

Series Editor: Jane Chance

The Library of Medieval Women aims to make available, in an English translation, significant works by, for, and about medieval women, from the age of the Church Fathers to the fifteenth century. The series encompasses many forms of writing, from poetry, visions, biography and autobiography, and letters, to sermons, treatises and encyclopedias; the subject matter is equally diverse: theology and mysticism, classical mythology, medicine and science, history, hagiography, and instructions for anchoresses. Each text is presented with an introduction setting the material in context, a guide to further reading, and an interpretive essay.

We welcome suggestions for future titles in the series. Proposals or queries may be sent directly to the editor or publisher at the addresses given below; all submissions will receive prompt and informed consideration.

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The Paston Women: Selected Letters

Translated from the Middle English
with Introduction, Notes and Interpretive Essay

Diane Watt
University of Wales, Aberystwyth

Also, bring my letter home to me with you, and my cousin Clere's copy of her letter, and the copy of the receipts of Horwellbury. And commend me to Lomnor,¹⁴ and tell him that his best-beloved is in good health, but she has not yet come to Norwich, because people are still dying, but not so grievously as they did.

And God be with you. Written at Norwich in very great haste on the 16th day of November.

By your mother, AGNES PASTON.

No. 11: Agnes Paston to John Paston I.

Agnes sends news of two deaths.

[6 July 1453]

To my dearly beloved son John Paston.

Son, I greet you warmly and send you God's blessing and my own, and let you know that Robert Hill came home by Horwellbury; and Gurney told him that he had been to London for money, without success, and asked Robert that he should send me money by you. I entreat you not to forget it on your way home, and diligently to ask about another rent collector.

As for news, Philip Berney¹⁵ passed to God last Monday in the greatest pain that I ever saw in a person. And on Tuesday Sir John Heveningham went to his church and heard three masses, and came home again never happier, and said to his wife that he would go into his garden to say a little prayer and then he would dine. And immediately he felt a loss of strength in his leg, and sank down. This was at 9 o'clock, and he was dead before noon.

My cousin Clere entreats you not to let anyone see her letter, which is sealed up under my seal.

I entreat you to pay your brother William for the four and a half ounces of silk that he paid for, which he sent me by William Taverner, and bring with you a quarter of an ounce exactly the same as that which I send you enclosed within this letter. And tell your brother William that his horse has farcy¹⁶ and big running sores on his legs.

May God protect you. Written in great haste at Norwich on the eve of St Thomas's Day.

By your mother, A. PASTON.

¹⁴ William Lomnor, a lawyer who was a relative and agent of the Pastons.

¹⁵ Margaret Paston's uncle.

¹⁶ A disease of horses.

No. 12: Agnes Paston's Memorandum.

This is a list of tasks, presumably for one of Agnes' sons. Clement was a student at the Inns of Court. Elizabeth, still unmarried, had been placed in the service of Lady Pole.

[28 January 1458]

Errands to London for Agnes Paston, the 28th day of January, in the 36th year of King Harry VI.

To entreat Greenfield faithfully to send me word in writing of how Clement Paston has applied himself to his learning. And if he has not done well, and will not mend his ways, entreat him to whip him truly until he does mend his ways; and that is what the last master did, the best he ever had, at Cambridge. And tell Greenfield that if he will undertake to bring him into good conduct and learning, so that I may truly know that he applies himself, I will give him 10 marks for his effort; because I would rather he were fittingly buried than lost out of negligence.

Also, to see how many gowns Clement has; and those that are worn, have them brushed up. He has a short green gown and a short musterdewillers¹⁷ gown that have never been brushed; and a short blue gown that has been brushed, and was made out of a long gown when I was last in London; and a long russet gown, furred with beaver, was made this time two years ago; and a long murrey¹⁸ gown that was made this time twelve months ago. Also, to have made for me six spoons, of eight ounce of troy¹⁹ weight, well-made and double gilt.

And tell Elizabeth Paston that she must accustom herself to work willingly, as other gentlewomen do, and thus help herself somewhat. Also, to pay the Lady Pole 26s 8d for her board.

And if Greenfield has applied himself to Clement, or intends to apply himself, give him the noble.

No. 13: Agnes Paston to John Paston I.

Agnes writes to her eldest son about various legal matters.

[1 December 1461]

To John Paston in London, may this be delivered in haste.

I greet you warmly and let you know that today Bartholomew Ellis of Paston came to me in Norwich and showed me a rent roll for the term of

¹⁷ A grey woollen cloth named after the town of Montivilliers in Normandy, where it was produced.

¹⁸ Purple red.

¹⁹ A standard system of weights used for precious metals.

