“A drane amonges bees”: A Gendered Analysis of the Paston Family and Social Identity

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the

requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

History

at Massey University,

New Zealand.

Michaela Crawford

2021

Abstract

This research analyses the Paston men and women through a gendered lens in order to understand how they expressed themselves individually and in the context of their wider social environment. It does this through the analysis of two major gentry life events, marriage and the writing of a will. Marriage was a source of power and control for both men and women in the Paston family. It served as a means to exert authority over others by arranging marriages and it was a way for them to advance themselves both socially and financially within the gentry. This level of authority and control over one's life depended on factors such as age and status. Like marriage, wills were another avenue through which the Pastons were able to express individuality, control and authority in a system of patriarchy that, in theory, favoured and benefitted first-born sons.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to these wonderful people, without whom the journey to completing my thesis would not have been possible.

My supervisors Amanda and Andrew for your time and the effort you put into guiding me. Amanda for your constant support, compassion and mentorship that helped me through the tough times and your gentle guidance that always steered me onto the correct path. Andrew for your knowledge on everything religion and your attention to details that I would have otherwise overlooked. To my parents and brother, your positivity and support for me was unconditional, even when I would constantly complain to you! And for that I thank you. Finally, thank you to my husband, for your care and understanding in times of self-doubt, for being my emotional support when I needed it and my biggest cheerleader when I celebrated the small achievements and milestones.

Contents

Introduction

> [A]nd þat also guided hym to all mennes vndirstondyng þat he was wery of bidyng in myn hows, and he not insurid of help in any other place, yet þat grevyth nat me so evill as doth þat I neuir coud fele ner vndirstand hym poletyk ner diligent in helpyng hym-self, but as a drane amonges bees whech labour for gaderyng hony in the feldes and the drane doth nought but takyth his part of it.[1]

Bees were of particular interest to medieval people for their ability to embody idealised beliefs about religion, society, politics, gender and, as illustrated in this quote, the division of labour.[2] In this letter to his wife Margaret Paston, John Paston complains of the apparent ineptitude of his eldest son. This quote illustrates all of the complexities and pressures that came with ensuring the gentry estate was running smoothly. Family was at the centre of this struggle and as exemplified above, it was expected that every member of the family, in particular the eldest son, would do their part to ensure the efficiency of the "hive". By calling his son "a drone amongst bees", John Paston suggested his son was not contributing to the work that the rest of the family were engaging in for the greater good of the family. Such expectations were the main cause of conflict within the Paston family but as this research argues, despite the high expectations and the conflict they caused, the Paston men and women continued to live lives in accordance with their own values and ambitions as well as to benefit the wider family. In a beehive, each bee fulfilled its assigned roles in order to ensure the success of the hive. John Paston clearly identified with this metaphor and given his way, he would have had each of his children work in harmony for the greater good of the hive or in this case family. What the bee metaphor and John Paston did not account for was the sense of personal identity and individual agency that was present within all of members of the Paston family, and which is illustrated through their extensive letter collection.

The Paston family of fifteenth-century England were a powerful, influential group of men and women who managed to navigate the political turmoil of the Wars of the Roses and secure themselves a place in history through their letters. They were able to express individuality and agency despite familial expectations and a rigid system of patriarchal, religious and cultural gendered norms. This expression of individuality differed depending on factors such as age, birth rank, status and occupation. The Paston letters have been

[1] Norman Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century, Part I* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 128.
[2] Jonathan Woolfson, "The Renaissance of Bees," *Renaissance Studies 24*, no. 2 (2010): 281-300.

extensively studied and have been used to gain an understanding of fifteenth-century gentry life, as well as to provide some insight into how they and other members of their peer group perceived the events of the Wars of the Roses.[3] The Paston women in particular have been a source of great interest for historians due to their extensive involvement in matters of family business, as well as their exemplification of female authorship in medieval England.[4] The Paston men have been the subject of a comparatively smaller collection of studies but have been a source of interest, nonetheless.[5]

This research builds on existing studies of the Pastons to examine how individual members of the family skilfully and intentionally navigated gendered expectations placed on them by medieval society, family and gentry culture in order to benefit themselves and the wider family, socially and economically. A selection of Paston letters, wills and related documents are examined for evidence that they convey about gendered norms and expectations as well as day-to-day life for medieval men and women. These sources reveal disjunctures between ideals and reality when it came to societal expectations. This study will answer three questions. First, how did the Paston family respond to gendered expectations placed on them by fifteenth-century gentry English society? Second, were the Paston men and women able to express agency and individuality within a rigid system of patriarchal, religious and cultural gendered norms? Finally, in what ways did the Paston men and women express masculine and feminine identity in order to benefit themselves or the broader family? This research is focused on the Paston family and therefore its scope is relatively small. However, the

[3] Key studies include: Helen Castor, *Blood and Roses* (London: Faber & Faber, 2011); Richard Barber, ed., *The Pastons: The Letters of a Family in the Wars of the Roses* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981); Norman Davis, ed. *The Paston Letters: A Selection in Modern Spelling* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Frances Gies and Joseph Gies, *A Medieval Family: The Pastons of Fifteenth-Century England* (New York: Harper Collins, 2010); Colin Richmond, *The Paston Family in the Fifteenth Century, The First Phase* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

[4] See: Diane Watt, *The Paston Women: Selected Letters* (New York: DS Brewer, 2004); Susan Signe Morrison, *A Medieval Woman's Companion: Women's Lives in the European Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2015); Brian W. Gastle, "Breaking the Stained Glass Ceiling: Mercantile Authority, Margaret Paston, and Margery Kempe," *Studies in the Literary Imagination 36*, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 123-147; Rebecca Krug, *Reading Families: Women's Literate Practice in Late Medieval England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002).

[5] Most studies that analyse the men do not do so from a gendered perspective (with the exception of Moss' article regarding fatherhood that focuses mainly on the Pastons) but do provide some insights into their lives. See: Curt F. Bühler, "Sir John Paston's Grete Booke, a Fifteenth-Century 'Best-Seller'," *Modern Language Notes 56*, no. 5 (1941): 345-51; G. A. Lester, "The Books of A Fifteenth-Century English Gentleman, Sir John Paston," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen 88,* no. 2 (1987): 200-217; Rachel E. Moss, "An Orchard, A Love Letter and Three Bastards: The Formation of Adult Male Identity in a Fifteenth-Century Family," in *What Is Masculinity?,* eds. John H. Arnold and Sean Brady (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

findings are consistent with broader studies of gender and gentry culture and can therefore be applied more widely.

The Paston Family

The Pastons were a wealthy landowning gentry family who resided in Norfolk. Their wealth grew out of William Paston's work as a judge, his subsequent purchase of land and his marriage to an heiress, Agnes Berry. William and Agnes Paston had five children: John Paston I, Edmund Paston I, Elizabeth Paston (later Poynings and Browne), William Paston II and Clement Paston II. William, and in particular, Agnes had a tumultuous relationship with their children and were often very stern with them, a parenting technique that they seemed to have passed on to their son John I, who also had complicated relationships with his children, especially his eldest son. This research focuses primarily on the line of inheritance which went through William and Agnes' eldest son John Paston I. John I, like his father, had a thriving career in London as a lawyer and around 1440 married the heiress Margaret Mautby. After the death of William Paston, John, Margaret and Agnes ran the family estate together, although the work was often left to Margaret and Agnes due to John's frequent trips to London for work. Margaret and John I had seven children: John Paston II, John Paston III, Edmund Paston II, Margery Paston (later Calle), Anne Paston (later Yelverton), Walter Paston and William Paston III. As is revealed through the Paston letters and wills, the family's history is full of dramatic twists and turns, from the acquisition of land and the subsequent defence of it against enemies to family feuds and the relentless pursuit of the inheritance of family friend John Fastolf. This research concentrates on expressions of gender and identity within the letters and wills in order to understand the ways in which individual Pastons expressed agency and perceived themselves and the world around them.

Fifteenth-Century Gentry Culture

Fifteenth-century gentry culture is notoriously hard for historians to define. Even in the fifteenth century, gentry were not a homogenous group and were therefore vague about what made them "gentry". While legislation under Edward IV attempted to define the group as gentlemen who earned at least £10 a year from their lands, historians agree this definition did not work in practice because of the significant income disparity within the class of people

who self-identified as gentry.[6] Another indicator of gentry status that the Pastons themselves tried to use was bloodline. As Philippa Maddern argues, bloodlines in the fifteenth-century were easy to forge and therefore an unreliable marker of gentry status.[7] A more productive way to understand the gentry is to recognise them as a group whose "meaning stretched to encompass various levels of specificity, many criteria of social standing, and different kinds of social behaviours".[8] Fluid definitions of gentry status reflect attempts by those on the outskirts of the class to remain a part of it. In all, the gentry can be understood as an exclusive group of often landowning, wealthy individuals who were gentry because they were accepted as so by the wider class. Income, landownership or bloodline had to couple with a certain level of performance and expenditure in order for an individual or family's social status to be recognised by other members of the gentry, who continuously tested and negotiated this status.

Primary Sources

> Letters are always written because of absence and are destined to create presence. From antiquity onwards, the writing of letters has been regulated by norms, but could allow spontaneous expression of one's feelings and thoughts.[9]

The Paston family letters and wills are the primary sources that inform this research and they provide a glimpse into family members' lives, how they perceived the world, their ambitions and their relationships. Letters in the fifteenth century straddled the line between public and private as they were written by scribes and read by multiple parties.[10] This meant that they could often be formulaic and impersonal in nature, with the contents appearing on the surface to be strictly business-orientated. However, as Rosenthal explains, even within dry and formulaic letters, instances of variations in expression and in the conventions can display the writer's passions and emotions. Moreover, a "formal" letter can be covered in an "outerwear" of courtesy that is at odds with the substance.[11] The Paston letters demonstrate a family

[6] Malcolm Mercer, *The Medieval Gentry: Power, Leadership and Choice During the Wars of the Roses* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 9.
[7] Philippa Maddern, "Gentility," in *Gentry Culture in Late-Medieval England*, ed. Raluca Radulescu (New York: Manchester University Press, 2005), 21-22.
[8] Maddern, "Gentility," 21.
[9] Regina Schulte and Xenia Von Tippelskirch, "Introduction," in *Reading, Interpreting and Historicizing: Letters as Historical Sources,* eds. Regina Schulte and Xenia Von Tippelskirch (Florence: European University Institute, 2004), 6.
[10] Joel Thomas Rosenthal, "Letters and Letter Collections," in *Understanding Medieval Primary Sources: Using Historical Sources to Discover Medieval Europe,* ed. Joel Thomas Rosenthal (Oxon: Routledge, 2012), 74.
[11] Rosenthal, "Letters and Letter Collections," 72.

navigating the effects of a civil war, living their daily lives and communicating with each other about matters including marriage negotiations, business endeavours and local gossip.

The pragmatic nature of the Paston letters has meant that historians have been reluctant to delve into the possible emotions behind them for fear of speculation. However, recent insights from the history of emotions demonstrate that such sources can be used to understand individuals' emotional world.[12] Through careful exploration of the language used in the Paston letters, in conjunction with evidence of the actions people took, we can make inferences about their emotional states or at the very least their feelings about a certain situation. The letter collections of families such as the Pastons are often a mixture of business and personal letters, so they deal with estate management and other pragmatic matters, as well as relaying messages of affection. Moss explains this conjuncture:

> The form as well as the content of letters served specific generic functions, and these point to the construction of models of social interaction within the constraints of the genre. Letters were used not only to transmit information, but also to reinforce social norms and strengthen social bonds.[13]

The difficulties of interpreting letters are similar to the problems of interpreting wills. Wills cannot be read too literally; particular aspects of wills are strictly formal. Yet there are also aspects that can be understood as an expression of self. This self-expression, however, is not a reflection of how the individual presented themselves in life; rather, it presents an idealised vision of how they wished to be perceived and remembered.[14] Medieval wills marked one of the most significant moments of an individual's life, the decision regarding how to transfer property, and this was a particular concern for the gentry. The will was a formal document but as Maddern has argued, "[w]ills combine an expression of individual experience with the statistical possibilities of data quarried from dry institutional formalities".[15] Many aspects of the transfer of goods and property were organised orally prior to one's death and a will

[12] See for example: Susan Broomhall and Andrew Lynch, eds., *The Routledge History of Emotions in Europe: 1100-1700* (London: Routledge, 2019); Barbara H. Rosenwein, *Generations of Feeling: A History of Emotions, 600–1700* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Jan Plamper, *The History of Emotions: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[13] Rachel E. Moss*, Fatherhood and Its Representations in Middle English Texts* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer Ltd, 2013), 10.

[14] For medieval wills see: Mia Korpiola and Anu Lahtinen, eds., *Planning for Death: Wills and Death-Related Property Arrangements in Europe, 1200-1600* (Leiden: Brill, 2013); Shona Kelly Wray and Roisin Cossar, "Using Wills as Primary Sources," in *Understanding Medieval Primary Sources: Using Historical Sources to Discover Medieval Europe*, ed. Joel Thomas Rosenthal (Oxon: Routledge, 2012): 59-71.

[15] Phillipa Maddern, "Friends of the Dead: Executors, Wills and Family Strategy in Fifteenth-century Norfolk," in *Rulers and Ruled in Late Medieval England: Essays Presented to Gerald Harriss*, eds. G. L. Harriss, Rowena E. Archer, and Simon Walker (London: A&C Black, 1995), 155.

cannot therefore provide a complete an accurate picture of the testator's life. Despite the problems that come with analysing wills, there are still opportunities to use them in a constructive and nuanced manner.

The instructions within a will were carried out in public view and usually created with witnesses. As Boffa argues, the public nature of the will cannot be understated; the choices made by the testator were made with intent and with the acknowledgement of the audience, however small that audience might be.[16] Wills can therefore be understood as an expression of the individual's identity as they wished to present it, with their bequests reflecting what and who was important to them. As Lewis explains:

> In the case of both autobiography and wills we are dealing with a discourse that is based to a greater or lesser extent on the actualities of an author's life, but that can be manipulated to leave a particular impression behind.[17]

Moss argues that formal documents can be understood as carefully crafted narratives:

> Letters are in a sense fictions: not because they are filled with false information – indeed much of their content can be verified through other sources – but because their generic conventions have ideological agendas, consciously or unconsciously adopted by the writer, and because they have constructed narratives with intentions beyond merely passing on information. Nowadays historians are well aware that even such formal and official documents as legal cases have carefully crafted narratives, and that unpicking the narratives reveals preoccupations of the authors and audience that are as valuable as the details of the cases themselves.[18]

Although Moss is referring here to the ability of letters to convey information regarding an individual, the same sentiment can be applied to wills. Because wills are formal documents, their potential to reveal individuals' ambitions, anxieties and the ideals to which they held themselves have often been overlooked. Recent scholarly research has concerned itself with the ways that wills can be used to understand an individual within the context that they operated.[19] The formalities and religious undertones of a fifteenth-century will cannot be

[16] Andrea Boffa, "Creating Identity through the Act of Will-Making: A Case-Study of Fourteenth-Century Wills by the Women of Lucca," *Medieval Prosopography 33*, no. 1 (2018): 209-222.
[17] Katherine Lewis, "Women, Testamentary Discourse and Life-Writing in Later Medieval England," in *Medieval Women and the Law,* ed. Noël James Menuge (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2003), 68.
[18] Moss, *Fatherhood and Its Representations,* 10.
[19] See for example: Boffa, "Creating Identity through the Act of Will-Making,"; Jakub Wysmułek, "Wills as Tools of Power: Development of Testamentary Practice in Krakow during the Late Middle Ages," in *Planning for Death: Wills and Death-Related Property Arrangements in Europe,* eds. Mia Korpiola and Anu Lahtinen (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 214.

understated but this does not diminish their ability to shed light on an individual and their intentions behind the will itself.

Wills provide insights into the life of an individual and their family, and are often the only surviving document that tells us about the person in question. They combine the wishes of the individual testator, the family's expectations and societal and pious conventions.[20] Historians have used wills to understand social history, religiosity and material culture and much of what has been written regarding wills, emphasises the role of religion.[21] Wray and Cosser argue that as long as wills are read in tandem with other sources, in this case letters, they can be a useful resource for historians.[22] Indeed, the very existence of the will in medieval England was motivated by the Church's wish to access the pious bequests that appeared within them. As Sheehan argues, "the will was introduced into England as an instrument for the giving of alm".[23] Death in the fifteenth century was considered to be a sacral process and the fate of one's soul was a very real concern for medieval people.[24] Therefore, the religious overtones of most medieval wills come as no surprise. Even so, the pragmatic nature of wills was also a driving factor for their use in the fifteenth century. The norms of inheritance that were reflected in many fifteenth-century wills were intended to prevent family disputes by providing a sense of predictability.[25] Many individuals, however, preferred to decide for themselves how to split up their estate and as inheritance and legacy were some of the primary concerns of the gentry, wills were often the source of disputes within the family. There were recommendations surrounding the writing of wills. For example, the rule of thirds encouraged a man to split his estate into three: a third for his wife, a third for his children and a third to whomever else he deemed fit to inherit.[26] English lawyers tended to take the executor's role very seriously and therefore wills in which the individual's dying wishes did not align with recommendations, such as the rule of thirds, were still fulfilled.[27] Christine Churches notes that it was much more common for women to inherit the entire estate of her

[20] Wray and Cossar, "Wills as Primary Sources," 3.
[21] Wysmułek, "Wills as Tools of Power," 214.
[22] Wray and Cossar, "Wills as Primary Sources," 3.
[23] Michael M. Sheehan, *The Will in Medieval England: From the Conversion of the Anglo-Saxons to the end of the Thirteenth Century* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1963), 303.
[24] R. H. Helmholz, "Deathbed Strife and the Law of Wills in Medieval and Early Modern England," in *Planning for Death: Wills and Death-Related Property Arrangements in Europe, 1200-1600,* eds. Mia Korpiola and Anu Lahetinen (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 239-40.
[25] Mia Korpiola and Anu Lahtinen, "Introduction," in *Planning for Death: Wills and Death-Related Property Arrangements in Europe, 1200-1600*, eds. Mia Korpiola and Anu Lahetinen (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 3.
[26] Carole Shammas, "English Inheritance Law and Its Transfer to the Colonies," *The American Journal of Legal History 31*, no. 2 (1987): 145-163.
[27] Helmholz, "Deathbed Strife and the Law of Wills," 243.

husband and that the principles of primogeniture rarely dominated the distribution of property.[28] Erikson adds that:

> The reality of women's receiving large amounts of property and exerting power over it in a distinctive way does not change the fact of oppression, but it does highlight the dis-juncture between theory and practice. It also exhibits the ingenuity of many ordinary women in working within a massively restrictive system.[29]

This has been validated through my own analysis of the wills of the Paston women and is evidenced through their ability to have direct control of their own property while existing within the paradigm of patriarchy.

Wills often followed a set pattern when it came to their structure. According to Jefferies:

> The use of such strict verbal formulae in the wills makes it impossible to use their words to determine individuals' religious commitments. However, the individual voluntary bequests in the wills followed no set pattern and they allow one to draw inferences about the testator.[30]

The gentry most often used their wills to improve their local parish through pious bequests. As Saul argues, this was partly to leave a physical mark on the structure that would perpetuate their name and partly to assist in the swift passage of their souls through the pains of purgatory.[31] Whether small or large improvements, the intention and motivations were usually the same. There has been some debate regarding the gentry's involvement in the parish church. Richmond suggests that the gentry focused mainly on individual piety and were involved primarily in their private chapels.[32] Other historians maintain that gentry involvement in the parish church was central to their religion and their need to demonstrate status and lordship. Private expressions of piety were therefore not in opposition to public piety, but were part of the spectrum of religious devotion in fifteenth-century English gentry society.[33] Saul concludes that:

---

[28] Christine Churches, "Women and Property in Early Modern England: A Case-Study," *Social History 23,* no. 2 (1998): 165-180.
[29] A. L. Erickson, *Women and Property in Early Modern England* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 19-20.
[30] Henry A. Jefferies, "Men, Women, the Late Medieval Church and Religion: Evidence from Wills from County Dublin," *Archivium Hibernicum 69*, no. 44 (2016): 355-365.
[31] Nigel Saul*, Lordship and Faith: The English Gentry and the Parish Church in the Middle Ages,* First edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 7.
[32] Colin Richmond, "Religion and the Fifteenth-century English Gentleman," in *The Church, Politics and Patronage in the Fifteenth Century,* ed. R. B. Dobson (New York: St Martin's Press, 1984), 197-9.
[33] Peter D. Clarke, "New Evidence of Noble and Gentry Piety in Fifteenth-Century England and Wales," *Journal of Medieval History 34*, no. 1 (2008): 23-35.

> [T]he story of gentry engagement with the parish church in the Middle Ages is not just one about the affirmation of status and the takeover of religious buildings for secular display. It is also one about the discharging of Christian obligation and the laity's quest for religious truth.[34]

These debates around wills provide an insight into gentry religion and to what degree they were involved in their local parish. There have been some significant studies that centre around women and their wills.[35] There is, however, room for more analysis regarding the impact that gender had on both men and women as evidenced in their wills. This study therefore seeks to address this gap and add to the research regarding gender and wills.

Theoretical Framework, Gender and Social and Personal Identity

This research is informed by using gender as a category for historical analysis. While early work in gender history focused on women, historians now recognise the need to incorporate men as well. As Joan Scott argued in her field-defining essay:

> [W]omen and men were defined in terms of one another, and no understanding of either could be achieved by entirely separate study . . . gender becomes a way of denoting "cultural constructions"-the entirely social creation of ideas about appropriate roles for women and men. It is a way of referring to the exclusively social origins of the subjective identities of men and women. Gender is, in this definition, a social category imposed on a sexed body.[36]

Gender, therefore, is a category that allows historians to understand men and women in relation to each other. Analysis of one cannot come without the other as their experiences were not mutually exclusive. When coupled with intersections such as class, religion and race, a gendered analysis provides us with a more nuanced approach to the lived experiences of men and women of the past.

Men and women had different experiences of gendered expectations and masculinity and femininity have been studied in different ways. While studies of women and gender have flourished since the 1970s, masculinity as a category for historical analysis emerged comparatively later although it is now a rapidly expanding field of research.[37] The study of

---

[34] Saul, *Lordship and Faith*, 11.

[35] Caroline A. J. Skeel, "Medieval Wills," *History 10*, no. 40 (1926): 300-310.

[36] Joan Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *The American Historical Review 91*, no. 5 (1986): 1053-1075, quote at 1056.

