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The Paston Letters: The Increasing Prominence of the Paston Women in the Medieval Household[1]

Paston Mektupları: Paston Kadınlarının Orta Çağ Hanesinde Artan Önemi

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Ö Z

Yirmi birinci yüzyılın gelişmiş iletişim araçları düşünüldüğünde, Orta Çağ'da kültürel, sosyal ve edebi bir aktivite olarak dönemin değişen dinamiklerine ışık tutan mektup yazımına atfedilen öneme şahit olmak tuhaf bir vazife gibi görülebilir. Beklendiği üzere, Orta Çağ'a özgü mektuplara uygulanan ölçütler bu mektupların modern benzerlerinden oldukça farklıdır, çünkü mektup üslubuna özgü samimiyet ve mahremiyet hissinin aksine, Orta Çağ'da mektuplar birden fazla kişi tarafından okunması muhtemel olan toplumsal bir belge niteliği taşımaktadır. Ayrıca şunu da belirtmek gerekir ki, mektup yazımını tek başına yapılan bir eylem olarak görmeye yatkın genel görüşe karşılık, Orta Çağ'da mektuplar genellikle kâtiplere dikte edildiği ve de yüksek sesle okunduğu için aynı zamanda sözlü geleneğin de birer parçasını oluşturmaktadır. Dahası, yazılı belgelerin daha da önem kazanması ile hemen hemen her varlıklı aile bu dönemde kendi özel arşivlerini tutmaya başlamıştır. Ancak, bu belgelerden sadece bazıları on beşinci yüzyıldan günümüze ulaşmayı başarabilmiştir ve bunlar arasında en çok bilineni Paston mektuplarıdır. Dolayısıyla, bu makalenin amacı öncelikle Paston kadınlarına odaklanarak on beşinci yüzyılda ortak dille yazılan mektupların gelişim sürecini analiz etmek ve aile üyeleri arasındaki bilgi dolaşımını kapsamlı bir şekilde incelemektir. Mektupların çeşitliliği onları yazan kadınların – tarihte yaşamış figürler olarak – günümüzde bizim de hissedebileceğimiz endişe, korku, istek ve umutlarını ifade etmekteki kendilerine has üsluplarından kaynaklanmaktadır. Bu açıdan, Paston ailesindeki kadınların artan otoritesi ve daha görünür hale gelmeleri, pasif ve uysal olarak temsil edilen Orta Çağ kadınları ile ilişkilendirilmiş ideal imgelerin çözülüşünün ilk evresini oluşturmaktadır. Tüm bunlardan hareketle, ideal olanı gerçek olanla değiş tokuş eden Paston kadınlarının mektupları, Orta Çağ kadınlarının kendilerine has bir ses ve mekân bulma çabasını temsil etmektedir.

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A B S T R A C T

Considering highly developed communication mediums of the twenty-first century, it is a peculiar task to go back to the Middle Ages and to witness the importance attached to letter-writing as a cultural, social, and literary activity that unearths the changing dynamics of the age. Not surprisingly, the standards applied to medieval letters were quite different from their modern counterparts because unlike the feeling of intimacy and privacy inherent in the epistolary style, medieval letters were communal pieces intended to be read by more than one person. It is also important to note that, contrary to the general tendency to regard letter-writing as a solitary activity, in the Middle Ages it was a part of the oral tradition since medieval letters were usually dictated to the scribes, and they were read aloud. Moreover, together with the increasing value of the written documents, almost every wealthy family started their own archive in medieval England. Still, only some have been able to reach us from the fifteenth century, and of these the best known are the Paston Letters. Accordingly, the aim of this paper is to analyse the development of fifteenth-century vernacular letters by primarily focusing on the Paston women and to examine the circulation of information in and out of the family members. The variety proposed by these letters mostly stems from the number of their women writers who – as real figures in history – tried to express their anxieties, fears, aspirations and hopes that each one of us may feel familiar with today. In this respect, growing authority and visibility of the female figures in the Paston family underline the early stages of the dissolution of the idealized prescriptions of medieval women who were projected as passive and docile beings. Exchanging the ideal with the real, therefore, the letters of the Paston women illustrate the attempt of medieval women to find a voice and space of their own.

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Introduction

> All happy families are alike, each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. (Tolstoy, 2016, p. 3)

The Paston Letters contain a large number of documents dating back to the fifteenth and to the early years of the sixteenth century in England. They cover "a period of almost ninety years (1418-1506)," and they provide a deeper insight into the socio-political background of the medieval period in terms of uncovering historical fragments from the lives of at least three generations of the Paston family who lived during the reigns of Henry VI, Edward IV, and Richard III (Warrington, 1956, p. v). As the title of the letters also indicates, the Pastons designate the members of the Norfolk family of Paston – taking "their name from the village where they lived, about twenty miles from Norwich on the north-east coast of the country" (Davis, 2008, p. iii). According to H. S. Bennett (1990), family letters of this nature are quite significant for any researcher in the field because they enable us "to view the life of the time from the inside" (p. xiii). In this respect, the collection proves itself as a valuable source of information which not only sheds light on medieval social history but also indicates the growth in general literacy and marks the emergence of English as a written language (Gies & Gies, 1998, p. 7). Without overlooking the comprehensive scope of the Paston Letters and their historical value – as written documents that are mostly associated with the public realm – the main focus of this study will be concentrated on the letters of the Paston women, and it will be attempted to illustrate how the increasing authority of the gentry women in the medieval household contradicts with the patriarchal projections of the 'gentle' sex as docile, submissive and passive beings.

