



# MEDIEVAL PERSPECTIVES

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## The Hand of the Master: Sexing Paleography in the *Paston Letters*

When we examine the writings of medieval women, we rarely do so from a disinterested position. We come to such texts for a number of reasons—from political to literary to historical to religious to philosophical—and when we come to them, we come freighted with the baggage of our critical expectations. As Annette Kolodny (1985) observed some years ago with respect to American literature, we find in a text what we expect to find there. In this paper I want to explore one of the key assumptions we hold about medieval women's texts in the early and mid-fifteenth centuries, why we hold it, and what we actually can find if we try to pierce the veil of such critical assumptions and get closer to the words these medieval women actually wrote.

The assumption I wish to challenge is that medieval women were largely illiterate. In modern terms, "illiterate" means unable to read or write—in other words, illiteracy is an inability to create and consume texts. In the Middle Ages, though, literacy and illiteracy had a more fluid range of meanings. "Literatus" was a term reserved for those who could read and write Latin—the language of authorized textuality, of government, business, the law, the Church. It was largely, though not exclusively, the province of men who had experienced formal education in the "clerkly" (as opposed to vocational) tracks of medieval schooling. Those who were not "literatus" were known, in Middle English, as "lewed"—those without "konnyng" of

Latin texts. “Lewed” is usually translated as “illiterate,” though that does not mean such persons could not read and/or write in the vernacular. For instance, in Eileen Power’s early study of medieval convents in England (1922), she cites accusations by episcopal examiners that nuns in many English convents were illiterate or incompetent in Latin (or later, in French, the language of the social upper classes). Power’s depiction of “the complete ignorance of Latin and general illiteracy in these houses” (250), consonant with what scholars in the 1920s believed about medieval women’s lives, led to a widely-accepted picture of medieval English nuns who memorized their prayers without knowing what they were praying about—a pathetic picture indeed.

But the picture is a construct. As David Bell’s 1995 study *What Nuns Read* demonstrates, medieval English nunneries, though much poorer than monasteries or cathedral libraries, owned a wide variety of texts, usually in the vernacular, for distribution through the annual *eleccio* to their residents for private reading and reflection. The physical evidence—conventual records, extant shelf marks, ownership dedications—strongly contradicts Power’s picture of largely-ignorant English nuns and demonstrates that many religious women were frequently *lewed* in the medieval sense, but literate in ours. (In fairness to Powers, she was working with the very limited set of sources published by the early 1920s, which is a far smaller body of evidence than we have to work with today.) Yet Powers’ picture is still a pervasive critical position—perhaps because it was published earlier and has had more time to take root, perhaps because of Power’s well-deserved reputation as a scholar of medieval English-

women's lives and writings, perhaps because that picture fits better with what we think medieval women's lives were like.

The case is similar for women in secular settings. Because such women had little access to formal schooling beyond 'dame schools' or sharing the tutelage of their brothers, it is easy for us to assume that a great number of them were illiterate in the modern sense. We frequently point to Margery Kempe as a model of typical female illiteracy, ignoring the ample hints in her text that she was literate in the vernacular (Koster). We overlook the instructions in texts like *Ancrene Wisse* warning against anchoresses setting up as teachers—for which they would have to have at least some degree of literacy. We downplay the pictures of literate women in medieval English literature, like Langland's Abstinence the Abbess teaching the ABCs, or Chaucer's May, who pours over her love letter in the privy. We discount the numerous paintings and manuscript illuminations that show women pursuing pious reading individually and in groups (see Bell 1988 for a convincing overview). In short, we assume that women's literacy was far less widespread and far weaker than the actual evidence suggests.