[37] For examples of some recent studies regarding masculinity see: Ruth Mazo Karras, *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003)*;* Clare

masculinity has for some time been criticised by historians focused on women's studies for apparently bringing men back to the centre of the discussion and leaving women on the margins, but as Shepard argues:

> There is a difference, of course, between treating men as universal subjects and investigating the ways in which male identities and experiences are particularized by gender. The former is characterized by gender blindness and perpetuates the myth of a male norm, or the "false universal" that has been shrewdly analyzed by Hilda Smith. By contrast, exploring the experiences and representations of men as men avoids approaching gender simply in terms of female deviance from that male norm.[38]

Katherine Lewis adds that "[t]he wider problem of 'men' in general standing as an unexamined default while women's gender identities were being so thoroughly unpicked inspired the growth of studies focusing explicitly on medieval masculinity in the 1990s".[39]

The study of masculinity is not without its problems and does have the potential to sideline the experiences of women once again. Rather than adding masculinity into the historiography as an afterthought, the solution is to analyse men in the same way we do women, in relation to broader questions regarding their existence, for example, the distribution of power and individual agency.[40] This study therefore follows the advice of historians such as Joan Scott and Natalie Zemon Davis who argue that:

> [W]e should be interested in the history of both women and men, that we should not be working only on the subjected sex any more than an historian of class can focus entirely on peasants. Our goal is to understand the significance of the sexes, of gender groups in the historical past. Our goal is to discover the range in sex roles and in sexual symbolism in different societies and periods, to find out what meaning they had and how they functioned to maintain the social order or to promote its change.[41]

Gender expectations and the subsequent pressures that came with those expectations, significantly affected both men and women in the medieval period.[42] Bullough demonstrates that the strict rules adopted from anatomical and philosophical assumptions about sex

---

A. Lees, *Medieval Masculinities, Regarding Gender in the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994)*;* P. H. Cullum and Katherine J. Lewis, eds. *Religious Men and Masculine Identity in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer Ltd, 2013); R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005).

[38] Alexandra Shepard, "Manhood, Patriarchy, and Gender in Early Modern History," in *Masculinities, Childhood, Violence: Attending to Early Modern Women and Men: Proceedings of the 2006 Symposium*, eds. Amy Leonard and Karen L. Nelson (University of Delaware Press, 2011), 78-9.

[39] Katherine Lewis*, Kingship and Masculinity in Late Medieval England* (London: Routledge, 2013), 5.

[40] Shepard, "Manhood, Patriarchy," 79.

[41] Natalie Zemon Davis, "'Women's History' in Transition: The European Case*,*" *Feminist Studies 3*, no. 9 (1975): 83-103, quote at 90.

[42] Karras, *From Boys to Men*, 1-3.

inhibited both men and women, so that "the medieval male was plagued by many of the same fears and anxieties as his modern counterpart, and being masculine was all-important".[43] Gender is therefore the main avenue through which the Paston men and women will be understood within this research.

Analysing the Pastons as men and women with social and personal identities is fundamental to understanding their position in the world and how they perceived it.

> Social identity provides a model for locating the individual in a society which makes the allowance both for the action of competing collective influences such as predetermined roles, status and memberships of groups and for the response, conscious and unconscious of the individual.[44]

A sense of self, of personal and social identity, is a part of the human condition and existed within the minds and lives of medieval people. Attempting to quantify such human emotions and experiences within written formal and religious documents is an emerging field that focuses on understanding the history of emotions. This thesis is more concerned with analysing instances of social and personal identity and locating the Pastons within their environment in order to understand how they perceived themselves and those around them. As Neal proposes, gender is one such avenue through which we can come to understand the sense of self and social identity:

> While that sense of self depended on many things, gender has to be regarded as one of its central anchors. Every society presents its members with a set of meanings imputed to biological sex, and every individual, male or female, must respond to those meanings in tracing the route of his or her life.[45]

Woolf argues that we must see communities and individuals in the context of their local cultures, cultures that in turn give past lives meaning at a variety of levels from the individual through to the corporate to the ecclesiastical and national.[46] The Pastons will be analysed as a case study and located within their community of gentry and societal expectations. This is to understand where they located themselves within their community and how they navigated gendered expectations from both society and their family.

---

[43] Vern L. Bullough, "On Being a Male in the Middle Ages," in *Medieval Masculinities,* ed. Clare Lees, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 43.
[44] Julia Crick, "Posthumous Obligation and Family Identity," in *Social Identity in Early Medieval Britain*, eds. William O. Frazer and Andrew Tyrrell (London: A&C Black, 2001), 194.
[45] Derek G. Neal, *The Masculine Self in Late Medieval England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 25.
[46] Daniel Woolf and Norman Jones, "Introduction," in *Local Identities in Late Medieval and Early Modern England,* eds. Daniel Woolf and Norman Jones (New York: Springer, 2007), 12.

Chapter One: Marriage and the Paston Women

Gentry society was in many ways formed around the institution of marriage, from both a religious as well as a personal and political standpoint. The marriage between a fifteenth-century man and woman was a religious and a domestic rite of passage, and it signalled the legal bonding of the couple as well as their completion of a Christian sacrament.[47] Marriage looked very different and took on various meanings between social classes and individuals. Medieval marriage fell into one of two categories, regulated and unregulated and the "tendentiously uniform model recommended by the ecclesiastical and secular authorities is counterpoised by a plurality of individual conjugal initiatives".[48] For the Pastons, marriage was a frequent topic of discussion in many of the letters within the family, particularly those of Margaret. This illustrates the importance of the act, the significance of marriage in preserving the family line and often, its role in securing a higher status and financial position for the family within wider gentry culture.

Medieval Gentry Marriage

A "good" marriage, it has been suggested, could be more advantageous and more profitable than most professions in medieval England. It had the ability to provide men and women with security, both financially and socially, and it could propel individuals up the social hierarchy.[49] The overarching ambition for a gentry family was to secure a strong family lineage; this would significantly help guarantee power, status and wealth. The most effective and often the only way to ensure that property remained within the family lineage was through a lucrative marriage.[50]

While gentry marriage can be understood as a social and indeed a business contract, the religious component of marriage in medieval England cannot be understated. Marriage was considered a form of spiritual bond and a sacred act between man and woman and acted as

[47]See: Neil Cartlidge, *Medieval Marriage: Literary Approaches, 1100-1300* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer Ltd, 1997), 1-21; Silvana Seidel Menchi, Emlyn Eisenach, and Charles Donahue, "Introduction," in *Marriage in Europe, 1400-1800*, eds. Seidel, Eisenach and Donahue (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 7.
[48] Seidel Menchi, Eisenach and Donahue, "Introduction," 7.
[49] Anne F. Sutton, "Serious Money: The Benefits of Marriage in London, 1400-1499," *London Journal 38*, no. 1 (March 2013): 1-17.
[50] David D'Avray, *Medieval Marriage: Symbolism and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1.

the symbol for a religious life.[51] Individual agency and freedom of choice had to be taken into account when discussing medieval marriage. While marriage was a religious and institutional act, one cannot underestimate the human element of marriage and the capacity for it to be a loving union and incorporate free choice which was often endorsed by the Church.[52]

Canon and common law systems in medieval England reflected the patriarchal ideals of society that saw women as the weaker and therefore subservient sex. Theologians and canonists were primarily concerned with the marital bond between the couple, and considered the spiritual desire to internalise the relationship in order for the individuals to grow together and create a bond of charity to be most important. Moreover, clerical commentators often emphasised the ideal of marriages free from the worldly influences of family or overlords, and in which the individual consent of both parties was paramount.[53] Canonists also believed it was the God-given right of the man to be respected as the head of the household. It was incumbent upon everyone in the family, including the wife, to be submissive and obedient to the man as husband and father, in order to resemble the hierarchical union between Adam and Eve or analogously, Christ and the Church.[54] As will become apparent, the reality was very different for Paston men and women.

Under common law, coverture reflected the societal view that women needed to be protected by their husbands because of their perceived inability to reason in the way men did. The ideology that informed coverture was rooted in the doctrines of Christianity, as well as in classical philosophy and medieval science.[55] Under coverture, a woman's legal rights were in effect granted to her husband and the married couple became one legal person as opposed to two individuals, and known as "unity of a person".[56] A married woman could not legally own property of her own and unity of a person meant that any profits made through property were in theory meant to go to the husband. The common law of coverture was informed by the influential thirteenth-century legal text known as *Bracton*, which helped to define married

[51] D'Avray, *Medieval Marriage*, 2-3.
[52] D'Avray, *Medieval Marriage*, 1-2.
[53] Michael M. Sheehan, *Marriage, Family, and Law in Medieval Europe: Collected Studies* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 91-4.
[54] Sara McDougall, "Women and Gender in Canon Law," in *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe,* eds. Judith M. Bennett and Ruth Mazo Karras (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 164.
[55] Barbara J. Harris, *English Aristocratic Women, 1450-1550: Marriage and Family, Property and Careers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 24.
[56] Sara M. Butler, "Discourse on the Nature of Coverture in the Later Medieval Courtroom," in *Married Women and the Law: Coverture in England and the Common Law World*, eds. Tim Stretton and Krista J. Kesselring (Quebec: McGill-Queen's Press, 2013), 25-8.

women's legal existence based on social and intellectual assumptions that women were by nature less reasoning and weaker than men.[57] There has been much debate about the extent to which coverture applied to the lived reality of medieval men and women. Many historians ascertain that it did not have the legal grasp and influence on the lives of married women (especially gentry) that lawmakers had intended it to.[58] The cultural effect that coverture had on women, however, was much more significant, adding to the ideas about women's natural inferiority that were ingrained more widely in medieval culture. Therefore, failing to follow laws such as coverture would not necessarily require enforcement from a legal perspective yet the nature of coverture made it acceptable and even expected for men to govern their wives.[59] The culturally ingrained systems of patriarchy that informed gendered laws such as coverture could have a profound impact on both men and women. Even so, this may not be quite so evident among the gentry. As will be seen, the Paston letters do not seem to show that the submission of women always took precedence over advancing the family socially and financially. This chapter will analyse the actions of the Paston women, and their ideas about marriage, as much in terms of duty to family as of adherence to gendered ideals.

The women of the Paston family were a resolute group who were not afraid to voice their concerns, act as representatives for their husbands, arrange matters of business for the household and family (including marriages), and protect their rights and lands when necessary. Marriage is a topic that features in majority of the letters from and between women. It was a subject that was on the forefront of their minds and often a tool that they used in order to gain power and authority for themselves, friends and family members. The structures put in place by coverture appear on the outset to be a rigorous set of rules that would ensure women did not have a voice nor an equal position within their marriage. The Paston women seemed to have led lives that did not act in accordance with such cultural ideals and often completely disregarded them. Their lives and marriages do not represent all women of gentry families, nor do their experiences speak for medieval women in general. Their experiences do, however, offer insights into how coverture and the structures of patriarchy that existed within medieval English culture did not prevent all women from expressing their individual agency. The Paston letters tell an alternative story to what lawmakers would have considered an acceptable form of marriage. Paston men and women

[57]Samuel E. Thorne, ed., *Bracton on the Laws and Customs of England (*Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1968).
[58]Michelle M. Sauer, *Gender in Medieval Culture* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), 16.
[59] Sauer, *Gender in Medieval Culture*, 16.

worked together in order to benefit the family and wider household and the women were able to exercise authority within their marriage and sometimes more broadly, behind the scenes of public life.

Some key themes emerge from the letters that illustrate how the Paston women navigated gendered societal expectations and how they operated within their marriages. Firstly, women held an equal position with their husbands in the marriage in regard to their ability to negotiate, run the family estates and often act as matriarchs for the family while their husbands were away. This display of individual agency and implementation of the "female career" that was marriage, was in complete indifference to the patriarchal structures that medieval society was founded on.[60] For this reason, I have argued that while options for women were often limited to marriage and childbirth, the display of female power within some of the Paston marriages constituted relationships that appear to have been more egalitarian. The next theme that emerges from analysing the letters is the idea that marriage was a duty that women had to live up to. It is clear from the Paston letters that not every woman's experience of marriage was the same. Women were prepared for marriage from birth and they were not expected to enter into any careers other than marriage and motherhood, while the marriages that they entered into determined their success and even more so, that of the wider family. Marriage was therefore a duty that medieval women were expected to fulfil and the pressure to do so was immense. I argue within this chapter that marriage can be a source of power for women and that it provided them with the ability to say no if necessary. However, this risked disownment by the family and accompanying social and financial ruin. Marriage could therefore be understood as a woman's duty and a source of oppression for some. The last theme that will be analysed is women's attitudes towards marriage and how they used it for their own gain. As discussed above, marriage could be a source of oppression for women, but this section will analyse women's varying attitudes towards marriage and the ways in which it also served and advanced them.

Margaret Paston

Marriage took on many forms in medieval England depending on factors such as social status, birth rank and age. The idea that women should be subordinate to men was an ingrained cultural ideal, reflected in the common belief that women should be firmly "under

[60] Barbara Harris discusses marriage as a female career and its opposition to coverture in Harris*, English Aristocratic Women,* 26.

the rod" of their husbands, both figuratively and physically.[61] The perceived inferiority of women was based on notions derived from religion, science, classical literature and legal institutions, resulting in a culture within which many women were generally assumed to have little authority over themselves or anyone else. It is necessary to remember that the lived experiences of men and women could diverge a great deal from this gendered model, depending on factors such as status, age and finances. Some women, such as the older Pastons, even benefited from the structures of patriarchy once they got married. They were able to have greater control over their lives and the lives of their children, servants and tenants. The various permutations of marital status, age and birth rank could determine the degree of control. Women such as Agnes and Margaret Paston had authority because of their wealth and status but women such as their servants or even their daughters had less individual agency due to patriarchal social and household structures combined with their lesser status. Moreover, not all men benefitted from the patriarchal society within which they resided. For example, men of lower social rank and second-born sons were at the mercy of men of higher status and birth rank. These ideas will be explored in more depth in Chapters Two and Four, which examine the Paston men.

For fifteenth-century churchmen, as well as for many secular commentators, the ideal woman followed the example of the Virgin Mary who embodied characteristics such as piety, obedience, chastity and humility.[62] The antithesis to the Marian ideal was derived from Eve, who was understood to be responsible for all the sin and folly of the human race. Eve represented the sexual, lustful, disobedient side of women and therefore provided a justification for their subsequent inferior legal and social status.[63] The popular fourteenth-century conduct poem *How the Goode Wife Taught Hyr Daughter* outlined expectations for married women, told through the scenario of a woman preparing her daughter for marriage. The woman in the poem places emphasis on a few key areas, most notably, a woman's demeanour. Quotations such as, "Loke that thou be bothe meke and myld", "Suete of speche" and "Fayre wordes wreth do slake; Fayre wordes wreth schall never make, Ne fayre wordes brake never bone" demonstrate the degree to which the author believed meekness determined a whether or not a wife was behaving as she should.[64] The ideal wife, according to the author,

[61] Sara Margaret Butler, *The Language of Abuse: Marital Violence in Later Medieval England* (Leyde: Brill, 2007), 43-4.
[62] Schaus, *Women and Gender in Medieval Europe*, 284-5.
[63] Ibid, 267.
[64] Eve Salisbury, "How the Goode Wife Taught Hyr daughter," in *The Trials and Joys of Marriage*, ed. Eve Salisbury (Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 2002), 219-224.

should remain sweet in order to combat potential violence from her husband, practice obedience, submission and love him above all things.[65] Submission, obedience, chastity and a careful tongue were all considered necessary for a woman to be considered a "good wife". The Paston letters show that these gendered expectations for marriage were not necessarily what shaped the lived reality of gentry women. As shall be seen, evidence points to the fact that women were able to run estates on behalf of men, use their voice to air concerns and ideas within the marriage, and in effect work in a team with their husbands. The following section explores the relationship between expectations for women in marriage and how these universal ideals were adapted to their lived reality as gentry women.

The common law doctrine of coverture suggested that a married woman's existence and her ability to act as an individual were subject to the approval of her husband. Married women according to coverture, ceased to exist as individuals and were unable to sign a binding contract, initiate or defend a lawsuit, write a will and had little to no property rights.[66] The letters of the Paston women reveal their lived experiences could diverge a great deal from legal and cultural models that placed women in an inferior position to their husbands. This reflects the pragmatic nature of the Pastons and the necessity to fulfil familial duties such as running their large estate. In her husband John's absence, Margaret had to adopt traditionally masculine and dominant leadership roles in order for their household and family estates to run smoothly. Margaret's ability to step into roles considered traditionally masculine – for example, conducting business meetings, defending manors from invaders and acting as an authoritarian in the family – was paramount to the family's social and economic success.

Many letters between Margaret and John discussing matters of business for their estates demonstrate that Margaret needed to, and was able to, adopt some of the roles gendered as masculine that would have typically been reserved for her husband. Most of these letters were almost always practical, and they read as if two partners were discussing matters of business. John and Margaret wrote to each other, delegating jobs, discussing ways to profit from certain local situations and going over their estates. Their letters do not read as though one were dominant and the other submissive, but rather as though they worked together to govern a household. John does not demand things of Margaret; he asks her if she can complete certain tasks on his behalf and offers alternatives if she cannot. For example, in a letter from John to Margaret he discusses the inadequacies of the undersheriff and asks if she can

[65] Salisbury, "How the Goode Wife Taught Hyr Daughter," 219-224.
[66] Butler, "Discourse on the Nature of Coverture," 25.

confront him and set him straight: "wherefore I pray yow bring hem to-gedyr and set hem accord if ye can".[67] In another letter, he asks her to "put alle your wittes to-gedir and see for the reformacion of it. And ye may remember be pis how ye shuld do if pis wer yowres alone, and so do now".[68] John often asks things of Margaret but leaves matters in her hands and entrusts her to use her "wittes" in any given situation. Margaret is free to interject and refuse tasks if she wishes to do so. For the most part, Margaret does as John asks of her and relays the outcome of these situations back to him through letters.

The surviving letters indicate Margaret Paston took an active role in writing and in matters of business and property. Her letters and those of the other Paston women provide us with an understanding of what marriage may have looked like for a gentry couple in fifteenth-century England. Margaret took a particularly active role in running the family estates when her husband John Paston was away on business in London. Margaret was often left as the sole proprietor of the estate in his absence, and there are several examples of her attempts to protect the Paston lands from rival families. In one instance, with the threat of an attack from rival Lord Moleyns looming, Margaret asks John to send her various weapons so that she can defend herself in the case that someone should attempt to abduct her.[69] This is an example of Margaret preparing to defend herself, as opposed to asking John to come home and defend her as her husband. Margaret was prepared to take control of the situation and act as her own defender in combat, a very masculine act in and of itself. She was not afraid to order her husband to acquire weapons for such an occurrence:

> Ryt wurchipful hwsbon, I recomawnd me to 3u and prey 3w to gete som crosse bowis, and wyndacis to bynd pem with, and quarell, for 3wr hwsis here ben so low pat pere may non man schete owt with no long bowe pow we hadde neuer so moche nede.[70]

Bracton speaks on the expectation of a husband to protect a wife:

> One may suffer an injuria not only in his own person but in the persons of those, he has in his potestas as his children and his wife. A husband may sue for an injuria done to his wife, but the converse is not true, for wives ought to be protected by husbands, not husbands by wives.[71]

[67] Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers,* 64.
[68] Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers*, 95.
[69] Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers,* 226.
[70] Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers*, 226.
[71] Thorne, ed., *Bracton On the Laws and Customs of England,* 438.

Bracton was just one of a number of legal texts on the laws and customs of England, but it nevertheless provides a valuable insight into how medieval lawmakers thought about women and marriage as well as men, property and agency. Although we do not have John's reply to Margaret's letter, she was left to defend and protect their estates on several occasions. Unity of a person was one of the key principles of coverture; therefore any attack on John's estates, or on Margaret, would have been an attack on John himself. The fact that John seems to have regarded Margaret as quite capabe of defending herself suggests a trusting relationship and a partnership of equality between them. The circumstances surrounding the attacks on Margaret and her willingness to defend herself and her household display not only her readiness to forgo gendered expectations of fifteenth-century women, but seemingly also John's willingness to bend the expectations of fifteenth-century men. It demonstrates John's inherent trust in Margaret to defend their estates while he was away, as well as to lead and govern their household effectively.

Margaret's effective governance of the family estates is well documented in the Paston letters and John Paston himself seems to have trusted Margaret with matters that concerned his household. He states in a letter to his wife:

> I pray you, see the good governance of my household and giding of other things touching my profit . . . weekly have a discussion of such things that are to be done . . . that is to say both for the providing of stuff for my household and for the gathering of my rents and grains, and for the setting my servants to work, and for the most sensible means of selling and dispatching my malt . . . and when I come home I want no excuse, such that you told my servants to do it.[72]

This letter is often used as an example of Margaret's governance of the household in John's absence and of her authority within it. This is certainly an example of Margaret taking on more masculine roles in John's absence, as well as her ability to act as the governing head of the household, a traditionally masculine role. This letter illustrates John and Margaret's indifference towards the gendered ideals set in place by common law such as coverture and societal expectations for men and women. However, there are qualifications to note. John addresses the letter, "To my mastres Margrete Paston and to my welbelovid frendes John Daubeney + and Richard Calle".[73] This suggests that while John is formally addressing Margaret as the head of the household while he is away, he expects her to work with his

[72] Roger Virgoe, ed*., Private Life in the 15th Century: Illustrated Letters of the Paston Family* (London: Macmillan London Limited, 1989), 132.
[73] Davis, ed., *The Paston Letters and Papers,* 127.

advisors and servants who he says can "advise as the matter requires".[74] John, evidently trusted Margaret to run the household and estates in his absence not only because he deems her capable but also because he trusts his advisors to help her. Moreover, the letter frequently describes the estate and household as his. John was trusting Margaret to run his household and secure his profit; he never refers to it as theirs. Perhaps John did espouse the notion of "unity of a person" in marriage. This letter does demonstrate the teamwork of a married gentry couple in a domain that would usually be considered men's, but not complete indifference to gendered legal and religious ideals. In the letters between Margaret and John that deal with the growing tensions between the duke of Suffolk and Paston tenants, this teamwork is truly demonstrated. In one letter Margaret describes the tenants as John's, telling him "Please you to know that I have spoken this week with the divers of your tenants of Drayton", while in another from John to Margaret, he describes them as her tenants, stating "You are a gentlewoman and it is worshipful for you to comfort your tenants; wherefore I would that you should ride to Hellesdon and Drayton".[75] This encapsulates the teamwork that went on within the correspondence of their letters, as well as in public, as they worked to govern their estates. Perhaps neither wanted to take responsibility for such matters, but they were able to work together in communicating their responsibilities to each other, the expectations that they held for their respective spouse as well as the roles that they each held as landlords. This exemplifies the practicalities of a gentry marriage that could not realistically align with gendered societal expectations for marriage.

