies in how impossible they are. A pseudo-scientific experiment punctuates a later scene, as a coconut-laden swallow is put in flight to determine if such a thing is empirically possible. As the camera cuts away, the bird falls. One lesson is clear: swallows cannot carry coconuts, even in a silly place like Monty Python's Camelot. Another lesson is equally apparent, if actually false: coconuts could not have existed in medieval England. Occluded is the possibility that a chain of human relationships and sophisticated mercantile networks could have transported the coconuts from India all the way to England. Is that what Arthur had begun to say:

¹ Cleese, et al. *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, 2.

“through trade”? We cannot know, as his subsequent failure to defend the existence of coconuts renders them historically impossible, if materially present in the scene.

In Great Britain and the United States, one simply cannot bring up the subject of coconuts in medieval England without Monty Python entering the conversation.² Indeed, this famous comic debate, and its implied erasure of non-European people and places from the Middle Ages, may be so deeply embedded in the unconscious of the contemporary medievalist that we have never even thought to look for coconuts in this era. After all, what could be less evocative of medieval England than the coconut? My study reveals, instead, that late medieval England was actually rife with coconuts—and that this apparently surprising fact reveals much about the need to challenge the old assumptions that have governed medieval studies. Coconuts imported from India healed people and cups made out of coconuts graced the tables of medieval English households for hundreds of years before Columbus sailed to the Americas. Placing the coconut in its English context enables a case study of the degree to which medieval people had physical, daily experience of durable goods from far outside of Europe.

It also shows that disregarding the global dimensions of medieval material culture runs the risk of perpetuating presentist myths of medieval insularity. The reassessment required by the existence of coconuts in late medieval England forces us to confront the ahistorical persistence of a Great White Middle Ages, despite the efforts of a growing number of scholars who have worked to counter such narratives. First, the evidence of coconut ownership provides a surprising proof of the imported luxury market’s reach in medieval England. While coconuts were certainly beyond the means of peasants, the evidence is clear that, by the fifteenth century, coconuts could be found in even quite modest homes. Second, we must credit that the medieval English owners of these items may have viewed their provenance in Asia, and India in particular, as ordinary and comprehensible as well as rare and magical. While coconuts were thought to have mysterious and valuable properties, the English understood that they, like some other luxury goods such as pepper, came from specific places. Indeed, this localization of coconuts to India was part of their desirability. Third, I argue that a preexisting tradition of prizing luxury wooden goods primed the English to view coconuts not only as exotic medicine, but also as potential material for fine wooden tableware. Unlike ostrich eggs, nautilus shells, and other true rarities, native English traditions made coconuts especially attractive and familiar. The English adapted coconuts to their own uses, and did not treat them as special or unique on account of

² In Germany you also cannot avoid it, since the German title of the film is *Die Ritter der Kokosnuß* (The Knights of the Coconut).

their tropical origins. In short, by the late Middle Ages, many English people might well have handled a coconut and perhaps even owned one: his or her very own everyday Indian treasure.

The Freight of Medieval Coconuts

The medieval English coconut provides material support for the arguments of Kim Phillips (and others) that “Orientalism” in its current configuration is a largely modern phenomenon.³ Lucy Pick sets out in detail how conceptions of Asia expressed in the European Middle Ages do not tidily align with Edward Said’s tripartite definition in which academics normalise an imaginary “Orient” that is then deployed politically as part of colonial processes.⁴ As Phillips argues, the European Middle Ages were a “pre-colonial” era, at least insofar as relations between Europe and non-European territories is concerned. Even after European exploration of West Africa and voyages into the Indian Ocean, even after institutionalised colonisation of the Americas began, Phillips argues for a complicated European understanding of places, such as India, that do not fit the “Orientalist” model. Marianne O’Doherty argues that pre-modern European conceptions of “the east” could be simultaneously very local, especially when informed by knowledge of specific, heavily trafficked commercial ports; and fictional, when influenced by earlier wonder literature and religious texts.⁵ Conversely, Kathleen Davis shows how early modern political commentators rhetorically crafted a colonised Indian Other at the same time that they used the same legal and religious justifications to construct a Middle Ages: the colonised Indian and the “Dark Age” peasant share the same origin.⁶ With the notable exception of Davis, most of this analysis of “pre-colonial” European perceptions of Africa, India, and Asia concentrates on textual analysis of literary romances, travel narratives, maps and the like.⁷ Material cul-

3 In this paragraph I am highlighting recent scholarship discussing India specifically. See Phillips, *Before Orientalism*, particularly the introduction. Though most of the postcolonial critics cited here write to expand and critique Edward Said, they acknowledge that his seminal work on the subject, *Orientalism*, remains central.

4 Pick, “Edward Said, *Orientalism*.” Also see Phillips, *Before Orientalism*, 15–27.

5 O’Doherty, *The Indies and the Medieval West*, especially 1–9 and 53–76.

6 Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty*.

7 As they do not specifically focus on the sub-continent’s history and culture, this concentration leaves out the important and growing body of related criticism, including but certainly not limited to: Whitaker, *Making Race Matter*; Conklin Akbari and Mallette, *A Sea of Languages*; Ganim and Legassie, *Cosmopolitanism and the Middle Ages*; Conklin Akbari, *Idols in the East*; and Cohen, *Cultural Diversity*.

ture offers much yet-untapped material that could bolster these efforts.⁸ Indeed, medieval coconuts preserved in modern museums provide physical evidence of the dual colonial process described by Carol Symes: “un-Modern artefacts are transferred to Modern metropolises, where they are prized by private collectors and the curators of competing imperial museums. The un-Modern comes into vogue, inspiring Modern fashions.”⁹

The medieval English coconut also substantiates what Geraldine Heng calls medieval “globalism” and highlights some of the methods Heng outlines as necessary to apprehending early globality.¹⁰ Studying medieval coconuts requires a deeply interdisciplinary approach, combining the insights of literary critics, historians, and archaeobotanists (among others).¹¹ I accordingly cite translated and original-language materials, unpublished archival documents, and physical objects handled with gloves in museums. I deploy all of these sources in order to develop a preliminary history of the medieval English coconut. At the same time, I recognise that this endeavour throws my own unacknowledged racism and that of European medieval studies into stark relief, and makes the interpretive analysis of this history (the “historicization, contextualization, analysis, interpretation, and considered evaluation and judgment”) both more tentative and more antagonistic than it might otherwise be—yet all the more necessary for that.¹² This is part of the praxis to which western scholars must become accustomed as a result of the attempt to “do global history.”