But is this assumption true? To examine it I have chosen the great collection of medieval documents held chiefly by the British Library and collectively known as the Paston letters, produced by a family of Norfolk merchant-gentry and their correspondents throughout the fifteenth century. Most of these are in print, thanks to a magisterial edition produced by Norman Davis that appeared in the early 1970s. For nearly three centuries, excerpts from the Paston letters have been widely antho-

logized and commented upon; and they contain writings by both men and women that can be dated and localized. Thus, they provide an exemplary body of texts for us to examine the range and breadth of English literate practices at the close of the Middle Ages. More than 800 Paston letters and documents exist in dozens of separate hands and handwritings, some of which can be identified and others only guessed at. Davis (1971) spends a number of pages in his introduction laying out the laborious methodology by which he has assigned various letters to authors. As the principal criterion by which he identifies autography, Davis assumes if most of the letters from one person are in the same hand, and no contradictory reason exists to believe someone else wrote them, they must be examples of the author's actual writing skill—his demonstrated literacy. For example, he argues:

The majority of William II's letters, from the time when he was at Cambridge and would hardly have employed a secretary, are in a single hand, though some of the later ones are not. In this case the writing of the majority must be his. All six of Clement's letters of which the originals survive are in the same hand, strongly characteristic and certainly unprofessional, with no incongruous corrections. This must be his own. In the next generation the great majority of John II's letters are in a single hand, which also signs or initials them; and nearly all John III's in another. Both groups must be autograph. (I: xxxvi)

But the practice of writing letters by hand was also circumscribed by circumstance and social status. Davis notes that

A letter may well be in the hand of the person in whose name it stands; but whether or not it is cannot always be simply determined. If the subscribed name is in a hand

other than that of the body of the letter it is, of course, likely to be the author's signature. Many fifteenth-century letters, especially those of noblemen or other magnates, are of this pattern; but of ordinary private letters a large number are not . . . . It is obvious that a clerk who took a letter from dictation, or perhaps composed it largely himself according to a general direction, would often write his employer's name in the place of the signature, not leaving it for his autograph as a modern secretary normally would. (I: xxxv-xxxvi)

Note here that there is no assumption that the person dictating the letter is illiterate in any modern sense; indeed, Davis goes on to note that many of the dictated or clerical copies of letters show interlinear corrections in different hands, often the hand of the subscription, indicating that the author read the letter over and "fine-tuned" it before adding his signature. This is certainly consonant with modern practice—busy people dictate their letters to their staff, who then prepare them to be sent. The only difference is today, when paper and computer printers are relatively inexpensive, the revised draft will usually be archived. In the middle ages, when parchment and paper were expensive, the hand-corrected draft would be filed or sent, warts and all.

But when Davis comes to letters written by the women of the Paston family and their female correspondents, his standards for determining literacy are rather different. Like the Paston men, the Paston ladies at times used clerks: Agnes Paston's surviving letters are in eight separate hands. Margaret Paston's extant canon includes 104 letters in at least 29 different hands. Davis concludes that "[t]he natural interpretation of this multiplicity of hands in one person's work is surely that women could not

write, or wrote only with difficulty, and so called on whatever literate person happened to be most readily at hand" (I: xxxvii). Davis also notes that when John Paston III wrote to his mother Margaret about negotiating his marriage to Margery Brews, he provided a draft of what financial arrangements she should offer on his behalf and instructed her to have another letter written

'of some other manys hand' [no. 378, I: 608-611]. If she could have written it herself this qualification would not have been needed. From these considerations it is legitimate to conclude that the women of this family whose letters survive were not, or not completely, literate. (I: xxxviii)

By Davis' logic perhaps it *is* legitimate to conclude that women using secretaries must have been illiterate. Such an assumption ignores, however, the exact rationale he uses to justify secretaries writing for men: that the heads of households were too busy with their daily duties to actually do the writing of letters, and so used household employees already on the payroll for that purpose as their clerks or to compose letters based on their instructions. After all, Agnes, Margaret, and later Margery Paston oversaw large households of as many as 40 people, with a variety of agricultural, legal, and business activities that needed to be supervised. They were almost constantly involved in litigation and negotiations over various personal, civil, and sometimes criminal matters. So why Davis thought busy men could use secretaries without being considered illiterate but busy women who used them *must* be illiterate certainly requires our scrutiny.

What we know about women's domestic practices, furthermore, may shed some light on their letter-writing.