There are many examples of the women of the Paston family exerting authority within the private confines of their household and within their private marriage. While it was not acceptable within medieval society for women to have a strong voice even within their marriage, it was more commonplace within gentry society. The Paston women had this authority behind closed doors and could freely express themselves within their marriages. As this independence was exerted within the private home and through letters, it could have been largely unnoticed, and their marriages would have seemed entirely acceptable to the average person outside the gentry. There are, however, examples of public displays of power, independence and authority from the Paston women that reveal medieval gentry women as keen negotiators, businesswomen and advocates for their husbands and families. There are numerous instances in which Margaret negotiates with others and meets with other men to

[74] Virgoe, ed., *Private Life in the 15th Century: Illustrated Letters of the Paston Family*, 132.
[75] Virgoe, ed., *Private Life in the 15th Century: Illustrated Letters of the Paston Family*, 136 and 141.

discuss matters of business. One such example is discussed in a letter between Margaret and John in which she suggests that he might like to buy some the possessions of one Sir Henry Inglose, who had just died. She writes, "If you desire to buy any of his stuff I pray you send me word thereof in haste and I shall speak to Robert Inglose and to Witchingham thereof: I suppose that they are executors".[76] Margaret came up with this idea on behalf of her husband and proceeded to offer to do the business on his behalf. While this is a matter that would be completed on behalf of her husband, Margaret was still the face of the family and the person with whom men would interact regarding family business. In several instances while John was away in London for work, Margaret had to act as his representative. In one case, she writes:

> This day was held a great day at Acle before the under-sheriff and the under-escheator for the matter of Sir John Fastolf's lands. And my cousin Rookwood and my cousin John Berney of Reedham were there, with divers other gentlemen and worthy men of the country; and the matter is well sped.[77]

She then goes on to describe the contents of the meeting, her dinner with the mayor and his wife and the rumours surrounding the duke of York's claim to the throne. This was a very public display of power and agency from a married woman, and an example of the position of authority that Margaret as a woman held within the privacy of her household, as well as in public as a representative for John and the family. Given people's willingness to work with Margaret and the ease with which she discussed these matters of business, it appears that such exercise of authority was commonplace for this couple as well as acceptable in the eyes of their peers. Status and financial success could evidently confer power on a woman. Margaret was not behaving as society expected her to, but she had access to authority that was inconceivable to someone in a lower class.

After John died, Margaret became the head of the household in many ways and other Pastons wrote to her for advice and to ask her to send various items to them. Margaret acted as go-between for the men in her family, as is illustrated in this letter from Margaret to John Paston II in which she advises to update her on his situation:

> I marvel greatly that you send me no word how you do, for your enemies begin to grow bold and that puts your friends in fear and doubt. . . for if we lose our friends, it will be hard in this troublous world to get them again.[78]

[76] Virgoe, ed., *Private Life in the 15th Century: Illustrated Letters of the Paston Family*, 71.
[77] Virgoe, ed., *Private Life in the 15th Century: Illustrated Letters of the Paston Family,* 110.
[78] Olga Kenyon, *800 Years of Women's Letters* (Gloucester: The History Press, 2011), 195.

This is clear evidence of Margaret's position as the head of the family. She knows the importance of social connections in the acquisition of power and the necessity for alliances, especially during a time of social and political unrest. On John's death, if the Pastons had followed traditional medieval patterns of inheritance and gendered relations of power, Margaret would have given more power to her sons or other male relatives. Indeed, Margaret seems to have been aware that her position of power was not the usual place for a woman and she expressed her fears of losing her land to her son, as is explained in a letter between John Paston III and John Paston II:

> My mother weeps and takes on marvellously, for she says that she will arrange for her land so that you shall sell none of it, for she thinks that you would if it came into your hands.[79]

Despite her fears, Margaret remained in a position of power, leading her family and her household. Marriage therefore was able to serve as an avenue through which she could express herself and exert agency and dominance within her own life and that of her family.

While marriage was a source of significant power for Margaret, widowhood seems to have been the period in her life when she was able to exert the most dominance. Margaret's children refer to her as "right worshipful", which is also how Margaret addressed John when he was alive. This gesture can be seen as a sign of respect as well as an acknowledgement of Margaret's position of authority within the relationship. The term "worshipful" implies a position of submission on the part of the writer; in this instance Margaret was the authority figure and the language used by her children can be seen as an acknowledgment of her status as a matriarchal figure and as a sign of respect.[80] The Pastons seemed to have been a family that was very comfortable with a woman having a position of authority both within a marriage and later as a widow. This is true also for Agnes Paston. Agnes was a widow for many years and there is evidence of her leading the family as a matriarchal figure. *Bracton* reflected common practice in stating that when a wife was left widowed, the estates and land should go to a surviving male relative:

> [C]hildren have no more rightful claim than wives, for a citizen could scarcely be found who would undertake a great enterprise in his lifetime if, at his death, he was compelled against his will to leave his estate to ignorant and extravagant children and undeserving wives.[81]

---

[79] Virgoe, ed., *Private Life in the 15th Century: Illustrated Letters of the Paston Family,* 219.
[80] Gies and Gies, *A Medieval Family,* 15.
[81] Kay E. Lacey, "Women and Work in Fourteenth and Fifteenth Century London," in *Women and Work in Pre-Industrial England,* eds. Lindsey Charles and Lorna Duffin (London: Routledge, 2013), 35.

The way that both Margaret and Agnes lived after the deaths of their husbands seems to be in complete contrast with the sentiment behind this statement. These women were able to live independently and govern their lands on their own once they were widows. Indeed, gentry women who were widowed often proceeded to live a life of much greater independence and freedom than they did when they were married.

What is out of character for the Paston women as medieval members of the gentry class, is that they never re-married. It was common for women to re-marry multiple times, and the fact that both Margaret and Agnes did not re-marry after the death of their husbands is perhaps a sign that they were aware of their relative freedom when married. It was much more common for a woman to re-marry after the death of her husband. This ensured social acceptance, the security of having her lands in the hands of one person (her husband), in contast to male family members who had the ability to take control of the estate of a widow. In the case of Margaret and Agnes, this is evidence of their position as heads of the family. The fact that they did not re-marry could indicate that they were both in a position within the family, such that no males would interfere with their ability to govern their lands and estates independently.

The Paston letters also reveal a tension between women's lived experiences and the gendered ideals set in place by coverture and other institutions such as the Church. One of the best examples of this is the women's ability to speak their mind in their letters towards their husbands without fear of repercussion. For example, in one letter Margaret offers John some trenchant counsel. She is replying to John's letter in which he has asked her to retrieve goods stolen from their property, Gresham, which had been ransacked by Lord Moelyns. Margaret disagrees with John and tells him others will dispose of the goods if they hear of their attempts to retrieve them:

> As for your desire that I should enquire where any stuff of yours is, I do not know how to do this, for if anyone were to seen to have some of your stuff and we had it from him, others who have more thereof would beware and rid themselves of it.[82]

This letter is strong evidence that John did not have absolute authority within the marriage. Margaret is able to voice concern about a request from John and refuse to comply. It is also an example of Margaret's tactical and governing hand in matters of family business. John was quick to act here without thinking much about the consequences of seeking out his stolen

[82] Virgoe, ed., *Private Life in the 15th Century: Illustrated Letters of the Paston Family*, 66.

property, whereas Margaret was able to act as the voice of reason and put a stop to it. She then goes on to ask him to "send me word in haste whether you will have red for your livery as you were intending. And also I pray you that you will have bought two good hats for your sons".[83] Margaret is able to disagree with a request John has made of her, and then ask him to do something for her in return. Despite the strictures of coverture on what was acceptable in a marriage, a more egalitarian and flexible relationship between husband and wife was possible. Moreover, while perhaps John attempted (in the letter regarding the governance of his household) to adhere to some of the ideals presented through coverture, Margaret was less likely to follow unquestioningly the requests of her husband and more likely to live her life in accordance with her own judgement as opposed to societal expectations.

Margery and Elizabeth Paston

Gentry women were raised from birth with the expectation that they would marry well and have children. A marriage deemed acceptable to the family was the one thing that women knew they would have to do in order to advance both themselves and their family socially and financially. In this sense, marriage was a duty for women that they were expected to fulfil. Most Paston women came to accept this, as they married with the approval of their parents.[84] But there are a few notable exceptions. What happened to women who acted against their families's wishes and decided to marry someone of their own choice? What does this reveal about gentry beliefs regarding a woman's place within the family and subsequently her future marriage? This section will analyse primarily two women's experience of marriage, Margery Paston and Elizabeth Clere, as well as their family's response to their decision to marry someone of their own choice. Both women chose who they did and did not want to marry, and both were ostracised by their families because of it. The notable thing about this ostracisation and criticism is that it primarily came from women. This is illustrative of women's knowledge of their place in the world and the degree to which they believed their duty to fulfil their families' wishes was more important than following their own.

[83] Virgoe, ed., *Private Life in the 15th Century: Illustrated Letters of the Paston Family,* 66.

[84] For example, Margaret was arranged to marry John Paston by his father William Paston and mother Agnes Paston: "I send you good tidings of the coming and bringing home of the gentlewoman that you know from Reedham . . . And as for the acquaintance between John Paston and the said gentlewoman, she made him gentle cheer in gentle wise," quoted in Virgoe, ed., *Private Life in the 15th Century: Illustrated Letters of the Paston Family*, 40.

Many of the Paston letters were written merely to convey messages of business and everyday life, but they also lend themselves to an exploration of emotion. This is evident in the letters from Elizabeth Clere to John Paston regarding the marriage of Elizabeth Paston, as well as in all the correspondence surrounding the marriage of Margery Paston. Both of these women went against their families' wishes for their prospective marriages. The emotions and pressure surrounding the institution of marriage, as well as what happened to women who did not fulfil their duty to marry for the greater good of the family, can be understood by reading the correspondence regarding these marriages. Both Margery and Elizabeth Paston were women who put their own needs first, and in the gentry class this could have detrimental impacts on a woman's financial and social status. The letters that survive regarding the potential marriages of these women initially appear to be pragmatic in nature, featuring attempts from certain family members to convince them to change their minds. But when analysed a little closer they can be seen as emotionally charged letters that at their core portray desperation, anxiety, anger and sorrow on the part of the family surrounding the women.

The letters between family members regarding the marriage negotiations of Elizabeth Paston illustrate the pressure placed on women to marry for the greater good of the family. Agnes, fearing her daughter Elizabeth Paston was about to marry below her rank after her refusal to marry Stephen Scrope (a man thirty years her senior) attempted to force her into the marriage. This is described in a letter from family friend Elizabeth Clere to John Paston:

> [F]or she may not speak with any man, whoever comes, and may not see nor speak with my man nor with servants of her mother, without her mother suggesting that she is behaving otherwise than she means to. And since Easter she has been mostly beaten once or twice a week and sometimes twice in one day, and her head broken in 2 or 3 places.[85]

Agnes was clearly desperate for her daughter to follow her wishes and marry Scrope, and while Elizabeth Clere fears for her cousin and pleads with John to find her another suitable match, she does not discredit Agnes and indeed says of Elizabeth, "sorrow oft-times causes women to behave otherwise than they should do, and if she were in that case I am sure you would be sorry".[86] Elizabeth evidently felt that Agnes was well within her rights to punish her daughter for behaving "otherwise" than she should. We can reasonably assume that Elizabeth felt that the right thing to do would have been to follow the orders of her mother. Therefore, a Paston woman behaving as she should, would have been one who prioritised the

[85] Davis, ed. *The Paston Letters: A Selection in Modern Spelling,* 23-4.
[86] Ibid.

advancement of her family and herself, socially and financially, through marriage. Women of the gentry class seem to have been the enforcers of normative gender ideals surrounding marriage, at least in this circumstance. Agnes Paston was the person at the forefront of the punishment handed out to Elizabeth Paston, not another male relation, and Elizabeth Clere agrees that her cousin is not behaving in a manner appropriate for her sex. Femininity was clearly defined by the Church, contemporary science and legal institutions, but here we see gentry women defining femininity themselves, through the institution of marriage and responsibility to their family. A good woman in this case valued social, political and financial advancement through marriage as opposed to marriage for love. This is to a degree a contradiction of the medieval Church's teachings regarding marriage, in which the primary goal was for the matrimonial union between a man and a woman that encouraged the growth of a loving bond.[87] The Paston women clearly had gendered expectations for each other that were specific to their environment and did not necessarily align with societal views of gender roles.

When Margery Paston wished to marry the man she loved, Richard Calle, the anger displayed towards her reflects the Paston family's commitment to putting the needs of family before their own. This is demonstrated in a letter between John Paston III and John Paston II, "by your letter which you sent my by Jude that you have heard of R.C's labour that he makes with the assent of our ungracious sister".[88] John was insinuating that Margery was ungrateful for what her family had done for her and behaving selfishly. It is evident that he believed she was throwing her privileges away on a man who would do no better than "sell candles and mustard in Framlingham".[89] John clearly thought that his sister could do better than to marry someone from the merchant class, and he prioritised the social status of a potential match for his sister over the love she had found with Richard Calle. Margaret Paston had similar disdain for her daughter regarding the situation, stating: "for if she had been good, this would not have happened, in whatever place she had been; and if he (Calle) were dead at this hour, she would never be in my heart as she had been".[90] Margaret was making it clear that Margery had not been "good" and that her marriage to Richard Calle had caused nothing but a rift in the family. The "good" thing to do would have been to marry to advance the family as Margaret had done for her family. The pressure for women in the Paston family to find a

[87] Sheehan, *Marriage, Family, and Law in Medieval Europe*, 91-4.
[88] Davis, ed., *The Paston Letters: A Selection in Modern Spelling*, 177.
[89] Virgoe, ed., *Private Life in the 15th Century: Illustrated Letters of the Paston Family*, 40.
[90] Davis, ed., *The Paston Letters: A Selection in Modern Spelling*, 190.

suitable husband coincided with the financial pressure to maintain the family estate, especially in later years when the family would fall into financial hardship. Margaret felt so strongly about her daughter's marriage that she refused to receive her at her house, asserting: "I had charged them all that she should not be received into my house, as I had given her warning".[91] Margaret's response was fuelled by anger and sadness at a daughter whom she most likely believed to be behaving selfishly and irresponsibly. This is not only an example of the expectations placed on women but of the ultimate authority that Margaret and Agnes had within the family and therefore marriage. It may seem that the response Margaret and Agnes had towards their daughters was cold and harsh but from their perspective, they had followed the wishes of their family in marrying someone their parents had picked for them and had been able to advance socially and financially (as had their parents). Why could their children not? The expectation for women to sacrifice their lives for their families had been practiced for generations, and it would likely have seemed as though the children were acting selfishly and not fulfilling their duty to prioritise their family. The letters surrounding the potential marriages of Margery Paston and Elizabeth Paston can be understood as highly emotional for everyone involved, and are an example of both the variety of letters within the Paston collection, as well as the ways in which marriage could have an effect on everyone within the family, not just on the potential couple.

As discussed earlier, the Paston women had a degree of power and independence in a public setting and within the marriage itself. There were however limits to this public authority as they were almost always acting on behalf of their husbands. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that arranging marriages for other women in the family could have been a respectable source of power for the older Paston women and other women who were in matriarchal positions. Margery and Elizabeth Clere were not the heads of their families and therefore there was pressure for them to marry someone in order to gain such authority for themselves and advance the Paston name. Advancing themselves and their family through the marriages of their children was a way for women such as Agnes and Margaret to gain power indirectly. Moreover, Margaret and Agnes were able to have some form of control over the rest of the family in a way that was deemed acceptable for women within the gentry. This is an example of how a patriarchal society could benefit some and oppress others, and gender was not necessarily the determining factor in such oppression. Women such as Agnes and Margaret were able to thrive within a system that ultimately aimed to limit their individual agency

[91] Virgoe, ed., *Private Life in the 15th Century: Illustrated Letters of the Paston Family*, 187.

because of their wealth and access to social status. This contrasts with the experiences of Elizabeth and Margery Paston, who were at the mercy of the older women in their family due to their age and status.

We see examples of Margaret, Agnes and Elizabeth Clere convening with John Paston in order to ask him to approach men with regards to marriage (or to talk the likes of Elizabeth Paston out of marriage) but in general, women took the lead role in marriage negotiations. Margaret and Agnes Paston in particular took a very active role in arranging marriages for both men and women of their family, as seen in this letter here from Margaret to John:

> My mother prays you to remember my sister and do your part faithfully before you come home to help to get her a good marriage. It seems by my mother's language that she would never so fain to have been rid of her as now. It was tole here that (William) Knyvett, the heir, is able to marry.[92]

This exemplifies the teamwork and authority that Margaret and Agnes (whom Margaret referred to as her mother) could exercise behind the scenes, and illustrates the power that both women had over the extended family as well as over John. They were not asking John if he could act on their behalf. Rather, they were reminding him to do his part faithfully and remember to advance the needs of the family while he was away in London. Such an exchange between men and women outside of the gentry class may have been considered improper, but for men and women in the Paston family (and the gentry as a whole) it seems to be commonplace. Family came first for the Pastons, and the Paston women seemed to have been aware of the power that a "good marriage" could wield for women.

The letters used as examples here are a representation of gentry women's voices and emotions in the medieval period. No letters from Margery Paston regarding her marriage to Richard Calle survive and it is therefore difficult to understand her perspective on the matter. One way to understand what she was feeling about the pressure placed on her by her family is to analyse a letter from her husband Richard to her, in which he describes the situation as well as his feelings towards her:

> My own lady and mistress and before God very true wife . . . considering the great importunate and pressure upon you and that many untrue tale about me was made to you, which, God knows I was never guilty of.[93]

[92] Virgoe, ed., *Private Life in the 15th Century: Illustrated Letters of the Paston Family*, 75.
[93] Virgoe, ed., *Private Life in the 15th Century: Illustrated Letters of the Paston Family*, 183.

Richard understood Margery to be receiving immense pressure from her family, whom Richard described as "cursed" for trying to prevent matrimony. Richard then urged that Margery's family should have focused their energy on worshiping God and easing their heart instead.[94] Margery was not only bearing the brunt of anger and disdain from her family; she was also forced to stand between them and the man she loved. Therefore this "pressure" that Richard described in this letter to his wife, seemed to have been something that Margery and indeed many gentry women had to live with. Richard described their life together at this stage as "no pleasure to God nor to the world" even though they were bonded through matrimony.[95] This is illustrative of the choices that women of the gentry could be forced to make. Margery was forced to live a life of disharmony because of her choice to marry the man that she had fallen in love with, rather than someone her family had deemed acceptable, and she was ultimately never an accepted member of her family again because of it.

Marriage as a duty to one's family and as a performance of social status was clearly demonstrated in the senior Pastons' rejection of marriage as a romantic gesture. There is an interesting dichotomy between what the Church believed was appropriate for a Godly marriage and what families such as the Pastons believed was necessary in marriage. The Church frequently described marriage as a bond between a man and a woman and advised the couple to focus internally on their relationship as opposed to listening to the wishes of the family.[96] Richard's emphasis on his marriage to Margery being before God, his labelling of her family as cursed and his advice for Margery's family to please God seems to align with the Church's view of marriage. Margery's choice to marry Richard may have had religious underpinnings but ultimately demonstrated the strength of her character, a trait that she seemed to inherit from her mother and grandmother. Women of the Paston family tended to praise each other when they prioritised the needs of the family over their own, even if it meant acting in discordance with the expectations of society and the Church for women. It is therefore entirely acceptable that the Paston family were not angry at the women because they were disregarding their duty as women to marry, but because they were prioritising their own needs. These women were refusing to fulfil the traditional role of a gentry woman which was to marry for social and financial advancement of themselves and in turn their families. If the goal was simply for women to marry, Margery's marriage would not have caused such a

[94] Virgoe, ed., *Private Life in the 15th Century: Illustrated Letters of the Paston Family*, 183.
[95] Virgoe, ed., *Private Life in the 15th Century: Illustrated Letters of the Paston Family*, 183.
[96] Sheehan, *Marriage, Family, and Law in Medieval Europe*, 91-4.

rift in the family. The ultimate duty for a gentry woman in the fifteenth century can therefore be understood as advancing the family financially and socially through her marriage. This illustrates the complexities present within gendered norms and expectations that could differ depending on class, religion and age. Marriage and moreover gendered expectations were a different experience for each woman depending on the intersection between these factors.

Marriage was a source of power for the Paston women, but to what extent can we understand the women of the Paston family to be the exception to the rule when it comes to understanding their power and authority in marriage in fifteenth-century England? Gentry culture as it emerges through the Paston letters placed women at the forefront of power, valuing their contribution to their families over and above medieval ideals that positioned women as meek, obedient and confined to the household. The limit of this research is one particular gentry family, but the fact that these women often performed very public acts of power because of their marriages suggests that women's authority was not uncommon or frowned upon among the fifteenth-century gentry. The Pastons were very well known in their area and there is no evidence of any objections to these women's exercise of public agency, particularly Margaret who frequently met with men outside of her family to negotiate and discuss matters of business. The fact that she was operating on behalf of her husband could have contributed to the apparent acceptance of her role among those outside of the family. But Margaret was in a position of power that would have been frowned upon by lawmakers and Church fathers who created and reinforced the gendered expectations that she and the other Paston women were disregarding. A woman such as Margaret was in this position of power because of her marriage and not in spite of it. The standards set for married women were high and their position in their marriage was intended to be firmly submissive to their husband. These were ideals that the Pastons did not strive to live up to; it was more commonplace and practical to favour their own family expectations over gendered ideals. Indeed, the consequences for women like Margery Paston, who failed to live up to the expectations of the family, were far worse than for women like Margaret who did not behave in accordance with the prescriptive norms for marriage reflected in legal and religious texts but whose actions seemed to be entirely acceptable to other members of the gentry class. Marriage was the avenue through which women were able to gain a sense of control over their lives and the lives of family members, and moreover a sense of purpose and identity.

Chapter Two: Men and Marriage

Masculine identity in fifteenth-century England was fragile and could be challenged, denied or insulted for a number of reasons and at any stage of adulthood. To be an adult male was not on its own enough to claim the privileges of masculinity; men had to earn the status of manhood, prove it and constantly reinforce it.[97] Marriage, the governance of a household and the extension of one's lineage was one important avenue through which men of gentry status such as the Pastons could claim and prove their masculinity.

The expansion of the gentry in the fifteenth century saw the concentration of wealth and power in fewer households. Subsequently, the gap between the rich and the poor was increasing, and this caused mounting anxiety about maintaining status and wealth. As discussed in the Introduction to this thesis, the gentry class is not an easy group to define. The most effective way to understand gentry is to know that they were self-defined and continuously felt the need to put on a performance in order to reiterate their status as gentry to their peers.[98] An advantageous marriage was one way to ensure that the family would be accepted by their peers. Medieval gentry families such as the Pastons were relatively new to such avenues of power and therefore the arrangement of certain family members' households to benefit the wider family was necessary to ensure they held their powerful social and financial status. The pressure felt by all members of the Paston family to conform to the expectations of their peers as well as meet the demands of their family would have been immense.

Marriage served as the means for social and economic advancement of the family and this was often acquired through the families' first-born sons, as they were the direct line of inheritance in accordance with primogeniture. This meant they received the most attention, the most parental involvement in their marriages and moreover, the most pressure from the wider family. This chapter will concentrate on the Paston men and their experience of marriage and the culture surrounding masculinity. It will call to attention the differences in the marriage experience between three Paston men: John Paston, his eldest son John Paston II and his younger son John Paston III, who was second in the line of inheritance to the estate.