John Damme and William Bacton. And on the Friday, John Paston, John Damme, and I went into Goodred's room and they asked me to show them the will. I let them see it, and John Damme read it. And when he had read it, John Paston walked up and down the room; John Damme and I knelt at the foot of the bed. The said John Damme asked me what my husband's intentions had been concerning Sporle, and I said that it was his intention that one of the two youngest sons should have it. He said privately to me that on his word he had said the same to him. Then at the same time I let them see the deed of gift, which I believe was confidential to all of those to whom this deed was made until I showed it to them. And they all swore accordingly, except John Paston and John Damme. After that my son John Paston never had any very kind words to say to me. And John Damme asked me which judge and colleague of his my husband trusted most, and I answered him to the best of my knowledge.

After this, John Damme came and asked me which of the judges my husband trusted most, and said to me, 'Do you not remember a day when my master supported Marriott at Norwich?' I said, 'Yes, because I was there myself.' He said to me that my husband handed over to a certain man something written and sealed by my husband's hand, but he never knew what was in it.

The Letters and Papers of Elizabeth Paston Poynings or Browne

No. 18: Elizabeth Poynings to Agnes Paston.

After repeated efforts on the part of her family and friends to find her a husband, Elizabeth Paston married Sir Robert Poynings in 1458, when she was almost thirty. (For her marriage negotiations, see nos. 3, 4, 31, 34 and 76.) She wrote this letter to her mother shortly after the wedding. Relations between Elizabeth and her mother are evidently still strained, and Elizabeth asks for outstanding debts, undertaken on her behalf, to be repaid to her husband and to Lady Pole.

[3 January 1459]

To my very honourable mother Agnes Paston.

Very honourable and my most dearly beloved mother, in the most humble fashion I commend myself to your good motherhood,²⁸ beseeching you daily and nightly for your motherly blessing, wishing ever more to hear of your good health and prosperity, which I pray to God to continue and increase according to your heart's desire. And if it pleased your good motherhood to hear of me, and how I do, at the time that this letter was composed I was in good bodily health, thanks be to Jesus. And as for my master, my most loved one as you call him, and I should call him now, because I know of no reason to the contrary, and as I trust to Jesus never shall. Because he is very kind to me and is as solicitous as possible to make me certain of my jointure for which he is bound in a bond of £1000 to you, mother, and to my brother John, and to my brother William, and to Edmund Clerc, who needed no such bond. Therefore I beseech you, good mother, as our most singular trust is in your good motherhood, that my master, my most loved one, should not be without the 100 marks at the beginning of this term, which was promised him on his marriage, with the remainder of the money left in my father's will. Because I have made a faithful promise to a gentleman called Bain, who was one of my most loved one's surties, and was bound for him for £200, of which he demands to have £120 at the beginning of this term. And if he goes without this at this time he will claim the whole amount

²⁸ A term of address.

from us, which would be too great a loss for us. And he cannot pay off any of his other sureties without this said silver, and my brother John can tell you that well enough if it pleases him to do so.

And concerning all other things, as for my lady Pole, with whom I stayed, I hope that you will be my esteemed and good mother so that she can be paid for the expenses incurred for me before my marriage. . . .

And may Jesus, of his great mercy, protect you. Written in London on Wednesday the 3rd of January.

By your humble daughter, ELIZABETH POYNINGS.

No. 19: Elizabeth Poynings to John Paston II.

Following the death of Sir Robert Poynings in 1461 at the second Battle of St Albans, Elizabeth was dispossessed of her lands. Here she asks John Paston II to intervene.

[15 December, probably 1467]

To the honourable Sir John Paston, knight, may this be delivered in haste.

Honourable, and with all my heart dearly beloved nephew, I commend myself to you, wishing to hear of your prosperity and good health, which I entreat Almighty God to maintain and increase according to His Will and your heart's desire, thanking God for your improvement and health. Furthermore, informing you that Sir Robert Fiennes has done great damage in the estates which belonged to my husband and me in the county of Kent, in which William Keen and other people are enfeoffed, and greatly afflicts them and receives the produce and profits of a great part of them. And as for my said husband's estates in both the same county and other counties, over and above my jointure, my said husband, when he set off to St Albans' field, ordered his will to be made so that I would control all of his estates and those of Edward, his son and mine, and take the produce and profits of the said estates to pay for the keeping of his and my said son, to pay his debts and to protect the legal right of ownership and title of the same property. . . . In defiance of legal right and conscience, depriving me of my legal right and breaching my said husband's will, the said Robert Fiennes has caused a great amount of destruction and damage there, and for a long time has received the revenues and profits of the same, as a result of which I am deprived of my legal right and the said will cannot be carried out.

