

Spring 2015

# Concerns of a Fifteenth Century Gentry Woman: A Study in Letters

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### Recommended Citation

Allen, Grace (Spring 2015) "Concerns of a Fifteenth Century Gentry Woman: A Study in Letters," *Tenor of Our Times*: Vol. 4, Article 5.  
Available at: <https://scholarworks.harding.edu/tenor/vol4/iss1/5>

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## CONCERNS OF A FIFTEENTH CENTURY GENTRY WOMAN: A STUDY IN LETTERS

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By Grace Allen

Traditionally, the household, child-rearing, and the kitchen have been seen as the woman's domain. In the late fifteenth century in England, this was no different concerning the gentry class. As an authority on English life in the fifteenth century, H. S. Bennett writes, "If we want to see the medieval woman rightly, it is in her home we must view her. All other things in her life were subservient to her housekeeping."<sup>1</sup> On the nature of women, the attitude of the time held that women were innately inferior to men, both because of the way people interpreted the Bible at the time and because of the widely-held belief in the Hippocratic methods of the four humors, which alleged that the cool and damp nature of women caused them to be indecisive and of inferior judgment.<sup>2</sup> Even so, this bleak underlying view of the women's subservient position was continually contradicted in many fifteenth-century contemporary writings. Most of these writings held that a good wife was highly valued and even respected as a partner to her spouse in business management and the in the household. Though slightly predating the fifteenth century, in "Le Mesnagier de Paris" a bourgeois husband lovingly wrote an instruction manual to his young wife detailing the many responsibilities and assets she was to manage.<sup>3</sup> Bennett and Joan Kirby also assert in their separate studies that gentry wives and husbands functioned as partners in resolving local business matters and in elevating the family reputation and betterment.<sup>4</sup> In recent studies, the various roles and of women, as wives and mothers and as women of legal and local business matters, has been given

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<sup>1</sup> H. S. Bennett, *The Pastons and Their England: Studies in an Age of Transition*, 2nd ed. (1932; repr., London: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 51.

<sup>2</sup> Joan Kirby, "Women in the Plumpton Correspondence: Fiction and Reality," in *Church and Chronicle in the Middle Ages: Essays Presented to John Taylor*, ed. Ian Wood, G. A. Loud, 219-232 (London: Hambledon Press, 1991): 219-220; P. J. P. Goldberg, "Women," in *Fifteenth-Century Attitudes: Perceptions of Society in Late Medieval England*, ed. Rosemary Horrox, 112-131 (1994; repr., Cambridge, University of Cambridge Press, 1996), 116.

<sup>3</sup> Tania Bayard, trans., ed., *A Medieval Home Companion: Housekeeping in the Fourteenth Century* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 21-23.

<sup>4</sup> H. S. Bennett, *The Pastons and Their England*, 51-53; Joan Kirby, "Survival and Betterment: The Aspirations of Four Medieval Gentry Families as Revealed in their Letters," *Family and Community History* 15, no.2 (October 2012): 103.

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much attention.<sup>5</sup> The various ways in which English gentry women influenced the world in which they lived; however, the primary concerns that motivated the gentry women have not been greatly discussed. With the examination of primary documents written by and about women in the late fifteenth century, it can be gleaned that in general, English gentry women's primary concerns in their work in and outside the home were to preserve and advance the family unit by securing an adequate inheritance and position for themselves and their children through marriage, legal and social means.

In order to discover the driving motivations that dictated the activities of a fifteenth-century English woman, it is essential to study their lives in their own words. The best place to find their voices is in the letter writing which largely increased in the fifteenth century. Nearly all letters of the fifteenth century, regardless of authorship, were practical and concerned only with conveying immediate business concerns beginning and ending with formal greetings. Malcom Richardson eloquently stated, "A modern reader coming to any of these collections with romantic notions about the Age of Chivalry will quickly be disabused of these preconceptions by the sheer opportunism, naked aggression, and edgy suspiciousness found on virtually every page."<sup>6</sup> Letter writing at this time was the primary means of long-distance communication rather than a leisurely activity. Their purpose was not to comment or express opinion as such, but to inform. Because there is a rarity of other contemporary material written by women, the letters written by gentry women, although business-like, are the best windows into understanding their primary concerns. Through the examination of these letters it can be understood that these women showed their care for the family unit through the actions of gaining and maintaining family lands and prestige so that their family might prosper.<sup>7</sup>

The collections of letters that are representative of the gentry class from the late fifteenth century are primarily the Paston, Stonor, Cely and Plumpton family letters. Together these letters number into over a thousand letters and include a strong cast of wives, mothers and daughters-in-law. The

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<sup>5</sup> Valerie Creelman, "'Ryght worchepfull mastres': Letters of Request and Servants' Scripting of Margaret Paston's Social Self," *Paregon* 26, no. 1 (2009): 91; Alison Speddings "'I Shall Send Word in Writing': Lexical Choices and Legal Acumen in the Letters of Margaret Paston," *Medium Aevum* 77, no. 2 (2008): 241-242.