[97] Karras, *From Boys to Men*, 10.
[98] Maddern, "Gentility," 31.

The experience of marriage for each of these three men was unique, but their experiences do fit into the wider context and themes of marriage in fifteenth-century England. The first section will discuss the marriage of John Paston, the patriarch of the Paston family. It will take into account the career that often meant he was away from his wife, who then had to adopt some of the roles traditionally reserved for men. The flexibility of this marriage and the necessity to forgo traditional notions of gender in favour of the smooth running of the household is therefore argued within this section. John Paston II was the eldest son and was therefore expected to marry to benefit the wider family and extend his lineage. John Paston II did not achieve this and died before having married or producing offspring. His experience of marriage will therefore be analysed as an instance of a late medieval "youth culture" that was causing anxieties for the older generations in the early and mid-fifteenth century. John Paston III had a difficult time securing a marriage, and proposed to as many as ten women over a ten-year period, all but one of whom turned him down. His experience fits into the wider theme of younger sons being left to find their own marriages and feeling the pressure to exhibit their masculinity. The less appealing financial situation of younger sons such as John III, with their relatively small inheritances, contributed to their struggle to find a woman who would be interested in them as a marriage partner. This chapter confirms that every man in fifteenth-century England had a different experience of marriage and this is particularly true within the gentry class. Factors such as occupation, age and peer relationships all had an influence over the ways that men could experience marriage.

John Paston

In the early to mid-fifteenth century, John Paston was the patriarchal figure and the head of his household. He ran a large estate in Norfolk, was married to an heiress, had several children through whom he could extend his lineage and had a flourishing career as a lawyer in London. By all accounts John Paston was living up to many of the masculine ideals that medieval gentry society had for men of his standing. But to what extent did the marriage function as strictly patriarchal, and would John's career as a lawyer have been possible had not Margaret performed some of the duties that would traditionally have been expected of John? As the head of the household and of their joined estates, John had many responsibilities, but because of his continued absence from home he could not live up to them alone. I argue that for this reason, his marriage to Margaret Paston and gentry marriages as a

whole had to be flexible in terms of gender roles in order to function successfully within the broader social class.

Medieval gentry men had continuously to prove their masculinity, and one way to do this was to take on the responsibilities of a household. Through Margaret, John was able to express his masculinity and in turn further his and his family's economic ambitions and advance their social standing. For gentry men in fifteenth-century England, the acquisition of wealth and the responsibility of household governance that came with marriage marked a transition from boyhood into manhood.[99] This transition required a move towards stability, and marriage and children were common and accepted demonstrations of the successful transition from boy to man.[100] Getting married and having children came with an responsibilities through which a man was able to prove himself as capable to his family and peers. Marriage, however, did not look the same for every man and to a similar extent, neither did their motivations for getting married. John's motivations for marrying Margaret were garnered from his parents who organised and negotiated the marriage. Although their marriage did eventually become one of love and affection, it did remain at its core a business arrangement that benefitted both parties involved.

For the fifteenth-century gentry, it was common for the husband to work away from the family estate in the city, leaving wives and servants to run the household. This was particularly true for John and Margaret's marriage, as discussed in Chapter One. John was often away in London pursing his career as a lawyer, leaving Margaret to run the household, take care of matters of business and even defend their estates from potential rivals. The nature of John's career in London and his frequent absence from home necessitated a relationship of trust, reliance and flexibility when it came to traditional gender roles. Although John almost always remained the patriarchal figure within their marriage, their relationship was not as simple as the duality of dominance and submission that medieval society deemed to be the ideal marriage. Indeed, John's frequent trips to London made this idealised form of marriage almost impossible.

Marriage was a rite of passage for men between boyhood and manhood, with the key factor being the acquisition of responsibility. John's expression of manhood was rooted firmly in his

[99] Susan Mosher Stuard, "Burdens of Matrimony, Husbanding and Gender in Medieval Italy," in *Medieval Masculinities, Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*, ed. Clare Lees (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 61-70.
[100] Moss, "An Orchard, A Love Letter and Three Bastards," 228.

marriage to Margaret and this begs the question, would the Pastons have been such a powerful force if this had been a strictly male-controlled family? And was this flexibility with regards to gendered roles common amongst other gentry families? The Stonors were another gentry family who rose to prominence in the fifteenth century and their experience of marriage seems to have resembled the Pastons' in many ways. When William Stonor married Elizabeth Riche in 1475, he did so in order to benefit himself and his endeavours in the wool trade.[101] William had a significant flock of sheep and Elizabeth, being of the merchant class, had ties to wool merchants who would have been of use to him. Moreover, being married once before, Elizabeth had a significant amount of money to bring to the marriage. The union seemed only natural for the two, although due to the difference in class between them, and the three children that Elizabeth bought to the marriage, there was some opposition from William's family. Nevertheless, the marriage ended up benefitting William significantly and even grew to be a loving and affectionate match.[102] The parallels that one can draw between this marriage and that of Margaret and John Paston are abundant. Both marriages had a significant correspondence through letters as the couples were often apart (although in the Stonors' case, it was Elizabeth who preferred to be in London). Both women had the ability to speak their mind within the marriage and guide their husbands on matters of business and both marriages started out as business relations and ended up becoming affectionate. Gentry culture allowed space for women to have a voice within the marriage although there were limits to this autonomy.

The irrationality and inferiority of women was an ingrained belief within medieval society as a whole and this was used to justify excluding them from responsibility in the public sphere.[103] However, in the marriage of Margaret and John Paston, Margaret took on many of the public responsibilities that John simply could not attend to. Arguably, men and women of the gentry valued the social and economic advancement of their family and the ability to effectively govern a household over strict division of women's and men's roles. In a letter from John to Margaret and his servants, he describes their household as "your house and mine", suggesting John viewed Margaret as his partner and an individual in whom he could

[101] Kay Lacey, "Margaret Croke (d. 1491)," in *Medieval London Widows, 1300-1500,* eds. Caroline Barron and Anne F. Sutton (London: A&C Black, 1994), 153; Elizabeth Noble, *The World of the Stonors: A Gentry Society* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2009).
[102] Alison Hanham, "The Stonors and Thomas Betson: Some Neglected Evidence," *The Ricardian 4*, no. 15 (2005): 4.
[103] Bullough, "On Being a Male in the Middle Ages," 31–45.

entrust the "good governance" of his household.[104] John acts as the head of the household in many ways but also expects those in his household to take on active roles in ensuring its effective running. John and Margaret wrote to each other within this same sequence of letters, discussing the incapability of their son and his inability to work in accordance with other members of the household. It is not clear which son they are discussing, but they are deliberating whether or not to send him away with John, so he might learn how to become someone who does not think only of themselves and act like a "drane amonges bees which (labour for) gaderyng hony in the feldes and the drane doth nought but takyth his part of it".[105] This analogy serves as the very foundation of the Paston family and their subsequent marriages. One did not marry or work for themselves, but for the greater good of the family, as a worker bee endeavours to work for the greater good of the hive. To be a drone amongst bees was to live selfishly and forego the wishes of the rest of the family, as this quote by John Paston so eloquently demonstrates.

This section has analysed the marriage of John and Margaret Paston in order to understand how it functioned and to what extent it reflected the dominant gender norms of fifteenth-century English society. This marriage was one that required flexibility regarding gender roles due to the practicalities that came along with John's career as a lawyer in London, a pattern also reflected in other fifteenth-century English gentry marriages such as that of William and Elizabeth Stonor, which functioned in a similar manner. Overall, it seems from these marriages that it was common for husbands and wives of gentry status to put societal notions of gender to the side in favour of the advancement of themselves and their families. As discussed earlier in this chapter, however, marriages could adopt different forms and serve different functions depending on the context, age and occupation. In the next section I will analyse what marriage looked like for John Paston II, who by all accounts was not so quick to adopt the traditional patterns of gentry marriage.

John Paston II

John Paston II was the eldest son of Margaret and John Paston and therefore held the responsibility of continuing the family legacy through marriage and the birth of his children. However, John Paston II never married and lived much of his life in opposition with his

[104] Davis, *Paston Letters and Papers,* 126.
[105] Davis, *Paston Letters and Papers,* 126.

parents. Indeed, his younger brother John III wrote a letter in 1467 that detailed John II's seven-year absence from the family and the effect that this had on his "folk":

> And, syr, wher as it lyekyth yow to desyir to haue knowlage how þat i haue don wyth þe Lady Boleyn, by my feythe i haue don nor spokyn nowght in þat mater, nor not wyll do tyll tyme þat ye com hom, and ye com not thys vij yer. . . I beseche yow wyth all my hart, hye yow hom, thow ye shold tery but a day; for i promyse yow your folk thynk þat ye haue forgetyn hem, and the most part of them must depart at Whytsontyd at the ferthest, they wyll no lenger abyd.[106]

John II was engaged to Anne Haute (the first cousin of Elizabeth Woodville) from around 1469 to 1477. Although his parents did not arrange the marriage due to their dispute and John II's attempts to negotiate his own finances, it seemed to have been advantageous for both families.[107] While some have argued that this marriage was sought out by John II in order to benefit the wider family, I argue that because he was estranged from his family at the time, the more likely scenario is that John II was pursuing his own ambitions.

Margaret wrote to John upon hearing of his engagement, which strongly suggests she was not involved in the negotiations:

> I have no very knowledge of your ensurance, but if ye be ensured I pray God send you joy and worship together and so trust ye shall have, if it be as it is reported of her; and before God ye are as greatly bound to her as ye were married, and therefore I charge you on my blessing that ye be as true to her as she were married unto you in all degrees and ye shall have the more grace and the better speed in all other things.[108]

Given the large inheritance, a typical gentry marriage that involved the first-born son would have been arranged by his parents, as was the case with William Paston I and John Paston I. The primary objective for John II was arguably to advance himself into the court of Elizabeth Woodville, and the Pastons would have gained from it simply by association. Nevertheless, both parties attempted to dissolve the betrothal from around 1471 and succeeded in doing so in 1477. There has been some considerable debate around whether or not this betrothal was a marriage or an engagement, due to the fact that it took eight years to dissolve and attempts to end the union went all the way to Rome.[109] Regardless of the legal status of the union, the

---

[106] Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers*, 535.
[107] Conor McCarthy, *Marriage in Medieval England: Law, Literature, and Practice* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2004), 88-9.
[108] Charles W. Turner, "Husband and Wife in the Fifteenth Century," *Virginia Law Review 5*, no. 5 (1918): 336-344.
[109] McCarthy, *Marriage in Medieval England,* 88-91.

couple parted ways in 1477, most likely due to a change in the political situation in England that rendered a political alliance through the marriage useless.[110] Margaret Paston spread the rumour in 1478 that John was said to be engaged to another women of significant political standing now that his union to Anne Haute was dissolved, stating that the said woman was "right nigh of the Queen's blood".[111] Unfortunately, John II died before this marriage was ever formalised. He therefore left behind no lineage and was succeeded by his brother John Paston III.

What can we learn about marriage, masculinity, duty and familial rivalry from John Paston II's story? In the fifteenth century, there were growing anxieties about the extent to which young men were abandoning traditional forms of masculinity to pursue a version of their own paths to adult manhood. The experience of John II seems to have reflected this new "youth culture" and his life gives us an example of how young men were struggling to negotiate the expectations of their parents (notably their fathers) with their own desires as well as the expectations from their peers.[112] Below, I analyse the tensions between traditional and new forms of masculine expression as well as the ways that John II felt about marriage and attempted to use it for his own gain.

John Paston II had long engagement to Anne Haute and his rumoured engagement to another woman of status tell us that although a marriage never eventuated for John II, it was not without effort on his part. John's financial prospects, as well as his large inheritance, would have seemed attractive to any potential match within the gentry, so why then did he never marry? John's ambition could have been his potential downfall, as he seemed consistently to pursue women who were connected to royalty and therefore above his status as a gentry man. John clearly wished to advance himself socially and financially through a valuable marriage, but the difference in social status left room for the women he was pursuing (who were in a better position to negotiate) to leave the union when it did not seem advantageous to them. This is evidently what happened in the case of Anne Haute, for it did not seem as though John himself was trying to get out of the marriage as much as Anne was. Indeed, John made it clear that he wished to be "delyueryd off Mestresse Anne Hault" and wished to find the means to "dyscharge hyre concyence".[113] John wanted to put Anne at ease, presumably so

[110] McCarthy, *Marriage in Medieval England,* 91.
[111] Turner, "Husband and Wife in the Fifteenth Century," 338.
[112] Regarding youth culture see, Moss, "An Orchard, A Love Letter and Three Bastards," 226–44; Karras, *From Boys to Men,* 1-19.
[113] Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers,* 458.

that they could continue with the marriage and John could get closer to the queen who was her first cousin.

John II was engaged to Anne for eight years, but his lack of communication with her and about her is strange when compared to the engagement and marriages of his siblings. From the surviving letters, John seems to have written to Anne only once before they got engaged and not at all afterwards. Furthermore, over the span of eight years he only writes of the matter to his family six times.[114] John wrote many letters during his life but not many of them pertain to his potential marriages. One could reasonably assume that marriage was an avenue through which John believed he could advance himself, but it was not necessarily at the top of his priorities.

John's siblings seemed to have taken a different approach to marriage. John III for example attempted for ten years to find a suitable match and was always concerned with what the women thought of him. While he was concerned with how much a potential marriage was worth financially, he eventually married Margery Brews for love.[115] Their letters are well known for being more affectionate than other love letters of the time, with the first mention of a Valentine appearing in a letter from Margery to John when their marriage negotiations were taking place.[116] John did not seem to put in the same effort as his younger brother when looking for a potential marriage and did not seem to view marriage as affectionately as his sister Margery, who controversially married Richard Calle for love.

Marriage did not seem to be at the forefront of the mind of John Paston II and this, coupled with the tension between himself and his parents, suggests that he was not living his life in accordance with the traditions set by them. Given that John II was the eldest son, the expectations and pressure for him to carry on the family legacy and lineage would have been immense. The way John II expressed masculinity may not have been in accordance with his father's expression of masculinity. The older generation of men who lived according to traditional values of masculinity were growing increasingly concerned with a "youth culture" that seemingly rebelled against such traditions.[117] A certain degree of "wild" behaviour was expected from young medieval men, but there was a line that if crossed would invoke the

[114] Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers*, 439, 442, 448, 457, 470 and 504.
[115] Jo Eldridge Carney, "The Paston Letters," in *Historical Dictionary of Late Medieval England, 1272-1485,* eds. Ronald H. Fritze and William Baxter Robinson (London: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2002), 411.
[116] Watt, *The Paston Women,* 127.
[117] Barbara A. Hanawalt, *Of Good and Ill Repute: Gender and Social Control in Medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 190.

authority of the father.[118] Participating in youth culture was a way for men themselves to transition gradually from childhood to adult male status.[119] Concern only arose when the activities of a young man brought shame to the family name, for example, through excessive gambling debts or marrying without the consent of the parents.[120]

Young men were often balancing the expectations of older men such as fathers and other extended family with the ways that other men their age chose to express their masculinity. In a letter between Margaret and John I, Margaret reports that:

> I vnderstand be Jon Pampyng that ye wolle not þat your sone be take in-to your hows nor holp be you tylle suche tyme of yere as he was put owt therof, the wiche shalle be a-bowght Seynt Thomas messe. For Godys sake, ser, a pety on hym and remembre yow it hathe be a long season syn he had owt of you to helpe hym wyth, and he hathe obeyed hym to yow and wolle do at all tymis, and wolle do that he can or may to have your good faderhood. And at þe reuerence of God, be ye hys good fader and have a faderly hert to hym. And I hope he shall euer knowe hym-selff þe better her-after and be þe more ware to exchewe suche thyngys as shuld dysplease you, and for to take hed at þat shuld please you.[121]

Margaret referred to the fact that it had been a long season since their dispute; clearly some form of rift had come between John II and his father John I. The dispute came about when John II left the family home without permission from his father, thereby threatening his authority. Margaret in the letter above pleads with John I to be a good father and help his son by having a fatherly heart towards him. John and his eldest son clearly had a complicated relationship and at this time it had got to the point where John refused to have John II in his house. This has in the past seen John I labelled as an authoritarian and cold father but as Moss explains, John's stance on the matter arises from the "Christian obligation to honour one's parents".[122] She argues that John's response reflects his perception of the failure of his son to honour the relationship between them. Margaret, too, uses God as an example of how she believed her husband should be behaving, as she asks him to be a reference of God and be his good father. This relationship turmoil reflects the wider anxieties felt by John I's generation about young men failing to honour their obligations and responsibilities. Indeed, Margaret warns John II that:

[118] Moss, "An Orchard, A Love Letter and Three Bastards," 239.
[119] Karras, *From Boys to Men*, 15-16.
[120] Moss, "An Orchard, A Love Letter and Three Bastards," 239.
[121] Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers,* 293.
[122] Moss, *Fatherhood and Its Representations,* 73.

> [A]nything touching your father that should be [to] his worship, profit, or avail, that ye do your devoir and diligent labour to the furtherance therein, as ye will have my good will; and that shall cause your father to be better father to you.[123]

John II was beginning to assert his own levels of authority as well as express his identity and moreover masculinity in his own right. The relationships between fathers and sons often faced this type of tension due to the oldest son's potential to override the authority of his father as he aged.[124] John I clearly wished for his eldest son to work under his authority and advance the needs of his household and the wider family as opposed to working for his own future or indeed, working to take his father's place as the head of the family. Marriage and the furthering of his lineage was one way that John II could have chosen to express his male identity and was one of the ways that his father had chosen to do so.

Marriage represented the transition from boyhood to manhood and by all accounts, John II never got there. He was, however, much more pre-occupied with his attempts to secure the lands left behind in the Fastolf will that the Pastons fought over for years.[125] His dedication to the matter can be seen as an attempt to further to family ambitions in some way. While he was not expressing his version of masculinity through marriage and the acquisition of a household, he did succeed in acquiring land, and subsequently power, for the family. John I perceived his eldest son to be living his life selfishly by going out on his own and refusing to adhere to his authority as the head of the family. However, John II's dedication to the Fastolf will could have been an alternative way for him to devote himself to the family (even after the death of his father), just not in the tradition or expectations his father set for him. John II was able to live his life in accordance with his own values and expectations, but this came at the cost of his relationship with his father and to a certain extent, his mother.

The younger brother of John Paston II, John Paston III, often employed the help of his older brother in finding him a suitable marriage. The process of matching suitable couples and subsequently exerting authority over neighbours was a common way for men of status to exhibit masculinity. By looking for a match for his younger brother, John II was acting as his intermediary and ensuring that his role as an authoritative figure was clear. John II took his role as an intermediary more seriously than his own relationship in the letters. John valued

---

[123] Davis, *The Paston Letters: A Selection in Modern Spelling*, 99.
[124] Moss, *Fatherhood and Its Representations,* 72.
[125] For information regarding the Fastolf will see: Colin, Richmond, *The Paston Family in the Fifteenth Century: Volume 2, Fastolf's Will* (New Jersey: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

what scholars now call chivalric manhood or the expression of masculinity through knighthood.[126] While this was not in direct opposition to marriage, John II's knightly career that he valued so much did seem to take precedence over the expectation that he would get married.

John III

John Paston III was one of the more active writers in the Paston family and often acted as the secretary for his mother's letters. John was the second son of Margaret and John Paston and was the head of the household with his mother for many years after the death of his older brother and father. The experiences that John III had with marriage and his failed attempts to secure a match are consistent with the experiences of younger sons in fifteenth-century England. Gentry parents preferred to spend their resources on the eldest son in order to secure the main line of the family. It was much less expensive to have younger sons unmarried, or as back-ups for the eldest son's marriage (in the case of the eldest son's death), than to provide an endowment for his marriage.[127]

The eventual goal for parents in securing marriage alliances was to preserve the lineage of their family, and younger sons did not add to that line. This is a key example of how gender roles and gendered structures such as primogeniture could have an impact on the lives of men. Primogeniture was "the system of inheritance whereby an estate passed to the eldest male heir. In practice, the distinctions were blurred, for younger children received some provision."[128] In fifteenth-century England, primogeniture was the main form of inheritance law and was known to cause many tensions within families. This was because it excluded not only many daughters from inheriting land from their parents, but also any younger brothers of the eldest son.[129] John III put significant pressure on himself to find a suitable wife and the failure of his older brother to marry was likely one of the reasons. He spent ten years searching for a "good" marriage and many women were lined up as potential matches. John III had significant difficulty securing a marriage, and his position as the younger son (and therefore his less appealing financial status) was most likely a key reason why he was

[126] On chivalric manhood: Karras, *From Boys to Men,* 20-66.
[127]Rhoda L. Friedrichs, "Marriage Strategies and Younger Sons in Fifteenth-Century England," *Medieval Prosopography 14,* no. 1 (1993): 53-69.
[128] *The Oxford Dictionary of Local and Family History,* (1997), S.V. "Primogeniture".
[129] Noel James Menuge, *Medieval English Wardship in Romance and Law* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2001), 43-5.

consistently denied by potential matches. The lack of involvement from Margaret in the marriage negotiations for John II and her unwillingness to partake in finding John III a suitable marriage is interesting. She involved herself in all areas of her daughters' potential marriages but was less involved with her sons'. It is likely that Margaret wished to be involved in the matchmaking of John II but due to the feud between him and her husband, she could not. John III struggled to find a good match for himself for ten years and he pursued the help and advice of other men, especially his older brother John II, but it does not seem as though Margaret or her husband involved themselves in finding a desirable match for him. This is characteristic of the negative impacts of primogeniture on younger sons whose parents all but abandoned them in their searches for marriage. The system of patriarchy could benefit some, such as John Paston I and Margaret Paston, and inhibit others such as John III. Despite his gender, John III's status was less than that of his mother and elder brother as he received little inheritance in comparison.

John III seemed always to want to follow in the footsteps of his father and grandfather and marry advantageously in order to express himself as an individual and extend his lineage. John III's expression of his masculine identity was wrapped up in marriage and the subsequent running of a household; he had clearly seen how this had been successful for his father and perhaps wanted to emulate this success for himself. This, however, did not happen for many years and John was instead focused on his military role in the Wars of the Roses, an arena in which he could prove his masculinity by other means. In a letter to Margaret Paston, John II describes his brother and father after the battle of Barnet as:

> [A] lyffe and farethe well, and in no perell off dethe. Neuer the lesse he is hurte wyth an arow on hys ryght arme be-nethe þe elbow, and I haue sent hym a sorion whyche hathe dressid hym, and he tellythe me þat he trustythe þat he schall be all holl wyth-in ryght schort tyme.[130]

Marriage and the acquisition of a household was at the forefront of John III's mind and was a topic that occupied many of his letters, but as that did not happen until 1477, he had to assert his masculinity through the chivalric avenue in the battle of Barnet (1471).