Therefore I entreat you with all my heart that you will canvass the King's Highness if it pleases him to address his honourable letters to be directed to the said Robert Fiennes, utterly forbidding him tenure, possession, and receipt of the revenues of the said manors of Tirlingham and others . . . so that

I and my assignees may occupy them in peace. And if any person should attempt to do the opposite, if it please the King's Highness, that a commandment might be given by him to the lord Chancellor to seal sufficient documents with his great seal to aid and assist me and my assignees in the same. And as for the manors of Easthall, Faulkham, Ashe, and Chelsfield, with the rights appertaining to them, in the said county of Kent, which my husband possessed on his departure, and my son after until the time that the Earl of Kent, without any inquest or rightful title from the King, by colour of the King's letters patent took possession of them by force and turned him out of there. And now my lord of Essex has taken possession of them in the same method and way. If any redress for this can be obtained, I entreat you to attempt to obtain it.

And furthermore, I entreat you with all my heart that, should any general pardon be granted, that I may have one for John Dane my servant, whom the said Robert Fiennes has maliciously accused of felony; and that you discreetly try to achieve this and send me an answer in writing as quickly as you are able. As soon as it pleases you to send me part of the costs and expenses that you undertake and pay for the said legal actions, I will truly pay you back for the same, and, in addition to that, will reward you to your satisfaction, by the grace of Jesus, may He have you in His blessed protection.

Written in Southwark on the 15th of December.

By your aunt, ELIZABETH POYNINGS.

No. 20: Will.

Around about 1471, Elizabeth married her second husband, Sir George Browne. After being widowed a second time (Browne was executed in 1483 for taking part in Buckingham's revolt against Richard III), she became exceptionally wealthy, as her will testifies. No one in the Paston family is mentioned in the will.

[18 May 1487]

In *Dei nomine*, Amen.²⁹ On the 18th day of the month of May in the year of our Lord God 1487, and in the second year in the reign of King Henry VII, I, Dame Elizabeth, until recently wife of Sir George Brown, knight, being of sound mind and good memory, thanks be to Almighty God, make and order to be made this my present testament and last will in the manner and form following, that is to say:

First, I bequeath my soul to Almighty God, our Lady Saint Mary, and to all the holy company of heaven, and my body to be buried within the church

²⁹ 'In the name of the Father', i.e. the opening of the Lord's Prayer.

Elizabeth Pevereil⁴² has been ill for 15 or 16 weeks with sciatica, but she has sent a message to my mother by Kate⁴³ that she should come here when God should grant the time, even if she must be wheeled in a barrow.

John of Damme was here, and your mother revealed my secret to him, and he said by his word of honour that nothing he had heard this year had pleased him more than this. I can no longer live by deception; I am found out by everyone who sees me. Everything else you wanted me to send you word of I have sent you word of in a letter that I wrote on Our Lady's Day just passed.

May the Holy Trinity protect you. Written at Oxnead in very great haste on the Thursday before St Thomas' Day.

I entreat you to wear the ring with the image of St Margaret that I sent you as a reminder until you come home.⁴⁴ You have left me such a reminder that makes me think about you both day and night when I would like to sleep.
Yours, M.P.

No. 22: Margaret Paston to John Paston I.

In this letter, Margaret expresses concern for her husband who is recovering from an illness, again requests a new gown, and elliptically refers to her second pregnancy.

[28 September, probably 1443]

To my very honourable husband John Paston, living in the Inner Temple in London, in haste.

Most honourable husband, I commend myself to you, wishing with all my heart to hear of your welfare, thanking God for your improvement from the serious illness that you have had. And I thank you for the letter that you sent me, because on my word of honour, my mother and I have not been easy in our hearts from the time we knew of your illness until we knew for certain of your improvement. My mother promised another image of wax, of your weight, to Our Lady of Walsingham,⁴⁵ and she sent 4 nobles to the four orders of friars at Norwich to pray for you; and I have promised to go on pilgrimage to Walsingham and to St Leonard's⁴⁶ for

⁴² Presumably the midwife.

⁴³ A family servant.

⁴⁴ St Margaret is the patron saint of childbirth and labour. I am grateful to Karen Cherewatuk for drawing my attention to this.

⁴⁵ The famous Norfolk shrine.

⁴⁶ A Norwich Priory.

you. On my word of honour, I have never had such a sorrowful time as I had from the time I knew of your illness until I knew of your improvement, and my heart is still not much at ease, nor shall be until I know that you are completely well.