<sup>6</sup> Malcom Richardson, "'A Masterful Woman': Elizabeth Stonor and English Women's Letters, 1399-c.1530," in *Women's Letters Across Europe, 1400-1700*, ed. Jane Couchman and Ann Crabb (Aldershot, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2005), 53.

<sup>7</sup> Malcom Richardson, "'A Masterful Woman,'" 53-54.

Paston family made their rise to significance first through successful careers as judges in the Norfolk area, then through a string of advantageous marriages. William Paston, the first to be formally educated person in the family, married Agnes Berry, a local heiress, who brought much-needed social status to the family. Agnes prudently arranged another successful match for her son, John, with Margaret Mautby, also an heiress that improved the family station. When Agnes was widowed in 1444, she was left with a significant portion and continued to live and manage her estates for over thirty-five years. Although Agnes provides a good study, Margaret Paston wrote the majority of letters written by the Paston women, and her strong administration of the Paston household provides a great insight into gentry women.<sup>8</sup>

The Stonors from Oxfordshire were a much older family than the Pastons, but the Stonors also made their rise through judicial means. In the 1350s, as Chief Justice of the Common Pleas, John de Stonor brought stability to the Stonor family and amassed enough estates for his children to become landed gentry. The largest number of letters written by a woman in this family's collection is from William Stonor's first wife, Elizabeth. Elizabeth's father was a grocer and she was a member of the London merchant class, which was resented by the William's family for having married below the gentry class. However, Elizabeth had previously been married to a wealthy wool merchant and upon his death inherited a large amount of money and two-thirds of her previous husband's estate. Though Elizabeth died not long after marrying William, she wrote a significant number of letters with an interesting perspective from London, where she preferred a city lifestyle.<sup>9</sup>

The Cely family was also connected to the wool trade, as they were wool merchants primarily based in London and Calais. Theirs is the smallest collection of the four families with only 251 letters between 1471 and 1488. Though the family's origins are debated, the Celys were Londoners who also possessed manors and properties in Essex. The Celys were fortunate in their connection to the Company of Wool Staplers, which had a monopoly on Calais's wool market in exchange for the Crown's ability to take loans out

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<sup>8</sup> Colin Richmond, *The Paston Family In The Fifteenth Century: Fastolf's Will* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1996): 7-8; Agnes Paston to William Paston I, April 20, 1440, in *The Paston Letters: A Selection in Modern Spelling*, ed. Norman Davis, rev. ed. (1963; repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 2008): 2-3; Valerie Creelman, "'Ryght worchepfull mastres,'" 91.

<sup>9</sup> Malcom Richardson, "'A Masterful Woman,'" 43-46.

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from the company. These letters are almost entirely business-related and though there are no letters written specifically by women, there are several references by the Cely men to their wives and about marriage arrangements, which illustrates the roles and the complexities of making a successful marriage match and demonstrates the importance of finance in the matter.<sup>10</sup>

The Plumpton's had been of the gentry and knightly class since 1166. Similar to the Pastons and the Stonors, they had made their fortunes through auspicious marriages. By the mid-fifteenth century, the Plumpton's fortunes would fade fast. Although the Plumpton's forged many alliances and connections for their daughters through marriages, the family ran into ruin because Sir William lacked an undisputed heir. His illegitimate son Robert Plumpton squandered much of the money left in pursuit of land rights of the manors and inheritance. Letters by Robert Plumpton's wives and daughters show the concerns of a struggling gentry family and their actions to better their situation.<sup>11</sup>