Coconuts exemplify the interconnectivity that Heng sees as characterising pre-modern globalisms, demonstrate the elasticity of periodization from a global perspective, and underscore the deliberate construction of “the Middle Ages” as fully separate from an early modern period marked by European colonialism in Asia

8 For an excellent example of how consideration of material culture can enrich document-based study, see, for example, Lambourn and Lieberman, “Chinese Porcelain and Rabbinic Law.”

9 Symes, “When We Talk about Modernity,” 715–26, at 715. Some early modern and modern coconut cups starkly illustrate this process, since coconut cups in European styles were imported into colonised areas and displaced indigenous cup materials and styles among colonised elites. South American coconut jícara and their differences from the traditional gourd jícara used to drink mate offer particularly illuminating examples.

10 Heng, “Early Globalities,” 244, 249.

11 This interdisciplinarity is advocated by Kinoshita, who sees it as both inevitable and necessary for true global historical research: Kinoshita, “Medieval Mediterranean Literature,” 606–7.

12 The quotation is from Heng, “Early Globalities,” 249.

and the Americas.¹³ As we shall see, coconuts had been harvested and shipped as export commodities across the Indian Ocean and into the eastern Mediterranean since Roman times. In this sense there was no “medieval coconut” at all; coconuts had been a normal export or import for a very long time. In fact, given England’s Romanization, it seems likely that coconuts were imported in this early period, too, if less commonly after 410 CE, when trade with the Mediterranean area became increasingly difficult. At some point in the later Middle Ages, and by the mid-thirteenth century at the latest, coconuts began to become regularly available (perhaps again) in England: the “medieval English coconuts” of my title. In one sense, their purpose was the same: both medieval and ancient coconuts were valued as medicinal. At the same time, the medieval coconut served a new purpose, becoming a decorative commodity and a vehicle for artistic craftsmanship. The evidence I offer below suggests that craftsmen in England, as in Germany, enjoyed the challenge of working with coconut shells and adapted them to their own native fine woodenware traditions. Before we can examine medieval English coconuts in records or in museums, however, we have to learn how to see them, and also consider why they have seldom been noticed before. I contend that the medieval English coconut was not thought to exist because its existence would require a pre-colonial relationship to have existed between England and India, and such a relationship upends modern (English) assumptions about the historical relationship between these two regions. The Python gag, of course, exploits these assumptions. Previous academic studies of medieval coconuts highlight the barriers to seeing them, especially in England, since the only monograph devoted to this topic concentrates on Germany.¹⁴ Most recently, Karl-Heinz Speiß has studied coconuts among other precious objects prized in European court culture, but begins his study with Vasco da Gama’s voyage to India in 1498.¹⁵ Prior to that encounter, he claims that “nothing can be said with certainty about the coconut trade, since coconuts are not listed in tariff-lists or freight registers.”¹⁶ (Happily, English sources provide more insight than this.) Speiß also associates coconut collections exclusively with the nobility and the papacy; notably, his only exceptions

13 Heng, “Early Globalities,” 244; Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty*, 1–20.

14 The barrier to seeing the medieval coconut is strengthened by the inaccessibility of Fritz, *Die Gefäße*, as just over a dozen libraries and museums in the United States own it, and very few of these copies circulate. Only a handful of copies are available in the United Kingdom. More recently, there is material on German coconut cups used as reliquaries (something else the English never did) in Cordez, *Schatz, Gedächtnis, Wunder*. According to WorldCat, no libraries in North America or the UK own this book.

15 Speiß, “Asian Objects,” 9–28.

16 Ibid, 22. Fritz, *Die Gefäße*, 11, also found coconuts in wills and inventories, as I have.

are the colleges of Oxford and Cambridge.¹⁷ More imaginatively, Rabia Gregory allows us to glimpse what the examination of medieval coconuts in German collections might bring to the study of material culture, religious studies, and the history of colonialism.¹⁸ Writing exclusively about coconuts carved with relief designs, she asserts that “objects depicting Jesus that were crafted in Europe from African materials communicated to medieval viewers the universal scope of Christianity.”¹⁹ To her, the coconuts’ non-European origin was crucial both to their desirability and to the religious significance of their decorations. The examples she cites were frequently repurposed as reliquaries, although she notes that coconut cups were rarely used liturgically as chalices in the sixteenth century.²⁰

Coconuts aside, scholarship on medieval European trade, especially the spice trade, has struggled to embrace the notion of a commodity that might be both commonplace and a luxury import. As Christopher Dyer notes, the word “luxury” “is constantly used by historians, who refer to ‘luxury goods’ and people involved in the ‘luxury trades’. We think that we know a luxury when we see one, or read about it in a document.”²¹ Yet he also acknowledges that “there are often difficulties in distinguishing between luxury and the everyday.”²² As a corrective, Dyer offers the following definition:

Luxury goods and services can be defined as not being merely utilitarian. They were scarce and expensive, they conferred status on those who used them, brought people of similar standing together, and excluded those who did not belong. Luxury status had economic significance, but cultural factors defined which goods were regarded as desirable. This brought into the picture pleasure, taste and fashion. Luxuries changed over space and time, and they were perceived differently at different social levels.²³

Coconuts fit into this definition of luxury relatively well. Once reduced to their empty shells, their use was both utilitarian and decorative, and while they were more expensive than some other kinds of goods, they were inexpensive enough to be acquired by many different classes of people and often in quantity. As we

17 Speiß, “Asian Objects,” 23.

18 Gregory, “Black as a Coconut.”

19 Ibid, 396.

20 Ibid, 397–98, 401.

21 Dyer, “*Luxury Goods*,” 217.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid, 219.

will see, the way coconuts are treated in probate documents suggests that they did bring people of similar standing together. Only Dyer's temporal limits may not apply to coconuts: the evidence suggests that there was a fashion for coconuts, but that this vogue lasted for hundreds of years, far beyond the limits of this present article and perhaps outside of Dyer's definition. If the coconut was a luxury in later medieval England, then it was a relatively common one for a long time.