Your father and mine was at Beccles a week ago today on business for the prior of Bromholm and he stayed at Geldeston that night and was there until 9 o'clock the next day. And I sent there for a gown and my mother said I would not be able to get any from there until I went back there; and accordingly they could not get one. My father⁴⁷ Garneys sent me word to say that he would be here next week, and my uncle as well, to amuse themselves here with their hawks; and they want to take me home with them. And so God help me I will excuse myself from going there if I can, because I believe I will sooner have news from you here than I would have there.

I shall send my mother a token that she gave to me, because I believe the time to send it to her has come, if I keep the promise I have made — I believe I have told you what it was. I entreat you with all my heart to undertake to send me a letter as quickly as possible, if writing is no trouble to you, and that you will undertake to send me word how your illness is. If I might have had my way I would have seen you before now. I would rather you were at home, if your comfort and illness could be as well looked after here as it is where you are now, than have a new gown, even if it were of scarlet.⁴⁸ I entreat you, if your illness is healed enough for you to bear to ride, when my father comes to London, to ask permission and come home when the horse is to be sent home again. Because I believe that you would be looked after as tenderly here as you are in London.

I do not have enough time to have written half a quarter as much as I would say to you if I could speak to you. I shall send you another letter as quickly as I can. Thank you if you undertake to remember my girdle and if you write to me now, because I imagine writing was not easy for you. May Almighty God protect you and send you health. Written at Oxnead in very great haste on St Michael's Eve.
Yours, M. PASTON.

My mother greets you well and sends you God's blessing and hers, and she entreats you, and I entreat you too, that you will eat and drink well, for that would be the greatest help to you now in respect of your health. Your son is doing well, blessed be God.

⁴⁷ Margaret's stepfather.

⁴⁸ A rich material.

and a rebuke to us. Therefore, provide for this quickly and wisely while he is alive and do not delay as you did when my lord of York was chancellor. Because if you had made the effort in his time that you have since, this business would have been finished with. Guard against that, and do not let sloth catch you in this sort of negligence again. Think about the unfortunate consequences and have foresight in all your work, and you will do the better.

May God protect you. Written on Mid-Lent Sunday in haste.

By your mother, M.P.

No. 59: Margaret Paston to John Paston II.

Margaret urges John II to take his engagement seriously, and reiterates her advice about delaying marriage until the land disputes are resolved. She also entreats him to find a place for her daughter Margery, after relations between them had become strained.

[3 April 1469]

To Sir John Paston.

I greet you warmly, and send you God's blessings and mine, thanking you for sending me my seal. But I am really sorry you went to such expense for it, because one of a 40d would have done me very well. Let me know what it cost you and I will send you the money for it. I sent you a letter by a man from Yarmouth. Send me word if you have it, because I am surprised you sent me no answer to it with Juddy. I have no certain knowledge of your engagement, but, if you are engaged, I entreat God to send you joy and honour together, as I believe you will have if she is as she is reported to be. And in the sight of God you are as greatly committed to her as if you were married. And therefore, I order you upon my blessing to be as true to her as if she were actually married to you, and you will have more grace and better success in all other things. Also I would not like you to be too hasty to be married until you are more secure in your property, because you must remember what expense you will have; and if you have not the means to maintain it, it will be a great shame. And therefore work towards getting legal conveyances from the lords, and be more secure in your land before you are married.

The Duchess of Suffolk is at Ewelme in Oxfordshire, and your friends here think this has been done so that she might be far away, and more easily make excuses because of age or sickness if the King should send for her about your business.

Alice
Chaucer

Your enemies are as bold here as they were before. Therefore I can only think they have some encouragement. I sent a message to Caister that they should be careful in guarding the place, as you wrote to me. Make haste to resolve your business as swiftly as you can, so that you can keep a smaller body of men at Caister. Because the expenses and costs are great and you have no need of them if you remind yourself what other expenses you have and how your property is damaged and destroyed by your enemies.

Also I would like you to arrange for your sister to be with my lady of Oxford or with my lady of Bedford or in some other respectable place, wherever you think best, and I will help with her keep; because we are both tired of each other. I will tell you more when I speak with you. I entreat you to do your duty in this if you wish for my comfort and well-being and your honour, for various reasons which you will understand later, etc.

I spoke with the Lord Scales in Norwich and thanked him for the patronage he had shown you and asked him to continue in his patronage of you. And he vowed by his word of honour to do whatever he could for you. And he told me that Yelverton the justice had spoken to him about your affairs, but he did not tell me what was said. But I believe if you asked him to tell you he would. You are indebted to my lord for his good account of you in this district, because he said better of you than I believe you deserve. I understood from him that great rewards had been offered to him by your enemies, against you. Let me know as quickly as you can after the beginning of the legal term how you have got on in all your affairs, because it will seem a very long time to me until I hear some good news.

