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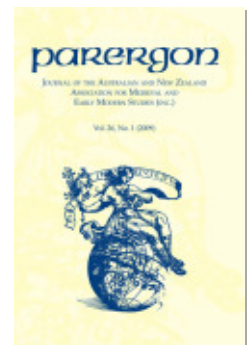
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‘Ryght worchepfull mastres’: Letters of Request and Servants’ Scripting of Margaret Paston’s Social Self

Valerie Creelman

Margaret Paston’s influential role in managing the Paston family’s affairs in her capacity as a wife, mother, and widow has been well documented. Garnering less attention, however, has been Margaret’s role as the ‘maistresse’ of her household and the influence she exercised in governing the estate servants with whom she collaboratively managed the Paston family’s estate business. Examining the highly politic speech activity of request enacted in the petitionary letters servants addressed to Margaret offers a rare opportunity to examine the rhetorical impact of these letters in the dialogic shaping and expression of Margaret’s honour or ‘worshep’, a critical aspect of her social self and influence in the course of estate management.

Born of an established, respected Norfolk family, Margaret Paston (née Mautby) brought the Paston family, through her marriage to John Paston I, not only several desirable properties but also the legitimizing gentle status and social connections this provincial parvenu family so desperately needed.¹ With the exception of her mother-in-law, Agnes Paston (née Barry), also of gentle birth, Margaret was the only other Paston woman of any pedigree to guide her husband and children on how to conduct themselves in an honourable way. Not surprisingly, Margaret emerges from the Paston correspondence as the household’s arbiter in defining what actions and alliances could enhance or diminish its members’ ‘worshep’.

In addition to augmenting the Paston family’s honour through marriage, she was also an active agent in its protection. The most prolific letter-writer in the family, Margaret frequently used her letters to guide, counsel, and, some might even say, bully family members into walking or, at the very least, toeing an honourable line. In addressing the role Margaret’s letter-writing performed in expressing her concern for and ‘maintenance of honour’, Roger Dalrymple has demonstrated how Margaret purposefully used her words to counter or

1 See Colin Richmond, *The Paston Family of the Fifteenth Century: The First Phase* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 120–34, and his chapter titled ‘Margaret’, in *The Paston Family in the Fifteenth Century: Endings* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 88–127.

redress the irksome lies, rumours, gossip, or, to borrow Margaret's descriptor, 'noyse' that threatened to damage the Paston family's honour.² In this way, she used her letters as a political tool to help maintain and broker her family's social reputation.³ Indeed, Margaret seemed to learn early on the impact her letter-writing could have in managing aspects of her and her family's social identity. As Rebecca Krug explains, the Pastons' reliance on textual evidence in defending its claims to gentility had a transformative effect on Margaret's own attitude towards her letter-writing and the textual strategies she employed there, using her letters to manage and shape her own publicly constructed identity.⁴ Margaret's substantial epistolary output has proven a valuable resource in gaining insight into her social roles, relationships, networks, and identity within the Paston household.⁵ As well, her letters to family members have been discussed to good effect in showcasing her influential role in managing the family's affairs and in cultivating its 'worshep'.⁶ Less attention, however, has been directed towards Margaret's role as the 'maistresse' of her household and the role household and estate servants might also have had in the social expression and cultivation of her 'worshep'. My intention here is therefore to examine the epistolary expression of servants' requests in order to show how the textual strategies present in their petitionary letters could also contribute to the shaping of Margaret Paston's identity as their 'ryght worchepfull mastres'.

- 2 'Reaction, Consolation, and Redress in the Letters of the Paston Women', in *Early Modern Women's Letter Writing, 1450–1700*, ed. James Daybell (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 16–28 (pp. 22–25).
- 3 On women's role as brokers of social reputation, see Laura Gowing, *Domestic Dangers: Women, Words, and Sex in Early Modern London* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 125–33.
- 4 *Reading Families: Women's Literate Practice in Late Medieval England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), pp. 17–64. On Margaret Paston's use of textual strategies to shape her identity, see also Valerie Creelman, 'Quotation and Self-fashioning in Margaret Paston's Household Letters', *English Studies in Canada*, 30.3 (2004), 111–20, and Joel T. Rosenthal, *Telling Tales: Sources and Narration in Late Medieval England* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), pp. 95–147.
- 5 See Richmond, *Paston Family: Endings*, pp. 88–127; Rosenthal, *Telling Tales*, pp. 95–96, 133–37, 144–47, and Diane Watt, *The Paston Women: Selected Letters* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2004), esp. pp. 1–10 and pp. 134–58.
- 6 Diane Watt, "'No Writing for Writing's Sake": The Language of Service and Household Rhetoric in the Letters of the Paston Women', in *Dear Sister: Medieval Women and the Epistolary Genre*, eds Karen Cherewatuk and Ulrike Wiethaus (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), pp. 122–38.

