Introduction

In order to describe (through a twenty-first century scholarly discourse) the ways that townspeople and villagers understood themselves and the world around them in the early English renaissance, it has been necessary to use some theoretical terminology. Initial responses to the word ‘theoretical’ might either be positive or negative, depending on the reader's sensibilities. So it seems appropriate to make an initial statement of intent, not an apology, regarding the use of certain terminology. The use of abstract theoretical words and phrases such as ‘representation’, ‘construction of identity’, ‘appropriation’, ‘transmission’, ‘consumption’, ‘reception’ – all of which are explained in more detail below – is intended to reflect a sense of the dynamic (or at least non-static) situation in which individual and group identity was formulated in this period. These descriptive words do indeed often arise from very recent theoretical vocabularies used to understand cultures and societies both in the past and in the present. The immediate justification for their use is that the approaches these vocabularies signal also prioritise issues of contemporary perception and experience. In this chapter, some of the vocabularies that I use are examined with reference to one particular example of the kind of evidence used throughout this book. This is a last will and testament, made in 1516, by a man called John Aunsell, a merchant tailor and citizen of London, dwelling in Southwark. This particular text is taken because it provides useful illustrations for all the theoretical terms I wish to explain. It is a particularly interesting will text, but this is not to say that it is abnormal in any way. Its formulaic structure, the requests made, and the bequests given, are all entirely conventional.
All the terms described in the first sections of this chapter contribute to the understanding of what is meant by ‘cultural creativity’. The approaches and abstract concepts discussed here arise from various disciplines, and they constitute what might seem an eclectic array. Their multidisciplinary range is justified by the fact that the combinations of experiences that inform an individual’s identity are themselves eclectic. The name I give to this process through which identity was constructed, performed, and understood by ordinary individuals of the early English renaissance, is ‘cultural creativity’. The chapter ends by describing in more detail what is meant by ‘cultural creativity’ and how the term arises.

**An illustrated example: the last will and testament of John Aunsell**

Below, the will of John Aunsell is transcribed in its entirety. Aspects of this text are then discussed in more detail to illustrate what is meant by a collection of abstract theoretical terms used throughout this book. The whole text is reproduced here because a consideration of the abstract concepts is most meaningful when related to the entire text.

In the name of god Amen. the xviii daye of August the yere of our Lorde god M\(^{iv}\)c xvi. I John Aunsell Citizen and merchant taylour of London in the parish of Saint Olave in Southwerke in the Countie of Surrey in my good hole mynde and memorie in my good Remembraunce being doo make ordeigne and dispose this my pres-gent testament and last wyll in maner and forme folowing ffirst I bequeth and Recomende my soule unto Almyghty god my maker and my Redemer and to our blissid Lady the Vyrgin his mother Saint Mary And to all the holy company of hevyn And my body to be buried afore Jesus in the body of the churche of Saint Mary Overie in Southwerke aforesaid And I wyll that myn Executors do agree with the prior of the same place for the said Buriall as they shall thinke most necessary for all the chargeis there unto belonging. Also I will my body to be hadde afore my buryall to the parish churche of Saint Olave where I am parissohonir to And there to have a solemn dirige and masse Also I will there be a doctour of divinitie and doe make a symonde of the lif of saint John the Baptist sometyme the saide masse whyle in the saide church of Saint Olave Also I bequeth to the high aulter of the same churche of Saynt Olave for my tythes neglygently forgotten vi s viii d Also I bequeth to the high aulter of