Also, I entreat you to commend me to the good religious instructor whom you appointed to Caister chapel, and thank him for the great expense he went to on my account in Norwich. And if I were a great lady he would understand that he would prosper on my account, because I believe, from his demeanour, that he is a very virtuous man.

Also, I send you the diamond clasp by the bearer of this letter.

I entreat you do not forget to send me a kerchief of cremil for neckerchiefs for your sister, Anne, because I am put to shame by the good lady she is with because she has none, and I cannot get any anywhere in this town. I would write more to you were it not for lack of time. May God protect you and send you success in all your affairs. Written in haste on Easter Monday.

By your mother.

The Letters of Elizabeth Clere

No. 76: Elizabeth Clere to John Paston I.

Elizabeth Clere intervenes on behalf of Elizabeth Paston, in the matter of the marriage negotiations. (See headnote to no. 18.) All of Elizabeth Clere's letters are written in the same hand, which was probably her own.

[29 June, not after 1449]

To my cousin John Paston may this letter be delivered.

Faithful and very dear cousin, I commend myself to you, wishing to hear of your welfare and success in your business, which I entreat God to send you according to his pleasure and to your heart's ease.

Cousin, I let you know that Scrope has been in this region to see my cousin your sister, and he has spoken with my cousin your mother. And she would like him to show you the indentures made between the knight who is married to his daughter and him; whether, if Scrope marries and is granted children, it is the children or his married daughter who will inherit his land.

Cousin, for this reason, pay close attention to his indentures, because he is happy to show them to you or to whoever you will appoint with you. He says to me that he is the last in the tail of his inherited estate, which is worth 350 marks or more, according to Watkin Shipdham, because he has valued his estate many times. And Scrope tells me that if he marries and has an heir, his married daughter will have from his estate 50 marks and no more; and therefore, cousin, I think he would be good for my cousin your sister, unless you can get her someone better. And if you can get someone better, I would advise you to try to achieve it in as short a time as you conveniently can, because she was never so sorrowful as she is nowadays. Because she cannot speak to anyone, whosoever may visit, nor see or speak to my servant, nor the servants of her mother, unless she is deceptive about her intentions. And since Easter she has for the most part been beaten once or twice a week, and sometimes twice in one day, and her head has been broken in two or three places.

For which reason, cousin, she has sent to me by Friar Newton in great secrecy, and entreats me to write to you of her grief, and entreat you to be her good brother, as she relies on you. And she says, if you can ascertain by his title-deeds that his and her children are able to inherit, and she is to have

a reasonable jointure, she has heard so much about his birth and social position that, if you want her to, she will marry him, whether her mother wants her to or not, even though she has been told that his appearance is unattractive. Because she says people will hold her in greater esteem if she submits herself to him as she ought to.

Cousin, I have been told that there is a pleasant man in your Inn⁹⁶ whose father died recently. If you think that he would be better for her than Scrope, it ought to be canvassed. And give Scrope a kind answer, so that he is not put off until you are sure of someone better. Because he said when he was with me that unless he has a reassuring answer from you he will not pursue this matter any further, because he is unable to see my cousin your sister. And he says he would be able to see her if she were better than she is, and that makes him suspect that her mother is not favourably disposed; and I have informed my cousin your mother of this. For this reason, cousin, remember this matter, because sorrow often causes women to bestow themselves in marriage on someone they should not; and if she were in that situation I know very well that you would regret it.

Cousin, I entreat you to burn this letter, so that neither your servants nor anyone else should see it. Because if my cousin your mother knew that I had sent this letter she would not love me any more.

I write no more to you at this time, but may the Holy Ghost protect you. Written in haste, on St Peter's day, by candlelight.

By your cousin ELIZABETH CLERE.

No. 77: Elizabeth Clere to John Paston I.

Elizabeth Clere seeks John Paston I's advice about a dispute over grazing land in Norwich.

[25 May, probably before 1460]

To my honourable cousin John Paston may this letter be delivered in haste.

Faithful and very dear cousin, I commend myself to you. May it please you to know that there has been purchased from various people of former times a certain pasture and gorse field containing an estimated 100 acres called N, situated in the town of N and belonging to the manor of the same town, except that certain people have 4 acres in various small parts within the same pasture, which are very nearly overgrown with gorse at this time. In spite of this they have, for every half acre, fodder for cattle wandering in the open all summer in the said pasture, paying 4d for the herding of a beast.

⁹⁶ The Inner Temple.