We see reflected both in medieval art and in medieval literature the nature of women's work circles—a group of women of the household engaged together in sewing, spinning, or other domestic duties, while one of them read aloud to the others—perhaps something uplifting like Osborn Bokenham's collection of lives of exemplary women, or instructional books like the one written by the Knight of La Tour Landry for his daughters. As the good Knight says [in Caxton's translation], “as for wrytyng it is no force | yf a woman can nought of hit but as for redynge I saye that good and prouffitable is to al wymen | For a woman that can rede may better knowe the peryls of the sowle and her sauement | than she that can nouȝt of it.” (La Tour Landry 122) Obviously, reading is spiritually a higher-order accomplishment for women in the Knight of La Tour Landry's eyes than is writing—which is of “no force.” Thus, for the medieval world, literacy may in fact be a segmented activity: one can consume texts without being able to produce them.

Examination of the Paston manuscripts to some degree bears this out. Some of Margaret Paston's letters, for instance, are in several different hands, as if they were passed from one writer to another—or perhaps around a circle of young women who took turns writing from Margaret's dictation. This we cannot know, but the possibility certainly exists. Furthermore, in many cases, the Paston “letter” that survives is a rough draft—the actual copy sent to the recipient was rarely returned for the family records. Some letters, although it is hard to tell from Davis' notes, actually exist in two or three drafts, often in several different hands, as if several people worked them over in a collaborative authorship. What does this tell us about their



“literacy,” or about the scribal practices of their households?

Norman Davis was an exemplary scholar and I do not mean to suggest otherwise. But when I started working two decades ago on women’s literacy, my first project was to try to determine what was the earliest example of a woman’s autograph handwriting in English, and I bogged down among the Pastons. Every time I found a letter that might be autograph, I came up against one of Davis’ notes, such as this one to no. 446 (the oft-anthologized letter about Margaret Paston’s abuse of her daughter Elizabeth): “Hand unidentified; the same as in Elisabeth Clere’s other letters, nos. 500, 600, 724, which suggests that it may be her own; but it seems too regular and practiced for this to be likely” (II: 31). Or this, from a letter sent by Elizabeth Brews to her son-in-law asking in haste for a dozen armed retainers to retrieve her stray cows from the sheriff’s men, who have threatened her (no. 820): “Hand unidentified; evidently unskilled, possibly autograph” (II: 461). From my own experience working with later English manuscripts, such sweeping generalizations struck me as suspect, and I always resolved that if opportunity presented itself, I would look at the actual manuscripts of the Paston letters themselves and judge for myself. When I finally received permission from the British Library to examine the originals, the results were striking.

Consider the text of no. 798, the famous letter from the young Duchess of Suffolk, sister of Edward IV, asking John Paston III for the loan of his lodgings for a weekend, for purposes never identified (Figure I). Davis describes this hand as “An unpractised hand, apparently autograph” (II: 442). Davis’s assessment here seems sound. This is an early

example of Italic humanist hand, written by a young woman between 1479 and 1483. And it *is* quite obviously unpractised, with letters irregular in size and shape. This is a woman who obviously is not used to writing her own letters; as one of those “magnates” that Davis talks about in his introduction (I: xxxvi), she would be likely to use clerks to handle her routine correspondence. The spelling is no less regular than many other of the Paston letters; however, the only abbreviation used is the ampersand, suggesting that she did not know many scribal conventions for abbreviating letters. The quality of the ink and execution, moreover, support Davis’ judgment of inexperienced penmanship. The letter was folded into eight inch-wide parts, then bent together and sealed with red wax, into a packet about 1 x 2 inches, easily concealed in the palm of the hand. Apparently, the circumstances must have required that she bypass the usual means for producing a letter and do it on her own, evidencing her literacy.

Six letters survive with Margery Brews Paston’s signature. Typical is letter 418, written shortly after her marriage, which shows a clerk’s hand with autograph subscription (Figure II). Note that Margery is using a different pen than the scribe and is writing a different grade of script; but even in her signature, she includes three scribal suspension abbreviations. Is this, as Davis claims in his introduction, “a distinctively halting and uncontrolled hand, as of someone beginning to learn to write” and “making a rather ineffectual effort to sign her letters in her own hand as the men so often did” (I: xxxvii)? Furthermore, based on this sample (and the autograph signatures in Margery’s five other surviving letters), do we have enough evidence to sustain Davis’ claim that Margery “certainly

could not have written a whole letter reasonably legibly in a reasonable time" (I: xxxvii)? The fact that she had a clerk copy out her Valentines may convince some of her inability to write; whether it is contributory or sufficient proof, however, can be debated.