As a common luxury, coconuts share some characteristics with pepper. As Paul Freedman has shown, the ubiquity of pepper compounded its desirability and therefore affected its cost. But unlike coconuts, pepper was imported into Europe in truly enormous quantities, large enough that, by the fifteenth century, it was the least expensive of all spices, even as demand for it continued to rise.²⁴ Freedman calls pepper a "necessary luxury" and "an expensive condiment, but one within reach of a substantial proportion of the population."²⁵ He estimates that a pound of pepper would have cost a bit over two days' wages for a skilled London craftsman in the mid-fifteenth century.²⁶ I argue that coconuts occupied a similar position similar among commodities: they were luxuries, but they were everyday (if not really necessary) luxuries.

The Coconut Cups of Late Medieval England

The English appear to have had a passion for coconuts, perhaps unmatched across Europe.²⁷ Coconuts appear in English customs, probate, and guild records both as an edible commodity and as cups made from shells emptied of their meat. The earliest record of a coconut cup I have found in published sources dates from the mid-thirteenth century; and while it seems likely that they arrived in England earlier than this, they certainly become increasingly common in wills during the fourteenth and fifteenth century—partly because making a will became a more common practice in this period.²⁸ I have found coconuts willed in every quarter century, and almost every decade, from 1300 onward through the end of Henry

24 Freedman, "Spices," 1214. For pepper trade in the Indian Ocean see Prange, "Measuring by the Bushel."

25 Freedman, "Spices," 1215.

26 Freedman, *Out of the East*, 127.

27 Fritz, *Die Gefäße*, 27, and see also the comparison of my findings with his in n. 28 below.

28 Raine, *Wills and Inventories*, 9. This mid-thirteenth century date is also noted by Fritz, though I have found far more coconuts in the English records than he adduced in non-English sources predating 1498: Fritz, *Die Gefäße*, 13, 25–27. His data from individual collections, like the Papal treasury, parallels mine more closely, *Die Gefäße*, 25.

VIII's reign in 1547, and beyond.²⁹ In one series of wills from 1479–1486, twenty-one people bequeathed one or more coconuts.³⁰ Probability suggests that the complete manuscript record would confirm the regular appearance of coconut cups in wealthier medieval homes across England. For now, a random sampling of wills offers insight into the ways these Indian objects circulated among the English and how they were positioned among other English woodenwares. Wills show that a special effort was made to identify coconut cups among other tableware, and many wills emphasize that this particular cup is “called” a “nut,” whether in Latin (*nux*), law French (*le note*), or English (*nutte*). In both Latin and Arabic, the medieval coconut was known formally as the “nut of India.” Thanks, perhaps, to the coconut’s introduction to the Americas, it could no longer be thus identified, and the “coco” modifier was added later in the 16th century. Yet there is no doubt that the medieval commodity called simply “nut” was a coconut.³¹ The only nut large enough to serve as the bowl of a goblet was a coconut. There was no other. Indeed, the earliest recorded English bequest of a coconut cup explicitly adds the formal modifier “Indye.” After that, apparently, the specific identity of these nuts went without saying: another proof of the coconut’s ubiquity. This English shorthand usage mirrors that of the mazer: in wills, “a mazer” refers to a decorated maplewood cup. Likewise “a nutte” in a will refers to a coconut cup.

Wills are notorious for leaving out many goods that are otherwise known to have been owned by the testator, such as books, and many wills use language suggesting that the testator owned several coconut cups, not all of which appear in the will, for whatever reason. In 1383, a London fishmonger willed two coconut cups with silver stands and covers to his wife.³² Perhaps reflecting the increasing availability of coconuts following da Gama’s voyage, some coconut collections could be relatively extensive by the early sixteenth century. In 1508, Thomas Tremayll willed three coconut cups, each individually decorated: “a cup of mine called ‘le grete Nutt’ with the cover”, “a cup called ‘le Nutte’ bound with silver and gilt with a lion on its cover,” and “that new cup bound with silver called ‘le litell Nutte’ with its

29 Aside from the Raine volume already cited, these include: Sharpe, *Calendar of Wills Proved*; Darlington, *London Consistory Court Wills*; Boatwright, Habberjam, and Hammond, *The Logge Register*; Weaver, *Medieval Somerset Wills*; Foster, *Lincoln Wills*; Gibbons, *Early Lincoln Wills*; *Testamenta Eboracensia*.

30 Boatwright, Habberjam, and Hammond, *The Logge Register*, wills numbered 12, 27, 33, 52, 55, 75, 78, 87, 89, 99, 122, 130, 172, 199, 246, 262, 303, 309, 317, 320, 361.

31 “Coco, cocoa,” Simpson and Weiner, eds., *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 3: 423–24.

32 Sharpe, *Calendar of Wills*, 2: 238.

cover.”³³ Other wills imply the existence of coconut cups that simply did not make the testator’s list of bequests, and one wonders how many are hidden behind the many references to “my best” coconut cup. For example, in 1459, a Hull widow willed only her “best” and her “least” coconut cups, and so presumably had more than these two.³⁴ Institutions might have owned even more coconut cups than private households; Durham Priory had four coconut cups as early as 1446.³⁵

Coconut cups were willed both to and by a relatively wide range of people: yeomen and gentry, clerics and laypeople, men and women, dwellers in town and in the provinces. However, our reliance on evidence from wills places a firm lower limitation on the class of documented coconut-owners: one did not make a will unless one had enough property to warrant such a document. Nevertheless, making a will became increasingly common for the upper classes throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and by the end of the fifteenth century even yeomen were making wills: these include coconuts.³⁶ The number of women willing and receiving them may be notable on its own, as women are less well represented in the documentary record than men in most cases: the earliest attestation of a coconut cup is in the will of the Master of Sherborn Hospital outside Durham, who willed a cup to his niece in 1259.³⁷ Clergy received a number of coconut cups in wills, and while coconut cups turn up commonly in inventories of ecclesiastical institutions, I think we should not view these cups as liturgical in nature.³⁸ Indeed, clergy willing coconuts to their own relatives strongly suggests personal use.³⁹

The nature of testamentary evidence creates the strong impression that coconuts were often handed down to children from parents. One august coconut cup was even entailed in 1517; in the future, it would descend only to the eldest male heir. The rest of the testator’s children and grandchildren each received a horse

33 Weaver, *Medieval Somerset Wills*, 1: 128.

34 *Testamenta Eboracensia*, 2: 235.