As Laurie A. Finke (1999) notes, the Paston Letters have "the largest numbers of letters written by women" (p. 115), for about one-fifth of the letters belong to them (Watt, 2020, p. 338). Among these women, the most prolific figure is Margaret Paston (c.1420-1484) who "composed a hundred and four letters between 1441 and 1478" (Clayton, 2020, p. 8). Her pioneering influence and dominance within family can be considered as a sequel to her mother-in-law Agnes Paston (c.1405-1479) and as a prequel to her daughter-in-law Margery Paston (1460-1495) whose letters defy the stereotypical projections of womanhood by introducing a genuine standpoint – which may be regarded as a 'revolutionary' attempt considering the socio-cultural dynamics of medieval England. In addition to Margaret, Agnes, and Margery, the relationship and communication between mothers and daughters will also be exemplified through the image of non-conformist daughter figures: Margaret's daughter Margery (1448-1480) and Agnes's daughter Elizabeth (1429-1488), who refuse to comply with the tenets of an arranged marriage in their own period. Within this spectrum, it is necessary to have a general overview regarding the letter writing/reading as a medieval activity and to understand the conditions that give rise to the blurring of the divisions between public and domestic domains for the female members of the Paston family.

While letter writing is a solitary activity that is mostly associated with the transmission of private thoughts and emotions, it should be remembered that in the Middle Ages it was the only way to communicate with "someone who was absent" (Finke, 1999, p. 111), and medieval letters functioned as communal pieces that were not necessarily read by a single person. Furthermore, the composition method of these letters differed from their modern counterparts, for they were "written by servants, or friends, or business acquaintances of the Pastons, some in a beautiful hand, others barely legible" (Bennett, 1990, p. 114). Therefore, unlike the sense of "intimacy, spontaneity, and privacy" that marks the epistolary genre, "in the Middle Ages letters were for the most part self-conscious, quasi-public literary documents, often written with an eye to future collection and publication and often intended to be read by more than one

person" (Dossena & Camiciotti, 2012, p. 5). Accordingly, medieval letter writing and/or reading was more of a communal activity than an individual experience, and the circulation of these letters justified the increasing importance attached to "the value of the written evidence" (Barber, 2004, p. 6). As a result, almost every wealthy family started their own archive, which mainly consisted of letters, and these documents were also used in law courts and business affairs (Barber, 2004, p. 6). Nevertheless, only some of these letters have been able to reach us from the fifteenth century, and of these the most extensive are "the Cely papers, from a London merchant family in the 1470s and 1480s, the Stonor papers from the Oxfordshire family of that name, and, best known of all, the Paston letters" (Barber, 2004, p. 6).

The Paston Letters and Letter Writing in the Middle Ages

The Paston Letters do not merely encompass the communication between the family members. The familial bond is extended to the relatives and in-laws; thus, it is possible to see how the Pastons were interacting within their social milieu from an all-inclusive perspective (Gies & Gies, 1998, p. 8). Before analysing the content of the Paston Letters, however, it is beneficial to give brief information on their stylistic and technical characteristics. As Bennett (1990) further elucidates, the sheets of paper used to write the letters are mostly from 10 to 12 inches wide, and the whole sheet is from 16 to 18 inches long (p. 127). Since the sheets are quite long, the letter writer has to cut off the sheet when there is nothing more to add. This is the reason why "some letters take up a whole sheet, and contain a great deal of matter; while others are only a few lines long, and the width of the paper makes these look even shorter than they are" (p. 127). As for the envelope, small packets are used, and the letters are fastened by a thread or a strip of paper. Finally, the ends of the paper are sealed, and the address is added (p. 127). Regarding the stylistic conventions of these documents, it should also be noted that the greetings which start off the letter are not written on a separate line, but they are united with the opening sentence. The greetings are usually decorated with common expressions such as "right reverend and worshipful husband" (*The Paston Letters*, 2008, p. 3), "to mine well beloved son" (p. 8), "right worshipful and my most entirely beloved mother" (p. 47), "mine own dear sovereign lady" (p. 132), "I greet you well and send you God's blessings and mine" (p. 208), and "heartily beloved brother" (p. 221). On the other hand, for the closing part of the letters, religious expressions such as "The Holy Trinity have you in governance" (p. 3), "Almighty God have you in his keeping and send you health" (p. 7), "Trust verily in God and leve him and serve him, and he will not deceive you" (p. 13), "And Jesu speed you" (p. 69), "Jesu have you in his keeping" (p. 74), "God keep you" (p. 120), "God send you good speed in all your matters" (p. 157), "God preserve you, and I pray you be of good cheer till I speak with you; and I trust to God to ease your heart in some things" (p. 190) are used. The juxtaposition of the medieval manner of greeting and concluding the letters demonstrates the strong familial bond within the Paston household and reveals the cultural contours of medieval family life.

