

# Noctua:

Medieval and Renaissance Studies at The W



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## The Lady of the House

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Women in the Middle Ages had very distinct responsibilities. However, those of a higher status often had more autonomy, especially in the case of their husbands' absences. These women were expected to take care of their everyday duties as well as those of their absent husbands. In the case of Margaret Paston, the daughter of John Mautby and wife of John Paston, she endured the absence of her husband throughout the majority of their marriage. Margaret often dealt with very important men of the community, her children, her extended family, and her neighbors on issues that were thought to be much more suited for a man. The letters written between Margaret and John Paston show the abundance of responsibilities placed on a woman in her husband's absence. Margaret was responsible for her duties, such as caring for her children and the household, but she was also responsible for the large estate and many tenants that John acquired.

Marriage between noblemen and women was often a political tool, and often was motivated by social improvement and economic gain. Parents arranged the marriages of their children largely to benefit the status and position of their family.<sup>1</sup> John Paston, son of William Paston, a well-to-do lawyer, was an undergraduate at Peterhouse in Cambridge when his father arranged his marriage to Margaret Mautby, who was the sole heir to her father's wealth. In a letter from April of 1440, written from Agnes Paston to her husband William Paston, she related the first meeting between John and Margaret. She explained that Margaret gave John a gentle welcome and that she hoped no great negotiations would be needed between them.

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<sup>1</sup> Amy Livingstone, *Out of Love for My Kin* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010), 153.

After John and Margaret were married, John was still in school in Cambridge. After he finished school, John began practicing law in London. For these reasons, letters between John and Margaret were necessary so that she could properly handle John's affairs back home. The earliest surviving letters between John and Margaret are from early in their marriage while John was still at Peterhouse in Cambridge. The first letter from Margaret was from the summer or fall of 1441 and was rather businesslike. The letter was mostly concerned with local news. Margaret wrote, "This is to let you know that 1100 Flemish landed at Waxham, of whom 800 were captured, killed or drowned. If they had not been, you would have been home at this Whitsuntide, and I expect that you will be at home before very long."<sup>2</sup> The remainder of the letter dealt with the lord of Norfolk's presence in town for court. In contrast, the letters that survive from the later part of 1441 to 1444 are much more intimate and affectionate in nature. These letters were personal unlike those of their later years that were much more businesslike. In December of 1441, Margaret wrote to John about acquiring for her some wool to make winter clothing,

Please let me tell you that my mother sent to my father in London for some grey woolen gown cloth, to make me a gown, and he told my mother and me when he came home that he had instructed you to buy it after you left London. If it is not yet bought, please be so kind as to buy it and send it home as soon as you can, for I have no gown to wear this winter except my black and green one with tapes, and that is so cumbersome that I am tired of wearing it.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *The Pastons: a family in the War of the Roses*, ed. Richard Barber (London: The Folio Society, 1981), 18.

<sup>3</sup> *The Pastons*, 19.

This shows that though their marriage may have been arranged, they were not unhappy. They cared for and respected one another.<sup>4</sup>

In 1443, Margaret was living with her mother-in-law at Oxnead, while her own mother was living with her second husband, Ralph Garneys, at Geldeston near Beccles. Margaret wrote a letter to John on September 28, 1443 with the latest gossip and news from home. She began by explaining how thankful she and her mother-in-law were that John had gotten over his recent sickness and went on to discuss their families. She wrote,

Right worshipful husband, I commend myself to you, desiring with all my heart to hear how you are and thanking God for your recovery from the great illness you have had; and I thank you for the letter you sent me, for I swear that my mother-in-law and I were not easy in our hearts from the times that we knew of your sickness until we knew for certain of your recovery.<sup>5</sup>

This concern is significant because, if Margaret had been with John she would have been caring for him through his illness. She also used affectionate language in this letter that is rarely seen in the couples later letters. “If I could have had my way, I would have seen you before now. I wish you were at home, if you would have been more comfortable here, and your sore might have been as well looked after here as it is where you are now; I would rather have you here than be given a new gown, even though it was a scarlet one.”<sup>6</sup> Because this was writing from early in their marriage, John and Margaret had not yet had to face their toughest adversaries and trials. It

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<sup>4</sup> *The Pastons*, 17-20.