John III eventually married Margery Brews in 1477 but prior to that, he proposed to or attempted to court (according to the letters) ten or eleven women who were all in positions of wealth.[131] His marriage to Margery was far from financially advantageous and may by all

[130] Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers*, 437.
[131] Colin Richmond, *The Paston Family in the Fifteenth Century: Endings* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), 41.

accounts may have been a love marriage. It is not clear from the letters whether or not John III settled for a less advantageous marriage or whether he truly wanted to marry Margery for love. From the marriage negotiations it appears as though John did try to get himself a better deal, even getting his mother involved. This led to tensions between himself and his father-in-law Thomas Brews, whom he described as "hard" on him.[132] Even though the marriage was not as financially beneficial for John as the other marriage alliances he pursued in the previous ten years, it was still one that was suitable for him. In a letter between John II and Margaret Paston, John discusses the potential marriage of his younger brother:

> [Y]ou wrote of the great injury likely to come about if the matter between him and Sir Thomas Brews's daughter does not come about. I would be as sorry as he would be, and as glad as any man over the wealth and suitability of the marriage if it should take place. I am happier now that he should have her than I was over any previously contemplated marriage, considering her person, her youth, her family, the love on both sides, the tenderness of her mother and father towards her.[133]

Several items of interest can be seen in this letter. Firstly, the love between Margery and John III was apparent from outside the marriage, indicating a clear and mutual affection between the two. Hereafter, their marriage was clearly a union of love rather than a business-like relationship. Moreover, although John II viewed marriage as a means to advance himself, he supported his brother in his decision to marry Margery mostly for love. He even seemed to have preferred this marriage over any of the other contemplated marriages:

> I have receyvyd yowre letter and yowr [deleted in MS] man J. Bykerton, by whom I knowe all þe mater off Mestresse Brews, whyche iff it be as he seythe I praye Godde brynge it to a goode ende. . . Neuerthelesse she desyryd to see me as gladde as I wasse to se hyre. I praye yow sende me som wryghtyng to Caleys off yowre spede wyth Mestresse Brewys. Bykerton tellyth me þat she lovyth yow weell. Iff I dyed I hadde lever ye hadde hyre than the Lady Wargrave; neuerthelesse she syngeth weell wyth an harpe.[134]

This letter illustrates the affectionate relationship and bond between the brothers and John II's ability to view John III as an individual with different needs and wishes than his own and indeed the wider family's. John II felt so strongly about the potential marriage that he asked

[132] Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers,* 605-606.
[133] Jennifer C. Watt, *Women of the English Nobility and Gentry, 1066-1500* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 39.
[134] Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers,* 500.

Margaret to offer more than just the manor that was left to John III, so that his potential sons could inherit something off him:

> [T]here is another drawback. I understand that the manor (Sparham, Norfolk) is given to my brother and his wife and to the issue born to them. If it should happen that they have one or more daughters and his wife dies and then he marries again and has a son, that son would have no land although he was his fathers heir.[135]

Their mother did not offer any more land for the marriage other than her manor at Sparham and John II was critical of this decision.[136] Clearly, Margaret did not believe the marriage was worth losing some of her own lands over, illustrating once again the lack of support for younger sons as they entered marriages.

Marrying for love did not seem to be a common occurrence within the gentry and doing so risked alienating a person from their inheritance as well as their familial relationships. Perhaps this idea however, only pertained to women and the eldest sons in the family, as the contrast between John III's experience of a marriage for love contrasted heavily with his sister and aunts. The family were much more accepting of this marriage that would if anything, cost them more than it was worth. But when Margery and Elizabeth Paston married for love, they suffered alienation from the family and in Elizabeth's case physical and emotional abuse. Perhaps this was because the older women in the family knew the power and independence that could arise from an advantageous marriage for a woman who would remain otherwise powerless. Marriage was certainly a defining moment in men's lives and could prove extremely beneficial if they married advantageously, but without it, they were still free to choose their own path. This was a luxury that gentry women were not as free to afford. The Paston women learned to work within the confines of a patriarchal society and used beneficial marriages to gain independence. John Paston III was the younger son and therefore the lineage of the family was not dependent on him. Furthermore, John was already independent, fighting in battles and living his life as he chose. Therefore, marriage was more a way for him to express his manhood than a means for independence, as was the case for gentry women. Thus, the scorn that John II felt for his (as he described) "ungracious" sister Margery when she married Richard Calle, in contrast to the acceptance of his own love marriage, seems severe but fitting for the Paston family.

[135] Ward, *Women of the English Nobility and Gentry,* 40.
[136] Ibid.

John Paston, John Paston II and John Paston III have their names in common, come from the same family and all share the same status as gentlemen, but their experiences of marriage were far from universal. Gentry men in fifteenth-century England were not a homogenous group and this chapter has demonstrated this through their participation in what was considered to be a common rite of passage, marriage. Marriage within the gentry class was not a unified experience for all men. Flexibility in gender roles within the marriage was common in order to benefit the wider family, and marriage looked very different from one man to the next, even within the same family. Consider the experiences of John Paston in comparison to John II, and indeed John II in comparison to John Paston III. The patriarch of the family, John Paston ascribed to a more traditional form of gentry marriage. The marriage was arranged by his parents, benefited John and the family financially and socially and served as a means for him and Margaret to build on and expand the Paston family empire. John II, however, did not have an arranged marriage and was in fact estranged from his father when he sought out a marriage to secure him a place within the royal court. As we have discussed, this marriage never came to fruition, but his rumoured engagement to another women at court demonstrates his determination to make a name for himself within the royal court. Unlike his older brother, John III attempted for ten years to marry within his peer group, albeit with women whose financial and social outlooks were better than his own. John III was much more concerned with continuing his father's legacy than John II was. If John II had had the same ambitions as his younger brother, given his large inheritance, his marriage prospects would have been much greater than John III, and he could have arranged for his parents to find him a suitable match. John II was clearly much more concerned with his own ambitions and perhaps John III saw this as an opportunity to extend the lineage of the Paston family through himself. Due to John III's position as the younger brother and therefore his significantly smaller inheritance, we know he had trouble finding a match for himself. John III's experience here was very typical of younger sons within gentry families and illustrates the fact that financial and social prospects were important factors influencing the likelihood of a marriage within the gentry. This illustrates the complexities of patriarchal family and social structures and the fact that not all men benefited from these. It also demonstrates that all three men shared a common cultural understanding that marriage was a vessel for advancement and for acquiring manhood, even though their motivations for marrying differed. Even considering the Paston mens' different experiences of marriage, as well as their varying motivations for marriage, it was clearly a tool through which they could express

their sense of masculinity to their peers, advance themselves through the gentry class and make a name for their family in doing so.

Chapter Three: Wills of the Paston Women

The next two chapters will focus on the wills of the Paston men and women in order to understand the intersections between gender, age and status and draw conclusions about individual men's and women's experiences and identities. This analysis will allow us to gain an understanding of the gendered dimensions of gentry wills. Chapter Three will analyse the wills of the Paston women and Chapter Four will focus on the wills of the Paston men. Agnes and Margaret Paston, as well as Agnes' only daughter Elizabeth Poynings, are the only Paston women whose wills have survived (other than those of two women who married into the family in the sixteenth century); this chapter therefore centres around them. This chapter will analyse the intersections between gender, status and age and the experiences of these three women who lived with significant economic and social power. Although we can understand some general patterns by analysing the wills of Agnes, Margaret and Elizabeth, in general they all demonstrate different personalities, aspirations and motivations specific to the individual. Furthermore, analysis of the wills of these three women demonstrates the status of the individual within the family and reinforces the idea that gender was not always the determining factor in one's ability to access power, be it economic or otherwise. Moreover, the wills of Agnes, Margaret and Elizabeth demonstrate that will-making was a way for these women to access power as well as to express themselves as individuals.

Wills can be a valuable indicator of how someone wanted to be remembered, who they valued the most in their lives, how a husband and wife organised their relationship and who they deemed the most fitting to inherit. Writing a will in the fifteenth century was first and foremost a religious experience and expectation, but wills were also an expression of personal identity and an opportunity for one to reflect on the experiences of their lives at the time of writing.[137] For this reason, wills can be a beneficial primary source to analyse in order to understand an individual as well as the society that they operated within.

Medieval wills in general survive mostly from men of the upper classes, including gentry, but to a lesser degree from women. For this reason, the wills of the three Paston women can be particularly useful for understanding to what degree they exercised economic and social power and what the determining factors were in gaining access to such authority within the family. Canon and common law in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries could not agree on whether it

[137]Crick, "Posthumous Obligation and Family Identity," 193-208.

was even appropriate for a married woman to write a will. Common law stipulated that a married woman had no possessions under coverture, but canon law dictated that a woman was fully capable of making a will for her separate property. The tension was so evident that in 1343 the Archbishop of Canterbury stated that anyone (including husbands) stopping wives from making a will, should be excommunicated.[138] This led to a Commons petition in 1344 requesting of the king, "that whereas an ordinance was made by the prelates... that bondsmen and married women might make a will, which is unreasonable, may it please him and his good council to ordain remedy".[139] Canon law, however, was not superseded by common law and married women continued to make their own separate wills through the fifteenth century, albeit to a much lesser extent than men.[140] All three of the Paston women were widows at the time of writing their wills, and it was therefore much more of an expectation for them given their large estates.

Margaret and Agnes Paston were for a long time the matriarchs of the Paston family. They worked in conjunction with their husbands to run the family estate, were both heiresses, and worked independently as widows. Similarly, Elizabeth was a wealthy and independent widow towards the end of her life, with her wealth and power having been gained through her two marriages. Their wills, therefore, reflect the positions that these women were in towards the end of their lives. Wills provide us with a sense of how the writer self-identified and what their priorities and aspirations were and as James argues, in the later part of the fifteenth century:

> Insecurities roiled by the quickening pace of social change, religious upheaval, and the accelerated transition from a medieval perception to a modern one intensified the individual's need to establish identity and to control remembrance. Women were an entrenched part of this process.[141]

Agnes' and Elizabeth's wills highlight their self-identification as wives and for Agnes, the teamwork between herself and her husband that ensured the success of the Paston family. Although Margaret worked with her husband in a similar fashion when he was alive, this is not reflected in her will, as at that point he had been dead for sixteen years. We can therefore understand their wills as possible reflections of their lives at the time when their wills were made, and not necessarily as reflections of their lives as a whole. However, they all display

[138] Cordelia Beattie, "Married Women's Wills: Probate, Property, and Piety in Later Medieval England," *Law and History Review 37*, no. 1 (2019): 29-60.
[139] Beattie, "Married Women's Wills," 33.
[140] Ibid.
[141] Susan E. James, *Women's Voices in Tudor Wills, 1485–1603: Authority, Influence and Material Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 59.

what life was like for a married woman in the gentry and likewise for a widow of significant means. Moreover, these wills give us an understanding of the ways in which the women were able to function in gentry society and to what extent their gender was or was not a hindrance in their ability to govern their estates effectively. In her work on women's wills, James notes that "[d]ifferent women gave different weights to each successive identity," and this is certainly the case for Agnes, Margaret and Elizabeth who lived similar lives but emphasised different aspects of them in their wills.[142]

There are some things that I have taken into consideration when analysing the wills of the Paston men and women. Wills are a useful source for understanding how an individual wished to be remembered and what they deemed to be important at the time of writing their will. They do not, however, always include everything that a person owned, and often omit many personal possessions and even property. Oral wills were an accepted legal form in the fifteenth century, and an individual may have established certain bequests with family and friends prior to their death.[143] Wills can therefore give us a distorted view of who the individual was in life and need to be analysed in conjunction with other sources. Fortunately, in the case of the Pastons, other documents and material items exist that can give us a more holistic understanding of who they were and what they valued. It is also important to bear in mind that wills do not necessarily reflect an individual throughout their life and that priorities and anxieties may differ when one is close to death. For example, as shall be seen, Margaret Paston displayed a greater degree of piety in her will than throughout her letters, arguably because she was close to death when writing it. For the purposes of this chapter however, I will be analysing the Paston wills on their own in order to argue their use as a way for women to create a legacy. These wills also tell us what the individual valued most and what familial relationships they respected at the time of writing. Arguably when understanding their lives in hindsight, these women would have been able to establish a greater degree of clarity regarding how they truly felt about certain individuals and events in their lives.[144] Therefore, despite the limitations that wills can present, there are still opportunities to draw conclusions about the Paston women and how they wished to be remembered and what their aspirations and priorities were.

[142] James, *Women's Voices in Tudor Wills,* 60.
[143] Louisa Foroughi, "To Sey or Thinke Otherwise: Ordinary Theology and Facing Death in Late Medieval Norfolk," *Religions 9*, no. 67 (2018): 67-86.
[144] Norman P. Tanner, *The Church in Late Medieval Norwich, 1370-1532* (Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1984), 116.

Agnes Paston

Agnes Paston wrote her will at the age of thirty-five while her husband William Paston was on his deathbed. Her will demonstrates her strength as an individual, the loyalty she showed to her husband, her ability to exercise power over her life and that of her family, as well as how her status came to affect the relationships she had with her children. Agnes illustrates that it was not always one's gender that determined the level of authority and independence that someone had in the family, but a combination of wealth, age and character. Agnes seems to have desired to be an authoritative figure in her family, and her inheritance from her husband and her ability to decide what she did with it only solidified this position for her. Agnes' will differs from all the other Paston wills, in that it is a draft and an autobiographical will, that is to say, it is written in the first person, is reflective in nature, and provides a narrative of the proceedings regarding the outcome of her will writing and that of her husband's. This was not common in wider Europe in the fifteenth century but seems to occur occasionally in England, where rules were a little more lenient regarding the formality of wills.[145] Agnes structured her will in such a way that it reads as a description of the events stemming from the reading of her husband's will. This shows how entwined her own life and identity were with her husband's as well as the vital role she played in running the Paston estate with her husband. Although Agnes' will has some of the religious elements that were typical of a gentry will, it is significantly less pious than some of the other Paston wills. This is probably because it is a draft as well as autobiographical, and because she was still relatively young at the time of writing it.

Agnes Paston's relationship with her children was turbulent at times. Her expectations for them were high, and if they failed to meet them, physical violence was not out of the question. Agnes was a woman who was not afraid to speak her mind and stand her ground when others questioned her. This is best evidenced in the reading of her husband's will to her son John Paston, which she outlined in a detailed description in a later draft of her own will. Although her husband William had his own will and testament, Agnes may have written her own will based on his, as he left most of his estate to her and, in the event of her death, to their children.[146] Rather than separate points outlining which of her children would inherit her possessions and manors, Agnes' will is a description of how she wrote her will and how her family reacted to her draft will and to her husband's will. Indeed, a more formal will and testament of Agnes'

[145] Helmholz, "Deathbed Strife and the Law of Wills," 242-3.
[146] Richmond, *The Paston Family, The First Phase,* 171-2.

most likely existed at some point, but her draft and the descriptive nature of it indicates that she was likely still deciding what to do based on her husband's will and the reading of this draft to her son. Nevertheless, this draft has some revelations about the relationships she had built with those closest to her and sheds light on the tensions such large inheritances could cause gentry families.

William Paston left almost every manor that he owned to Agnes along with her dowry, and in the event of her death, these would be distributed amongst their children, with John Paston inheriting the manor of Gresham immediately.[147] As discussed earlier, while a number of different norms surrounding a wife's inheritance existed in fifteenth-century England, people often took matters of their inheritance into their own hands. This means that although it was not unheard of to leave almost all of the estate to the wife and nothing to the children until her death, this was not the norm. The reaction from John Paston I that Agnes describes, seems to reiterate this departure from tradition. At a reading of William Paston's will on his death bed, after hearing that John Paston would only inherit the manors of Gresham and, after the death of his mother, Oxnead, Agnes describes him as "not plesyed be-cause". During a separate reading of Agnes' will, she described his reaction:

> [T]hey desyred of me to see the wyll. I lete them see it, and John Dam redde it. And whan he had redde it John Paston walkyd vp and down in the chamber; John Dam and I knelyd at the beddys fete. The sayd John Dam askyd me what was my husbondys wyll shulde be done wyth Sporle, and I sayd it was his wyll that oone of his tw [unclear] ayn yongest sonnys shulde haue it. He sayd preuely to me by his feyth he sayd the same to hym. Than the sa [unclear] me tyme I lete them see he dede of yiffte which as I suppose was councell to all tho this dede was made on-to till I shewyd it them. And soo they swore all sauf John Paston and John Damme. After that [unclear] my sonne John Paston had neuer ryght kynde wordys to me. And John Dam askyd me what justice and felowe of his my husbond trustyd most, and I aunsweryd hym as I knewe.[148]

This was presumably an attempt by John Paston and John Damme to gather support from other men trusted by William in order to overrule William's dying wishes. Upon learning of her son's anger about her will and his request to inherit Sporle, Agnes consulted another of the executors for her husband's will, William Bacton, for advice about how to handle the situation:

> I yede in-to Seint Elyne chirche and told to William Bakton how they had sayde to me, and told hym I coude not fynde in my herte to sette in the wyll that I knewe wel was the contrary. And he sayde he wolde not councell me

[147] Richmond, *The Paston Family, The First Phase*, 171-2.
[148] Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers,* 49.

> therto; and soo we departed. After this cam John Damme and askyd me whyche of the justicys my husbond trusted most, and sayde to me, Be ye not remembrid of suche a day my maister helde wyth Maryott at Norwych?' I sayd, 'Yis, for I was ther my-selfe.' he [unclear] sayd to me my husbond toke a certeyn man a thyng wryten and insealed of my husbondys hande, but what was in þer [unclear] -in he wyste neuer.[149]

These extracts shed light on the state of familial relationships at the time of writing the will, gendered expectations held by the family, as well as Agnes' character. The relationship that Agnes had with her eldest son was already strained before these interactions but upon hearing of his inheritance, John Paston was clearly not pleased. Did he expect to inherit everything immediately in place of his mother? More likely, the fact that he was left but one manor until her death angered him and he likely felt that it undermined him, his independence as a gentry man and therefore his honour. As Wright argues, "the importance of land to the medieval gentry may be a truism but it is fundamental and inescapable. Land was the basis of a family's economic, social and political standing and the management of their 'estate' in its broadest sense was of paramount concern".[150] John Paston likely expected to inherit substantially more upon the death of his father, as the eldest son traditionally would have. The model of masculinity that John ascribed to encouraged land ownership and moreover, authority over other men. It would have likely dishonoured him that his mother and father refused to allow him the inheritance he thought he deserved when other men of his standing were receiving theirs without question or at least could expect to. Moreover, as Richmond argues, times were becoming unpropitious and John needed more landed security than just Gresham in order to support his growing family.[151]

William Paston had a partnership with Agnes that proved she was a capable landlord. The most sensible thing to do would have been to allow her to carry on her work with their tenants and servants after his death, as she had done in his lifetime. This, however, would have seemed to John Paston to be a direct rejection of him as a man and his ability to take on such responsibilities, which of course marked the transition into manhood from boyhood. Agnes described John Paston as being "not plesyed" upon hearing of this news, and the fact that he and John Damme attempt to persuade Agnes to allow him to inherit Sporle and Sweynesthorp before his younger brothers suggests that John believed in the traditional system of

[149] Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers,* 49.
[150] S. M. Wright, *The Derbyshire Gentry in the Fifteenth Century* (Derbyshire: Derbyshire Record Society, 1983), 143.
[151] Richmond, *The Paston Family, The First Phase,* 173.

primogeniture. This situation also highlights the fact that he felt so strongly about his right to inheritance that he attempted to rally support to go against the wishes of his deceased father and persuade his mother.[152]

Agnes' strength of character is demonstrated here as John Damme persistently asks her what man her husband trusted the most, presumably in an attempt to bypass her authority with support from another trusted man. She tells him, but this did not seem to worry her as is demonstrated by her consultation with the other executor. After this, she decides that she will refuse her son's wishes, and presumably those of any other man who attempts to persuade her otherwise, as she knows that her husband's will expresses the contrary. This strength speaks to Agnes' character and her ability to stand up for what she believed to be right, which was to respect the wishes of her husband and remain loyal to him. This also illustrates her considerable level of power and authority within her family and as a direct result of her wealth. John Paston and John Damme attempt to overrule her authority but Agnes was in a position of power, despite her gender. Agnes was older and commanded respect from those around her and she had access to a great deal of wealth and resources. This suggests that gender alone was not a determining factor for the Paston women and their ability to govern not only themselves, but those around them. This enables us to understand how the Paston women were able to hold positions of authority during a time when women were viewed as the weaker sex, and patriarchal structures tended to work against women's access to economic power.

Agnes Paston had access to a significant amount of economic power within her family at the time of her husband's death. Widowhood only strengthened this authority and the act of writing her will was a way to express this. Widowhood brought significant freedom, yet as Walker notes, "[t]he death that 'liberated' her from coverture left many formal records. Widows in charge of their own destinies, however, often gave up their independence for remarriage, and, accordingly, their 'legal' and 'documentary' separateness was submerged in a new marital relationship."[153] Although she was a relatively young widow, Agnes never remarried. In one way, this highlights the loyalty that she had for her late husband William, as remarriage was often thought to show disrespect to the first spouse and marrying within the first year of his

[152] Richmond, *The Paston Family, The First Phase,* 174

[153] Susan Sheridan Walker, "Introduction," in *Wife and Widow in Medieval England*, ed. Susan Sherian Walker (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 11.

death was forbidden.[154] Agnes' perpetual widowhood also speaks to her new status within the family and reflects her desire for independence over the security that a second marriage would have given her. Agnes' decision to remain a widow was a choice and one that would have been fraught with risk of potential challenge from a male family member who deemed himself worthy of controlling the estate. Through her inheritance and her own will, she was able to exercise authority over her children, their families and her lands and tenants. Agnes enjoyed such a status that she was clearly never pressured to marry again by threats to her property, as many others in her financial position would have been.[155] The will of her husband and the act of writing her own will therefore shows the power and freedom over her own life that came with her new position as a *femme sole*, a woman with full legal personality.[156] As Wysmułek argues, the transformative power of wills is often understated. In this instance the lives and relationships of many members of the Paston family were transformed after the reading of William's will.[157] Agnes was able to live her life of independence after the inheritance she accumulated from her husband and the subsequent act of writing her own will.