35 Raine, *Wills and Inventories*, 94.

36 Boatwright, Habberjam, and Hammond, *The Logge Register*, 1: 257–58 (Southwark, 1483). I am grateful to Louisa Foroughi for bringing this citation to my attention.

37 Raine, *Wills and Inventories*, 94.

38 Sharpe, *Calendar of Wills*, 2: 269 (London, 1388); Foster, *Lincoln Wills*, 1: 6 (Lincoln 1327), *Testamenta Eboracensia*, 1: 180 (Ingmanthorpe, 1392); *Testamenta Eboracensia*, 2: 47 (York, 1433); *Testamenta Eboracensia*, 3: 262, (Helmsley, 1481); Raine, *Wills and Inventories*, 94 (Durham Priory, 1446).

39 For examples, see Raine, *Wills and Inventories*, 9 (to a niece, 1259); *Testamenta Eboracensia*, 1: 69 (to a female relative, 1358); *Testamenta Eboracensia*, 3: 174 (to a sister, 1476); *Testamenta Eboracensia*, 4: 32 (to his sister, 1487).

or a cow, suggesting that, while comfortable, this esquire's estate was not deluxe; at the same time, it suggests that these cups were more valuable than livestock.⁴⁰ Some cups are identified as having been previously owned by other family members, or otherwise identified as heirlooms.⁴¹ Coconut cups might even be so closely identified with a particular household that some widows were allowed to continue using the cups until their own deaths, when a cup would revert to her deceased husband's heirs.⁴²

Few fifteenth-century English coconut cups survive today, but those that do supplement the documentary evidence. Extant cups are set onto metal stems and bases, with metal straps extending upward. (**Plate 1.1**) All of this metalwork could be decorated. The stems could be quite wide, and the straps often extended to include a metal lip above the level of the coconut. Sometimes this lip was inscribed, although we do not have enough extant examples to know if this was a common practice or not. As with all medieval cups, a coconut cup could be lidded. Unlike the Germans and the Dutch, who frequently carved their coconut cups, the English polished theirs smooth.

The terms used to describe these cups also give us a good sense of how the larger, no longer extant, body of cups compares to those remaining today. Wills needed to be specific enough that executors could recognize each item and so that anyone contesting the will had little room for manoeuvre. Like the extant English examples, the coconuts in the wills were polished and, in many cases, painted or stained black.⁴³ Given its added monetary value, the description of any metalwork was also of importance in the wills. The addition of a stem could be highlighted by calling the cup a "standing" cup, or mentioning the base of the stem.⁴⁴ Covers and bases could be silver, gold, or fashioned of various gilt alloys. Sometimes a will

40 *Testamenta Eboracensia*, 5: 85 (Bolton, Yorkshire, 1517).

41 For example, Sharpe, *Calendar of Wills*, 1: 471 (London, 1342); Gibbons, *Early Lincoln Wills*, 132 (Pedwardyn, 1404); *Testamenta Eboracensia*, 3: 174 (Beverley, 1476); Boatwright, Habberjam, and Hammond, *The Logge Register*, 2: 133 (Canterbury, 1485); *Testamenta Eboracensia*, 4: 158 (Calverley, 1499).

42 For example, see *Testamenta Eboracensia*, 3: 207 (York, 1472) and Boatwright, Habberjam, and Hammond, *The Logge Register*, 2: 305 (Tetbury, 1486).

43 For example, see *Testamenta Eboracensia*, 1: 105 (Cleveland, 1379); Sharpe, *Calendar of Wills*, 2: 589 (London, 1485); Boatwright, Habberjam, and Hammond, *The Logge Register*, 1: 33 (London, 1480) specifies that the coconut is "paynted."

44 For representative examples from fourteenth-century London, see Sharpe, *Calendar of Wills*, 1: 371 (London 1331, silver foot), 669 (London 1353, silver stand); Sharpe, *Calendar of Wills*, 2: 90 (London 1365, standing). Similar examples can be found in the fifteenth century as well, and in every county studied.

**Plate 1.1: The Columbus
(or Pallisade) Cup, 1492: English.**

Reproduced courtesy of the Warden
and Scholars of New College, Oxford /
Bridgeman Images.

specifies that the nut itself has been gilded.⁴⁵ There are occasional specific references to the figural decoration of metalwork, like the example noted above, of the lion on the cup's lid.⁴⁶ Occasionally the cup was coconut-shaped but made entirely of metal, and this was also carefully described.⁴⁷

We even have some evidence that documents the construction of English coconut cups in the records of the goldsmiths' guilds. Of course, the most famous association of goldsmiths with coconut cups must be the painting by the Dutch artist Petrus Christus, showing a goldsmith's shop in 1449.⁴⁸ (Plate 1.2) Partly tucked behind the green curtain sits a rather plain coconut cup, alone on a shelf of exotic jewellery-making materials like coral and an open bag of seed pearls. Since the English taste required relatively little preparation of the coconut shell, goldsmiths may have readied the coconuts for decorating themselves. A seventeenth-century botanical guide notes that when coconut shells are rubbed with powdered tripoli stone (a grit agent) in water, then polished with a woollen cloth, they became "blacker and more sweete and shining."⁴⁹

⁴⁵ For example, *Testamenta Eboracensia*, 3: 262, (Helmsley, 1481), and *Testamenta Eboracensia*, 4: 81 (York, 1492–1493).