Besides, the dating method of the Paston Letters is much different from the present-day habit of putting chronological information on any official and/or unofficial document. As Bennett (1990) conveys, "few people knew the exact year according to the Christian chronology," only the members of the clergy could date their letters by using chronological information in the Middle Ages (p. 119). Ordinary people such as the members of the Paston family, however, dated their letters according to the day and the month, or they referred to important religious festivals, and saint days (p. 119). For instance, in her letter (1464) to her husband John Paston I (1421-1466), Margaret Paston concludes the document as follows: "Written in haste at Norwich on the Sunday next before the Ascension Day" (*The Paston Letters*, 2008, p. 103). In another letter (1465), Margaret Paston, again, refers to an important religious occasion to be able to date the document: "Written the Friday next before Michaelmas Day" (*The Paston Letters*, 2008, p. 141). In this manner, it is possible to assert that for the

Pastons religion and daily life were closely intertwined, and they – especially the Paston women – used every means possible to emphasize their piety.

In order to understand the subtle dynamics determining the nature of the relationship between the members of the Paston family, it is crucial to have an overview of the family's genealogy. As Frances and Joseph Gies express, according to an account written by a hostile contemporary of the Pastons – probably between 1458 and 1460, "the Pastons were Norfolk peasants, with servile origins on at least one side of the family, striving to rise above their proper station in society" (1998, p. 24). In line with another certificate issued in 1466 in the name of King Edward IV, however, "aristocratic Norman blood flowed in Paston veins" as they intermarried with the nobility and became entitled as lords of manors (Gies & Gies, 1998, p. 24). The contradictory nature of these two accounts verifies that fifteenth-century England was a period of social unrest and upheavals, and this turmoil paved the way for social mobility – particularly for the gentry. In such a disordered atmosphere marked by the Hundred Years' Wars (1337-1453) and the Wars of the Roses (1455-1485), it is not unexpected that the Paston family would benefit from the opportunities to rise in prominence. In this regard, as Melissa Marie Morris (2010) expounds:

> With battles fought on English soil, people of all social classes were drawn into the conflict. The Yorkists, led by Richard, Duke of York, and the Lancastrians, under the leadership of Edmund Beaufort, Duke of Somerset, were each determined to save the crown from the incompetency of the king, leading to a drawn-out conflict. […] The turmoil created by such disturbances fomented change not only in the political structure of England but also in its organization of society. The fifteenth century was a time of change where individual families such as the Pastons could take the advantage of the unsettled political situation, unify with others who possessed similar aspirations, and raise their social status. (p. 3)

Rather than vehemently taking sides with the Yorkists or the Lancastrians, the Pastons were mainly motivated by their family interests – such as expanding their land and acquiring more wealth. Thus, though "Lancastrian in sympathy," there was "no rancour, no libelling of the other side" by the Pastons (Warrington, 1956, p. ix). On the other hand, the family's Lancastrian sympathy brought about good results for the Pastons as well. To exemplify, while John Paston III (1444-1504) got injured "by a Yorkist arrow during the battle of Barnet in 1471," sixteen years later he was "knighted on the battlefield of Stoke in 1487 by Tudor – Lancastrian Henry VII" (Gies & Gies, 1998, p. 17). All in all, the political turmoil triggered the breakdown of the feudal system in the fifteenth century, and it left "the way open for the advance of ambitious and unscrupulous men" (Bennett, 1990, p. 4). As a determined and foresighted man, it was the great grandfather of the family, Clement Paston (1355-1419), who prepared the necessary conditions for the family's rising to a higher status – despite his humble background as a husbandman who held a small land. Borrowing money, he sent his son William Paston I (1378-1444) to London to study law. The father's altruism proved fruitful, because after completing his education, William Paston attested himself as an able lawyer. Soon William got appointed as Steward to the Bishop of Norwich, which was followed by his becoming a sergeant of the Court of Common Pleas in 1421, and eight years later he was raised to the bench (Finke, 1999, p. 188). Having accumulated the necessary financial source beforehand, William Paston started purchasing land around Paston, and as opposed to the modest status of his father, he turned out to be a major landowner. As Frances and Joseph Gies (1998) state, in the Middle Ages, "[l]and was the source not only of income but also of prestige and power" (p. 30). Therefore, William Paston had to be quite meticulous about his marriage because a rich wife would mean more lands and prestige to be added to the Pastons. As a result, at the age of forty-two he married Agnes Berry, eighteen-year-old daughter of Sir Edmund Berry – a Hertfordshire knight. Descending from a wealthy family, Agnes brought three valuable manors into her new family, and they "constituted a worthwhile accrual to the expanding Paston estates, though their possession was qualified by the fact that they were

Agnes's for life, and as it turned out, she lived to a ripe old age" (Gies & Gies, 1998, pp. 30-31). Hereby, it is seen that women of the nobility were turning out to become indispensable markers of the financial well-being of their families; thus, it is not unusual to witness their increasing visibility and presence in medieval letters. Given the socio-historical legacy of medieval England, it is not possible to talk about the empowerment of the materially disadvantaged women in the social hierarchy. Still, the prominence of the Paston ladies and their soft power betoken an 'unsettling' change that starts threatening the strong hold of the patriarchal discourse in the Middle Ages.