In 1450, Thomas Gnatashale, serving as Margaret Paston's estate agent at her Norfolk properties at Sparham and at Salle, wrote the following letter to her. In it, he requests her assistance in protecting his cattle and goods against a purportedly unlawful distraint by James and Robert Radcliffe:

Ryght worchepfull mastres, I recomawnde me to yow, &c. Mastres, I am enformyd þat my goode maystyrrys James Radclef and Robert Radclef intendyn to take awaye my pore good and catall where so euer they fynd it, be what menys I wot not. Also it is told me þat if I be in Norwych att þe nest schyere I xal be takyn, &c. Wherfor, maystres, I beseche yow to avyse me for þe best, as I may be your bedeman and seruaunt. Thes gentylmen are att þis tyme att Norwych bothe, if it plese your mastreschep to let my mayster have knowyng þer-of. Also I supose my ij neet þat were take att Lyng on Saterdaye last passyd was be here comawndment, for oon þat is vndyrbaly of Rychemond toke hem, &c. Also, mastres, John Eueryton xal telle yow oþer thynghys.

As for þe receytys of your maner of Sparham, with costys and expencys it is x li. iij s. xj d. ob.

Mastres, I beseche yow if ony man of your com to Norwych, if it plese yow your avyce, &c. Wretyn in gret hast.

Your seruaunt T. GNATYSHALE (no. 709)⁷

Although written, at points, in almost abbreviated haste, Gnatashale's letter nonetheless adheres to the prescripts of medieval dictamen in that he adopts the epistolary scripts suited to the supplicatory speech activity at hand and to the social position of his recipient.⁸ At every step, Gnatashale's language

7 *Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Norman Davis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 2 vols. Further citations will be given parenthetically in the text by letter number.

8 For discussions on the genre of late medieval letters see Giles Constable, *Letters and Letter Collections* (Turnhout, Belg.: Brepols, 1976). On medieval *ars dictaminis* see Martin Camargo, *Ars dictaminis, ars dictandi* (Turnhout, Belg.: Brepols, 1991); James J. Murphy, *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages: A History of Rhetorical Theory from Saint Augustine to the Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), pp. 194–268; and Les Perelman, 'The Medieval Art of Letter Writing: Rhetoric as Institutional Expression', in *Textual Dynamics of the Professions: Historical and Contemporary Studies of Writing in Professional Communities*, eds Charles Bazerman and James Paradis (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), pp. 97–119. For discussions of medieval *dictamen*, see 'The Principles of Letter-Writing (*Rationes Dictandi*)', attributed to Anonymous of Bologna, in *Three Medieval Rhetorical Arts*, ed. and trans. James J. Murphy (Tempe, Arizona:

delineates the social contours of their relationship; his formal salutation and deferential honorifics express and are calibrated to the subordinate service position he occupies in relation to Margaret Paston's superior position as his 'mastres'. Unable to perform the courteous acts or gestures of 'worshep' such as doffing the hat, lowering the head, or bowing the torso, he relies instead on the respectful honour-inflected salutation ('Ryght worchepfull mastres'), the deferential vocatives ('maystres' and 'mastreschep'), and the carefully mitigated polite phrasing of his requests ('I beseche yow', 'if it plese yow') to recognize and pay tribute to Margaret Paston's 'worshep'. In doing so, his words dynamically enact the observances of honour he would otherwise ceremoniously perform through physical acts and gestures in a face-to-face encounter.