⁴⁶ Weaver, *Medieval Somerset Wills*, 2: 118 (lion, London, 1508).

⁴⁷ A related example is the mazer described in one will that had "a cover of wode and a cope of silver," *Testamenta Eboracensia*, 4: 159 (Calverley, 1499)

⁴⁸ "A Goldsmith in his Shop," New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Robert Lehman Collection, 1975 (1975.1.110).

⁴⁹ Parkinson, *Theatrum Botanicum*, 1599.

Plate 1.2: *A Goldsmith in His Shop* by Petrus Christus, 1449: Dutch.
New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Robert Lehman Collection.

Much of our non-probate documentary evidence comes from fines levied on goldsmiths who failed to abide by guild ordinances. From the fourteenth to the fifteenth centuries, these fines highlight a range of accidental or intentional frauds. Lead was added to the silver foot of a coconut cup to falsely inflate its weight in 1372.⁵⁰ Faults found in the bands for the cups were the most common infraction, fol-

⁵⁰ Jefferson, *Wardens' Accounts*, 158–59.

lowed by mistakes in the precious metal ratio used in gilding.⁵¹ Two guild records offer a glimpse into the production of less precious coconut cups that might well have sold to a wider customer base than the wills evince. Coconut cups might be covered in white lead and then painted to appear silver. This method apparently so tempted craftsmen that in 1470 the guild banned such practices in a formal ordinance.⁵² Yet if the craftsman was not a goldsmith, but a pewterer (who worked an alloy of tin and copper or lead), then manufacturing such cups would have been entirely legal. In another guild record, a former goldsmith's apprentice was essentially found to be surreptitiously running a down-market cup shop. In 1436 he was making mazers, drinking horns, and coconut cups with copper and a copper alloy called "latten."⁵³ Even though he was in Westminster, and not in the city of London proper, the guild had the power to close his shop.⁵⁴ (If he had not formerly been associated with the goldsmiths' guild as an apprentice, he would have been doing nothing wrong at all.) Slender as these records are, they leave us to wonder whether there were once many other decorated coconut cups manufactured by artisans in non-precious metals that were purchased by an even wider public.

The goldsmiths' archives also recount an episode that neatly brings together all of the strands of evidence for medieval English coconut use. William Chipstead had previously been a member of the goldsmith's guild, but following a terrible row with the guild wardens, subsequent incarceration, and release on the personal request of the queen, he formally renounced his membership in 1407 and become a physician.⁵⁵ In 1440, the guild wardens then found him constructing coconut cups, a thing he was no longer allowed to do.⁵⁶ As medicine, coconuts would have been prescribed by physicians just like Chipstead. Having the expertise himself, and clearly caring little for guild censure, he manufactured cups on the side out of the empty shells.

51 For example, see Jefferson, *Wardens' Accounts*, 328–29, 332–33 (1407–1408, bands), 500–1 (1439–1441, metal ratio).

52 Reddaway, *Early History of the Goldsmiths*, 257–58.

53 Jefferson, *Wardens' Accounts*, 480–81.

54 Reddaway, *Early History of the Goldsmiths*, 108–9, thanks to the liberty the guild's searches involved the abbot, 142.

55 For the accusations against Chipstead and the guild records of his release, see Jefferson, *Wardens' Accounts*, 322–27. For Chipstead's new profession of physician, see Jefferson, *Wardens' Accounts*, 506–7.

56 Jefferson, *Wardens' Accounts*, 506–7.

The “Migratory” Medieval Coconut

Like the Monty Python knights, when faced with the existence of a coconut in medieval England, one is immediately struck by its very improbability and invited to imagine a means of conveyance. The reality was far more pedestrian than the theory of migrating swallows. To find the route of the average coconut into England one need look no further than the merchants with direct access to the *termini* of those trade routes that extended to India and beyond: the Venetians.⁵⁷ Venetian fleets regularly made the sea voyage to Bruges or Antwerp starting early in the fourteenth century, and England became a stop along that route.⁵⁸ Trade agreements to make port in England were reached with Edward II in the early 1320s, and it does not appear to be happenstance that the records of coconuts in England become regular from that era onward.⁵⁹

Contemporaries considered Venetian cargo to be special, though not always in a positive way. The Middle English political poem *Libelle of Englysh Polycye*, dating to the later 1430s and early 1440s, credits Genoa with exporting a range of useful goods, from luxuries like silks to resources such as wood and oil; but Florence and Venice also trade “apes and toys and marmosets with tails / things, trifles,” and other such “things not enduring.”⁶⁰ These merchants are singled out for peddling gaudy wares that “blear our eye.”⁶¹ The poet suggests that even the medicines on these ships were not necessary, as English medicinal plants would likely do just as well.⁶² The single worthwhile exception that the *Libelle*’s famously chauvinistic poet concedes to these Italian vessels is sugar.⁶³

57 Fritz guesses that the English coconuts arrived primarily from Lisbon, and while this may have been the case after 1498, I have not found documented Portuguese coconuts before that date and for several decades after: *Die Gefäße*, 15, 27. Christopher Dyer makes this error as well, *A Country Merchant*, 4 n. 4, carrying it over from Campbell, “The Table and Feasting,” 320, who cites Fritz.

58 The classic text on Venice continues to be Lane, *Venice*, 126. For shipping into Southampton, see Quinn, *The Port Books*, 2: xvii.

59 Ibid.

60 Warner, *The Libelle of Englyshe Polycye*, 18–19, lines 348–49, 351, “apes and japes and marmusettes taylede/ nifles, trifles,” and “thynges not enduring.” For bibliography on the *Libelle*, see Meale, “*Libelle of Englyshe Polycye* and Mercantile Literary Culture,” 181–227; Scattergood, “The *Libelle of Englyshe Polycye*: The Nation,” 28–49; Sobceki, “Bureaucratic Verse,” 251–88. Warner, *The Libelle of Englyshe Polycye*. The sections on Italian shipping are found on 17–25.