Consider another supposedly "unpractised" hand, that of Elisabeth Brews asking for the loan of those armed men for cattle wrangling (Figure III). It was written, according to Davis, between June 1487 and 1495—after John III was knighted but before her daughter Margery Brews Paston's death. It is written, to be sure, with an execrable pen, as indicated by the blots and the smeared double letters. So Davis' assessment of "evidently unskilled, possibly autograph" (II: 461) may be merited. But closer examination shows a fairly readable late secretary hand. It uses professional abbreviations: the nasal suspension and suspended T in line 5, the E suspension just past the small hole in line 7, the thorn-T combination beginning line 8, and so forth. Unlike the Duchess of Suffolk, whoever wrote this letter knew *how* to form secretary-hand letters competently. The hand is not unusually unreadable by Paston (or Secretary) standards; compare John Paston I's hand (Figure IV). Which of the two—Elisabeth Brews or John I's—looks the more "evidently unskilled"?

Other letters from women correspondents in the Paston collection show texts containing content suggesting autograph composition *as well as* scribal fluency, yet Davis consistently either denies or only grudgingly admits the possibility that they are autographs. For example, consider Elizabeth Mundford's letter to John Paston I (no. 657), written at about the same time that the Duchess of Suffolk was writing (Figure V). Davis calls this "hand

unidentified" (II: 266).

Mundford was the sister of Margaret Paston's mother, and thus calls John I "my right good neveu". She writes in "grete nessessyté" (line 2) about legal stratagems for breaking the entail on the manor of Estlexham she inherited from her grandfather and which forms part of her jointure. She has need of John I's intervention "in right hasty time" (line 18) and begs him to forgive "my symple wrytyng, for [I] hadde no leyser." The signature again is in the same hand and pen—and apparently practiced. It is clearly the same style of handwriting as that in Elizabeth Brews' letter, only squeezed to fit a considerable amount of text on a sheet about the size of our current 8.5 x 11-inch sheet. A number of pen blots may perhaps identify someone who has not quite mastered the technology of the pen or who has an ill-mended writing instrument; but if blots and haste, furthermore, make a hand "unpracticed," what do we make of the contemporary hand (figure VI) of one of the Paston's professional clerks, Richard Calle (no. 618)? What reason can Davis have for not even noting the possibility that this is Elizabeth Mundford's own hand? The only conclusion we can fairly draw is that Davis' paleographical judgments, as well-researched and considered as they obviously were, were also filtered through the lens of his gender expectations. Men were allowed to be messy writers. Women were not, because he did not believe they *could* write.

Finally, I turn to the hand that most vexed Davis: Elizabeth Clere's (Figure VII). This is the famous manuscript of Paston letter no. 446, which Davis felt was "too regular and practiced" to be autograph (II: 31). The handwriting is old-fashioned—much more Anglicana book

hand than secretary hand. Clere at this time would have been middle-aged, so she may well have learned Anglicana in her youth. The letter uses very typical, not fancy or esoteric abbreviations—w<sup>t</sup> for “with,” the ampersand, nasal suspensions, and so on. It is corrected in the same hand interlinearly—usually to amplify a statement, as if a writer’s afterthought. And it concludes “wretyn in hast on seynt peterys day be candel light”—which, considering the subject matter (the physical abuse of Elisabeth Paston) it may very well have been. Remember that Clere’s other surviving letters are in the same hand, as are all the subscriptions.