It is important to understand the structure and function of marriage to comprehend the circumstances of women during this time and ultimately to recognize the primary concerns they held. The overwhelming majority of aristocratic women, approximately ninety-four percent, married during this time. Marriages were an important way for a family to secure greater social connections, wealth, and ultimately inheritance.<sup>12</sup> The marriage between William and Agnes Berry Paston is illustrative of this. Conversely, the presence of an unmarried daughter in a household would cause a strain on their families for further support, and for single women, life could even be rather cruel. Elizabeth Paston, though she did marry eventually, spent many years as a single adult in her mother's household. In letters to John Paston, her brother, Elizabeth's mistreatment in the form of beatings was described, and she wrote of seeking a marriage in order to escape her position.<sup>13</sup> John Paston and Margaret Mautby Paston's marriage served to increase the Paston holdings and to connect the family further. Advantageous marriages also ultimately prevented families from facing financial ruin. After Sir Robert Plumpton lost his legal battle for inheritance and legitimacy, his first and second wives' estates and their dowries played a large part in keeping the

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<sup>10</sup> Joan Kirby, "Survival and Betterment," 98-102.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>12</sup> Barbara J. Harris, *English Aristocratic Women, 1450-1500: Marriage and Family, Property and Careers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 88.

<sup>13</sup> Elisabeth Clere to John Paston I, June 29, Not after 1449, in *The Paston Letters: A Selection*, 23-25.

family solvent financially, although barely.<sup>14</sup> Women also gained more autonomy through marriage as they assumed the position of household manager.

For these reasons, marriage served as the fundamental way of life for most women. A further look into the role of marriage during the fifteenth century requires delving into the legal issue of coverture, dowry and jointure in the marriage contract. When a woman married, her legal person and right to individual property was merged with her husband's person. In a sense, the common law custom of coverture did away with the wife's ability to act on her own behalf in legal matters.<sup>15</sup> Another essential element of fifteenth-century marriage was the use of dowers and jointure to provide for widows. In Harris's study of seven-hundred and fifty-five knights and noblemen who married in the time period, sixty-nine percent of them died before their wives. With the reality that many wives were likely to become widows, it was essential for families to secure a livelihood for them. During the late fifteenth century, the use of dowers decreased as the use of jointure increased. A dower, not to be confused with a dowry, is the entitlement of a widow to one third of her husband's property at his death. This was a significant portion, and because there was often conflict between a widow and her husband's heir (sometimes children from a previous marriage), the use of jointure became a common practice.

In the event of death, the jointure was a settled piece of land often garnering a set amount of money each year that was held in common between the husband and wife. The jointure went to the surviving partner. The jointure was usually seen as compensation for the dowry. Jointures were on average about ten percent of the dowry. If the dowry had not been paid in full at the time of the husband's death, the jointure was often forfeited. Most court cases about marriage concerned these jointures.<sup>16</sup> With these cases, women as widows often represented themselves, though some had to rely on their male relatives to fight on their behalf.<sup>17</sup> For the gentry, marriage was not just a bonding of two people but a bonding of two families and a financial agreement between them. With all these components to a marriage contract and both families striving to get some financial or social benefit from the

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<sup>14</sup> Lady Neville to Dame Isabel Plumpton, April 28, 1506. In *The Plumpton Letters and Papers*, ed. Joan Kirby (1996; repr., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 182.

<sup>15</sup> Barbara J. Harris, *English Aristocratic Women, 1450-1500*, 18-20.

<sup>16</sup> Barbara J. Harris, *English Aristocratic Women, 1450-1500*, 44-52.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

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agreement, the marriage negotiations could take years to finally settle.<sup>18</sup>

Evidence of the complexity of these marriage contracts can be seen by looking more closely at the marriages of both the Cely brothers, Richard and George, and the Paston brothers, John Paston II and John Paston III. It took a significant amount of time to successfully negotiate each one's marriage contract. The Cely brothers first began to mention marriage in their letters in 1481. In May of 1482, Richard told of his pursuits of a gentlewoman with the family name of Lemryke from the Cotswolds and his competition for her favor with his rival William Mydwyntter. These ventures faded to nothing, but by 1484 both brothers were successfully married to women of means. Most notable was the marriage of George to Margery Rygon, whose first husband had left her nearly everything because he had no children.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, in 1477 John Paston III made a very successful match financially, despite its long negotiation, to Margery Brews; however, his brother, John II, was caught in an unsatisfactory engagement. John II had previously been engaged to Anne Haute, a relative of the Queen. Though there was no outright objection to an alliance with the family nor to finances, John II and Anne seemed to have had a change of heart and John II spent several years trying to get a legal release from their engagement.<sup>20</sup>

Engagement was not merely an agreement between two people but also a legal matter. John Paston II and John Paston III had a sister, also named Margery, who was not able to escape the legal ramifications of engagement, much to the displeasure of Margaret Paston, her mother. Margery had fallen in love with the family bailiff, Richard Calle, and they had secretly become engaged. This was an embarrassment to the family; the bailiff was a far cry from a great family connection for which they would have hoped. Of the unfavorable situation John III told his brother, "even if my father (on whom God have mercy) were alive and had consented to it, and my mother and both of you as well he would never have my good will to

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<sup>18</sup> Joan Kirby, "Survival and Betterment," 102.