<sup>5</sup> *The Pastons*, 20

<sup>6</sup> *The Pastons*, 21

is understandable why their later letters are so divergent. They faced struggles that required their full attention and were not able to find solace and comfort in being physically near one another.<sup>7</sup>

On August 11, 1444, William Paston, John Paston's father, died. He left behind a widow and a young family, not to mention a vast estate to manage. Luckily, John was finished with school by this time and was able to take over his father's estate with the help of his brother Edmund. Margaret's letters to John began to change because the nature of their relationship changed. They were no longer newlyweds and their lives had become much more complicated. William Paston's estate caused many disputes among the Paston family because William's will was not clear, this led John to seize land that was not specifically allocated to his younger brothers, but had in fact been intended for them according to John's mother. This was the first of many quarrels the Pastons would face and one of the many feuds Margaret would have to endure and mediate due to John's frequent travels.<sup>8</sup>

In May 1448, Margaret faced one of the first of many quarrels she would endure in the years to come while John was in London practicing law. In Norfolk, there were two men, John Wymondham and James Gloys, who got into a fight in the city during mass. The fight was over Gresham manor, a property owned by the now deceased William Paston. This fight led to John Paston spending the entire summer pursuing the cause with Lord Moleyns, who also felt entitled to the property, but John made no progress. In an attempt to make his presence felt, John moved the Paston family into Gresham manor himself. The situation exploded while John was away on business and Margaret was in charge. It looked as though the manor was under siege. In Margaret's letter to John about the impending siege, she asked him to "get some crossbows, and

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<sup>7</sup> *The Pastons*, 20-21.

<sup>8</sup> *The Pastons*, 22-23.

windlasses to wind them with, and crossbow bolts,”<sup>9</sup> she also asked for “...two or three short pole-axes to keep indoors, and as many leather jackets, if you can.”<sup>10</sup> At the end of the same letter, she asked for a pound of almonds, a pound of sugar and some cloth to make gowns for their children. Not only is Margaret taking measures to protect their family from violence, but she is also taking care of their need for food and clothing.<sup>11</sup>

February of 1449 brought a chance for Margaret to display her diplomacy. Just as she had feared, in late January, Margaret and her children had been driven out of Gresham manor by, riotous people to the number of a thousand... arrayed in manner of war with cuirasses, body armor, leather jackets, headpieces, knives, bow, arrows, shields, guns, pans with fire and burning timber in them, long crowbars for pulling down houses, ladders, pickaxes with which they mined the walls, and long trees with which they broke up gates and doors, and thus came into the said mansion.<sup>12</sup>

That is the explanation John gave in his petition to the king concerning Lord Moleyns. Margaret found refuge with a family friend, John Damme, a mile away in Sustead. Since John was absent, she did her best to put his case to the men at Gresham, and was able to report of some degree of success, though some people were still hostile towards her.<sup>13</sup> She wrote to John, filled him in on the events at Gresham, and warned him to take care of himself. She told him to be cautious in London just as he would if he were at home and to beware of where he went, and whom he kept in his company when he was out. This situation put the Paston family’s lives at risk and Margaret feared she would be kidnapped or forcibly removed, so much so, that she sought safety for her

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<sup>9</sup> *The Pastons*, 33.

<sup>10</sup> *The Pastons*, 33.

<sup>11</sup> *The Pastons*, 30-34.

<sup>12</sup> *The Pastons*, 35.