The Paston Women and Female Agency in Medieval Letters

Agnes Paston belongs to the first generation of women who, as the authority figures of the household, have a central position in the formation of the Paston Letters. As Finke (1999) remarks, the "Paston correspondence is by far and away the largest and most significant collection […]: it includes 930 letters, including 174 by women" (p. 115). To be more precise, in the first generation of the Paston women there are thirteen letters written by Agnes Paston; the second generation is represented by Elizabeth Paston (Agnes's daughter) and Margaret Paston (Agnes's daughter-in-law); and finally, in the third generation only six letters of Margery Paston (Agnes's granddaughter-in-law) survive (Finke, 1999, p. 190). Among the Paston women, the most productive Paston correspondent, as it has been stated above, is Margaret Paston (wife of John Paston I), for she is credited with the authorship of more than a hundred letters (Finke, 1999, p. 187). These numbers cannot be merely seen as statistical information since they reveal a lot about the prominence of women in the gentry families of medieval England.

To understand the responsibilities of a gentry woman in the fifteenth century, it is essential to reflect on the traditional three estates model upon which the hierarchical structure of the medieval society was grounded. According to this model, the society was divided into three estates: the clergy (the ones who prayed), the nobility (the ones who ruled, governed, and fought) and the commoners (the ones who worked). With the waning power of feudalism, however, the sharp regulations of the three estates model gradually became blunt. As a result, the fourth estate, which can also be termed as 'middle-grouping,' started to be associated with people climbing up the social ladder "including esquires, merchants, and rich guildsmen" (Yıldız, 2015, pp. 21-22). Here, it is seen that medieval men were mobile and flexible because they had the privilege to upgrade their social status. In all these categorizations, however, medieval women were excluded and denied a free estate of their own; rather, they were catalogued according to their relationship with the patriarchal figures in their families. On the other hand, the precarious status of women and their increasing influence within the household started problematizing the long-held assumptions about the 'secondary' position of the female sex. In her detailed study of medieval women, *Fourth Estate: A History of Women in the Middle Ages* (1983), Israeli historian Shulamith Shahar explores the 'secondary' status of women and argues that starting from the twelfth century onwards women were defined according to their socio-economic and marital status (p. 2). Somewhat paradoxically, however, the subordination of women in medieval society also marked them as individual members of a social equilibrium and brought them together under a separate code in the fifteenth-century Dance of Death, where "women, as a distinct category, were added to Dance, which had previously comprised only male figures" (Shahar, 1983, p. 3). As Shahar further explains, the accommodation of women in a different category culminates in ranging them together as a separate class (1983, p. 3), that is the fourth estate; therefore, they grow out to have certain characteristics attributed to them by the patriarchal institutions:

> Among the faults and sins attributed to women as such are: vanity, pride, greed, promiscuity, gluttony, drunkenness, bad temper, fickleness, and more. The authors also declare that women must be kept out of

> public office, must not serve as judges nor wield any kind of authority, may not take part in councils or public assemblies, and must devote themselves to their domestic functions. A good woman is one who loves and serves her husband and brings up her children. (1983, p. 3)

In this scheme, it is obvious that medieval women were denied a genuine identity of their own. Instead, they were regulated and re-formulated according to the standards of Church and aristocracy in the Middle Ages. According to this model, the divisions between public and domestic spheres were sharply defined, and the only space where a 'good' woman could assert herself was projected as her house. As it is also proposed by Azime Pekşen Yakar, "medieval women's sphere was rigidly defined, and remaining in their allotted space was an indispensable virtue for them" (2021, p. 549) Hence, it is expected that a medieval woman should marry and have children to guarantee the future of this domineering system. For women of the gentry, especially, marriage was considered as an imperative choice (Haskell, 1973, p. 459), and different stages of womanhood – such as girlhood, adulthood, and widowhood – were valued as various steps that validated the limited mobility of women within the restricted bounds of the domestic space. Decomposing the idealized representations of medieval women, however, the letters of the Paston women not only illustrate the practical concerns of medieval daily life but also distort the ideological divisions between the feminine and the masculine realm. To illustrate, as women of the gentry, the Paston women were expected to run the household in the absence of their husbands. In their letters sent to the absent husbands, the Paston wives updated their menfolk, not necessarily on domestic affairs only,