Immediately observable from the language Gnatashale uses to voice his request is the palpable way in which Margaret's 'worshep' or honour both manifests itself and is acted out through the speech acts of his letter. In this regard, Gnatashale's verbal activity effectively displays the 'process' of English honour, the acts, words, and gestures by which another's social self – of which one's 'worship' is a critical part – is recognized and, in that recognition, ratified. The social self is consequently both a protean, fragmented 'bundle of perceptions' and a dialogic construct, 'a constant back and forth, a multifaceted, multiparty exchange of perceptions and interpretations of who someone is'. 'People', David Gary Shaw argues, 'are socially made in groups, by others' dialogue with self'.⁹ This collaborative shaping of the social self through language echoes Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogic view of social interaction and subjectivity, whereby the style and composition of human utterances both shape and are shaped by their intended addressees.¹⁰ Accordingly, a person's honour or 'worshep', and their perceived influence or power, is discursively constructed and traceable in the social exchanges of that 'speaking collective' with which the self engages.¹¹

Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2001), pp. 1–25; and Charles Sears Baldwin, *Medieval Rhetoric and Poetic (to 1400): Interpreted from Representative Works* (Gloucester, Mass: Smith, 1959), pp. 206–27.

9 *Necessary Conjunctions: The Social Self in Medieval England* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2005), p. 32, p. 15, and p. 44 respectively.

10 Mikhail Bakhtin, 'The Problem of Speech Genres', in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, trans. Vern W. McGee (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), pp. 60–102 (p. 95).

11 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 202.

As the dialogic interface through which mistress-servant relations were negotiated, letters like Thomas Gnatshale's provide us with only a partial transcript of mistress-servant relations in that no responding letters from Margaret survive. Nonetheless, servants' petitionary letters prove a profitable means of examining how the speech activity exhibited there contributed to the dialogic formation of a gentlewoman like Margaret Paston's 'worshep' for several reasons. First of all, letters of request conspicuously profile the determining and constraining effects differences of status and power had on an individual's words. In describing the addressivity of utterances, Bakhtin, in much the same vein as medieval dictaminal authors, underscores the shaping effects of the addressee on the addressor's message. 'One observes', he explains, 'an extreme differentiation of speech genres and styles, depending on the title, class, rank, wealth, social importance, and age of the addressee, and the relative position of the speaker.'¹² These letters thus provide a means of tracing how Margaret's perceived social position is grammatically encoded in the language male servants use to address her.

Request-making is also a potentially face-threatening speech activity. As such, it demands speakers and writers use rhetorical strategies to negotiate and advance their requests while also mitigating any potential threat or damage to their addressee's face. 'Face', as Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson define it, is 'the public self-image that every member wants to claim for him [or her]self'.¹³ Brown and Levinson differentiate between positive and negative politeness strategies as the two principal forms of redressive action speakers can use to minimize the consequences of face-threatening speech acts. With positive politeness, the speaker focuses on preserving the positive self-image his addressee wants to maintain and does so by demonstrating that his needs parallel his addressee's and appealing to a sense of shared values existing between them. With negative politeness, however, the writer shows his respect for the addressee by communicating his unwillingness to impinge upon her through self-effacement, formality, and restraint. Brown and

12 Bakhtin, 'Problem of Speech Genres', p. 96.

13 *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage* [1978] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, rpt. 1987), p. 61 and p. 70. See also Lynne Magnusson's profitable application of Brown and Levinson's politeness model in her reading of master-servant, mistress-servant social exchanges in *Shakespeare and Social Dialogue: Dramatic Language and Elizabethan Letters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), esp. Chapter 2.

Levinson's description of positive and negative politeness strategies helpfully emphasizes that in working to mitigate a face-threatening speech activity, speakers strategically use their words to maintain or style the hearer's or addressee's social face. As a means of analysing servants' petitionary letters, politeness theory thereby offers one method of describing how the mitigative language male servants like Gnatashale use to voice their requests can also act as a creative rhetorical tool by which they manage Margaret Paston's public face or 'worshep', using their words to preserve, enhance, or even refashion it.