<sup>19</sup> Richard Cely the younger to George Cely, London, June 4, 1481; May 13, 1482, in *The Cely Letters: 1472-1488* ed. Alison Hanham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975): 106-107, 151-153; Alison Hanham, *The Cely's and Their World: An English merchant family of the fifteenth century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1985): 310-311.

<sup>20</sup> Margaret Paston to John Paston, March 12, 1469; John Paston II to John Paston III, November 22, 1473; Margery Brews to John Paston III, February 1477; Margaret Paston to Dame Elizabeth Brews, June 11, 1477, in *The Paston Letters: A Selection*, 172, 221, 234, 240-241.

make my sister sell candles and mustard in Framlingham.”<sup>21</sup> Regardless of the family’s convictions that the engagement should be dissolved, these kind of secret promises or vows of engagement were as lawfully binding as marriage vows. In the church law, engagement spoken aloud *per verba de praesenti* had the same gravity as actual marriage vows. Though both Margaret and Margery’s grandmother Agnes disputed the issue, hoping to dissolve the promise by taking it before the bishop, the matter was closed because the vows were irrevocable.<sup>22</sup> Secret vows of engagement and even the concealment of a suitor such as that of Margery Paston were seen as disreputable and disrespectful attempts to undermine a mother’s authority. In the poem “How the Goodwife Taught Her Daughter,” popular in the fifteenth century as an advice manual from a mother to her daughter, there is a stanza that warns against secret suitors: “If any man offer thee courtship, and would marry thee... show it to thy friends and conceal it naught... for a slander raised of ill Is evil for to still, My leif child.”<sup>23</sup> Margery and her mother have very little record of communication after she broke her mother’s trust; however, there is some record of a possible reconciliation in that Margaret left Margery’s son £20 in her will.<sup>24</sup> The clear indications that Margery Paston’s engagement was such a scandal indicates that this kind of rebellion was less common and that in general, a good marriage to procure a better position for the brides and their families was deeply valued by the mothers and daughters, if not always for initial happiness.

The business-like nature of these marriage agreements being driven primarily by materialistic gains has often led some historians to conclude that these women were cold and detached from their children. It would seem that many of these women did not take into account the happiness of their children as a primary concern.<sup>25</sup> Though the way they went about these marriage agreements sometimes seems to put their children’s feelings aside,

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<sup>21</sup> John III to John II, May, 1469. In *The Pastons: The letters of a family in the Wars of the Roses*, ed. Richard Barber (1981; repr., Middlesex England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1985): 148-9.

<sup>22</sup> Richard Barber, *The Pastons: The Letters*, 153.

<sup>23</sup> Edith Rickert, ed. “How the Goodwife Taught Her Daughter,” in *The Babee’s Book Medieval Manners for the Young: Done Into Modern English From Dr. Furnivall’s Texts* (New York: Duffield, 1908): 33; Candice Gregory, “Raising the Goodwife: Mothers and Daughters in Fifteenth-Century England,” 145.

<sup>24</sup> Richard Barber, *The Pastons: The letters*, 155.

<sup>25</sup> Ann S. Haskell, “The Paston Women on Marriage in Fifteenth-Century England,” *Viator: Medieval and Renaissance Studies* vol. 4 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 469-470; Candice Gregory, “Raising the Goodwife,” 164-165.