No. 81: Dame Elizabeth Brews to John Paston III.

Elizabeth Brews writes to encourage the match between John III and her daughter. She also alludes to the business discussed in the previous letter.

[1477]

To my very honourable cousin John Paston, may this letter be delivered etc. Most honourable cousin, I commend myself to you, etc. And I sent my husband a letter about that business which you know about, and he wrote another letter back to me concerning the same business. And he wanted you to go to my mistress your mother and try to get the whole £20 in your control, and then he would be happier to make a marriage agreement with you and will give you £100. And cousin, on the day she is married my father will give her 50 marks. But, if we come to an agreement, I will give you a greater treasure, that is an intelligent gentlewoman, and, even though I say it myself, a good and a virtuous one. Because if I were to take money for her, I would not give her away for £1000. But cousin, I trust you so much that I would think her well bestowed on you even if you were worth much more.

And, cousin, a little while after you left, a man came from my cousin Derby and brought me word that it so happened that he could not come on the appointed day, as I will explain to your more openly when I speak with you, etc. But cousin, if it would please you to come back again on whatever day you fix, I guarantee that they will hold to the same day. Because I would be glad, if my husband and you can agree to this marriage, and it might be my good fortune to conclude this business between my cousins and you, that each of you might love the other in a friendly manner, etc.

And cousin, if this note does not please you, I entreat you that it should be burnt etc. No more to you at this time, but may Almighty Jesus preserve you, etc.

By your cousin DAME ELIZABETH BREWS.

No. 82: Dame Elizabeth Brews to John Paston III.

In attempting to persuade John III to marry her daughter, Elizabeth Brews tells him that Margery has been pleading his cause.

[About 9 February 1477]

To my honourable cousin John Paston may this letter be delivered, etc. Cousin, I commend myself to you, thanking you with all my heart for the warm welcome that you gave me and all my people the last time I was in Norwich. And you promised me that you would never broach the matter

with Margery until such time as you and I had agreed. But you have made her such an advocate for you that I can never have rest night nor day because of her entreating and appealing to bring the said business to its accomplishment, etc.

And cousin, on Friday it is Saint Valentine's Day, and every bird chooses itself a mate. And if you would like to come on Thursday night, and arrange matters so that you can stay until Monday, I trust God that you will speak to my husband, and I will pray that we will bring the matter to a conclusion, etc. Because, cousin, it is only a feeble oak that is cut down at the first stroke, because you will be open to reason, I trust to God, may He always keep you in His merciful protection, etc.

By your cousin DAME ELIZABETH BREWS, who with God's grace will be called otherwise.

No. 83: Dame Elizabeth Brews to John Paston III.

A decade after his marriage to her daughter, Elizabeth Brews writes to her son-in-law, requesting his help.

[About 1488]

To my most honourable son Sir John Paston, knight, may this be delivered. Most honourable son, I commend myself to you and to my lady my daughter your wife, and I send you both Christ's blessing and my own. And, son, I thank you with all my heart on behalf of my son William Brews, and I must entreat you, out of respect for Jesus, that you help him on behalf of your tenants and mine, or else John Dinne will prevail over them.

And, son, may God thank you, you once helped White of Metfield, and so I must now beseech you to act, if it pleases you to give credence to the Prior of the White Friars, because I have told him my intentions. I will consider myself contented with whatever you do.

And, son, we the ladies and gentlewomen of this region who are widows are greatly afflicted by the Bishop of Chester who asks to us to pay more than we are able to; and that is known to Almighty Jesus, who has you in His blessed protection.

By your mother DAME ELIZABETH BREWS.

No. 84: Dame Elizabeth Brews to John Paston III.

Once again, Elizabeth Brews seeks the assistance of John III. This rushed letter may be in her own hand.

[Not before June 1487 or after 1495]

To my most honourable son, Sir John Paston, may this letter be delivered in haste.

Most honourable son, I commend myself to you and to my lady your wife, thanking you with all my heart for the great effort you made on Thursday on my behalf, and for your kindness. Because if another acted as you did, I would have achieved my intention. Therefore I pray to God, do by them as they do by me.

Son, I must entreat you to have a dozen men in harness with bows and weapons appropriate to them, so that I can fetch my distrained goods back. The sheriff's man was with me and one of your men (so he says) and has made me a faithful promise that he will be with me again on Monday. Therefore I entreat you with all my heart, son, and request of you, that your men will be with me on Monday, as my trust is entirely in you, who acknowledge blessed Jesus, who keeps you and yours in His protection. By your loyal mother DAME ELIZABETH BREWS.

The Letters of Cecily Daune and Constance Reynnyforth

No. 85: Cecily Daune to John Paston II.