Thomas Gnatashale's letter represents one of a small corpus of letters within the Paston archive – twenty-six to be exact – addressed to Margaret from male correspondents without kinship ties. Of those surviving letters, the majority are petitionary letters, with a number of those attributed to estate servants who were primarily responsible for overseeing operations on remote estates. Among the existing letters addressed to Margaret Paston are, for example, three letters from her estate agent, Thomas Gnatashale, who managed her manor and property at Sparham (nos. 708, 709, and 710). Although no responding letters from Margaret survive, Gnatashale's outgoing letters acknowledge the receipt of written instructions from her requesting information on expenses incurred, collected revenues, land leasing, market prices for grain, and other commercial matters relevant to the management of her estate. The specific financial information Gnatashale provides in his responding letters convincingly implies that Margaret routinely expected to be kept up to date on his progress and that she monitored his activities closely. Another group of letters constitutes those attributed to an estate servant identified only by his first name, Piers. Initially a long-time estate servant to Margaret's uncle, John Berney of Reedham, he came to serve the Paston family after his master's death. He was, however, imprisoned by John Paston I for purportedly having stolen or dispatched money from one of the coffers belonging to John Berney, a charge Piers repeatedly denied both during and after his imprisonment. Though few in number, these letters should not be dismissed as unworthy of critical comment. Rather, they serve as a suggestive case study by which we can begin to explore the social rhetorics of Margaret Paston's mistress-servant relations and their role in the articulation of her social self.

Aside from situating a gentlewoman like Margaret Paston in a position of superiority and influence over a male subject, the mistress-servant relationship served a vital role in the Paston women's lives in offering them a social forum

in which to achieve honour and, in turn, a degree of influence within their households and localities. In tracing the quotidian social practices of landed gentry families like the Pastons, Philippa Maddern has persuasively argued that fifteenth-century English provincial society cultivated and participated in a system of honour that privileged social interaction and relationships in a way that the traditionally chivalric system of honour (and the martial activity it fostered) did not. 'The issue of honour for the Pastons', she observes, 'mostly occurred in the context of more humble and mundane affairs. The protection and help given to friends, family and servants was a matter of honour.' For women, this system of honour was particularly advantageous. Not only did the practice of honour gain them status and power within it, but the system also gave them the opportunity 'to gain achievements of honour which were comparable to those of their male relatives, and yet were not bound up with their sexual purity'.¹⁴

Within the household, a woman's social and material generosity towards domestic and estate servants was the most propitious way to maintain her honour. In the fifteenth-century didactic treatise *How the Good Wif Tauzte Hir Douztir*, generous wages and kind words are recommended as the surest way for a woman to retain her servants' goodwill and, in turn, her 'good name'. In governing her household, she is instructed to be equable with her servants, not 'to bittir ne to bonour [gentle]', and in paying servants, to '[d]oo weel bi hem of þi good þat þou hast in welde [dominion, power]'.¹⁵ The Goodman of Paris likewise advises his young wife that some liberality with wages helps cultivate servant loyalty: 'Wherefore cause your people to engage servants and workmen that be peaceful and debonnair, and pay them more, for all of peace and rest lieth in having to deal with worthy servants.'¹⁶ To maintain positive relations with bailiffs and servants tending to her lands and manors, Robert Grosseteste advises the Countess of Lincoln to speak 'pleasantly', 'discreetly', and 'gently' in her exchanges with them.¹⁷

14 'Honour Among the Pastons: Gender and Integrity in Fifteenth-Century English Provincial Society', *Journal of Medieval History*, 14 (1988), 357–71 (pp. 360, 366).

15 *The Babees Book*, ed. Frederick J. Furnivall, Early English Text Society, 32, 1968 (New York: Greenwood Press, 1969), p. 41, lines 102–03; p. 43, lines 139–42 respectively.

16 *The Goodman of Paris (Le Ménagier de Paris): A Treatise on Moral and Domestic Economy by A Citizen of Paris (c. 1393)*, trans. Eileen Power (London: Routledge, 1928), p. 207.

17 'The Rules of Robert Grosseteste', in *Walter of Henley and Other Treatises on Estate*

Margaret Paston's attentiveness to servants' needs and maintaining harmonious service relations is evident in the advice she gives to family members. Margaret routinely reminded her husband and sons that supporting and helping their upper-ranking honourable servants not only helped secure their loyalty but also helped protect the family's reputation. Writing to her husband, John Paston I, she expresses her concern that their servant Philip Loveday may complain to others if he is not recognized and duly rewarded for his steadfast service:

I pray you þat ye wull vochesaf to be gode mayster to Loveday, and þat he may haue mony of you to bye such thynges as be necessary for hym, for I wote wele he shuld go right evill or he shuld compleyne. And if it pleasid you to purvey for hym þat he myght be in sum gode seruyce ye myght do gret almesse vp-on hym.
(no. 166)

Writing to her eldest son, John Paston II, she reminds him that such rewards are a necessary investment in procuring an exemplary servant's continued goodwill and support: 'I fynd Crom ryght welwyllyng to you in such thyngys as lyth in hym for to do. I pray you lete hym be thankyd therfore, and that shall cause hym to be the betere wyllyd' (no. 185). Even beyond the grave, Margaret ensured her servants' material needs were met and her public reputation protected; in her will, she requested that her household be kept 'by half a yer' and their wages duly paid after her death (no. 230).