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there is also significant evidence to support that many women did have sympathy and love for their children. When Elizabeth Stonor was told her daughter from her first marriage, Katherine Ryche, was sick, she told her husband to immediately bring her home so that she might care for her.<sup>26</sup> Lady Edith Neville's reply to her daughter Isabel Plumpton's troubles with her absent husband and their money difficulties was that of affection and condolence. She said her husband would send the last of Isabel's dowry payment in hopes that it might help and told her that the Lord helps those who are in need.<sup>27</sup> Even Margaret Paston was willing to work through a difficult contract with the Brews family for the before-mentioned marriage of John Paston III and Margery Brews, despite the probability that her dowry was slightly less than what she wanted for him. Because John Paston III and Margery were in love and despite her eagerness to be rid of the situation, Margaret sought to come to some agreement with the acceptable Brews family.<sup>28</sup>

From these examples it is clear that these medieval women loved their children. This practical kind of love was not necessarily focused upon their child's emotional happiness but upon ensuring for them a better financial and social position so that they could live a good and productive life according to the society in which they lived.<sup>29</sup> However business-like these women may appear, it would have been improper for them to write in an emotional way that readers of today might expect to see and understand. In their own way, these women conveyed their concerns for the family, both children and husbands, through their business conduct.<sup>30</sup> Perhaps they showed their love in this manner because they defined happiness not as an emotional state but as success in their family's position.

When a woman married for the first time she was often quite young. In many cases women went to live with their in-laws for a significant time of their young married life. When John Paston I and Margaret were first

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<sup>26</sup> Elizabeth Stonor to William Stonor, August 18, 1476. In "The Fifteenth-Century English Stonor Letters: A Revised Text with Notes, a Glossary, and a Collation of Those Letters Edited by C.L. Kingsford in 1919 and 1924," by Alison Truelove, ( PhD diss., Royal Holloway, University of London, 2001): 251.

<sup>27</sup> Lady Neville to Dame Isabel Plumpton, April 28, 1506. *The Plumpton Letters and Papers*, 182.

<sup>28</sup> Sir Thomas Brews to John Paston II, March 8, 1477; Margaret Paston to Dame Elizabeth Brews, June 11, 1477. In *The Paston Letters A Selection*, 237-241.

<sup>29</sup> Barbara Hanawalt, "Medievalists and the Study of Childhood," *Speculum* 77, no. 2 (April 2002): 456.

<sup>30</sup> Malcom Richardson, "'A Masterful Woman,'" 43-44.

married, Margaret stayed with her mother-in-law, Agnes Paston, where she was able to observe Agnes's household and see how it functioned. The close quarters that many young wives shared with their mothers-in-law were a source for teaching the young wife how to handle matters of household.<sup>31</sup> Once the couple came into inheritance or established themselves separately, wives had to settle into their role as the center of the household.<sup>32</sup> As such, the wife had many responsibilities. Despite coverture and the lack of a legal status, women actually had great authority when it came to their husband's estates. Often the importance of a wife or woman to manage the household was such that the absence of one could be sorely missed. A responsible wife was usually highly valued by her husband. Though there were certainly unhappy marriages, this mutual respect and partnership often grew into a deeper affection. Despite the commonality of arranged marriages, it seems that most husband-wife relationships either began in love or became loving over time.<sup>33</sup> Elizabeth Stonor often thanked William in her letters for the venison and other fare that he attentively sent her. She also wrote out of concern to her husband when she heard that he was exposed to the small pox, and asked him to come home, or if the case were that he had already fallen ill, she offered to go to him, despite the risk of exposure.<sup>34</sup> Though John Paston I often seemed cold and business-like in most letters, he wrote Margaret a poorly-penned but kindly meant love poem in 1465.<sup>35</sup>

Women's husbands were often gone on business. Many of the Paston letters were written between Margaret Paston and her husband, John, and later their sons, about matters of business in their absences. The Celys also frequently left their wives at home for their merchant business. In their husband's absence, women had to know extensively about their husband's affairs and essentially served as their husband's authority on the estate.<sup>36</sup> On the estate they often managed tenants, settled disputes and even handled financial matters concerning debts, expenses of food, and other miscellaneous matters.<sup>37</sup> "How the Goodwife Taught Her Daughter" gives an excellent

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<sup>31</sup> Barbara J. Harris, *English Aristocratic Women, 1450-1500*, 62-63; Margaret Paston to John Paston I, 1443-4. In *The Pastons: The letters*, 20-22.

<sup>32</sup> Barbara J. Harris, *English Aristocratic Women, 1450-1500*, 61-62.

<sup>33</sup> H. S. Bennett, *The Pastons and Their England*, 60-64.

<sup>34</sup> Elizabeth Stonor to William Stonor, September 12, 1476. "The Fifteenth-Century English Stonor Letters," 254-255.

<sup>35</sup> Margaret Paston to John Paston I, September 27, 1465 in *The Paston Letters: A Selection*, 138-41.

<sup>36</sup> H. S. Bennett, *The Pastons and Their England*, 60-64.