This letter appears to have been written by John Paston II's mistress in Lincolnshire, who has heard a confused account of a marriage alliance between the Pastons and the Beaufort family. In fact it was John II's uncle, William II, who married Lady Anne Beaufort, daughter of the Duke and Duchess of Somerset. Judging from the request for livery, the uniform given to a retainer, and her stated financial dependence on John II, Cecily may, in effect, have been a prostitute, in which case this document is of some significance in English letter writing history. The signature is autograph.

[3 November, between 1463 and 1468]

To the most honourable sir and, by my faithful heart and service, completely beloved good master, Sir John Paston.

Most honourable sir, and by my faithful heart and service, most completely beloved good master, in my most humble fashion I commend myself to your mastership. May it please you to know that it seems to me a very long time until I will hear true knowledge of your good health, which when it is known to me will be a great comfort to me. And that makes me write to you just now, and also to let you know that I have heard a report that you are going to be married to a daughter of the Duchess of Somerset. Concerning this matter, if I spoke to you, I could tell your mastership something which it would take too long to write now. But I shall and do pray to God every day to send you such a person to be your mate in this world who will respect and faithfully and genuinely love you above all other creatures on this earth. Because that is the most excellent riches in the world, I believe. Because worldly goods are transitory and marriage lasts for the term of one's life, which for some people is a very long time. And therefore sir, without offence, I think marriage should be given careful consideration.

What is more, sir, if it pleases your mastership to understand that winter and cold weather draw near, and I have only a few clothes apart from those you have given me, God bless you. Therefore, sir, if it pleases you, I beseech your good mastership to agree to remember me, your servant, with some livery, such as pleases you, in preparation for this winter, to have a gown

made for me to protect me from the cold weather; and that I might have it, and such an answer as you wish to give on these matters, sent to me by the bearer of this letter.

And I will continue to be your petitioner and poor servant, and pray with all my heart to God for your prosperity, whom I beseech to keep you, most honourable sir, and with my faithful heart and service most completely beloved good master, in His blessed care. Written at Hellow on the 3rd of November.

Cecily Daune.

No. 86: Constance Reynyforth to John Paston II.

Constance Reynyforth was the mother of John Paston II's illegitimate daughter, also called Constance. The daughter is remembered in Margaret Paston's will (no. 75). Here Constance makes plans for secretly meeting with her lover.

[21 March 1478]

To Sir John Paston, knight, may this letter be delivered in haste.

Most respected and honourable sir, I commend myself to your mastership, earnestly wishing to hear of your good health and continuing prosperity. And if it pleases you to hear about my poor state, I was in good health at the composition of this simple letter. Regarding the reason for my writing to your mastership: in as much as I arranged to be with you on the day appointed for me, without your good support I cannot easily fulfil my intention unless it pleases you to send one of your men to me, and I shall provide a letter in the name of my uncle, which he shall deliver to my cousin as if he were my uncle's messenger, and by this means I will come at your request. Because my cousin will not want me to leave with him unless it were in the service of my uncle, whose and all others I refuse for yours if my simple service may please you.

And I beseech you to send an answer to this by the bearer of this letter, and I will comply with your intention, by the grace of God, may He protect you at all times. Written at Cobham on the 21st of March.

By your woman and servant CONSTANCE REYNYFORTH.

The Letters of Margery Brews Paston

No. 87: Margery Brews to John Paston III.

This love letter is written in the hand of Thomas Kela, a trusted servant of the Brews family.⁹⁹ The initials may be in Margery's own hand. At the time of writing, Margery Brews' father and John Paston II could not come to an agreement over the marriage settlement, and Margery laments her father's lack of generosity.

[February 1477].

To my most dearly beloved Valentine John Paston, squire, may this letter be delivered etc.

Most respected and honourable and my most dearly-beloved Valentine, I commend myself to you with all my heart, desiring to hear of your happiness, which I pray Almighty God to preserve according to His will and your heart's desire. And if it pleases you to hear how I am, I am not in good health in body nor in heart, nor will be until I hear from you. For no one knows what pain it is I suffer and even on pain of death I dare not disclose it.¹⁰⁰

And my lady my mother has pursued the matter with my father very industriously, but she cannot get any more than you know of, because of which, God knows, I am very sorry.