<sup>13</sup> *The Pastons*, 36.

family in Norwich. Lord Moleyns was not on the Pastons' side and the issue went on until January or February of 1450. All that time, Margaret's chief concern was still Gresham. Thankfully, larger political concerns began to overshadow the local affairs and left the Pastons, namely Margaret, to pick up the pieces.<sup>14</sup>

By November of 1453, tensions had died down a bit and Margaret was once again able to write a letter concerned with errands rather than impending war. With all of the uproar over Gresham and protecting the Paston estate, it is easy to forget that Margaret still had to care for her household and children. She asked that John not be angry with her because it had taken her so long to handle his errands. Margaret realized how important it was for John to receive the things he needed from her, but she had been reasonably preoccupied. She wrote him saying, "I am sending the roll of parchment that you sent for previously, sealed up, by the bearer of this: it was found in your travelling chest. As to herring, I have bought a horseload for 4 [shillings] 6 [pence]: that is all I can get at the moment. I am promised some beaver, but cannot get it yet."<sup>15</sup> However, Margaret was not the only one doing errands. She had quite the list for John as well,

As for cloth for my gown, I cannot get anything better than the sample I am sending you, which is, I think, too poor both in cloth and colour, so please buy me 3 ¼ yards of whatever you think is suitable for me, of what colour you like, for I have really searched all the drapers' shops in this town, and there is a very poor choice. Please buy a loaf of a good sugar as well, and half a pound of whole cinnamon, for there is no good cinnamon in this town.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *The Pastons*, 36-39, 45.

<sup>15</sup> *The Pastons*, 65.

<sup>16</sup> *The Pastons*, 65.

These specific letters show the juxtaposition of John and Margaret's duties in a clear and profound way. John and Margaret's relationship often seems backwards. The separation between women's work and men's work does not seem to be as prominent in their lives as it was for many women in the Middle Ages. Margaret bought herring and beaver while John bought cloth, sugar loaf, and cinnamon.<sup>17</sup>

In the year 1465, Margaret found herself in charge of all of her and John's estates while he was away in London. In the letter, John named the people he trusted most. With the help of Richard Calle, the Pastons' bailiff, and John Daubeney, a local baron, Margaret was managing everything John owned. On January 15, 1465, John sent Margaret a long letter detailing how he wanted his household and estates managed in his absence. He asked that at least once a week Margaret meet with Calle and Daubeney to discuss what needed to be done. He said this was necessary so that neither Margaret, nor Calle and Daubeney had any excuse to leave matters unattended. He detailed how Margaret should tend to his income, household, his tenants, and put his servants to work. He described those individuals who were indebted to him, discussed important errands such as the selling of his malt, as well as how to pay his priests and alms-people. He expressed to Margaret how he felt his estates and household were not being well managed and asked her to manage them as if they were her own. John believed that Margaret needed the help of Calle and Daubeney to take care of his estate in a way that was pleasing to him.<sup>18</sup>

In the same year, John Paston ended up in Fleet prison for the second time during his ongoing lawsuit concerning the will of Sir John Fastolf, a wealthy English soldier and veteran of

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<sup>17</sup> *The Pastons*, 64-65.

<sup>18</sup> *The Pastons*, 107-112.

The Hundred Years' War. During this time, Margaret was virtually in sole charge of his affairs. He could send his wishes and advice in letters, but could do nothing himself. The lawsuit and dispute over Fastolf's estate had caused the Pastons to have many enemies; with which Margaret had to contend. For example, in June of 1465, there were attacks on Costessey, a part of John Paston's estate. The tenants' cattle and sheep were driven out, and Costessey Hall was occupied. This put the Pastons' enemies in charge of the courts and subsequently, eight of the Pastons' men were indicted in the local courts, including John Paston III, the Pastons' youngest son. At the beginning of July, a similar attack was being planned against Hellesdon, where Sir John, the Pastons' oldest son, was now in charge. However, Margaret knew of it and wrote a letter to her Sir John to warn him. Thanks to her letter, the Pastons' men were well prepared and were able to impede the attack without a fight of any kind.<sup>19</sup>

In August 1465, Margaret and John were anxious to see each other. John had finally been released from fleet prison and had sent for her to come to London. In early September, Margaret left for London and returned home around September 19. The visit must have gone well because Margaret's next letter to John was affectionate in a way she had not been in many years. She referred to the 'great cheer' she and John had made when they met, saying that John had spent more on entertaining her than she had wanted him to. Business and distance often came between Margaret and John, but they still genuinely enjoyed each other's company.<sup>20</sup>

The Pastons still feared an attack on Hellesdon and in October their fears were finally realized. There is no record of the attack, but Sir John and Margery, John and Margaret's oldest son and daughter, were in the house, and were seized and taken out. The duke's men then

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<sup>19</sup> *The Paston Letters 1422-1509 A.D. Volume 2 Edward IV. 1461-1471*, ed. James Gairdner (Archibald Constable and Co., Ltd.: Westminster, 1900), 203-206.