Beyond the household, performing good works or charity was recognized as an important extension of a woman's household duties, especially if she were a woman of status.¹⁸ Charity was also the most public service a woman could perform to display her generosity and benevolence to the larger community and, in turn, maintain her honourable reputation. Although charity could be exercised in a variety of ways, the charitable works women performed were largely congruent with the Seven Works of Corporal Mercy espoused by the medieval Church which included everything from feeding the hungry

Management and Accounting, ed. Dorothea Oschinsky (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), pp. 388–407, (p. 407).

18 P. H. Cullum, "'And Hir Name was Charite": Charitable Giving by and for Women in Late Medieval Yorkshire', in *Woman is a Worthy Wight: Women in English Society c. 1200–1500*, ed. P. J. P. Goldberg (Phoenix Mill: Sutton, 1992), pp. 182–206, (p. 203).

to comforting prisoners.¹⁹ Offering consolatory words was also seen as an extension of women's charitable work. As Christine de Pisan explains in *The Treasure of the City of Ladies*,

charity exists in many modes and is not to be understood as helping another person only with money from your purse, but also with help and comfort by your speech and advice wherever the need arises and with all the good that you can do.²⁰

Christine therefore identifies gentlewomen's ability to act as advocates and mediators on the behalf of others as part of women's 'holy charity', underscoring the influential function women's speech serves in assisting, comforting, and counselling others in addition to more political speech activities such as negotiation and mediation.

I emphasize these two services of female honour because the expectation that a gentlewoman maintain her honour through protection and support of her servants and through charitable service to those in need is a dominant theme that surfaces in the appeals Thomas Gnatashale and Piers set forth in petitioning Margaret. Indeed, a combination of these appeals emerges in a second letter Thomas Gnatashale wrote in 1450 in which he once again sought Margaret's help in protecting his livestock from the Radcliffe brothers. Apparently, Gnatashale's first letter, introduced at the outset of this essay, did not elicit the desired response; at least, no corresponding letter from Margaret indicating he received a response survives. Whether Gnatashale's first letter was lost (never reaching Margaret), ineffectual (and thus ignored), or simply tabled in the face of more urgent estate business by the much put-upon Margaret, we don't know. What we do know, however, is that the silence his request was met with concerned Gnatashale enough to write a second letter in which he presents a strikingly more elaborate articulation of his initial request and invokes more explicitly the language of petition:

I recomawnde me to your good mastreschep, besechyng yow, *in þe weye of charyté* and as I maye be *your bedeman and seruaunt*, þat ye wyll lete me have wetyng hoghe I maye be rewelyd ageyns þe nest schyere. It is seyde þat there xal be mych more pepyll than was þe last; and also if I be in my ladys place or in any oþer in

19 Cullum, "“And Hir Name was Charite”", p. 188.

20 *The Treasure of the City of Ladies: Or the Book of the Three Virtues* [1405], trans. Sarah Lawson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), pp. 48–49.

þe town I xal be takyn owte. Also, mastres, þat my maysterys Radclyffys xal take all my catell and all oþer pore good þat I have, and so but *I maye have helpe* of my mayster and of yow I am but lost.

Also, my seruauit Maryot wyll go fro my wyfe, to my ryght gret hurte.

Wherefore, mastres, *I besech your help* in all thes, and I xal content þe costys as ye xal be plesyd, be þe grace of God, hoo euer preserue yow, &c.

Also, mastres, I can not be with-owte *your gracysows help* but I must selle or lete to ferme all þat I have.

Mastres, my lady sent to Cawnbrygg for a doctour of fesyk. If ye wyll ony thyng with hym he xal abyde þis daye and to-morowe. He is ryght a konnyng man and a gentyll.