Margaret Paston

While Agnes Paston's will was written with reference to the wishes of her husband, Margaret Paston's will was distinctly more independent in nature. Margaret wrote her will in 1482, after she had been widowed for sixteen years and was well-established as a head of the Paston family. Both Agnes and Margaret were in a position to transfer a great deal of land and personal possessions to their heirs, and this fact alone warranted the writing of a will on their part. Margaret was a significant authority figure within her family and community while her husband was alive but even more so after his death. She was respected as an individual by her family, servants and community and was able to govern her lands, tenants and children. Margaret's will, reflects her status as an individual, with more subtle nods to her husband, in comparison to Agnes, whose will, was written with direct reference to her husband's will. Some key themes emerge from Margaret's will, which can shed light on the politics of gender, Paston family

[154]James A. Brundage, "Widows and Remarriage: Moral Conflicts and Their Resolution in Classical Canon Law," in *Wife and Widow in Medieval England*, ed. Susan Sheridan Walker (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993).
[155] Brundage, "Widows and Remarriage," 25.
[156] Walker, "Introduction," 3.
[157] Wysmułek, "Wills as Tools of Power," 214.

relations under her influence and the role of religion that is perhaps not as evident within the contents of the letters alone.

Margaret Paston's will helps us to understand what and who she deemed to be important to her, as well as how she wished to be remembered. Her will establishes a deeply religious undertone at the beginning that continues throughout. The first sentence of Margaret's will, indicates where her loyalties and priorities were, stating "In the name of God, amen. I, Margaret Paston, widowe, late the wiff of John Paston, aught, aughter and heire to John Mauteby, squire".[158] This indicates Margaret's priorities and how she wished to be remembered: as a pious widow, wife and daughter, and as an heiress. This begins to suggest the role of religion in the life of Margaret Paston and why it played such a definitive role in her will. Expectations for gentry women were high in fifteenth-century England, and the expectation that they develop a suitable level of religious observance was no less demanding than their role as household administrators. Women were expected to attend regular mass and live a life in accordance with Christian values. This level of piety comes through in Margaret's letters in a much more subtle way than in her will. Margaret might offer to pray for someone's well keeping, or bid them farewell with a religious sentiment, but the degree to which she was genuinely pious is not evident in the letters. This does not suggest a lack of piety throughout her life, as letters in the fifteenth century were mostly pragmatic in nature and used to convey a specific message. Margaret may well have spent much of her life practicing genuine dedication to her faith and that is why analysing sources such as wills alongside the letters is important in order for us to develop a more holistic understanding of the lives of the Pastons.

The first two-thirds of Margaret Paston's will is dedicated to requests for religious ceremonies after her death, donations to parishes, priests and religious fraternities and details for her burial arrangements and funeral. This is very much in keeping with the overall theme of gentry wills. Before she makes her first request (to be buried in her family's church of Mauteby), Margaret is sure to give her soul to God and several of her chosen saints:

> First, I betake my sowle to God Almyghty and to Our Lady his blissed moder, Seint Michael, Seint John Baptist, and to alle seintes, and my body to be beried in the ele of the aught of Mauteby byfore the ymage of Our Lady there,

[158] Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers*, 383.

> jn which ele reste the bodies of diuers of myn aunceteres, whos sowles God assoile.[159]

This sentence gives us an impression of a woman with deep connections to her birth family, who was genuinely pious and wanted to be remembered as such. Margaret exhibited genuine piety through the consistent religious undertone within her will as well as the many requests for others to pray for her soul. We can reasonably assume that Margaret was deeply religious or at least held her faith in high regard at the end of her life along with her marriage and her birth family. Margaret's desire to be seen as religious by others after her death is evident throughout the contents of her will. One could argue that all inclusions of acts of religion were displays of genuine piety. While that may be true, the fact that many of the ceremonies that Margaret requests are so public, coupled with the sheer number of donations made to parishes, priests and friars suggests a desire that her peers would remember her as a woman of faith, but also as a woman of financial substance.

Margaret's will, is particularly useful for indicating the degree she identified with her status as a wife in her later years and the extent to which she wanted to be remembered as John Paston's wife. John Paston seems to feature significantly less in Margaret's will than William Paston features in Agnes Paston's will. Margaret had been a widow and independent for sixteen years at the time of writing her will and perhaps she identified less with her status as a wife than she had earlier on in life. Agnes, however, seemed to have written her will while her husband was on his death bed, seven years before her own death, and he therefore features heavily throughout her own will. That Margaret viewed herself as an independent woman and the matriarch of the Paston family can reasonably be assumed by the absence of her husband's influence throughout her will.

One of the biggest indicators of where her loyalties lay at the time of writing her will is her request for her tomb and place of burial. Margaret requested to be buried in the church of Mautby, amongst her ancestors and birth family, and she donated a significant amount to the church to ensure that her wishes were carried out. Margaret's will demonstrates her loyalty to her parents and the family in which she was born. The Mautby family name, in association with religious requests, is mentioned most frequently throughout her will. Margaret's requests for her tomb best demonstrates her priorities at the time of her will writing:

[159] Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers*, 383.

> I wull that myn executours purveye a stoon of marble to be leyde alofte vpon my grave within a yer next after my decesse; and vpon that stoon I wulle have iiij scochens sett at the iiij corners, wherof I wulle that the first scochen shalbe of my husbondes armes and myn departed, the ijde of Mawtebys armes and Berneys of Redham departed, the iijde of.[160]

This request demonstrates Margaret's loyalties to her faith, her late husband and her birth family. John Paston is included on her tomb but to a lesser extent than her Mautby side and the religious iconography that she is determined to include. Though John Paston is included on her tomb, in the middle she requests:

> And in myddys of the seid stoon I wull have a scochen sett of Mawtebys armes allone, and vnder the same thise augh wretyn: 'In God is my trust'; with a scripture wretyn in the verges therof rehersyng thise laugh: 'Here lieth Margret Paston, late the wif of John Paston, [d]aughter and heire of John Mawteby, squier', and forth in the same scripture rehersed the day of the moneth and the yer that I shall decesse, 'on whos sowle God have mercy'.[161]

Margaret wants her family arms in the middle of the stone and standing on its own, separate from her husband's arms with the words "In God is my trust" underneath. She includes "late the wif of John Paston", this indicates her loyalty to her husband albeit secondary to her birth family, whose arms she puts in the centre. Margaret clearly wanted a legacy that highlighted her status as a member of the gentry. This is indicated first by her emphasis on the money she dedicated to pious bequests and secondly on her focus on her status as a wife and an heiress. In front of her late father's name in the quote above, she includes the words "doughter and heire of John Mawteby, squire" signifying her beginnings as an heiress and the large inheritance that came along with that.

After spending around two-thirds of her will requesting various religious ceremonies and making donations to churches, Margaret begins disposing of the rest of her possessions, land and manors. This section is particularly useful for understanding the state of relations between Margaret and the rest of her family. We see who she has in her favour at the time of writing her will and can plausibly assess why certain people are left out by cross-referencing with the letters. For example, we know from the letters that Margaret had a strained relationship with

[160] Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers*, 383
[161] Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers,* 384.

her daughter Margery after Margery married a long-time servant of the Pastons, Richard Calle. In Margaret's will we find out that she did not leave anything to Margery and Richard when she died but left a small amount to their children. Moreover, her will reveals that John Paston II had an illegitimate child at some point and Margaret leaves this child some money.[162] These two examples provide us with an understanding about Margaret's beliefs regarding family and lineage. The children that she included in her will were not conceived in circumstances that Margaret deemed to be appropriate; nevertheless, they were recognised as family in her will. She did not include Margery and Richard in her will which indicates that she still did not approve of their marriage even though it had been thirteen years since it had happened. There could have been several reasons for this. Perhaps she had a relationship with the children and did not blame them for the mistakes she believed their parents made. Another likely explanation is that Margaret wanted to ensure that the family line remained prosperous in the event of her death. The gentry class emphasised the importance of inheritance and lineage as well as marrying and conceiving children within the same rank or even advancing through marriage. We know that this was very important to Margaret, given her disapproval of the marriage between Margery and a man of lesser rank. The likely reason there is no other public mention of these children reinforces that, for the Pastons, appearing as a unified and traditional gentry family was paramount because acceptance by other members of the gentry was the one of the sole markers of social status. Behind closed doors, however, the inclusion of these children in the will suggests that Margaret was more accepting of them. Margaret's will highlights the role that will-writing can play in a woman's access to power and the expression of her social identity. Margaret was able to reinforce her disapproval of a marriage and identify as an heiress at the end of her life rather than simply as John Paston's wife. Margaret's will can therefore be understood as a way for her to perform her identity and sense of individuality and be remembered on her own terms.

Elizabeth Poynings (nee Paston)

Elizabeth Poynings was the only daughter of Agnes and William Paston and was fifty-eight at the time of writing her will. Her will reflects the life of a woman with access to a great deal of economic and social power that was gained through her successive marriages. Elizabeth begins

[162] For more information regarding the illegitamite child of John II see: Jane Clayton, "Discovering Constance: Reconstructing the Life of the Illegitimate Daughter of John Paston II," *Medieval Feminist Forum: A Journal of Gender and Sexuality 56*, No. 2 (2021): 93-124.

her will with the traditional "In Dei nomine, amen" and then refers to herself as "Dame Elisabeth, late wife of Sir George Brown, knight".[163] The medieval context for the legal title "Dame" was associated with being the wife of a knight or noble and there is clearly a strong correlation between Elizabeth's identity and her role as the wife of a knight.[164]. Elizabeth follows this up with a list of specific religious bequests in a very similar fashion to Margaret:

> Also, I bequeith to the vicare of the churche of Dorking in the county of Surré for my forsaid housbandes soul and myne, oure faders and modres, and for all the soules that we be bound vnto to be praid for within the yere after my discesse, as in diriges and masses to be said or song by hym or his deputie, and to haue us specially in remembraunce in thayr memento by oon hole yere, xx s. also, I bequeith to the reparacion of the forsaid churche of Dorking xx s. Also, I bequeith to the parson of Saint Albans in Wodstrete within London, for diriges and masses to be said or song by hym or his deputie in like wise as the vicar of Dorking is charged as is afore rehersed, xxs. Also, I bequeith to the reparacion of the stepull of the said churche of Saint Albans xx solid.[165]

This will, is much more religious in nature than Agnes' will, presumably due to the fact that it was written nine months before Elizabeth's death. Like Margaret, Elizabeth had been widowed for some time when she wrote her will. Unlike Margaret though, Elizabeth re-married after her first husband Robert Poyning died. In 1471, over a decade after the death of Robert, Elizabeth married George Browne. In her will, there is very little mention of her first husband and indeed, Elizabeth seems to have a preference for her daughter Mary (whose father was George Browne) over her first-born son, who she had with Robert. Although she identified strongly with her second husband in her will, it had been twenty-eight years since the death of Robert and she no longer identified with her former status as his wife. This is consistent with Margaret's will; she had been widowed for sixteen years and her husband did not feature heavily. The common denominator between both marriages is that we know that both likely did not begin as love marriages.[166] There was, therefore, a certain degree of freedom that came with widowhood for both women. Indeed, Elizabeth was more in control of who she married later on in life, which can lead us to reasonably assume that her second marriage was one that she was more involved in organising, which is perhaps why she identified so heavily with it.[167]

---

[163] Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers*, 210

[164] *Middle English Dictionary*, (2019), S.V. "Dame".

[165] Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers,* 211.

[166] For Elizabeth see: Castor, *Blood and Roses,* 111. We know Margaret and John's marriage was arranged by their parents: Turner, "Husband and Wife in the Fifteenth Century," 340-1.

[167] Brundage, "Widows and Remarriage," 25.

Elizabeth's will is the longest out of the three women and includes a long list of personal possessions that she wished to leave to her daughter Mary. As Elizabeth was the middle child and only daughter of Agnes and William Paston, she did not inherit as much as her older brother John. Marriage was a way through which gentry women gained economic and social power, and through her two marriages Elizabeth was able to accumulate her extensive list of jewels and personal possessions. Elizabeth's will, demonstrates that she was not in possession of a significant amount of land in comparison to Agnes and Margaret. She did however list what seems like every personal possession she owned, unlike Margaret and Agnes who mostly list the land that they wished to pass on. Agnes and Margaret were no doubt in possession of just as much jewellery and clothing as Elizabeth due to their extensive wealth and their status as gentry women, but this is not itemised in their wills. Such items would have been distributed throughout their family orally and informally, as was common in the fifteenth century. Elizabeth's very detailed bequests highlight her explicit desire to assert agency in a way that she would have otherwise been unable to. Arguably, personal possessions were a way for Elizabeth to express herself as a woman of means in the same way that Agnes and Elizabeth were able to with their land. As Elizabeth did not have a significant estate, her plate and other valuable goods provided a way for her to demonstrate to others that she was a woman of authority.

Elizabeth was very specific with her instructions in her will on how she would like her possessions to be distributed, including details of potential scenarios for when certain individuals were not able to inherit due to death or lack of marriage:

> And if my saide doghter Mary dye vnmaryed, the I yeve and bequethe all the forsaid plate, with all other stuff of housholde, to my soon Mathewe her brothere. And if it fortune that he dye vnmaryed, as God forfende, then I yeve and bequeth all and euery part of my forsaid plate, juelx, and stuffe of housholde vnto my soon Sir Edward Poynings. And yef it fortune the said Edward to dye, as God defende, that then all the forsaid juelx and other stuffe aboue written, except a playne standing cuppe of syluer . . . I geve to my daughter in lawe Dame Isabell Poyningis.[168]

Elizabeth in this instance had control of every possible scenario and her will was a way for her to gain and express power as a woman, by dictating precisely how her possessions were distributed in the event of her death and to whom. Elizabeth's possessions are particularly useful for understanding gentry norms regarding gendered expectations for women. It is

[168] Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers*, 214.

notable that she is determined throughout her will to leave her plate to a woman and if not a woman, then a married man, presumably to give to his wife. Elizabeth clearly did not see these household items as useful or applicable to a man's life, and this reflects the notion that she believed a married woman's place was firmly within the household. Agnes and Margaret did not seem to make this same distinction between men and women within their wills and this is likely because their positions of power often took on traditionally male roles. This sequence of inheritance is also an indicator of who Elizabeth favoured and the value she placed on marriage, and here she used marriage as the deciding factor for deeming whether or not someone was fit to inherit her possessions. Marriage had clearly been beneficial for Elizabeth and perhaps she wished to see her children benefit in the same way.

Elizabeth's first bequest concerning her family, following all of the religious and charitable bequests, is the organisation of the marriage of her daughter Mary, as she states "I geue and biqueith to my doghter Mary, to the promocion of her mariage, all my plate and other juelles, with all myne hole apparel and all my stuff of household being within my dwelling", and then goes on to list every item.[169] Leaving everything in her household in order to promote a marriage for her daughter emphasises the value that Elizabeth placed on marriage, especially for women. Elizabeth had two other male children. Edward, her first son, was already married, and this may be why he was third in line to inherit her possessions even though he was the first-born son. Mathew was to be the next to inherit after Mary if he were married, suggesting that Elizabeth was concerned that her two youngest children were not married at the time of writing her will. Indeed, she was willing to use the majority of her possessions to encourage their marriages.

Elizabeth was a woman who was able to accumulate a great number of possessions towards the end of her life, due to her successive marriages to two men of means. Although she was wealthy, she lacked the large estates that Margaret and Agnes had and her will was therefore a means for her to express power through her bequests of goods. This will is also an example of the discrepancies between theory and practice when it came to inheritance laws. Elizabeth favoured her daughter Mary for inheritance over her first-born son most likely due to the fact that the son was already married. This emphasises Elizabeth's values at the time of writing her will, which as we have discussed, was accumulating power through marriage. This also highlights the individual nature of wills in general for the gentry class. Though there were set

[169] Davis, *Paston Letters and Papers,* 211.

formulae that most followed, each bequest can give us an insight into the specific values and ambitions of the individual in question. Elizabeth was only one year away from death at the time of writing her will and this is reflected in the religious nature of the will. We can reasonably assume that as both Elizabeth and Margaret were older at the time of writing their wills, they were able to contemplate their impending passage through purgatory, whereas Agnes' will, which was written when she was a young widow, has a decidedly less religious undertone.

There are several conclusions that we can draw from the wills of Elizabeth Poynings and of Margaret and Agnes Paston. Elizabeth and Margaret were older at the time of writing their wills and had been widowed for some time. Therefore, they tend to reference their late husbands considerably less than Agnes did in her will as she was a young widow. Margaret's will is indicative of a woman who considered herself to have an entirely separate identity from her husband at the time of writing. Elizabeth seemed to find power in being able to choose her second husband in widowhood and remained loyal to him in her will. Religion features heavily in the wills of Elizabeth and Margaret while Margaret's birth family seemed to be of high importance within her will, to a much greater extent than Agnes' and Elizabeth's. These three women illustrate the considerable power that could be wielded by a woman in a wealthy marriage but even more so after being widowed. Margaret and Agnes were both widowed and neither re-married, but Margaret had been widowed for sixteen years at the time of writing her will. This is reflected in the fact that she makes very few references to her late husband and divides up her property as she wishes, in comparison to Agnes' will, which is much more in alignment with her husband's dying wishes. This illustrates the varying ways in which a woman was able to live her life.

Flexibility is key to understanding the life of any gentry woman in fifteenth-century England, and there are some key themes that emerge from understanding their lives such as age, marital and economic status. Agnes' will, demonstrates that common law principles did not always apply to the lived reality of men and women. In common law a wife would only inherit her jointure in the event her husband died before her. As argued in the introduction to this chapter, the fact that women could receive large amounts of property from wills does not change the fact of oppression. This is certainly true for both Margaret and Agnes who wielded immense amounts of power due to their large inheritance, but were still affected by the limitations of a value system based on patriarchal ideas. Agnes had to contend with certain attitudes of the men around her and assert herself in a way that perhaps would not have been necessary had she been

born a man. A gentry man leaving everything to his wife was most likely not intending to resist gendered legal norms but rather trying to ensure that his estates were going to be run by someone who already knew what they were doing and how he liked things to be run. Leaving everything to Agnes meant that William would have had peace of mind that things would-be run in accordance with his wishes and that the future of the Paston family would be safe in the hands of the capable Agnes Paston.

In conclusion, the wills of these three women allow us to understand the ways that they wished to be perceived, what and who they valued, and the ways in which they were able to express themselves as women with access to economic authority and social standing within their families. As was the case with marriage, wills were a way for them to gain agency over their lives as well as the lives of those around them and this differed for each woman depending on their age, status and inheritance. Wills were an avenue through which they could express individuality, agency and control within a patriarchal system that valued the opposite in women.

Chapter Four: The Wills of the Paston Men

Wills were a means for men to shape how their peers remembered them, and to create a legacy that aligned with the masculine ideals that they particularly valued. The wills of William Paston II and John Paston II demonstrate the nature of manhood, identity and legacy for fifteenth-century gentry men. Within gentry culture and even the same family, men could and did have separate experiences of masculinity and life in general. Through their wills, William and John demonstrate individual identities, ambitions, beliefs and anxieties despite their similar upbringings and existence within the same cultural norms. Like Chapter Three, this chapter will be analysing wills, but it will centre around the experiences of men and masculinity as expressed through them. This chapter demonstrates that factors such as age, marital status, occupation and birth rank all intersected with masculinity and led to marked differences within the wills of the William and John Paston. Reading wills enables us to locate men within their families, communities and gentry society more broadly. This in turn can shed light on their homosocial networks as well as their individual experiences and performances of masculine identity.

John II was a knight who exhibited all the qualities of honour and valour that were idealised by gentry men. As was common with gentry expressions of masculinity, his will has a strong homosocial undertone to it, in that the women in his life feature very little within it. Moreover, John's will reveals the balance that John was able to achieve towards the end of his life between his individual ambition and a constructive relationship with his family. William II was both a lawyer and a knight. He married advantageously and had two surviving adult daughters at the time of writing his will. As a younger son, William did not live with the same pressures that John II did when it came to his identity and the need to prove himself as the head of the family. This is expressed in his will, which focuses more on passing on his own legacy as a gentry man.

These two wills are examples of the differing ways that men could choose to express their identity, status and masculinity, despite belonging to the same family, and operating within the same cultural norms. Among the gentry, masculine ideals were linked to land ownership and in turn the kinship and lineage that this represented.[170] Gentry men often left a will behind as this document represented the pivotal moment that would see the transfer of their

[170] Connell, *Masculinities*, 190.

property and goods. John and William's wills illustrate the different ways that a fifteenth-century gentleman could express himself. These wills demonstrate the need for each man to prove his manhood, not only in ways that expressed what they believed to be masculine ideals but that were acceptable within the paradigm of gentry norms.

Norms of Gentry Masculinity in Wills

Gentry masculinity was expressed in several different ways. Communicating masculine identity through land ownership and a strong lineage was one such way. Another common expression of the masculine ideal was violence-based honour. As Fletcher argues, "[s]trength and energy in battle are the most common qualities with which 'manly' and 'manhood' are associated" in late medieval England.[171] These qualities were reinforced by fifteenth-century romances which depicted tales of physical fighting. As Fletcher explains, the use of the term "manly" was always associated with action (for example in combat) and manhood had to be earned.[172] Gentry masculinity could also be expressed through domestic authority over women, although as seen in Chapters One and Three, women still had individual agency and were directly involved in decision making for the family.[173] These ideals set the expectations against which gentry men measured their masculine identity and the degree to which they sought to express and reinforce it.

In fifteenth-century England there was a wide array of potential variations of masculinity, depending on age, social status, profession, location and ethnicity. There is now an extensive scholarship examining all facets of medieval masculine identity and the ways in which this differed from the feminine experience.[174] It is understood that masculinity was unstable and had to be earned through the performance and recognition of other men.[175] Examining history through this gendered lens, however, is still relatively recent and there are therefore some notable gaps in the research. For example, there has been little attention to what Derek Neal calls the "masculine self" and to men's gendered social identities as these were expressed in

[171]Christopher Fletcher, *Richard II: Manhood, Youth, and Politics 1377-99* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 31-4.
[172] Fletcher, *Richard II,* 31-4.
[173] Connell, *Masculinities*, 190-2.
[174] For example: Karras, *From Boys to Men*; Lees, *Medieval Masculinities*; Cullum and Lewis, eds., *Religious Men and Masculine Identity in the Middle Ages*; Connell, *Masculinities.*
[175] P. H. Cullum and Katherine J. Lewis, "Introduction," in *Religious Men and Masculine Identity in the Middle Ages*, eds. P. H. Cullum and Katherine J. Lewis (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer Ltd, 2013), 2.

wills.[176] There have been many studies that focus on analysing medieval wills as a historical source, several that focus on femininity as it is expressed in wills but to date, little research that examines wills through the lens of masculinity.[177] This chapter therefore aims to address this gap in the literature by focusing on the masculine ideals and social identity as portrayed within the wills of John II and William II.

In her analysis of women's wills, Boffa notes that they:

> [B]ecome a lens through which to view an individual woman in relation to her social network, which while dominated by religious institutions and familial concerns, might also include friends and acquaintances. Of course, an individual will provides a very limited picture of what one can imagine was a very full life; however, as a collection, wills can illustrate the parameters through which women sought to define themselves as members of their broader community.[178]

Similar concerns and interests can be read in the wills of men, although their wills tend to focus more on the homosocial networks within their communities and on the expression and definition of masculine identity. Wills can seem so formulaic that the details can become highly noticeable and are a reminder of the individual behind the document. As Crick argues, individuals constantly perform in order to impose their position onto the world and documents such as wills can be understood as the performance of the individual posthumously, and that "property-holders as well as family were treated as potential channels for the aspirations of the testators".[179] This chapter will analyse the wills of John Paston II and William Paston II with the expectation that their wills reflected how they wished to be perceived after death and how they themselves identified, and were not necessarily a reflection of their actual lives. The contents of their wills tell us about the nature of masculinity as it intersects with factors such as age, occupation, marital status and birth rank.