> but rather to communicate information about dealings outside the domestic sphere, in property, legal matters, or local politics — business that in the normal division of space and labour would be dealt with by male family members. The Paston letters suggest that, for members of the landed gentry, the home is a space where public and private concerns overlap. In the absence of the male head of the family, the wife or widow seems to stand in for the man, so that the boundaries between masculine and feminine domains become blurred. (Harding, 2004, p. 53)

Therefore, the Paston women can no longer be treated as submissive and passive figures that comply with the romanticized portraits of medieval women. Instead, their letters demonstrate "the enormous amount of responsibility in economic and legal as well as domestic matters in the running of the household and estates" (Watt, 2004, p. 9). As members of the medieval gentry, for whom the land was of utmost importance, it is not unexpected that for the Paston wives and husbands, the household was to be evaluated as a business cooperation upon which the physical and the financial security of the family was constructed. Thus, far from the conceptual representations of medieval women and the regulations of the chivalric code that objectify the presence of the lady as an item for the success of the male figure, the portraits of non-fictional medieval women underline the sense of consolation and comradeship shared equally between husbands and wives in the Paston family. Hence, it is not surprising to witness how the Paston women were able to assert themselves in various fields that encompassed financial dealings with tenant farmers about the rent, making "decisions about the trade of produce," convening "courts to arbitrate disputes over the ownership of the land," and even defending family property just like a military strategist by "seeking reconciliation with enemies or eliciting support from the members of the nobility" (Clayton, 2020, p. 13). Although they assumed the role of strong authoritarian figures in the family, the Paston women were much careful about not posing themselves as a threat to the patriarchal order. In this manner, Wendy Harding (2004) states that as a clever businesswoman, Margaret Paston was "tactful in always preserving the appearance of male authority" (p. 54), and while offering a price over a piece of land she continued underscoring the authority of her husband by setting up a financial limit that she was not allowed to go beyond (p. 55). Nevertheless, it should not be assumed that the Paston women were merely interested in monetary and practical issues. In her letters to John Paston III – in addition to daily concerns – Margery Paston also used the rhetoric of courtly romance

while addressing her husband. Accordingly, it can be claimed that the Paston women knew how to create a relatively free space of their own without openly challenging the ideological doctrines of male authority in the Middle Ages.

Furthermore, the letters of the Paston women are also influential in terms of problematizing the dominance of male authorship and literacy. In their co-edited work, *The History of British Women's Writing, 700-1500* (2012), Liz Herbert McAvoy and Diane Watt elaborate on the medieval understanding of authorship and its connection with God: "Throughout the medieval period, God was considered the ultimate *auctor* or author, and the Bible was the source of all *auctoritas*, or written authority. *Author* could also mean 'writer' but the idea was associated with classical writers and patriarchs of the church, in other words with writers and thinkers of long ago, who were inevitably male" (p. 1, emphasis in original). In this respect, it is not an easy task to talk about female authorship in the Middle Ages since the period is marked by controversies regarding the scope of women's writing and literacy. To illustrate a few, while Julian of Norwich (1342–after 1416) and Margery Kempe (c.1373–after 1438) are classified as medieval women writers, they did not think of themselves as authors in the modern sense of the word. Similarly, considering the extensive scope of the languages spoken in Britain before the 1500s – such as Latin, French, Scottish Gaelic, and Welsh – there appeared more women writers on the history scene, including "Clemence of Barking (*fl.*1163–c.1200), Marie de France (*fl.*1180), and Gwerful Mechain (*fl.* c.1460–c.1502)," and if the list is enlarged to include continental women writers whose translated works circulated throughout medieval England, "Christine de Pizan (1365–c.1403), Marie d'Oignies (1177–1213), Bridget of Sweden (1303–1373), Catherine of Siena (1347–1380)" should also be recounted (McAvoy & Watt, 2012, p. 2). Within this scheme, the scope of the letters of the Paston women may seem limited since they are not addressed to a large audience but to the local family members. However, their documental and historical value far surpasses the seemingly restricted impetus of the letters, for they shed light on the secret corners of the medieval women's epistolary writing and unearth details about the changing status of the medieval gentry women in the fifteenth century.