(no. 710; emphases added)

Compared with his first letter, the appeals Gnatashale employs here to enlist Margaret's help are not only more skilfully crafted but also more strategically couched in the idioms of service and charity, thus echoing elements of the supplicatory scripts manifest in formal petitions submitted by petitioners or plaintiffs in Chancery.²¹ Through his salutary remarks (*'besechyng yow, in þe weye of charyté* and as I maye be *your bedeman* and seruauit' [emphases added]), Gnatashale quickly establishes the petitionary frame through which he wants her to read and consider his request, the social scripts of which Margaret would have immediately recognized, evident in the advice she gave her son, John Paston II, when she urged him to 'petition' her husband's forgiveness by adopting the rhetorical stance of a supplicant (no. 175).²² By casting himself as powerless supplicant, Gnatashale, through his speech activity, ineluctably assigns Margaret the elevating and empowering role of adjudicator or dispenser of justice in seeking her 'ruling' – an honourable position in its own right. By accenting his subordinate servant status, Gnatashale also directs Margaret's attention to the service relationship that unites them, the reciprocity upon which that relationship turns, and, more tacitly, the rites and obligations she is expected to perform as a person of status in that relationship. Even though the petitionary phrase 'in þe weye of charyté' typically appears near the end of a formal petition rather than toward its beginning, it is worth noting that by invoking the word 'charyté' at the outset of his letter, he effectively foregrounds the moral context of service relations, thus tapping

21 See *Select Cases in Chancery A.D. 1364-1471* [1896], ed. William Paley Baldon, Selden Society, vol. X (London: Bernard Quaritch, rpt. 1964).

22 Krug, *Reading Families*, pp. 54–55.

into Margaret's sense of charitable obligation to intercede and protect those servants who solicit her help.

Having situated his request within the parameters of charity, Gnatashale then incites Margaret to act by introducing statements designed to further actuate her social conscience. In almost clairvoyant fashion, Gnatashale describes for Margaret the calamitous events that will certainly ensue if she does not assist him: 'my maysterys Radclyffys xal take all my catell and all oþer pore good þat I have'; 'my seruaunt Maryot wyll go fro my wyfe, to my ryght gret hurte'; 'I must selle or lete to ferme all þat I have.' In building Gnatashale's appeal, this series of dependent clauses syntactically assigns subject positions to himself and Margaret which underscore the vulnerability of his position and his dependence on her intervention. His statements neatly dichotomize the mistress-servant relationship so that all agency in this relationship is ascribed to Margaret. Throughout his narrative, he casts Margaret as the charitable figure who will champion his cause and whose 'gracyows help' (indeed the word 'help' is conspicuously repeated three times) will prevent the seizure of his cattle and household goods. Thus, he effectively presents himself as a man at her mercy, dependent on one generous, charitable act to rescue him from this terrible fate. Collectively, then, Gnatashale's statements delineate an empowering portrait of Margaret, in identifying her as the only person who can intercede on his behalf and protect him from the imminent hurts and losses he foresees, and who, as his mistress, is morally obligated to do so.

By enumerating the hardships he will face, Gnatashale impels Margaret to envision and witness the material and social ruin he will experience if she withholds her support. In doing so, he offers an unsettling vision for Margaret to contemplate. For Gnatashale's essential claim when he writes 'but I maye have helpe of my mayster and of yow I am but lost' is that if she fails to help protect his livelihood by speaking on his behalf, then she is a silent agent in his public shame and the 'loss' of his good reputation. This loss of honour, the erasure of a distinguishing aspect of his social face is, even if expressed in formulaic terms, the 'ryght gret hurte' to which he alludes and wants to avoid. For Margaret to be culpable in or an accessory to the 'gret hurte' of one of her trusted estate servants would bring shame and dishonour to her and her family. Gnatashale therefore prompts her to remember that without her cooperation, his social privations will also be hers.

In closing his petition, Gnatashale refers to an unidentified lady whose presence, I will suggest, is not entirely incidental to his request. The 'lady'

to whom he refers is in fact Lady Isabel Morley. In addition to serving as Margaret Paston's bailiff at Sparham, Gnatashale also served as Lady Morley's bailiff at the nearby property of Foulsham.²³ Gnatashale's seemingly incidental reference to her would not have gone unnoticed by Margaret. In terms of status, Lady Morley, a member of the lesser nobility, was Margaret's social superior; to share the services of one of her estate servants would have been a social credit to Margaret. What is more, Margaret clearly valued her association with such a great lady and saw her as a living exemplar of 'worshepful' behaviour. That Margaret sought the advice of Lady Morley to learn what 'sportys' were permissible for a family and household mourning the death of Sir John Fastolf speaks of Margaret's desire to emulate the honourable behaviours of her social superiors (no. 153). By invoking his alliance with Lady Morley, Gnatashale indirectly reminds Margaret of the influential social networks in which he circulates and the damage it could do to Margaret's reputation if she were to refuse to protect him by providing the legal counsel her husband could provide. Certainly the prospect of having Gnatashale besmirch her good name by reporting her unwillingness to cooperate to Lady Morley would have been a social embarrassment Margaret could avoid by supporting his cause.