John Paston II

John Paston II was the eldest son of Margaret and John Paston and the prominent heir to the family estate. John died at age thirty-seven, without marrying or leaving a legitimate heir and most likely did not expect to die at the time of writing his will at the age of thirty-four. He

[176] Regarding the term "masculine self" see, Neal, *The Masculine Self in Late Medieval England*.
[177] Some examples include: Neal, *The Masculine Self in Late Medieval England;* Henry A. Jefferies, "Men, Women, the Late Medieval Church and Religion: Evidence from Wills from County Dublin," *Archivium Hibernicum 69*, no. 44 (2016); Korpiola and Lahtinen, eds., *Planning for Death.*
[178] Boffa, "Creating Identity through the Act of Will-Making," 212.
[179]Crick, "Posthumous Obligation and Family Identity," 201.

left behind a will that details the life of a man who wished to be remembered as a man of chivalry, and it demonstrates both how he perceived himself and wished to be remembered as well as the state of his relationships with the men around him.

John strongly associated with the chivalric expression of masculinity and that is evident within his will, as well as in his letters. John Paston II led a life that did not necessarily align with the traditions that had been perpetuated by his parents and that they expected him to continue. The pressure placed on John as the eldest son and heir to the Paston estate had been the source of conflict between him and his father, and for much of his adult life John II was estranged from John I. This estrangement began following a dispute that started when John II left the Paston estate at Caister without the permission of his parents and in doing so challenged their authority.[180] Indeed, John II and his father only reconciled one year before John I died, as most of John II's adult life was spent at court and fighting in various battles on both sides of the Wars of the Roses.

John II never married and left behind no legitimate heir. His life was therefore defined by his time spent in chivalric pursuits and at court and this is evidently how he wished to be remembered. This is apparent in the opening sentence of his will:

> I, John Paston, k [unclear] nyght, in the last day of October [unclear] anno Domini mlcccclxxvijo, will, graunte, and be-queth my sowle to All-myghty God and to the ... [unclear] Marye, Seint John Baptist, Seint Gorge, Seint Cristofure, and Seint Barbara.[181]

The first sentence of a medieval man's will, usually reflected his profession and in the case of John II's, it is an identifier for how he wished to be remembered. John's will reflects his ambitions to further himself socially and financially, and it also signals his desire to secure himself a place within the royal court. The question is, were his ambitions to raise the Paston name to a prestigious place or to create his own legacy? I argue that a combination of both is demonstrated in his will, though it was the latter earlier on in his life. This reflects some of the problems with analysing wills as a reflection of the individual's life as a whole. John's will demonstrates a balance that he was able to achieve between individual ambition and fulfilling the wishes of his family. As John spent much of his adult life at odds with his father, his will is not reflective of his entire reality, but it is indicative of the place that he had come to as a mature and independent adult man.

---

[180] Moss, *Fatherhood and Its Representations,* 1.
[181] Davis, ed., *Paston Letter and Papers,* 507.

Initially John was sent to the court of Edward IV and was financially supported by his father and uncle Clement II, but there were mounting frustrations regarding the cost of sending John to court as well as his lack of progress within it. The pressure placed on John II by his father likely contributed to the breakdown of their relationship. Many of John II's earlier actions signalled an intention to live a life for himself rather than for his family and this is reflected within his will.[182] John consistently references the king's court in his will and this highlights John's wish to leave a legacy of his own triumphs and the ambitions he had at court. We know the Pastons did not always know about John's plans to further his ambitions, which is evident in the letter from Margaret to John II that discusses her knowledge of an engagement that she did not arrange and that she did not hear of from him.[183]

We can therefore assume that John II framed his will largely with the intention of creating a post-mortem image of himself as a chivalric knight. This reflects the nature of wills and their ability to create a legacy that the testator could manipulate depending on how they wished to be remembered. By including individuals such as the duke of Suffolk in his will, John was signalling a powerful homosocial relationship that he had curated through his profession as a knight. Wills can therefore be understood as avenues through which men could gain agency over how lives would be perceived; here, John could influence how his peers would remember him and to what extent.

The father-son relationship, as Moss argues, sees the convergence of many kinds of masculinities:

> Fathers need heirs – specifically male heirs – in order to establish and reinforce their masculine identity. But as sons grow up, they begin to threaten the hierarchy of the family by encroaching on the fathers' territory. Sons, meanwhile, gain their masculine identity from their fathers and are raised in their likeness, but the more they grow to resemble their fathers, the more they chafe under the yoke of paternal authoritas, finding themselves wanting to exert their own nascent authority.[184]

The relationship between medieval father and son could be laden with complications that extended from unwanted expectations and competing identities. When taking stock of his life at the time of writing his will, John clearly identified with the chivalric form of manhood in that he self-identified with his title of "knight". This differentiated him from his father, who

[182] For example: His parents not knowing about his engagement/marriage, his fighting on both sides of the Wars of the Roses, his years spent advancing at court while not talking to his parents.
[183] Turner, "Husband and Wife in the Fifteenth Century," 337.
[184] Moss, *Fatherhood and Its Representations,* 72.

in some ways also subscribed to this expression of masculinity but was much more involved with his role as a lawyer and the civic expression of masculine identity in London. The legal profession had ensured the success of the Paston family, but John was forging a new path for Paston men by pursuing a career as a knight. Initially, his father was in favour of this as he supported John II in going away to live at court. However, he refused to cover expenses as time went on, likely due to John's "flighty" nature.[185]

We know the relationship between John II and his father was often tumultuous but towards the end of his father's life, this relationship entered a new phase of respect. This respect is evident in John II's will. John Paston I had been dead for eleven years by the time John II wrote it and he most likely looked back on this relationship in a more admiring light than when he was living his life separate from his father. At the very least, he wished to portray in his will an image of renewed family solidarity and ensure the Paston legacy was one that appeared strong. This is evidenced by his burial wishes, in which John II stated that he desired to be buried alongside his father: "I woulde my bodye were buried at the priory of Bromholm ny vn-to the founders toumbe which arche is vn-to the northside and right agayn my fadyres tombe".[186] After the death of his father and at the point of writing his will, John was most likely able to look back on his legacy, as well as his father's, and understand him more favourably. After all, his father had accused him of being a "drone amongst bees" after choosing to live his life for himself rather than for the family.[187] It demonstrates the peace that had come to be forged between John and his father. Despite family pressures, John acknowledged his close relationship with them through his plan to be buried next to his father, while still declaring his status as a knight which differentiated him from his father and grandfather who were both strongly linked with their careers in the legal profession. There were several men in the Paston family who fought in battles, but none of them made it a full-time career or used it as an expression of their masculine identity within their letters and wills. By having a career and an identity that differed from his father and grandfather, John II appears to have struck his own kind of balance between the expectations of others and his individual wishes.

John II existed within the system of patriarchy that dominated fifteenth-century England. As Moss argues:

[185] Moss, *Fatherhood and Its Representations,* 192.
[186] Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers,* 507.
[187] Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers,* 128.

> Patriarchy, understood through an intersectional lens, is not simply a system of male dominance over women. It is a system built on multiple intersecting power differentials. Patriarchy not only privileges men over women, but also men over other men, based on factors such as race, wealth, social status and gender expression (how 'masculine' a man is perceived to be).[188]

John's will makes consistent references to the men who were present throughout his life and the homosocial undertone to his will is hard to deny. Masculinity and the fabric of patriarchy itself, rested on the notion that one man could show dominance over another man and this is illustrated in the concept of homosociality. McVitty explains that homosociality is grounded in the idea that masculinity and manhood was a performance and that:

> Homosociality allows historians to examine the ways masculinity interacted with other determinants of political subjecthood such as ethnicity, religious identity and social status to construct, reinforce or subvert relationships between men within social and political hierarchies.[189]

The man John references most in his will is his brother John III, with whom he seemed to have shared a long and healthy relationship, as is apparent from the number of letters between the men and their light-hearted nature. John also makes reference to his father and to a lesser extent his grandfather: "brothere John, yf I dye with-owth yssue leffull of my bodye, have the maner of Swayell to hym and according to the willez both of myn graunfadere and of my fadere, on whos sowles God have mercye".[190] John clearly valued the relationships that he had with other men: his masculine identity was homosocial in nature. John spent much of his life at court and away from his family. These two quotes demonstrate his strong relationship with his younger brother as well as his repaired relationship with his father. It seems John had moved on from living a life that did not include his father, to one that acknowledged and respected all of the Paston men.

While John's will reflects a balance between competing expressions of masculine identity, it does not include many of the women in his life. John makes only one brief mention of his mother and none of his grandmother or sisters. John had meaningful relationships with the women in his family, in particular his mother with whom he stayed in contact even when he was estranged from his father. Yet these women are not mentioned in his will as the men in the family are. This in itself emphasises the homosocial nature of John's identity and the need he felt to prove himself to other men. John certainly respected his mother's place of authority

[188] Moss, *Fatherhood and Its Representations,* 8.
[189] E. Amanda McVitty, *Treason and Masculinity in Medieval England: Gender, Law and Political Culture*. (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2020), 10-11.
[190] Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers,* 508.

within the family and answered to her after the death of his father. Although John was the primary Paston heir, he spent much of his time pursuing his own interests at court as opposed to working within and for the family estate. This contrasts with his brother John III, who was less interested in a life at court and was much more interested in handling the responsibilities placed on him. Here we understand John's masculine identity as one that very much embraced relationships with other men. The performative aspect of his identity is apparent from his will in his need to reiterate his profession several times, exclude women and prove his position as a man with influence over other men.

The evidence discussed highlights the tension between the expectations of John's family and his ambitions as an individual, which had caused a significant rift between himself and his father earlier on in his life. The tensions derived from the broader social expectations placed on men of the gentry were one source of the consistent need for men such as John to constantly reinforce their masculinity. Gentry families were always under scrutiny by their peers and families were very quick to fall out of favour within their social circle. Members of the older generation were sensitive to this and therefore, significant pressure was placed on the up-and-coming generation to uphold and defend the family's reputation among their peers, as well as to advance it socially and financially. John experienced this pressure to a greater degree than his younger brother as he was the first heir to the estate. Indeed, the need to prove himself without the help of anyone else reflects John's attempts to define himself as a man. This is emphasised clearly when he decided to leave home and go to court without the permission of his parents, cementing his resentment of the pressure that came with being a first-born gentry man. Towards the end of his life John clearly found a way to make peace with his family as well as to live a life that he curated himself. This apparent peace and place of balance, whether it was genuine or not, was how John wished his relationships to be remembered. John II's will was an avenue through which he was able to assert himself as a man of chivalry and create an identity that reinforced his role as a knight. This is consistent with the literature regarding wills discussed earlier, that argues in favour of using them as an indicator of how individuals wished to be remembered and how they viewed themselves, despite their formulaic nature.

William Paston II

William Paston II's will reflects his desire for his legacy to continue through his heirs and executors and for his name to be remembered positively. William's will was written in 1496

when he was 62, and he used it as a source of expression of his individuality. There are two notable themes that emerge from William's will that shed light on how he wished to be perceived, as well as the wider themes of gender, family relations and gentry life in fifteenth-century England. From his will, it is evident that William was concerned with how his executors, tenants and heirs would be treated in the event of his death. William was arguably aware of the expectations that gentry families were held to by their peers and the effect that social acceptance could have on the place a family held in the memory of their peers. William was particularly concerned with protecting his own name in order to ensure a legacy of strength and power for the Paston family. His will is an example of how the process of will-writing could be a source of power for men; in this case William was able to control how he was perceived and the legacy he would leave behind for future generations. William's strong identification with his gentry upbringing, as well as his position as a gentry man, shaped his life and therefore the structure of his will. In general William preferred to identify as a "gentil-man" and this sets the tone for his will and life overall.

William had a desire to portray his life as one that was in keeping with the traditional norms of the gentry class. His will is filled with concern about how his estate would function without him. From advising anyone who had an issue with him in life to address his servant, to specifically advising people against harassing his tenants and farmers, William seems to have many concerns about the function of his lands and manors after his death. He was also anxious to protect his reputation, stating that, "I will that for euery wronge by me done in my life tyme a dewe recompence be made there-fore by th'enformacion of my saide seruante Thomas Andrew in that behalf".[191] Regarding his tenants and heirs:

> I will that none of my tenantes nor fermers suche as be of grete age and fallith in pouerte be in any wise vexid or troublid after my deceasce by my executours vnderwritten for no maner of olde dettes due vnto me before the day of my deces . . . I will that nether my heires, executors nor non other person for theim nor in theire names in any wise vex, sue, or trouble the saide Thomas Andrew my seruaunte after my deceasce of or for any maner of rekenynges or other maters bitwene hym and me in all my life tyme.[192]

These quotes demonstrate William's worries regarding the fate of his estate after his death. He was concerned about the repercussions that his will would have when presumably read aloud at one of the courts it was lodged in, and anxious that the debts he had accumulated in life would not be transferred to his heirs, tenants, farmers and executors. William's fears for

[191] Davis, *Paston Letters and Papers,* 195.
[192] Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers,* 195.

his reputation and the impact it could have had on the continuation of his legacy reflect the nature of gentry culture and the importance of a man's standing in the eyes of his peers.

Two life stages were fundamental to the continuation and flourishing of the gentry as a social group. These were marriage and inheritance. Marriage was the way through which men and women could advance both themselves and their families socially and financially; the same could be said for inheritance. William Paston II was third in line to his family's estate behind his brothers John Paston and Edmund Paston; therefore, marriage was the means through which he could both advance and express himself as a traditional gentry man. This is reflected in his will through his arrangement of the marriage of a woman by the name of Elizabeth Crane. William made sure to include a clause in his will that ensured the wedding of Elizabeth would be paid for by him:

> I will that Elizabeth Crane be wele married at my costis, or ellis by the menes of my doughters, vn-to suche a persoune as may dispende by yere xx merc, or ellis to a gode marchaunt or other craftisman.[193]

This is the only Paston will (of Pastons mentioned in this chapter) that arranges a marriage after their death. We can reasonably assume here that the motivations for arranging a marriage through a will for William would have been to cement his memory in the minds of his peers. This is evidenced by the fact that he included this arrangement in his will for his peers to hear. It is further demonstrated through the request that Elizabeth be "wele married" to someone who earns a specific amount or at least a good merchant or craftsmen. If William were arranging this marriage out of affection for Elizabeth Crane, then perhaps we would not see these requests so emphasised in the item. He would most likely have been acknowledged in some way during this wedding and therefore be remembered as a man with the means and power to arrange such a marriage. William was third in line to the Paston estate and inheritance was therefore not necessarily the avenue through which he could gain power and advance socially. This is perhaps why we see no mention of marriage or the arrangement of one demonstrated in the will of John Paston II, for example. John II was the eldest son and inherited a large portion of the Paston estate and as such, he had a sufficient number of manors, lands and possessions to pass down to his brother and whomever else he wished. This was a way for him to express his power through his position as the eldest son, knight and a member of the royal court. William was clearly someone who wished to emphasise his identity as a gentleman and as his estate was significantly smaller than John II's, marriage

[193] Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers,* 195.

was the means through which he could do this. This reflects the power that wills could have for these men in that they gave some control over their identity and their perception. William here chose to highlight his role as a mediator for other people.

There was, moreover, a religious motivation behind these bequests as was the case with many bequests in William's will. Benefactors of his generosity would have been expected to pray for his soul. It also potentially demonstrates his role as a lord and the responsibilities that came with it. Elizabeth may have in fact been a household servant or a tenant of one of his properties and the arrangement of her marriage would have secured in the memory of his tenants, servants and peers, as well as demonstrating effective lordship. We may never know the true motivations behind such bequests and that is the nature of working with wills as a source. As Boffa argues, "wills can be a promising yet maddening source for the historian seeking out the lived experience of women in the medieval period".[194] Though there were likely several motivations behind the bequest for the arrangement of Elizabeth's marriage, the relevance for this research is that William was able posthumously to control his reputation and memory within the minds of his peers. William's will, therefore, provides an example of how the Paston men and women were able to take control over their own lives and express individuality and agency despite societal and familial expectations.

William Paston's will is a reflection of his status as a fifteenth-century gentleman and the religious elements within his will demonstrate and reinforce his gentry status. William's will, begins with the traditional "In Dei nomine, amen" which reinforces the spiritual nature of wills. This is in contrast with the will of John Paston II whose will, jumps straight to his position as a knight. Although mentioning a man's occupation at the beginning of his will was common practice and likely influenced by a scribe, it tended to set the tone for the remainder of the will. William wished to portray himself as a traditional gentry man who valued faith, inheritance, marriage and legacy. The theme with the Paston wills seems to be that the older the testator is at the time of writing their will, the more religious in tone it is, as they are likely more conscious of impending death than someone who was younger at the time of writing. William was an older and established "gentil-man" at the time of writing his will and the religious bequests throughout his will reflect this:

> I wille that xx li. in money be geven and disposed for my soule ans all Cristen soules in dedes of pitee and charitee the day of my saide burying, that is to sey emonges pouer people and prisoners within the citee of

[194] Boffa, "Creating Identity through the Act of Will Making," 210.

> London and without. . . I will that the churche of Saynte Petre in Wodenorton haue a hole vestymennt of the price of v merc.[195]

William did not seem to have a sizeable estate and was worried about being able to afford to pay for certain bequests, asking for his executors to sell his goods in order to fund the bequests in his will:

> I will that all suche of my godes moveable in Warwikes Inne and in my place callid Castre Clere in Norffolk and in my place in Norwiche be solde by the discresion of my executours tawarde and for the contentacion and payment of my saide dettes and performance of this my present will.[196]

His charity for the Church of Saint Peter and for "pouer people and prisoners" speaks to the religious intent of his will and while it may have reflected genuine piety, it was also a way for him to emphasise to his peers his role as a generous and charitable man. Though John II had a larger estate and a few religious bequests, his will seems to be more focused on his role as a knight and giving to his brother John III. This reflects the limitations of wills and their ability to tell us about the actual lives of the individual, as we cannot tell from the will alone how genuinely religious someone actually was, only how they wished to be remembered by their peers. Wills were always written with an audience in mind as they were usually read aloud and written with witnesses. We may never know how pious William truly was, but we do know that he wished to be perceived as such.

Overall, William Paston's will demonstrates the variations that occurred in the lives of gentry men in fifteenth-century England, the ways that they wished to be portrayed, and how they identified during their lifespan. William in particular seems to exhibit the anxieties that came with being a gentry man, in particular a gentry man who was not the first-born son. Families were rising quickly to the top of the social ladder by accumulating new money, with the legal profession being one important route to wealth for the Paston men.[197] Gentry families were, however, falling to the bottom of the social spectrum, or being rejected by their peers just as fast. Gentry acceptance was contingent upon recognition from other members of the same social networks through the paths such as marriage and inheritance. William married an heiress, and this helped him to remain firmly a part of the gentry class. However, gentry life was fickle, and as William had no surviving male heirs, it was up to his daughters to continue

[195] Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers,* 195.
[196] Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers,* 196.
[197] On lawyers' aspirations to gentry status: A. Musson, "Men of Law and Professional Identity in Late Medieval England," in *Law and Society in Later Medieval England and Ireland,* ed. T. R. Baker (New York: Routledge, 2017).

his legacy. His will therefore exhibits anxieties regarding the stability of his estate and his fears about retribution of his peers tarnishing his name. It therefore made sense for William to add in several clauses to counteract this possibility and ensure that his legacy lived on through his heirs and executors. One way William intended to solidify his memory in the minds of his peers was through the marriage of Elizabeth Crane. As he had little in the way of manors, land or possessions to pass on, marriage was the other traditional gentry way to ensure one's memory lived on. William Paston's will has demonstrated the variety of factors that could influence one's life as a gentry man in the fifteenth century. Age, marital status and where an individual stood in the line of inheritance could all have a direct effect on a man's life choices and opportunities.

This chapter has demonstrated the ways in which the Paston men wished to be remembered, what they valued and how they perceived their own identity. Through their wills, William and John were able to gain some control over their image and reputation, and create a legacy for future generations. The ways they achieved this differed depending on the intersections between factors such as masculinity, age, birth rank, occupation and marital status. William wished to be remembered as a gentleman and a good lord. John wished to be remembered as a knight and a member of the royal court. There were religious motivations behind many bequests that signalled a desire to be prayed for in order to ensure a smooth passage through purgatory. Though other motivations may be behind many of the bequests, the key is that wills provided a sense of agency for these men, as they did for the Paston women. This demonstrates one of the ways that men and women were able to have individuality within a system of familial, social, legal and religious expectations.

Conclusion

The Paston men and women and their extensive letter collection have been of scholarly interest to historians for decades. However, there has to date been less scholarly attention paid to the gendered expressions that lay within their letters and documents, particularly concerning masculinity. This research therefore set out to answer some key questions regarding gender as it was expressed by the Pastons. How did the Paston family respond to gendered expectations placed on them by fifteenth-century gentry English society? Were the Paston men and women able to express agency and individuality within a rigid system of patriarchal, religious and cultural gendered norms? And in what ways did the Paston men and women express their masculine and feminine identity in order to benefit themselves or the broader family? Chapters One to Four concluded that the Paston men and women were able to express individuality and agency despite familial expectations and gendered cultural norms although their experiences differed depending on factors such as age, birth rank, status and occupation. A sense of individuality was expressed in theirs letters and wills, sources which have often been considered more impersonal and formulaic in nature. The Pastons provide many examples of a sense of self, gendered agency and a desire to control aspects of their lives that highlights the disjuncture between the patriarchal ideals modelled in medieval legal and religious discourses and the lived experiences of individual men and women.

Chapter One discussed the role that marriage played in providing a sense of control, agency and individuality for the women of the Paston family. While similar circumstances for the Paston women were reflected in a traditional form of gentry marriage, no two experiences of marriage were the same. The experience of marriage depended on the age of the woman, her birth rank, and her social and financial status. Most women within the Paston family were able to express power within their marriages and hold a position of authority within and beyond the family because of their marriages, not in spite of them. Women like Margaret and Agnes Paston were in positions of power because they married men with access to financial and social status and they brought their own levels of power from their backgrounds as heiresses. This was not the case for women such as Margery Paston, who was expected to follow in the footsteps of her mother and grandmother but instead married for love. This demonstrates the character of Margery and her ability to choose her own path in a family that placed familial duty above all else. This was further emphasised by Margaret Paston (sister of John Paston I) who refused to marry the man that Agnes and John I had chosen for her. These

examples reinforce the sense of individuality and personal autonomy that the Paston women were able to express. These examples moreover demonstrate the importance of familial duty over gendered societal expectations for the Paston family, as Paston women were able to govern estates and hold public power if it served to further the family financially and socially. Indeed, the consequences for women who failed to live up to the expectations of their family were far worse than facing judgement for failing to behave as married women were expected to by lawmakers and clerical commentators. Marriage was the avenue through which women were able to gain a sense of control over their lives and the lives of family members and moreover a sense of purpose and identity.