Considering the projection of the author as a male subject, it might be controversial to talk about the scribal agency of a medieval woman in the fifteenth century. As Diane Watt (2020) also accentuates, "[t]he literacy of the Paston women has been the subject of scholarly analysis, based on close scrutiny of the hands of the women's letters and on close reading of their contents, and is still debated" (p. 338). Without necessarily taking sides with any of the scholars, who either acknowledge or repudiate the literacy of the Paston women, it is beneficial to refer to one of the latest academic studies in the field. In her PhD dissertation, "A Study of the Letters and Wills of the Lesser-known Paston Women" (2020), Margaret Jane Clayton argues that "[w]hile there is no evidence that Margaret could write, we equally have no proof that she could not" (p. 31). Here, it should also be noted that medieval letters were not written by the correspondent's own hand, but they were dictated to the scribes; and this procedure was practiced both by men and women. Thus, it was quite rare for the members of the nobility to write the letters themselves in the Middle Ages. For instance, among the members of the nobility "[m]any great lords, like Sir John Fastolf, seem to have been able to do little more than sign their own names. Their letters were written for them by their private chaplains, or by a secretary" (Bennett, 1990, p. 116). Then, it would be wrong to disclaim the right of authorship to a woman, just because she did not hold the pen in her hand. Hence, as Jennifer Douglas (2009) also points out, "[b]y about 1400 most noble and gentlewomen possessed some ability to read in English, though likely very few of them were able to write for themselves" (p. 34). Moreover, contradicting with the general assumptions that evaluate Margaret Paston as an illiterate woman who used scribes not only to have the letters written on her behalf but also to be read to her; Margaret's desire to bequeath her "'premer' (primer) to her daughter Anne, and

her 'massebook' to her daughter-in-law Margery" exposes the importance of "religious texts, reading, and prayer within familial groups of women" (Watt, 2020, p. 346). Accordingly, it can be asserted that the Paston women were not illiterate at all, and it is quite likely that they were able to write when they thought it was of utmost necessity. For instance, at the end of her letter (1440) to her husband William Paston, Agnes Paston feels the need to apologize for her bad handwriting: "Written at Paston in haste the Wednesday next after *Deus qui errantibus*, for default of a good secretary" (*The Paston Letters*, 2008, p. 3). Although, it is possible to claim that Agnes might have referred to the absence of a good scribe and her having the letter written by another person consequently, it would still be an infertile approach to conclude that she was not able to write herself.

Agnes Paston, as stated above, belonged to the first generation of the Paston women, and she set herself as an example to be revered by the future members of her family. Agnes Paston's centrality is also rooted in the fact that she was the eldest Paston woman to use letters as a medium to express herself and to assert a voice of her own. Together with her daughter-in-law, Margaret Paston, who survived her husband by eighteen years, Agnes Paston, too, lived for another thirty-five years following William Paston's death (Morris, 2010, p. 45). As strong widows, Agnes and Margaret became visible in and out of the medieval household, and they used every means possible to protect the interests of the Paston family. As the marriage of William Paston and Agnes Paston demonstrates, medieval marriage was considered as a business affair that should be conducted diligently. Therefore, completely identifying herself with the interests of her husband and of her family, Agnes Paston was quite concerned about her children's choices of their prospective partners. To exemplify, in a letter (1440) to her husband William Paston, Agnes comments on the first meeting between her son John I and Margaret, the daughter and heiress of John Mauteby, as folllows:

> And as for the first acquaintance between John Paston and the said gentlewoman, she made him gentle cheer in gentle wise, and said he was verily your son. And so I hope there shall need no great treaty betwixt them. (*The Paston Letters*, 2008, p. 3)

Bennett's somewhat humorous yet equally realistic vision concerning Agnes's possible evaluation of her daughter-in-law to be, clearly demonstrates the general attitude of a mother of the landed gentry, who was mainly driven by the ambition to protect the land and the prestige that it was associated with: "Agnes Paston looked at her [Margaret] with eager eyes, not seeing a shrinking bewildered young woman, but the rich pastures and the manor of Mauteby which were to be her inheritance" (1990, p. 27). As opposed to the idealized projections of a medieval woman, who is totally confined to a romanticized realm that is devoid of any monetary concerns, Agnes Paston's imperious demeanour in determining the future wife of her son clearly negates the image of an 'all-submissive' and 'angelic' woman figure.

Another instance that portrays Agnes Paston's character as a determined woman concerns the marriage of her daughter Elizabeth. From 1449 until 1459, the Paston family were engaged in finding a suitable husband for Elizabeth (Bennett, 1990, p. 29). The first candidate was Stephen Scrope, fifty-year-old widowed stepson of a family friend and patron Sir John Fastolf (1380-1459) who was a wealthy veteran of the Hundred Years' War. Regarding the possible marriage between Scrope and her young daughter as nothing more than a business affair, almost like a money transaction, Agnes Paston was more than willing to give Elizabeth's hand to a rich husband. However, upon learning that Elizabeth did not want to get married with Scrope, Agnes went further enough to inflict violence on her own daughter – which was brought to the light in Elizabeth Clere's letter to John Paston I in 1449:

> And if you can get a better I would advise you to labour it in short time as ye may goodly, for she [Elizabeth] was never in so great sorrow as she is nowadays; for she may not speak with no man, whosoever come, ne not may see ne speak with my man, ne with servants of her mother's, but that she

> beareth her on hand otherwise that she meaneth. And she hath sin Eastern the most part be beaten once in the week or twice, and sometime twice on o day, and her head broken in two or three places. (*The Paston Letters*, 2008, p. 24)