But if you love me, as I truly believe you do, you will not leave me because of that. Because even if you did not have half the wealth that you do, and I had to undertake the greatest toil that any woman alive should, I would not forsake you. And if you command me to remain faithful wherever I go, I will indeed do everything in my power to love you and no one else ever. Even if my friends say that I am acting wrongly, they will not prevent me from so doing. My heart commands me to love you truly above all

⁹⁹ For a discussion of the hand of the letter, see the interpretive essay below. Richmond places this letter after the one following on the grounds that the latter 'seems more composed' (*Endings*, p.52 n.134). However, it may well be the case that the two letters simply represent different responses to the same event (one personal, the other more formal), but were written at the same time.

¹⁰⁰ In the original Middle English the main clauses in this sentence and the lines in the penultimate paragraph rhyme but do not scan; the rhyme is lost in the translation. Davis follows Gairdner in setting them out as poetry, although they do not appear as such in the manuscript (London, British Library, MS Add. 43490, f.23).

earthly things for evermore. And however angry they may be, I trust it shall be better in time to come.

No more to you for now, but may the Holy Trinity protect you. And I beg you that you will not let anyone on earth see this letter, except yourself. And this letter was composed at Topcroft with a very heavy heart, etc.

By your own M.B.

No. 88: Margery Brews to John Paston III.

This second Valentine letter from Margery to John III is also in the hand of Thomas Kela.

[February 1477]

To my most dearly beloved cousin John Paston, squire, may this letter be delivered, etc.

Most honourable and dearly beloved Valentine, in my most humble fashion I commend myself to you etc. And I thank you with all my heart for the letter which you sent me by John Beckerton, from which I know for certain that you intend to come to Topcroft shortly, with no other errand or business except to bring to a conclusion the business between my father and you. I would be the happiest one alive if only the business might come to fruition. And you say that, if you come and find the business no further advanced than you did previously, you would no longer want to put my father and my lady my mother to any expense or trouble in that matter for a long time after, which makes my heart very heavy. And if you come and the business comes to nothing, then I will be even sorer and full of sadness.

And as for myself, I have done and endured in the business as much as I know how to or am able to, as God knows. And I want you to understand clearly that my father refuses to part with any more money than a £100 and 50 marks in this business, which is very far from fulfilling your wishes. For which reason, if you could be content with that amount and my poor person, I would be the happiest maiden on earth. And if you do not consider yourself satisfied with that, or believe that you could get much more money, as I have understood from you before, good, faithful and loving Valentine, do not take the trouble to visit any more on this business. Rather, let it be finished and never spoken of again, on condition that I may be your faithful lover and petitioner for the duration of my life.

No more to you now, but may Almighty Jesus preserve you, in both body and soul, etc.

By your Valentine MARGERY BREWS.

No. 89: Margery Paston to John Paston III.

Four years after their marriage, Margery writes to John III about a conflict which had erupted in the course of an ongoing feud with his uncle William II over Agnes Paston's property (Agnes died in August 1479, having spent her final years living with William II in London). Margery gives advice on how to proceed. Margery signed this letter herself.

[1 November, perhaps 1481]

To my most honourable master John Paston in haste.

Most respected and honourable sir, in my most humble manner I commend myself to you as lowly as I can, etc. May it please you to know that John Howes, Alexander Wharton, John Fille, with the parson and the new miller of Marlingford, have taken the carts of Tom Atwell of East Tuddenham, my uncle William Paston's rent collector; Harry Harby of Melton Magna, my said uncle's rent collector and bailiff; Richard Barker of the said manor of Malton, until recently rent collector of and still indebted to my uncle; and William Smith of Brandon, next to Barnham Broom, until recently rent collector and bailiff of and also indebted to my said uncle. And on last Monday and Tuesday they carried away from Marlingford to the marketplace at St Edwards in Norwich twelve of your big planks, of which they made six loads, carrying bows and spears around the said carts for fear of capture.

Sir, as for your tenants at Marlingford, they keep both their livestock and themselves away from the court and do not enter the manor or make any affrontment, except for Tom Davy and John Water. This staying away of the tenants is a great injury and loss to them because of the failure to sow their lands with their winter corn. I beg you for God's sake to remember some redress for them.

My Lady Calthorp has been on pilgrimage to Ipswich, and visited my lady of Norfolk on her way home. And there was a great deal of discussion about the business between you and my uncle. He said to my Lady Calthorp that you need not have gone to London, as you would have been able to have reached a resolution at home. He reminded my said Lady Calthorp of the application that he made in relation to the manor of Sportle, promising my lady to observe that and to put it in writing and confirm it as freely as anyone would wish of him. And when he departed from my lady he was not happy; what the reason was I do not know. Lady Calthorp wishes me to write to you to resolve it, because he intends fully to make peace with you. But do not trust him too much, because he is not good.

It seems to my mother-in-law that she has not heard from you for a long time. She is in good health, blessed be God, and all your babies are too. I am