<sup>37</sup> Richard Barber, *The Pastons: The letters*, 113-115.

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example of how the wife was expected to manage her estate: “And wisely govern thy house, and serving maids and men. . . . And if thy husband be far from home, let not thy folk do ill, But look who doeth well and who doeth nil. . . . And if thy time be strait and great be thy need, Then like a housewife set to work with speed.”<sup>38</sup>

The letters that consist primarily of business records are by far the most numerous in comparison to letters that were matters of a personal nature. Agnes Plumpton, the wife of Sir Robert Plumpton, detailed her duties of collecting money from tenants in several different letters, one of which says that she had collected her husband’s “thewsans” to be sent to him.<sup>39</sup> She and Margaret Paston also gave examples of how they delegated the task of collecting the rent to their young sons in order to train them, familiarize them with their land, and promote good relations with their tenants.<sup>40</sup> These women clearly took a great initiative in the preservation of their family’s estates for both themselves and their children.

Another example of their initiative in preserving their family’s assets is that of Elizabeth Stonor. Sir William Stonor preferred to live in the country, whereas Elizabeth had ties to her family and first husband’s wool business in London, and kept a house there. It is fairly certain that even though the wool business would have been absorbed by William Stonor at his marriage to Elizabeth, she appears to have continued to oversee the business. Elizabeth remarked on the price of wool and the little profit that was made in one letter to her husband, and in another she discussed a debt that someone owed her for wool.<sup>41</sup> As the closest managers to the estate and in closer connection to their community, these women were often asked by various business associates and family to intervene with their husband on their behalf. William Goidwyn was promised a buck by William Stonor, and in order to get what was promised, he asked Agnes Stonor, William’s second wife, to speak to her husband about the issue.<sup>42</sup> Likewise, these women also were consulted about filling vacant positions on their estates. Often they managed

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<sup>38</sup> Edith Rickert, “How the Goodwife Taught Her Daughter,” 37.

<sup>39</sup> Dame Agnes Plumpton to Sir Robert Plumpton, March 19, 1503. In *The Plumpton Letters and Papers*, 170-171.

<sup>40</sup> Dame Agnes Plumpton to Sir Robert Plumpton, November 16, 1502. In *The Plumpton Letters and Papers*, 156.

<sup>41</sup> Elizabeth Stonor to William Stonor, November 7, 1476 and March 7, 1477, “The Fifteenth-Century English Stonor Letters,” 275, 292.

<sup>42</sup> William Goldwin to Agnes Stonor, July 18, 1480, in “The Fifteenth-Century English Stonor Letters,” 511.

multiple estates or manors so they would have to give directions from afar. In May of 1481, Richard Germyn asked Agnes Stonor to give him directives on how to fill the position of the poor man in the alms house in Devon.<sup>43</sup> When Agnes Paston officially inherited her jointure after her husband William passed away, she spent a significant amount of time improving her estate by building a controversially-placed wall next to the parish which redirected the highway. Though there were many disputes over this wall, she eventually prevailed.<sup>44</sup>

Women also managed expenditures on their estates, and often if they could not reach their husband or if their family was short of money, they had to find a way to stretch their resources. Sir Robert Plumpton's squandering of the fortune resulted in disaster at the Plumpton family's estates, which lasted throughout the marriages of both his first and second wives. Their tenants and the people living in the area knew of their financial struggles, and both wives, Agnes and Isabel, wrote at various times to Robert, complaining of not being able to sell wood to make a profit, of not being able to make their servants and tenants work, and recounting the rebellion by their neighbors who tried to take advantage of their difficulties. Isabel pleaded with her husband to come home and remedy the situation.<sup>45</sup>

One of the most important matters that landed gentry wives handled was the protection and defense of their land holdings. The Wars of the Roses did not prevent the proceedings of legal courts and law enforcement, and disputes over the land inheritance of many of the estates owned by the gentry families were very common. These land disputes between gentry and noble families often involved staking ownership through the physical occupation of the estates as well as trying to get legal rights of inheritance. This meant that defending the home or knowing when to abandon the home was very important in securing the family's property for the future. The Pastons were involved in a number of land disputes, one of which was with Lord Moleyns over the Gresham estate which turned increasingly hostile in 1448. Margaret sent to John for crossbows and other defense supplies sometime between October and January to defend the house against Partridge, the Moleyns's bailiff, and his men. Though Margaret had apparently fortified the manor, on

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<sup>43</sup> Richard Germyn to Agnes Stonor, May 1, 1481, in "The Fifteenth-Century English Stonor Letters," 563.