<sup>20</sup> *The Pastons*, 123-124.

ransacked the home and spent the next three weeks tearing down all the buildings. Three days after the attack, Margaret wrote a letter to John about the danger that was upon the Paston family and their supporters. The bailiff of Eye seized many of the Paston loyalists and took them to Eye prison. They also threatened to imprison or kill as many of John Paston's men, tenants, and supporters as they could. Margaret informed John of the destruction the attack had caused and then she had to pick up the pieces. Ten days later, she wrote another letter that gave the full details of the damage the duke had caused, and how the local people had reacted to it. Margaret told John,

The duke's men ransacked the church, and carried off all the goods that were left there, both ours and the tenants, and left little behind; they stood on the high altar and ransacked the images, and took away everything they could find. They shut the parson out of the church until they had finished, and ransacked everyone's house in the town five or six times.<sup>21</sup>

The attack bolstered the Pastons' support because of the pure destruction that was caused. Margaret expressed how she had been trying to encourage their tenants as best she could under the circumstances. She also had to draw up a list of things destroyed or stolen at Hellesdon. Items ranged from large quantities of bedding, linen and kitchen equipment to arms and armor from the church to personal possessions, such as gold thread belonging to John and Margaret's daughter, Margery Paston. These responsibilities would have usually fallen to John, but fell to her in his absence.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *The Pastons*, 128.

<sup>22</sup> *The Pastons*, 126-130.

On May 21, 1466, when John was almost at the end of the seemingly endless Fastolf lawsuit, he died in London. There are no details surrounding his death, but soon after, Sir John took over his estate. Sir John was not known for being the most responsible of people, so Margaret kept a watchful eye on him.<sup>23</sup> Margaret's influence on the Paston estate and household did not stop there. There were many letters between her and her sons discussing how to handle John's will as well as choosing a wife for John III. She was never afraid to give motherly advice as someone who ran the Paston estate for much of her married life. In regards to John's will, she told Sir John, "... please take good advice about it... they will make you and me responsible for more things than are laid down in your father's will, which would be too great an expense for either of us to bear."<sup>24</sup> Still Margaret and her sons found difficulty in dispersing John's assets. Margaret wrote to Sir John, "... the chancellor, Master John Smith, and others [say] we have all been cursed for administering a dead man's goods without license or authority, and I think matters are all the worse with us because of it. For the reverence of God, get a license from my lord of Canterbury, to ease my conscience and yours..."<sup>25</sup> Sir John's estates had been in such trouble for the past two years that he could get nothing at all for them and he owed so much money that he was having to sell his inheritance to pay back his debts. All the while, Margaret was at his side, whether literally or figuratively, giving him good council and helping him make wise business decisions like her husband had helped her do throughout their marriage.<sup>26</sup>

These accounts show a life of responsibility for Margaret Paston. The responsibility she held would be easily recognized by women of her status whose husbands were away often. Margaret dealt on her husband's behalf, with issues that were commonly reserved for men. She

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<sup>23</sup> *The Pastons*, 131-133.

<sup>24</sup> *The Pastons*, 132.

<sup>25</sup> *The Pastons*, 166.

<sup>26</sup> *The Pastons*, 166-167.

sought the guidance and advice of her husband and his loyal friends, but went about the deeds and decisions herself. She did all of the things a mother and wife was expected to do, while also filling the shoes of her husband. She was often left to defend her family because of the enemies John Paston made in his line of work, but she protected her family and provided for their needs. Margaret proved to John that she could manage the estate as if it were her own, and took care of the things that mattered most to him. She served as a mediator between her children and John, while also submitting to his ultimate authority. Margaret managed to be a loyal, submissive, hardworking wife, while simultaneously being a strong, capable decision-maker and supervisor. Margaret Paston is the standard of what was expected from upper-class women when their husbands were away. She can rightfully be known as the Lady of the Paston House.

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