Chapter Two covered the role that marriage played in the lives of the Paston men. This chapter demonstrated the diversity in the lived experiences of marriage through the examples of John I, John II and John III. The factors that shaped a man's marriage included birth rank, age and occupation so that marriage was not a unified experience for all gentry men. Flexibility with gender roles took precedence in order to benefit the wider family and marriage looked very different from one man to the next, even within the same family. The marriage of John I was arranged by his parents, benefited John and the family financially and socially and served as a means for him and Margaret to build on and expand the Paston family empire. John II, however, did not have an arranged marriage and was in fact estranged from his father when he sought out his own marriage in order to gain a place within the royal court. As was discussed, this marriage never came to fruition, but his rumoured engagement to another women at court demonstrates his determination to make a name for himself within royal and courtly circles. Unlike his older brother, John III attempted for ten years to secure a marriage to a woman of the same social class, and he seemed to have been much more concerned with continuing his father's legacy than John II. These two chapters demonstrated that marriage was a way for both men and women to gain power, status and control over their lives and the lives of their family members. It moreover emphasised the individual experience present within each marriage and the fact that gender roles often took a backseat to familial responsibilities. Both men and women were able to assert their own wishes through marriage and pursue them in order to further their own interests and ambitions. The Pastons had the power to refuse a potential marriage, control whom they married, use marriage for financial or social gain and arrange the marriages of others to benefit themselves.

Chapter Three analysed the wills of the Paston women and their role in giving individual testators a sense of control over their own lives as well as other people within their family

and community. Wills were a way for them to express themselves as women and prove to the audience they knew would hear in their wills that they were women of authority. Each will, differed depending on the age and status of the women. For example, those who had been widowed for a significant period of time such as Margaret and Elizabeth tended to reference their late husbands less than younger widows such as Agnes, who was much more focused on the wants of her husband within her will. Like marriage, wills provided a means by which the women could exert agency within patriarchal structures designed to diminish this control, or at least hand it over to the men in their lives. Wills gave the women a sense of individuality that common laws such as coverture tried to strip from them. This reinforces the disjuncture between ideals and lived reality that is so evident throughout the primary sources relating to the Pastons. These women were not only able to survive within the system that was founded on the perceived inferiority of women but thrive within it, and will making provided a means to do this.

Chapter Four focused on analysing the wills of the Paston men. The gendered system of patriarchy not only limited the lives of women but also created an environment that required men to dominate other men and consistently reinforce their masculinity. This was reflected in their wills, which saw William and John Paston continually expressing their individual identities in ways that proved their masculinity, which was different for every man in the medieval period and depended on factors such as age, status and occupation. In a similar way to women, the wills of William and John provided an avenue through which they could determine how they were perceived and who they were associated with. For John Paston II this meant emphasising the chivalric masculine identity with which he associated himself throughout his life as well as the reconciliation that he had with his father. For William Paston II it was about consistently reinforcing his reputation and his role as a lord and a man of influence in response to the insecurities of being the second-born son. Both men used their wills to construct images of themselves that may or may not have been true to reality. Wills once again were a source of power and agency for men, and provided an important arena for performing masculine identity.

Letters and wills have sometimes been perceived as sources that cannot tell us a great deal about the individual in question. This research shows the ways that they can be used to answer questions about gender, individuality and power. These sources also demonstrate the ways that the Paston men and women were able to use marriage and will writing to create a perception of themselves that reinforced their identity as they saw it and to exert authority

over the lives of those around them. For women this meant a sense of agency within a gendered system that tended to diminish it. For men it meant an avenue through which they could assert dominance over other men and reinforce their masculinity.

The Paston letter collection has been perceived as formulaic and impersonal. Despite this, historians have been able to use it to learn about the Wars of the Roses, kings, queens, fifteenth-century gentry life, female authorship and authority, marriage and gender. The letters have proved to be invaluable to furthering research regarding the fifteenth century and I believe there is still much to explore regarding gender and identity, not only within the letters and wills of the Pastons but other families such as the Stonors. This research has covered some of the primary source material but in a relatively small sample size. Other areas for further study could focus on the physical material that the Pastons left behind and described within their wills and letters. Material objects and physical structures could provide historians with valuable insights into the ways in which men and women such as the Pastons were able to express individual identity and power.

Overall, this research has used letters and wills to explore the ways in which the Paston men and women understood themselves and aimed to express this to others in order to reinforce their identity and exercise individual agency. Two of the paths by which this was achieved were marriage and will-making, which provided the Paston men and women with a sense of individuality and control over themselves and the lives of others. This is despite a system of patriarchy that aimed to limit women's individual agency and idealised some men as dominant over other men, and all men over women. The Pastons were able to thrive within this system, partly because their wealth and social standing gave them advantages that were not available to all families. Yet they also thrived because of their ability to negotiate gendered social structures in ways that benefitted themselves as individuals and as a gentry family.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Davis, Norman, ed. *The Paston Letters: A Selection in Modern Spelling*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Davis, Norman, ed. *Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century, Part I*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971.

Thorne, Samuel E., ed. *Bracton on the Laws and Customs of England.* Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1968.

Virgoe, Roger, ed. *Private Life in the 15th Century: Illustrated Letters of the Paston Family*. London: Macmillan London Limited, 1989.

Secondary Sources

Ågren, Maria. *The Marital Economy in Scandinavia and Britain 1400–1900*. London: Routledge, 2017.

Arnold, John H., and Brady, Sean., eds. *What Is Masculinity?*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

Barber, Richard, ed. *The Pastons: The Letters of a Family in the Wars of the Roses*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981.

Baker, T. R. *Law and Society in Later Medieval England and Ireland*. New York: Routledge, 2017.

Barron, Caroline, and Anne F. Sutton. *Medieval London Widows, 1300-1500.* London: A&C Black, 1994.

Beattie, Cordelia. "Married Women's Wills: Probate, Property, and Piety in Later Medieval England." *Law and History Review* 37, no. 1 (2019): 29–60.

Beattie, Cordelia, and Stevens, Matthew Frank., eds. *Married Women and the Law in Premodern Northwest Europe*. Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2013.

Bennett, Judith M. and Ruth Mazo Karras, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Boffa, Andrea. "Creating Identity through the Act of Will-Making: A Case-Study of Fourteenth-Century Wills by the Women of Lucca." *Medieval Prosopography* 33, no. 1 (2018): 209–22.

Broomhall, Susan, ed. *Authority, Gender and Emotions in Late Medieval and Early Modern England, Genders and Sexualities in History*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015.

Broomhall, Susan and Andrew Lynch, eds. *The Routledge History of Emotions in Europe: 1100-1700.* London: Routledge, 2019.

Bühler, Curt F. "Sir John Paston's Grete Booke, a Fifteenth-Century 'Best-Seller.'" *Modern Language Notes* 56, no. 5 (1941): 345–51.

Bullough, Vern L. “On Being a Male in the Middle Ages.” In *Medieval Masculinities*, edited by Clare Lees, 31-46. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994.

Butler, Sara Margaret. *The Language of Abuse: Marital Violence in Later Medieval England*. Leyden: Brill, 2007.

Butler, Sara M. “Discourse on the Nature of Coverture in the Later Medieval Courtroom.” In *Married Women and the Law: Coverture in England and the Common Law World*, edited by Tim Stretton and Krista J. Kesselring, 24-44. Quebec: McGill-Queen’s Press, 2013.

Brundage, James A. “Widows and Remarriage: Moral Conflicts and Their Resolution in Classical Canon Law.” In *Wife and Widow in Medieval England*, edited by James A. Walker, 17-32. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993.

Carney, Jo Eldridge. “The Paston Letters,” In *Historical Dictionary of Late Medieval England, 1272-1485*, edited by Ronald H. Fritze and William Baxter Robinson, 411-412. London: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2002.

Cartlidge, Neil. *Medieval Marriage: Literary Approaches, 1100-1300*. Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer Ltd, 1997.

Castor, Helen. *Blood and Roses*. London: Faber & Faber, 2011.

Charles, Lindsey and Lorna Duffin, *Women and Work in Pre-Industrial England*. London: Routledge, 2013.

Churches, Christine. “Women and Property in Early Modern England: A Case-Study.” *Social History* 23, no. 2 (1998): 165–80.

Clarke, Peter D. “New Evidence of Noble and Gentry Piety in Fifteenth-Century England and Wales.” *Journal of Medieval History* 34, no. 1 (2008): 23–35.

Clayton, Jane. "Discovering Constance: Reconstructing the Life of the Illegitimate Daughter of John Paston II." *Medieval Feminist Forum: A Journal of Gender and Sexuality 56*, No. 2 (2021): 93-124.

Connell, R. W. *Masculinities*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005.

Connolly, Margaret and Raluca L. Radulescu, eds. *Insular Books: Vernacular Manuscript Miscellanies in Late Medieval Britain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Coster, Will. *Family and Kinship in England 1450-1800*. New York: Routledge, 2016.

Couchman, Jane. *Women’s Letters Across Europe, 1400–1700: Form and Persuasion*. New York: Routledge, 2017.

Crick, Julia. “Posthumous Obligation and Family Identity.” In *Social Identity in Early Medieval Britain*, edited by William O. Frazer and Andrew Tyrrell, 193-208. London: A&C Black, 2001.

Cullum, P. H.. and Katherine J. Lewis, eds. *Religious Men and Masculine Identity in the Middle Ages*. Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer Ltd, 2013.

Cullum, P. H. and Katherine J. Lewis, “Introduction.” In *Religious Men and Masculine Identity in the Middle Ages*, edited by P. H. Cullum and Katherine Lewis, 1-15. Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer Ltd, 2013.

Davis, Natalie Zemon. “Women’s History’ in Transition: The European Case.” *Feminist Studies* 3, no. 9 (1975): 83-103.

D'Avray, David. *Medieval Marriage: Symbolism and Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Dobson, R. B., ed. *The Church, Politics and Patronage in the Fifteenth Century*. New York: St Martin's Press, 1984.

Erickson, A. L. *Women and Property in Early Modern England*. New York: Routledge, 1993.

Fletcher, Christopher. *Richard II: Manhood, Youth, and Politics 1377-99*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Foroughi, Louisa. "'To Sey or Thinke Otherwise': Ordinary Theology and Facing Death in Late Medieval Norfolk." *Religions* 9, no. 3 (2018): 67-86.

Frazer, William O. and Andrew Tyrell, eds. *Social Identity in Early Medieval Britain*. London: A&C Black, 2001.

Friedrichs, Rhoda L. "Marriage Strategies and Younger Sons in Fifteenth-Century England." *Medieval Prosopography* 14, no. 1 (1993): 53-69.

Fritze, Ronald H. and William Baxter Robison, eds. *Historical Dictionary of Late Medieval England, 1272-1485*. London: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2002.

Gastle, Brian W. "Breaking the Stained Glass Ceiling: Mercantile Authority, Margaret Paston, and Margery Kempe." *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 36, no. 1 (2003): 123-147.

Gies, Frances and Joseph Gies. *A Medieval Family: The Pastons of Fifteenth-Century England*. New York: Harper Collins, 2010.

Given-Wilson, Chris. *The English Nobility in the Late Middle Ages: The Fourteenth-Century Political Community*. London: Routledge, 2002.

Hanawalt, Barbara A. *Of Good and Ill Repute: Gender and Social Control in Medieval England*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Hanham, Alison. "The Stonors and Thomas Betson: Some Neglected Evidence." *The Ricardian*, Vol. 15, no. 15 (2005).

Harris, Barbara J. *English Aristocratic Women, 1450-1550: Marriage and Family, Property and Careers*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Harris, Barbara J. *English Aristocratic Women and the Fabric of Piety, 1450-1550. Gendering the Late Medieval and Early Modern World.* Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018.

Harriss, G. L., Rowena E.Archer and Simon Walker, eds. *Rulers and Ruled in Late Medieval England: Essays Presented to Gerald Harriss*. London: A&C Black, 1995.

Hickey, Raymond, Merja Kytö and Matti Rissanen, *Tracing the Trail of Time: Proceedings from the Second Diachronic Corpora Workshop, New College, University of Toronto.* Toronto: Rodopi, 1997.

James, Susan E. *Women's Voices in Tudor Wills, 1485–1603: Authority, Influence and Material Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2016.

Jefferies, Henry A. "Men, Women, the Late Medieval Church and Religion: Evidence from Wills from County Dublin." *Archivium Hibernicum* 69, no. 44 (2016): 355–65.

Karras, Ruth Mazo. *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003.

Kenyon, Olga. *800 Years of Women's Letters.* Gloucestershire: The History Press, 2011.

Korpiola, Mia and Anu Lahtinen, eds. *Planning for Death: Wills and Death-Related Property Arrangements in Europe, 1200-1600*. Leiden: Brill, 2013.

Korpiola, Mia and Anu Lahtinen, "Introduction." In *Planning for Death: Wills and Death-Related Property Arrangements in Europe, 1200-1600*, edited by Mia Korpiola and Anu Lahetinen, 1-26. Leiden: Brill, 2013.

Kowaleski, Maryanne and P. J. P.Goldberg, eds. *Medieval Domesticity: Home, Housing and Household in Medieval England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Krug, Rebecca. *Reading Families: Women's Literate Practice in Late Medieval England*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002.

Lacey, Kay. "Margaret Croke (d. 1491)." In *Medieval London Widows, 1300-1500*, edited by Caroline Barron and Anne F. Sutton, 143-164. London: A&C Black, 1994.

Lacey, Kay E. "Women and Work in Fourteenth and Fifteenth Century London." In *Women and Work in Pre-Industrial England*, edited by Lindsey Charles and Lorna Duffin, 24-82. London: Routledge, 2013.

Lees, Clare A. *Medieval Masculinities, Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994.

Leonard, Amy and Karen L.Nelson, eds. *Masculinities, Childhood, Violence: Attending to Early Modern Women - and Men.* Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2011.

Lester, G. A. "The Books of a Fifteenth-Century English Gentleman, Sir John Paston." *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 88, no. 2 (1987): 200–217.

Lewis, Katherine J. *Kingship and Masculinity in Late Medieval England*. London: Routledge, 2013.

Lewis, Katherine. "Women, Testementary Discourse and Life-Writing in Later Medieval England." In *Medieval Women and the Law*, ed. Noël James Menuge, 57-75. Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2003.

Maddern, Philippa. "Gentility." In *Gentry Culture in Late-Medieval England*, edited by Raluca Radulescu, 18-34. New York: Manchester University Press, 2005.

Maddern, Phillipa. "Friends of the Dead: Executors, Wills and Family Strategy in Fifteenth-century Norfolk." In *Rulers and Ruled in Late Medieval England: Essays Presented to Gerald Harriss*, edited by G. L. Harriss, Rowena E. Archer, and Simon Walker, 155-174. London: A&C Black, 1995.

McCarthy, Conor. *Marriage in Medieval England: Law, Literature and Practice*. Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2004.

McSheffrey, Shannon. *Marriage, Sex, and Civic Culture in Late Medieval London*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013.

McSheffrey, Shannon. *Seeking Sanctuary: Crime, Mercy, and Politics in English Courts, 1400-1550*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

McVitty, E. Amanda. *Treason and Masculinity in Medieval England: Gender, Law and Political Culture*. Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2020.

Menchi, Silvana Seidel, Emlyn Eisenach and Charles Donahue, eds. *Marriage in Europe, 1400-1800.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016.

Menchi, Silvana Seidel., Eisenach, Emlyn., and Donahue, Charles. "Introduction." In *Marriage in Europe, 1400-1800,* edited by Silvana Seidel, Emlyn Eisenach and Charles Donahue, 3-30. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016.

McDougall, Sara. "Women and Gender in Canon Law." In *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe,* edited by Judith M. Bennett and Ruth Mazo Karras, 164-176. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Menuge, Noël James. *Medieval English Wardship in Romance and Law*. Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2001.

Menuge, Noël James. *Medieval Women and the Law*. Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2003.

Mercer, Malcolm. *The Medieval Gentry: Power, Leadership and Choice During the Wars of the Roses*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2012.

Morrison, Susan Signe. *A Medieval Woman's Companion: Women's Lives in the European Middle Ages*. Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2015.

Moss, Rachel E. *Fatherhood and Its Representations in Middle English Texts*. Boydell & Brewer Ltd, 2013.

Moss, Rachel E. "An Orchard, A Love Letter and Three Bastards: The Formation of Adult Male Identity in a Fifteenth-Century Family." In *What Is Masculinity?,* edited by John H. Arnold and Sean Brady, 226-244. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

Murray, Jacqueline, ed. *Conflicted Identities and Multiple Masculinities: Men in the Medieval West*. New York: Garland, 1999.

Musson, A. "Men of Law and Professional Identity in Late Medieval England." In *Law and Society in Later Medieval England and Ireland,* edited by T. R. Baker, 225-253. New York: Routledge, 2017.

Neal, Derek G. *The Masculine Self in Late Medieval England*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

Noble, Elizabeth. *The World of the Stonors: A Gentry Society*. Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2009.

Plamper, Jan. *The History of Emotions: An Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Radulescu, Raluca. *Gentry Culture in Late-Medieval England*. New York: Manchester University Press, 2005.

Richmond, Colin. *The Paston Family in the Fifteenth Century, The First Phase*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

Richmond, Colin. *The Paston Family in the Fifteenth Century: Volume 2, Fastolf's Will*. New Jersey: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Richmond, Colin. *The Paston Family in the Fifteenth Century: Endings*. New York: Manchester University Press, 2000.

Richmond, Colin. "Religion and the Fifteenth-century English Gentleman." In *The Church, Politics and Patronage in the Fifteenth Century,* edited by R. B. Dobson, 193-208. New York: St Martin's Press, 1984.

Rosenthal, Joel Thomas, ed. *Understanding Medieval Primary Sources: Using Historical Sources to Discover Medieval Europe*. Oxon: Routledge, 2012.

Rosenthal, Joel Thomas. "Letters and Letter Collections." In *Understanding Medieval Primary Sources: Using Historical Sources to Discover Medieval Europe,* edited by Joel Thomas Rosenthal, 72-85. Oxon: Routledge, 2012.

Rosenwein, Barbara H. *Generations of Feeling: A History of Emotions, 600–1700*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

Salisbury, Eve. "How the Goode Wife Taught Hyr daughter." In *Trials and Joys of Marriage*, edited by Eve Salisbury, 219-232. New York: The Robbins Library Digital Projects, 2002.

Sauer, Michelle M. *Gender in Medieval Culture*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015.

Saul, Nigel. *English Church Monuments in the Middle Ages. History and Representation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Saul, Nigel. *Lordship and Faith: The English Gentry and the Parish Church in the Middle Ages*. First edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Schaus, Margaret. *Women and Gender in Medieval Europe: An Encyclopedia*. New York: Taylor & Francis, 2006.

Schulte, Regina and Xenia Von Tippelskirch, "Introduction," in *Reading, Interpreting and Historicizing: Letters as Historical Sources,* edited by Regina Schulte and Xenia Von Tippelskirch, 5-10. Florence: European University Institute, 2004.

Schulte, Regina and Xenia Von Tippelskirch, eds. *Reading, Interpreting and Historicizing: Letters as Historical Sources.* Florence: European University Institute, 2004.

Scott, Joan. "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis." *The American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (1986): 1053-1075.

Shammas, Carole. "English Inheritance Law and Its Transfer to the Colonies." *The American Journal of Legal History* 31, no. 2 (1987): 145–63.

Sheehan, Michael M. *The Will in Medieval England: From the Conversion of the Anglo-Saxons to the end of the Thirteenth Century*. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1963.

Sheehan, Michael M. *Marriage, Family, and Law in Medieval Europe: Collected Studies*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997.

Shepard, Alexandra. "Manhood, Patriarchy, and Gender in Early Modern History." In *Masculinities, Childhood, Violence: Attending to Early Modern Women and Men: Proceedings of the 2006 Symposium*, edited by Amy Leonard and Karen L. Nelson, 77-95. University of Delaware Press, 2011).

Skeel, Caroline A. J. "Medieval Wills." *History 10*, no. 40 (1926): 300–310.

Stretton, Tim and Krista J. Kesselring, eds. *Married Women and the Law: Coverture in England and the Common Law World*. Quebec: McGill-Queen's Press, 2013.

Stuard, Susan Mosher. "Burdens of Matrimony, Husbanding and Gender in Medieval Italy." In *Medieval Masculinities, Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*, edited by Clare Lees, 61-80. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994.

Sutton, Anne F. “Serious Money: The Benefits of Marriage in London, 1400-1499.” *London Journal* 38, no. 1 (2013): 1-17.

Tanner, Norman P. *The Church in Late Medieval Norwich, 1370-1532*. Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1984.

Turner, Charles W. “Husband and Wife in the Fifteenth Century.” *Virginia Law Review* 5, no. 5 (1918): 336–44.

Walker, Sue Sheridan, ed. *Wife and Widow in Medieval England*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993.

Walker, Sue Sheridan. “Introduction.” In *Wife and Widow in Medieval England*, edited by Sue Sheridan Walker, 1-16. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993.

Ward, Jennifer C. *Women of the English Nobility and Gentry, 1066-1500*. New York: Manchester University Press, 1995.

Watt, Diane. *The Paston Women: Selected Letters*. New York: DS Brewer, 2004.

Watt, Jennifer C. *Women of the English Nobility and Gentry, 1066-1500*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995.

Woolf, Daniel and Norman Jones, eds. *Local Identities in Late Medieval and Early Modern England*. New York: Springer, 2007.

Woolf, Daniel and Norman Jones, “Introduction.” In *Local Identities in Late Medieval and Early Modern England*, edited by Daniel Woolf and Norman Jones, 1-18. New York: Springer, 2007.

Woolfson, Jonathan. “The Renaissance of Bees.” *Renaissance Studies* 24, no. 2 (2010): 281–300.

Wray, Shona Kelly and Cossar, Roisin. “Using Wills as Primary Sources.” In *Understanding Medieval Primary Sources: Using Historical Sources to Discover Medieval Europe*, edited by Joel Thomas Rosenthal, 59-71. Oxon: Routledge, 2012.

Wright, S. M. *The Derbyshire Gentry in the Fifteenth Century*. Derbyshire: Derbyshire Record Society, 1983.

Wysmułek, Jakub. “Wills as Tools of Power: Development of Testamentary Practice in Krakow during the Late Middle Ages.” In *Planning for Death: Wills and Death-Related Property Arrangements in Europe*, edited by Mia Korpiola and Anu Lahtinen, 213-238. Leiden: Brill, 2013.