Nothing, I would submit, in this letter indicates anyone other than the author wrote it out, and much indicates that she did. Consider that Clere says (line 25) “I prey you brenne þis letter þat 3oure men ne none oþer man se it, for and my cosyn 3owre moder knew þat I had sent yow þis letter sche schuld neuer love me.” This does not sound like the kind of letter Clere wanted circulating among any of the servants, particularly the clerks—especially after Elisabeth Paston had to contact her cousin “be Frere Newton in grete counsell” (line 14) to get around her mother’s interference. The inference by Davis’ stated logic (I: xxxvi) is that such a letter is most likely to be autograph, and therefore, that the other letters in the same hand are also Clere’s autograph. But again, his predisposition to believe most medieval women illiterate led him to deny the evidence. If time or space permitted, I could cite other surviving letters—for instance, Constance Reynnyforth’s letter to John Paston II (no. 781) asking for guarantees of support for her illegitimate daughter by Paston—that similarly show that women could, indeed, evidence a level

of masculine clerkly execution in their handwriting.

So it seems clear that Norman Davis perpetuated patriarchal stereotypes of women's illiteracy in his edition of the Paston letters, despite evidence to the contrary. Why should we care? Because these letters are material evidence of people's lives, and it therefore is important that they be represented effectively, since other scholars rely on such collected editions to form their own critical judgments. For instance, consider Rebecca Krug's recent book *Reading Families: Women's Literate Practice in Late Medieval England* (2002), which devotes a long chapter to analyzing Margaret Paston's "semi-literate" status. Krug evaluates Paston's struggles to establish her own identity against her husband's and sons' textual and rhetorical dominance as evidenced in the letters Davis prints, without discussing the possibility that Paston may have in fact been not as dependent on men's agency to express her beliefs as the Davis picture makes her appear. Mary Erler's wonderful book *Women, Reading, and Piety in Late Medieval England*, doesn't even mention literacy as a possibility for any of the Paston women. Because Krug and Erler (and other scholars as well) rely on Davis' masterful edition and the critical judgments encoded in it to determine their picture of the Paston women's literacy, they perpetuate a representation that the physical documents do not bear out.

As primary textual study grows more and more unfashionable, travel grows more expensive, and access to manuscript collections more limited, our reliance on "magisterial" editions can only increase. We use the standard edited versions of Chaucer or Langland or Kempe or Malory or the Pastons because most of us have not

examined the manuscripts and never will be able to. But this does not absolve us of the duty to examine the lenses through which those magisterial editions show us the actual texts, insofar as they survive on the pages they come down to us on. When we have not seen a manuscript—or only seen a few pages from it—we need to use our critical judgment, our abilities to put together content and descriptions—and, in the final analysis—be willing to order a photograph and examine it closely. We cannot remove the mote from others' eyes if we ignore the beams in our own—and those beams may be present, even if we do not realize it, as the case of the Paston ladies' letters prove. And we cannot allow the dominance of a 'master's hand' to deter us from seeking the truth about medieval people's literacy, textuality, or other practices—or from constantly interrogating our own.

Josephine A.  
Koster  
Winthrop  
University





42

My beloved child in Christ  
I write to you from the  
heart of my heart. I am  
very glad to hear of your  
well-being and hope that  
you are all well and happy.

The Hand writing of  
Elizabeth, Dowager of  
Duke of York, Sister to King Edward IV.  
Empress of John de la Pole Duke of Suffolk

Figure 1. Letter of Elizabeth Duchess of Suffolk to John Paston III, probably after 1479, not after June 1483.



And yf I coud tyme to go to my wyf  
 to be your good & yf I coud tyme to go  
 myd but yette mynny I go to the nether, to you  
 od, piseyde you & sendy yf good tyme of your  
 wylle lavy piseyde to go felfe lavy of the name  
 that ye lavy felfe god, wylle to my wyf

The your friend & lover  
 Margery Paston

Figure II (previous page and above). Letter of Margery Brews Paston to John Paston III, perhaps 1481, 4 November.



I have been thinking much of late  
 of the many things that I have  
 done in my life, and how much  
 I have learned from them. I have  
 learned that I am not perfect, and  
 that I need to be more patient  
 and more kind to myself and to  
 others. I have learned that I am  
 not alone, and that I have many  
 friends who love me and who  
 are proud of me. I have learned  
 that I am a child of God, and  
 that I have a great future ahead  
 of me. I have learned that I am  
 a part of something much greater  
 than myself, and that I have a  
 great responsibility to live for  
 the good of others. I have learned  
 that I am a child of God, and  
 that I have a great future ahead  
 of me. I have learned that I am  
 a part of something much greater  
 than myself, and that I have a  
 great responsibility to live for  
 the good of others.