<sup>44</sup> Agnes Paston to John Paston, Summer 1451. *The Plumpton Letters and Papers*, 56-59.

<sup>45</sup> Dame Agnes to Sir Robert Plumpton, December 21, 1502; Dame Isabel Plumpton to Sir Robert Plumpton, 1506, *The Plumpton Letters and Papers*, 158, 181.

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January 28, 1449, John Paston sent a petition to the King that said that Moleyns's armed supporters rioted on the estate and broke down the doors, ejected Margaret and her household, and looted and damaged the building. Margaret escaped and found safety at John's advisor's house. Determined not to let the rioters intimidate her, she stayed in the area and made her presence known. A week after being ejected, she parlayed with them, standing her ground and insisting on a fair price of the goods from her household that had been pillaged and sold. Margaret Paston described their discussion and all that had transpired in a letter to her husband dated February 15, 1449. Margaret's indication that she was handling their situation allowed for her husband to continue to pursue their battle in court, to their eventual success and return of the manor. This is but one example of the efforts by gentry women to keep their estates running and intact, with the end result being the securing of property and a continued improvement of their social status and wealth.<sup>46</sup>

In pressing these gentry family's claims to their land rights in and out of the legal courts, it was essential to have the support of a higher-ranking noble family. John Paston ultimately sought patronage in the Duke of Norfolk. Though at first he looked to another man on the king's council, Margaret, his wife, persuaded him that there was a better choice after looking into the situation further. John Paston and his sons also fought under the Duke's heraldry for several years, and their uncle Richard Paston fought under Lord Hasting's heraldry at Calais with King Edward IV.<sup>47</sup> Thomas Stonor was also called to fight by a messenger from the King.<sup>48</sup> These nobility connections were understood as essential to a family's successful movement up the social ladder. The social element in creating a strong bond with their patron was important, but so too was that of being considered a worthy candidate to receive patronage.

Gentry women also understood how important it was to form these associations, and though they did not go to war or work for the wealthier noble families, they made these connections through other means. It is clear that these gentry women saw social connections as one of the key ways to achieve their ends when it came to promoting the family. Elizabeth Stonor

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<sup>46</sup> Richard Barber, *The Pastons: The letters*, 33-36.

<sup>47</sup> Richard Barber, *The Pastons: The letters*, 42,43; Joan Kirby, "Survival and Betterment," 109.

<sup>48</sup> Jane Stonor to Thomas Stonor II, August 2, 1463. In "The Fifteenth-Century English Stonor Letters," 65.

was perhaps one of the most adept at playing this social game. In several of Elizabeth's letters she elaborates on dinners and social gatherings. In one letter she indicates to her husband that her patron is none other than Elizabeth of York, Duchess of Suffolk and the King's sister. In the letter she says that she had dined with the Duchess and waited upon her, and that the Duchess would be visiting her sometime the next week. She also expressed concern for her sisters-in-law, who served Elizabeth of York, fearing that they have displeased the Duchess because they are, "no better arayed, and leke wyse... (they) owght they be otherwyse arayed, sche seyth sche maynot kep them."<sup>49</sup> No doubt Elizabeth was writing to John to warn him to acquire appropriate clothing for his sisters so as to not detract from the family reputation and keep their family's connection with the Duchess of Suffolk. It was extremely significant to keep up appearances and show that the family had a substantial amount of wealth to merit being seen in service to Elizabeth of York. On another occasion, Ann Stonor, William's second wife, tells him that she is staying in Taunton with the Marquis of Dorset's wife, further establishing the importance the women placed on making social connections as a way of furthering the status and betterment of her family's future.<sup>50</sup>

Some women sent their young adult daughters to serve at greater houses where they would learn both how to manage a household estate successfully and how to make essential connections. Joan Kirby mentions that Lady Ingoldsthorp was renowned for her education of ladies in household management and it was considered a privilege to be able to learn from her. Dorothy Plumpton was placed in the home of her step-grandmother, Lady Edith Neville. Though Dorothy said that Lady Neville was very kind to her, she wished to come home and begged her father to "fynd athing meyer for me in this parties, or any other, she [Lady Neville] will helpe to promote me to the ultermost of hir puysuance."<sup>51</sup> Most likely Dorothy thought that she was in a menial position and wished to be in a higher family's house.<sup>52</sup> One of Jane Stonor's daughters, earlier mentioned in

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<sup>49</sup> Elizabeth Stonor to William Stonor, October 22, 1476. In "The Fifteenth-Century English Stonor Letters," 263-265.