Although it is not certain whether Elizabeth Clere was afraid of Agnes Paston's grudge or of losing her friendship, she concludes her letter asking John I to get rid of the document after he reads it: "Cousin, I pray you burn this letter, that your men ne none other man see it; for an my cousin your mother knew that I had sent you this letter she should never love me" (*The Paston Letters*, 2008, p. 24). Having witnessed his sister's sorrow, John I objected to her marriage with Stephen Scrope, and in the end, Elizabeth married Robert Poynings in 1458. Soon after her marriage, Elizabeth was kind enough to send a letter (1459) to her mother, telling Agnes about her new life – illustrating the fact that the letters were not only circulating between husbands and wives, or sons and mothers, but also between daughters and mothers in medieval England:

> Right worshipful and my most entirely beloved mother, in the most lowly manner I recommend me unto your good motherhood, beseeching you daily and nightly of your motherly blessing; evermore desiring to hear of your welfare and prosperity, the which I pray God to continue and increase your heart's desire. And if it liked your motherhood to hear of me and how I do, at the making of this letter I was in good heal of body, thanked be Jesu." (p. 47)

After William Paston's death in 1444, John Paston I took the full responsibility of the family upon his shoulders. Similar to his father William, John I became a lawyer and started working as one of the legal advisers of Sir John Fastolf, who was a relative of his wife Margaret. John's close connection with Fastolf enabled him to become an executor in Fastolf's will, so he was able to inherit Caister Castle along with Fastolf's other manors in Norfolk and Suffolk. In the long run, however, it caused John to spend his days away from home, for he found himself struggling to prove the validity of Fastolf's will against his other executors. During her husband's visits to London, Margaret Paston became the only authority figure staying back at home, so she took charge of managing the estates, and wrote to John either to report or to ask for instructions on certain affairs (Davis, 2008, p. xvi). In this manner, Margaret Paston, following the steps of her mother-in-law, becomes the most prolific letter writer of the Paston women, and she holds a significant place in the family history – both physically, as it is confirmed by her husband's absence at home, and symbolically.

As John Warrington (1956) also conveys, "Margaret Paston saved the family from an early and irretrievable fate: her ability, her strength of character, her solid piety, and her wealth of common sense justify us in considering her as the central figure of this little drama" (p. vii). Her letters document the struggles that she faced both inside and outside – particularly to maintain the control of the lands that were attacked by various noble men of the period. In 1449 the dispute with the Lord Molyns over the property of Gresham ended up with Margaret's expulsion from their home. In 1465, Margaret, again, defended the manor of Drayton against the claims of the Duke of Suffolk. Her struggle continued even after her husband's death (1466), for in 1469 the Paston household got attacked by the Duke of Norfolk. However, having learned from her previous experiences by that time, Margaret appeared "determined to ensure that the Paston family continued to possess their house at Caister" (Morris, 2010, p. 62). Hence, she was immediately involved with the matter at hand and quickly sent a letter (1496) to her son John II and asked him to help his brother John III – while at the same time not refraining from criticizing John II's disinterested attitude, in her own subtle manner:

> I greet you well, letting you weet that your brother and his fellowship stand in great jeopardy at Caister, and lack victual; and Daubeney and Berney be dead, and divers other greatly hurt, and they fail gunpowder and arrows, and the place sore broken with guns of the tother part; so that, but they have hasty help, they be like to lose both their lives and the place, to the greatest rebuke to you that ever came to any gentleman,

> for everyman in this country marvelleth greatly that you suffer them be so long in so great jeopardy without help or other remedy. (*The Paston Letters*, 2008, p. 184)

As an active and courageous woman Margaret Paston attests the fact that the Paston women did not constrain themselves to the restricted atmosphere of the domestic sphere only. They were "just as likely as men to maintain their lands, and [did] fight for them in court, even in the face of a violent attack" (Finke, 1999, p. 196). In this respect, along with the fictional and non-fictional examples of ambitious women – represented by Chaucer's Wife of Bath and Margery Kempe respectively, Margaret Paston challenges the stereotypical representations of women as submissive, weak, and even fearful – waiting to be rescued by the knight in the shining armour (Finke, 1999, p. 197). As opposed to all these constructed images of womanhood, Margaret Paston proves herself to be a most capable, resourceful, clever, and strong business ally for her husband and for her family. The letters – as written documents – not only validate but also form her increasing prominence within the medieval household.

Her influence infiltrating into the public and the domestic domain alike, Margaret Paston was as equally calculating and objective in her dealings with the family issues as she was in more serious business affairs. As stated above, marriage was an important component of medieval life; therefore, it was usually arranged by the authority figures of the family. Margaret's youngest daughter Margery, however, rebelled against the enforcements impelled upon her by secretly betrothing herself to the family bailiff Richard Calle in 1469. Not being able to accept the fact that her daughter could marry much below herself, Margaret Paston attempted to annul the betrothal between Richard and Margery. Still, Margaret was not successful because "[t]he plighting of troth between two people at this time was absolutely binding. No witnesses were required, and no ceremony other than the actual plighting of the two lovers" (Bennett, 1990, p. 43). In his letter (1469) to Margery, Richard tried to soothe his lady by reminding her that they were already betrothed before God, so nothing or nobody could come between them:

> Mine own lady and mistress, and before God very true wife, I with heart full sorrowful recommend me unto you, as he that cannot be marry nor naught shall be till it be otherwise with us than it is yet; for this life that we lead now is neither pleasure to God nor to the world, considering the great bond of matrimony that is made betwixt us, and also the great love that hath be, and as I trust yet is, betwixt us, and as on my part never greater. (*The Paston Letters*, 2008, pp. 178-179)

In defiance of Margaret Paston's objections, Margery and Richard Calle were able to get married in 1470. As a reaction, Margaret Paston disowned her own daughter, and she did not allow Margery to be admitted into the house. Even after their marriage, the Pastons continued to treat Richard Calle as their bailiff, and they never considered him as a member of the family. Contrary to the marriage of John Paston I and Margaret Paston, which had been carefully planned beforehand and functioned as a necessary phase in the social climbing of the Paston family, the marriage of Richard Calle and Margery was a total blow against the aspirations set up by the family members. Even so, the Pastons were a colourful family and there were still a few surprises in store, such as the love match between Margaret's son John Paston III and Margery Brews – which, together with the match between Richard and Margery, "provide at least a partial relief from the prevailing attention to property" (Davis, 2008, p. xix). In this manner, the Paston Letters function as mediums that demonstrate the changing levels of tension and power dynamics within the household. While Elizabeth and Margery were projected as rebellious daughters that tried to go beyond the restrictions imposed by the arranged marriages, John III's marriage for love was not criticized by her mother.

Unlike Agnes Paston who was violent enough to apply violence on her daughter Elizabeth Paston; and Margaret Paston who was cold-blooded enough to disown her daughter Margery Paston; Margery Brews's mother, Elizabeth Brews, stand in such a stark contrast to

these two mother figures that one can even suspect whether she was a fictional figure, because within the literary atmosphere of the Paston Letters she seems to be too good to be real. In her letter (1477) to John III, Elizabeth Brews did not rebuke the young man at all, but invited him to her house so that he could speak to her husband about Margery:

> And, cousin, upon Friday is Saint Valentine's Day, and every bird chooseth him a make; and if it like you to come on Thursday at night, and so purvey you that ye may abide there till Monday, I trust to God that ye shall so speak to mine husband, and I shall pray that we shall bring the matter to a conclusion, &c. (*The Paston Letters*, 2008, p. 233)

Indeed, the matter was solved peacefully with the marriage of John Paston III and Margery in 1477, "and the affection between the two appears to have endured" (Finke, 1999, p. 192). In comparison to Margaret Paston's letters to her husband, which are usually in the form of reports and therefore strict and formal in tone, Margery's letters to her husband are decorated with loving expressions, and thus rightfully two of these letters are known as 'Valentines' (Davis, 2008, p. xxi). In these letters dating back to February 1477, Margery addresses John III with the directness and tenderness of an affectionate woman – which is hard to match among the examples preceding and coming after her in the Paston family:

> Right reverend and worshipful and my right well-beloved Valentine, I recommend me unto you full heartily, desiring to hear of your welfare which I beseech Almighty God long to preserve unto his pleasure and your heart's desire. And if it please you to hear of my welfare, I am not in good heal of body nor of heart, nor shall be till I hear from you. (*The Paston Letters*, 2008, pp. 233-234)

Margery's loving attitude does not seem to have changed even a few years after their marriage, as she concludes one of her letters (1481) by expressing her longing for John III: "Sir, I pray you if ye tarry long at London that it will please [you] to send for me, for I think long sin I lay in your arms" (*The Paston Letters*, 2008, p. 253). Unlike Margaret Paston (d. 1484), who outlived her husband John I, Margery Paston passed away in 1495. John Paston III remarried, yet he also died – a few years after his second marriage – in 1503 (Warrington, 1956, p. ix). Hence, only eight years after her demise, Margery could lay in her husband's arms once again.

Conclusion

Consequently, covering three generations, the Paston Letters contain a rich array of information that sheds light on the development of fifteenth-century vernacular letters. On the other hand, the letters present a comprehensive insight into the domestic and business affairs of the Paston family, as well as containing detailed information about the social, political, and economic background of medieval England. Although these letters are more communal pieces than private means of communication, one cannot help feeling the guilty conscience of peeking into the lives of the Pastons. But then, while reading the letters, one can also feel the unmediated sense of walking among the documents that are located in an archive building, and of meeting each member of the Paston family directly. Therefore, with a particular focus on the prominence of the Paston women, this study has attempted to uncover the personal relations among the family members – such as husband and wife, mother and son, mother and daughter. Accordingly, through the examples of Agnes Paston, Margaret Paston and Margery Paston, the letters enable us to scrutinize the function and authority of the Paston women not only as mothers, daughters and/or housewives, but also as business allies, defenders and affectionate lovers. Hence, the Paston Letters continue to appeal to basic human emotions, and they reach much beyond their time.

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