Kindly acknowledge my  
dear mother and sister

**Figure III:** Letter of Dame Elizabeth Brews to John Paston III, not before June 1487 or after 1495.

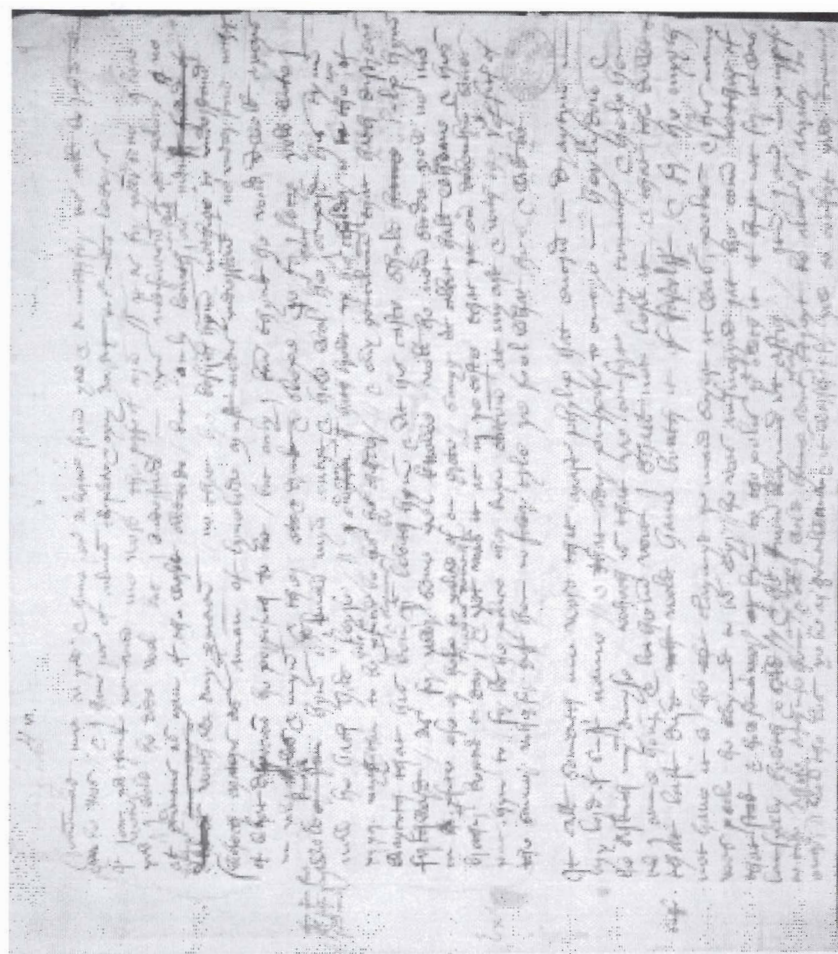


Figure IV. Letter of John Paston I to Margaret Paston, John Daubeney, and Richard Calle. 1465, 27 June.





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Figure VI: Letter of Richard Calle to John Paston I. Perhaps 1460, 11 November.





donn conunforable anstey of goth the that no more laboure in this murey. be cause he myght not so my cosyn zome anstey  
+ he myght be myght a ooe bye a sibe hat be lattyng. myn afe wt a y canstest hym to danyng. 2. by murey was not steel dilling  
+ so hane I sene my cosyn zome murey stary. wbessewe cosyn thynk on this murey. for oowt of syn tyme missef  
shamen to be se from ope wylle youn sibilites do. 2. if sibe wbessewe in yate case I wot weel ze shal be sary  
cosyn I tye goth if hane yot latty. 2. zome men ne wylle dyan se it for a my cosyn zome murey of furey. 2. hat  
sent goth yot latty. sibe sibilites men lode nua. Monnowe I wylle to goth at yot tyme but sibe goth hane goth in  
feyng. wbessewe in hant an sibe petyng. 2. be caused bye  
1452  
vi.

the zome cosyn  
wbessewe sibe

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