61 Warner, *The Libelle of Englyshe Polycye*, 19, line 350, “blere oure eye.”

62 Ibid., lines 354–67.

63 Ibid., 19, lines 368–69.

Poems are not port documents, however, and customs accounts give us a different picture of how coconuts fit among the rest of the commodities in a typical Venetian cargo, and among the cargoes imported by foreign merchants generally. Of course, nothing prevented coconuts, or any other commodity, from reaching England from one of the major European commercial hubs, such as Bruges or Antwerp. Yet it is on Venetian galleys that we can track their entry into England directly. While Venetian ships docked at Southampton and London, only at London do we see coconuts turn up among their wares as documented by the accounts of the Petty Custom, beginning in the early fourteenth century.⁶⁴ Clearly, Southampton was the lesser of the two ports, and in 1481 we can trace a single ship docking in both towns, and see how its trade in Southampton was dwarfed by that at London.⁶⁵ At both ports, the major imports on Venetian galleys were spices, with exotic items like raisins, lemons, and sugar included alongside commodities such as pepper, ginger, and nutmeg. Soap also features largely in Venetian imports, as do a range of textiles from carpets and silks to cottons. The coconuts were imported whole, in their husks, and stored in bags. Quantities in any given galley could vary. One galley in the late 1430s carried eighty coconuts, while a single galley in 1481 imported over two hundred.⁶⁶ No other nut was counted individually: one merchant handled twenty-seven coconuts, while one specific bag contained thirteen coconuts.⁶⁷ So while the market for coconuts in England appears to have remained strong throughout the later medieval period, and may have grown larger throughout the fifteenth century, Speiß is right to say that coconuts were not a bulk com-

64 For the port records used in this article see Quinn, *Port Books*: volume one covers 1469–1470, and volume two covers 1461–1464, 1472–1473, and 1477–1481; James, *Port Book*; Lewis, *The Southampton Port*; Studer, *Port Books*; Flavin and Jones, *Bristol's Trade*; Cobb, *Overseas Trade*; Gras, *Early English Customs System*. The London particular accounts of the petty custom are largely incomplete, and many accounts that do remain have been relatively heavily damaged. Both Cobb and Gras note difficulty finding intact, legible series to edit: Cobb, *Overseas Trade*, Appendix B, and Gras, *Early English Customs*, 452–53. In addition, I examined the cargo of galleys listed in Kew, National Archives, MSS E. 122/77/2 (1409–1411), E. 122/194/11 (1461–1462), E. 122/194/12 (1462–1463), and E. 122/194/20 (1472–1473), among others. The amount of detail provided by different customs officers, called controllers, can vary significantly.

65 Compare the port records of the ship of Bernardus Bondemer in Southampton (Quinn, *Port Books*, 2: 195) to its trade in London (Cobb, *Overseas Trade*, 46–51).

66 Gras, *Early English Customs*, 514, and Cobb, *Overseas Trade*, 46–51.

67 Kew, National Archives, MSS E, (1435–1436) E.122/76/34, m.10v–11r; (1437–1439) E.122/77/3, m.14r–v. See also Cobb, *Overseas Trade*, 47–48.

modity. They were never shipped in large enough quantities to turn up in Italian or English tariff lists.⁶⁸

The Venetians appear to have acquired their coconuts in Alexandria, but the fruits had arrived there from much farther away. Before the great anthropogenic migration of flora and fauna that began after 1492, these palms grew mainly on the fringes of the Indian Ocean and in the Pacific. Genetically native to the Maldives, they were imported to India in the prehistoric era.⁶⁹ By late antiquity, coconuts were a normal part of the trade passing from India to Egypt.⁷⁰ They appear in the accounts of Indian merchants trading with the important port of Aden in the twelfth century, and archaeological evidence evinces imported coconuts in the region from the eleventh century to the fifteenth.⁷¹ In Egypt, coconuts were eaten for their medicinal properties, and the evidence suggests that their shells were discarded after the meat and milk were harvested.⁷² Local African and Egyptian coconut cultivation, where it existed before 1500, appears to have remained limited to narrow climate zones, so that coconuts continued to be imported from India throughout this period.⁷³

By the early sixteenth century, the Portuguese circumvented Venetian networks and were exploiting India directly; however, their success was far from total. Venice's better relations with its trade partners, including the expanding Ottoman Empire, ultimately left these markets relatively safe from Portuguese reach.⁷⁴ For

68 Pegolotti includes the coconut in a list of spices, but that is his sole mention. Evans, *Francesco Balducci Pegolotti*, 295. Fritz, also notes such absences as common outside of England as well, *Die Gefäße*, 15.

69 Van der Veen, *Consumption, Trade and Innovation*, 48; Walshaw, "Converting," 140–41. Walshaw claims that Cappers identifies the coconut as a Roman domesticated, but I cannot find that Cappers does so. For a recent genetic study proving very early domestication of coconut palms in both India and the Philippines, see Gunn, Baudouin, and Olson, "Independent Origins."

70 For archaeological evidence of the importation, but not native propagation, of coconuts into Egypt and its environs, see Cappers, "Exotic Imports," 197–206; Van der Veen, "Trade and Diet," 207–12, and *Consumption, Trade and Innovation*, 49. Van der Veen, "Trade and Diet," 211, notes that the coconuts were consumed locally as well as shipped farther afield.

71 Van der Veen, *Consumption, Trade and Innovation*, 49, and Van der Veen, "Trade and Diet," 208.

72 Van der Veen, *Consumption, Trade and Innovation*, 49, and Van der Veen, "Trade and Diet," 188.

73 For African evidence, see Walshaw, "Converting Rice," 141–42; for high medieval importation evidence, see Van der Veen, *Consumption, Trade and Innovation*, 49, and evidence from the eleventh to the fifteenth century, see Van der Veen, "Trade and Diet," 208.

74 Lane, *Venice*, 285–94.

most of the later Middle Ages, as the Venetian fleet sailed steadily toward London, hauling goods from Alexandria, it securely gripped its coconuts in their husks.