<sup>50</sup> Ann Stonor to William Stonor, February 27, 1482. In "The Fifteenth-Century English Stonor Letters," 604.

<sup>51</sup> Dorothy Plumpton to Sir Robert Plumpton, May 18, 1506. *The Plumpton Letters and Papers*, 182.

<sup>52</sup> Thomas Stapleton, ed. *Plumpton Correspondence: A Series of Letters, Chiefly Domestick, Written in the Reigns of Edward IV, Richard III, Henry VII, and Henry VIII* (London: John Bowyer Nichols and Son, 1839), 202-203.

## *Concerns of a Gentry Woman*

service to Elizabeth of York, became homesick and pleaded to return home. In Jane's reply she told her daughter that she was not being unkind but being a good mother, and that they would be willingly disobeying Elizabeth of York if they allowed their daughter to come home without being released from service.<sup>53</sup> This rationale might be considered cold and unfeeling, but Jane probably recognized that the preparation of her daughter to the responsibilities of a gentry woman depended upon her understanding of the best way to advance in the future and that to offend Elizabeth of York would be to weaken the ties of the family's patronage.

Women knew the essential part that dress, hospitality, and display of wealth played in carrying the family into higher standing. As important as it was for Jane Stonor's daughters to be well-dressed in the company of Elizabeth of York, so it was for all gentry women that they might reflect their family's status and maintain their position. In "Le Mesnagier de Paris," the husband related the importance of dress and presentation. In addition to telling her to make certain that she is dressed according to their resources and status, he told her to, "Take care that you are respectably dressed without introducing new fashions, and without too much or too little ostentation."<sup>54</sup> Because gentry women were high in the social chain without being in the highest class, it would be considered presumptuous to introduce new fashions. The women and their families usually held a precarious position, striving to be taken seriously and seeking approval from their patrons and betters. A new fashion could make them seem as though they thought of themselves as overly important. Likewise the sumptuary laws were regulations that restricted the dress in cost, textiles and number of garments that could be owned for each social class so that people might know one's class based on their dress. This was central to the gentry in maintaining their place as members of one of the upper classes, and in distinguishing themselves from the growing middle class.<sup>55</sup> The Celys were as conscious of keeping a record of the cost of their servants' clothing as they were of the cost of their own clothing. In 1487, Margery Cely noted that she had one of her gowns furred, along with those of her sons. This furring almost certainly displayed their status, as furring was restricted by the sumptuary laws for

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<sup>53</sup> Jane Stonor to her daughter, before 1473. "The Fifteenth-Century English Stonor Letters," 180.

<sup>54</sup> Tania Bayard, *A Medieval Home Companion*, 35.

<sup>55</sup> Maria Giuseppina Muzzarelli, "Reconciling the Privilege of a Few with the Common Good: Sumptuary Laws in Medieval and Early Modern Europe," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 39, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 599-600.

upper classes. There are also records of dry cleaning and tailor bills showing the importance of the presentation of dress in their daily lives.<sup>56</sup> The Paston and the Stonor women also continually sent word to their husbands or other relatives to send them clothing or accessory items, and to give accounts of bills for clothing services.<sup>57</sup> These women were constantly overseeing the appearance of the family through the clothing and social position. It is clear that appearances kept by the women and their family were essential to presenting a formidable exterior that symbolized the state of the family.

Whether by the amassing of land and estate through marriage and legal means, or the accumulation of wealth due to patronage and social connections, the English gentry women of the fifteenth century had many concerns and interests. Although examination of the written words to and from some of these women can tell us much about the activities with which they were involved, it is hard to determine a full scope of their character and purpose from the business style of the letters that often lacked personal thoughts and emotion. However, the importance of their family's position in society and the focus on future wealth and stability permeates and underscores the descriptions they give of their lives as household managers, wives, and mothers. This primary concern of perpetuation of the family success through status, property and marriage was not just a superficial function of their roles in society, but the way in which these women sought to improve the quality of life for their family and children and solidify their future.

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<sup>56</sup> Alison, Hanham, *The Celys and their World*, 332-333.

<sup>57</sup> Jane Stonor to Thomas Stonor II, October 28, 1470. In "The Fifteenth-Century English Stonor Letters," 122.