Appeals to Margaret Paston's charitable and honourable duty emerge in a more pronounced and intricately crafted way in the second of two letters Piers wrote to Margaret in 1461 requesting her to intervene and help release him from prison. Although the two autograph letters attributed to Piers speak to the same theme, the second, like Gnatashale's, presents a more calculated and textured appeal for Margaret's intervention in expediting his release. In his first, and comparatively shorter, letter, Piers implores Margaret to speak to her husband and persuade him to accept the surety that will secure his release:

Right reuerent and wurchippfull maisteres, I recomaunde me vn-to yow, bescheching yow of your good maisteresshipp to be myn good masteres to helpe wit your gracious woord vn-to myn right reuerent and wurchippfull maister and your to take of me, his pore presoner and your, suerté queche I xall fynd to be bounde for me to brynge me vn-to all answere in-to the tyme þat myn maister and ȝe haue dimisse me wit myn suerté; and bescheche your good maistereschipp to prey myn mayster þat he will yeve yow lycense wit his wurchippfull counsaill

23 Richmond, *Paston Family: First Phase*, p. 122, n. 26.

and youre, in case þat myn maister may nout tarie, þat ʒe in his absence may take myn seid suerté. And if it please his heyghnesse and your þat I may haue answeere ayene be the brynger of this, and here-vp I xall send for myn suertés, queche I trust in Good xul be to your plesur.

No more att this tyme. I prey God euyr have yow in keypyng.

Be your pore presonere PIERS, sum tyme the seruauent of John of Berneye.
(no. 714)

Through his conspicuous identification of Margaret Paston as his ‘maisteres’ and himself as her ‘pore presoner’ throughout this letter, Piers laboriously underscores the social distance between them, using his words to direct her attention to the vulnerable and debased position he occupies in relation to her. Although Piers does not explicitly situate his request as an appeal to her charity in this first letter, his request that she ‘help’ him by offering her ‘gracious woord’ to plead his case casts Margaret in the mediatory role of his advocate. In doing so, Piers entreats Margaret to take up the mantle of intercessor, consequently urging her to use her voice to perform the ‘holy charity’ Christine de Pisan urges upon women, namely to use their words to support those powerless to advance their own petitions.

In his second letter to Margaret, Piers tries a different approach. His purpose here is still to enlist Margaret’s help in persuading her husband to release him from prison, but he avoids any specific mention of his surety and its acceptance. Instead, he focuses more directly on his servant status and the past service he has rendered to her family, both to her husband, John Paston I, and to her uncle, John Berney, to remind Margaret of her moral and familial duty to help secure his release:

Right reuerent and wurchipphull maisteres, I recomaunde me vn-to youre god maistereschipp, *bescheching ʒow* to be myn good maisteres to remembre and to thynk vp-on me, youre pore presoner queche is lyeng in grevous jeryns [heavy irons], queche jernys ... most lost myn leggis; *bescheching yow* of your god maistereschipp to speke vn-to myn maister your husbond to be myn good maister and þat he of his good maisterschipp will take me vn-to his grace; for be myn trewthe I neuer deserued othir ne nevir will in non maner wyse. And as for good I haue non. As for myn body he may don þer-wit as it please hym. And þefore I *bescheche yow* to informe his good masterschipp þat he will haue compassion vp-on me, for I nevir knew of the goodis queche he put it a-yens me, and I thus to be kepte in preson for squech goodis þat I nevir had knowyng of. I may rewe the tyme þat I euer ded hym seruice, thus myschevously to be presoned for his goodis.

And þerfore *I bescheche þou*, for the love of Good [sic.] and for the love of myn maister þat ded is (vp-on his sowle Jesu haue mercy) and *in the wey of charité*, þat ȝe se þat I be nout lost in prison as ittis non othir lyche, for it was nevir myn Maister Berneys wille, &c.