Incidental Medicine in Luxury Containers

From India to the Maghreb, people valued coconuts as medicine; and while the English did too, we know far more about how much they desired the containers that transported the medicine than we do about how they valued the flesh itself. From the Venetian galleys, London was the main point from which imported goods were received and dispersed to the provinces. In addition to spices, many of these goods were medicinal. In 1481, the same galley carrying coconuts also offloaded orpiment (Arsenic mono-, di-, or trisulfide), stavesacre (*Delphinium staphisagria*), coloquintida (*Citrullus colocynthis*), turbith (*Ipomoea turpethum*), and setwall (*Curcuma zedoaria*), among other medicaments. A galley's cargo in 1421 was little different.⁷⁵ A few of these imported herbs had multiple uses, since orpiment could also serve as a pigment, like the brazil wood also carried on this galley. Medical, too, appear to have been the primary uses for the bags of sea sponges carried in these galleys.⁷⁶ Placed in this context, coconuts were evidently valued as multipurpose commodities rather than simply as medicine. The flesh and oil of the coconut could be medicinal, and the shells could be reused as cups that might themselves be viewed as having healthy properties.

According to Fritz, the coconut was considered an aphrodisiac by the Germans, but I have found no evidence of this for England.⁷⁷ English medical treatises make no specific reference to the coconut's uses, although they do mention it: "It is the Indian Nut. It is a large nut that comes from India."⁷⁸ Versions of one treatise identify coconut as an ingredient in various pills.⁷⁹ In a Middle English translation of his fourteenth-century Latin work, the *Surgery*, Guy de Chauliac observes that

⁷⁵ Cobb, *Overseas Trade*, 46–51, and Gras, *Early English Customs*, 452–514.

⁷⁶ One medical use of sponges in the Middle Ages was to administer anaesthetic, see Chivukula, Grandhi, and Friedlander, "A Brief History of Early Neuroanesthesia," 3.

⁷⁷ Fritz, *Die Gefäße*, 20, and, indeed, elsewhere Fritz is careful to highlight that the English use of the coconut might be different than that of German- and Dutch-speaking lands, *Die Gefäße*, 22.

⁷⁸ Glasgow: University of Glasgow Library, MS Hunter 185, fol. 9v: "Nux indica id est. nux magna que venit de india." The following manuscript citations are derived from textual transcriptions and digitized manuscripts on this website: *Malaga Corpus of Late Middle English Scientific Prose*, accessed January 10, 2015, <https://hunter.uma.es>.

⁷⁹ Glasgow, University of Glasgow Library, MS Hunter 503, pp. 22, 77.

the coconut's "oil comforts the muscles."⁸⁰ One medical work defines the coconut's chief use as a material for cups: "Nux indica, a great nut, and cups are made of its shell."⁸¹ Thus medieval English medical practitioners seem to agree that the coconut belonged under their purview, even if the texts of the local medical corpus were vague as to its specific uses.

In his magisterial botanical work, *Theatrum Botanicum*, the seventeenth-century apothecary John Parkinson provides more information about what traditional authorities thought the coconut might accomplish, but also admits that the authorities themselves disagree. The list of conditions that the coconut might aid is long: it could be a purgative or could relax muscles, as one of the medieval texts had noted. However the "Indian nut" might also kill intestinal worms, act against poison or contagion, prevent or cure colic, palsy, and epilepsy, and could even assist in childbirth.⁸² Each of these uses was doubted by at least one of Parkinson's sources, however, and he leaves a final assessment up to the practitioner. The coconut cup figures into this discussion as well: "the browne, hard inner shell, being polished and made black and shining ... [is] made [into] cups, to drink in, set in silver or other mettall."⁸³ Parkinson recounts a tradition that drinking out of such a cup eases those with palsy.⁸⁴ Later he adds that drinking out of a coconut cup might also prevent poisoning.⁸⁵

The people of England were already accustomed to reusing the containers in which their imported medicines shipped. Ceramic jars called "albarelli" were packed with drugs in Italian pharmacies, and archaeological evidence proves that Italian *albarelli* reached medieval England and were preserved there.⁸⁶ Empty of their original contents and repurposed as flower vases, *albarelli* feature in English

⁸⁰ Ogden, *Cyrurgie of Guy de Chauliac*, 626, "oyle confortep þe synowes."

⁸¹ Glasgow, University of Glasgow Library, MS Hunter 95, fol. 194v, and the same quotation is also found in MS Hunter 185, fol. 170v, "Nux indica a grete note and cuppes beþ made of þe schelle."

⁸² Parkinson, *Theatrum Botanicum*, 1596–1600.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 1597.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 1599.

⁸⁶ For examples of albarelli found in London, see "Drug Jar," FER97[1074]<3925>, (London: Museum of London), accessed 31, May, 2016, <http://collections.museumoflondon.org.uk/online/object/536091.html>, and "Albarelo," FER97[1074]<3926> (London: Museum of London), accessed May 31, 2016, <http://collections.museumoflondon.org.uk/online/object/543627.html>. For an image of large *albarelli* in an Italian pharmacy, see Bologna, Biblioteca Universitaria, MS 2197, fol. 492.

Figure 1.1: Maplewood mazer with silver-gilt mounts: English, late 15th century.
New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Cloisters Collection.

manuscript art, suggesting that the English had a keen eye for making use of every bit of imported material.⁸⁷

After its meat and milk had been harvested, as we have already seen, the coconut shell was adapted to an English tradition of luxury tableware made of wood and decorated with precious metals. In wills and the records of the London goldsmiths' guild, coconut cups appear alongside native mazers: cups made of maple wood and finished with metalwork. (See **Figure 1.1**) Homegrown and Indian wood cups were constructed according to the same guild ordinances, fraudulently made against those ordinances, and willed to future generations in similar ways. The Wife of Bath's famous assertion that "a lord in his household/ has not every vessel of gold,/ but some are of wood," may be an unrecognized example of her characteristic temporizing.⁸⁸ This passage is part of the Wife's defence of the married state as worthy, though valued less than virginity. However, splendid mazers and coconut cups highlight that a lord's wooden tableware could be quite fine, if not as luxuri-

⁸⁷ For an example of an *albarello* reused as a flower vase in a medieval English manuscript, see Cambridge, MA, Harvard University: Houghton Library, MS Widener 2, fol. 7r.

⁸⁸ Benson, *The Riverside Chaucer*, Wife of Bath's Prologue, lines 99–101, "a lord in his household,/ He nath nat every vessel al of gold;/ Somme been of tree."

ous as pure gold. In comparing herself to a wooden vessel, the Wife of Bath is ranking herself below a golden cup, but typically for her, not necessarily very far below.

There are two possible approaches to the close relationship between coconuts and mazers in England. From one perspective, we could view their similar treatment as evidence that local artisans were limiting themselves to traditional forms even when working with more exotic materials. From another perspective, one could say that maintaining traditional styles while using exotic, imported materials highlights the value already placed on fine wooden wares, and underscores the degree to which wood was also considered a luxury material in England. If English artisans saw potential in the imported coconut because of its capacity to stand alongside local products, this upends modern tendencies to view medieval luxury imports as both more desirable and better than domestic products. We saw a similar attitude expressed by the *Libelle's* author, when he opined that native medicinal plants might work just as well as imported medicine.

The Wife of Bath's implication that wooden dishes are less fine than gold is only partly borne out by the records. Of course, no wooden cup was going to match the value of an entirely gold or silver vessel, yet not all woods were valued alike. Maple is a hardwood, and its softer bolls in particular can be cut and polished to result in a speckled appearance, not unlike that of a coconut shell. Mazers appear regularly in published wills beginning in the early fourteenth century, just a bit later than coconut cups, but this rather sudden appearance of both sorts of decorated wooden cup may point more to the development of probate practices than it does to a sudden interest in luxury wooden tableware. Carved into a shallow bowl, mazers could be set onto a short base or longer stems made of a range of metals, and mazers could be fitted with decorated covers like other fine tableware, including coconut cups.

A fully native product, mazers seem always to have been more numerous than coconut cups. In the fourteenth century, mazers were also willed far more frequently than coconut cups, and in many years records feature more than one instance of a mazer being bequeathed.⁸⁹ In fact, the earliest attestation I have found suggests that mazers were already common commodities by then: in 1298–1299, mazers occupy a list of household utensils distinguished only by material.⁹⁰ Groups of mazers were frequently listed alongside groups of silver utensils, again suggesting that these were common luxuries.⁹¹ Mazers also appear next to coconut cups in wills. According to these records, some mazers had lids,

⁸⁹ See Sharpe, *Calendar of Wills*, and Darlington, *London Consistory Court Wills*.

⁹⁰ Sharpe, *Calendar of Wills*, 1: 140.

⁹¹ See, for example, Sharpe, *Calendar of Wills*, 1: 151, 156, and 179 for examples just a few years apart.

and others did not; they could be a range of sizes, from “small” up to drinking cups capable of holding a gallon of liquid; they could sit on low feet or tall stems.⁹²

Mazers appear less frequently in wills in the fifteenth century than in the fourteenth, while conversely the number of coconuts appears to rise. Yet both types of luxury wooden vessel continued to be valued; together, coconut cups and mazers are almost the only fifteenth-century plate to remain extant at Oxford and Cambridge colleges today.⁹³ Later, the spread of coconut palms to the Caribbean and eastern shores of Central America in the early sixteenth century may have increased their fruit’s availability and perhaps decreased their price in English markets. But while coconut cups continue to be collected by the colleges at least occasionally after the early sixteenth century, mazers no longer feature among their plate after this period.⁹⁴ Nevertheless, late-medieval English people show a special appreciation for fine wooden goods, whether native like the mazer or imported like the coconut.

In the words of John M. Ganim and Shayne Aaron Legassie, “the Middle Ages offered a less impoverished range of imaginative identifications than our own moment does for communicating across the resistant divisions of language, religion, and geography.”⁹⁵ The medieval English coconut offers special, material proof of this. Keepers of coconut cups identified these fruits with India while simultaneously transforming these Indian fruits into English wooden housewares. Yet, as Sharon Kinoshita puts it, “at the current moment, our critical vocabulary is poorly equipped to conceptualize material and literary objects of multiple provenances,” or to make sense of their contemporary meanings and uses.⁹⁶ Coconuts are a case in point.⁹⁷ They demonstrate that even “insular” England was inextricably interconnected with other parts of the medieval globe. In the importation and use of coconuts, the people of late-medieval England show themselves to have gracefully adapted South Asian materials in ways that complemented but did not overshadow native artisanal products. For several hundred years, the medieval coconut was both English and Indian, familiar and unusual, exceptional and common. It is time to seize on this cultural artefact of medieval globalism and grip it by the husk.

⁹² See, for example, Sharpe, *Calendar of Wills*, 1: 371 (small); 2: 211 (large), 207 (gallon).

⁹³ For Oxford colleges, see Moffatt, *Old Oxford Plate*, 199. For Cambridge colleges, see Jones, *The Old Plate of the Cambridge Colleges*, 113.

⁹⁴ Moffatt, *Old Oxford Plate*, 199, and Jones, *Old Plate*, 113.

⁹⁵ Ganim and Legassie, *Cosmopolitanism and the Middle Ages*, 3.

⁹⁶ Kinoshita, “Beyond Philology,” 25–42, at 40.

⁹⁷ The term is Kinoshita’s, “Beyond Philology,” 38.

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Kathleen E. Kennedy (kek16@psu.edu) is an Associate Professor at Pennsylvania State University-Brandywine. Having published in literary criticism and art history, she is currently working on early Tudor book arts and late medieval English interaction with the Mediterranean world.

Abstract Medieval England was unexpectedly full of coconuts. Following ancient practices, the English used coconut milk, meat, and oil medicinally. By the thirteenth century English imported coconuts from the Venetians and once the medicine was extracted, craftsmen transformed the leftover coconut shells into goblets harnessed in precious metals modelled after traditional mazers.

Keywords England, India, housewares, commodity, coconuts, goldsmiths, mazers, medicine, *Libelle of Englysh Polycye*, Monty Python