Be your pore seruaunt PIERS, late the seruaunt of John Berney (no. 715; emphases added)

In his first letter, Piers's excessive deference heightens the social distance between them. Here, however, Piers promptly works to bridge that distance by encouraging her to identify with him in a way intended to arouse her pity and sympathy towards him. In his opening plea, Piers immediately implores Margaret to be mindful of him, to 'remembre' and to 'thynk vp-on' this self-titled 'pore presoner'. By inviting this meditation on him, he imposes himself on her thoughts, reminding her to be his 'good maisteres', to recall that he still remains a prisoner in her custody, and to recognize her moral obligation to protect her charge.

To facilitate this meditation, Piers exposes the physical and spiritual deterioration he suffers in prison, enabling Margaret to observe his suffering from a distance. In describing the disabling effects of the leg irons which threaten to leave him permanently crippled, he features himself as a man physically degenerating: a man no longer with the strength or fortitude to stand but left prone 'lyeng in grevous jeryns'. Having reported the physical condition of his outer self, Piers then indicates the crippling effects imprisonment has had on his inner self. To this end, he expresses a paradoxically detached attitude towards his imprisoned body, relinquishing it to his master – an indifference aimed, it would seem, at capturing the extent of his spiritual decline and the hopelessness he experiences in prison. Read in concert with Piers's emphatic assertions of his innocence, the resignation and plaintive tone Piers expresses here enable him to style himself as a martyr, a martyr who urgently seeks Margaret's intercession in securing the compassion and mercy of his overlord, John Paston I. For a religious woman like Margaret Paston, the dolorous tone of Piers's message would likely have achieved its desired effect: provoking some inward examination of her conscience and arousing in her a sense of her charitable obligation to offer consolation in the face of his desolation.

Although Piers casts his plea in terms intended to prick Margaret's religious conscience in his call for 'grace', 'compassion', 'love', and, of course, 'charité', he further complicates his plea by appealing to her desire to protect the honour

and good name of her family. In asserting his innocence and underscoring his unjust imprisonment, Piers's voice takes on a decidedly reproachful tone when he calls into question John Paston I's service ethic: 'I may rewe the tyme þat I euer ded hym seruice, thus myschevously to be presoned for his goodis.' In the face of untenable accusations, Piers's underlying claim here is that the treatment he has received at John Paston I's hands is not only indefensible but an egregious violation of the service bond between a master and his servant, and of the treatment a servant can reasonably expect from his master. With his much beloved John Berney epitomizing his measure of a 'good maister' and John Paston ostensibly missing the mark, Piers's implied censure is warranted. To Margaret, Piers intimates that John Paston I has lost his moral compass in this service relationship, and he requires her to guide him to an ethical and honourable course of action.

To offset any defacement of the Pastons' reputation, Piers consequently challenges Margaret to repair this fractured service relationship by ensuring that both his and his previous master's reputations are likewise upheld. In his closing plea, he emphatically incites Margaret to act by emphasizing her honourable duty to uphold a deceased kinsman's good name, her charitable duty to protect those who serve her family, and her religious duty to serve God:

And þerfore *I bescheche you*, for the love of Good [sic.] and for the love of myn maister þat ded is (vp-on his sowle Jesu haue mercy) and *in the wey of charité*, þat 3e se þat I be nout lost in prison as ittis non othir lyche, for it was nevir myn Maister Berneys wille, &c.
(no. 715, emphases added)

Neatly interweaving in one sentence the appeals voiced implicitly throughout his message, Piers concludes his request with familiar petitionary phrases but with added nuance as he reinforces for Margaret just how intertwined her social reputation is with his. Throughout his message, Piers positions Margaret as an observer of his suffering, but in his final plea, he begs her to abandon that role and not witness his loss in prison. Given the physical deterioration he already endures, the loss Piers alludes to may well be his life, but his use of the word 'lost' seems to bespeak, much in the same way Thomas Gnateshale's use of it did, an intense anxiety about the loss of his reputation or public face during this imprisonment. Branded a thief in the eyes of John Paston I, and his reputation in the system of service consequently imperilled, Piers faces socioeconomic ruin if he is not exculpated from the

charges against him and his good name restored. By imploring Margaret not to ignore or violate the 'will' of her kinsman, John Berney, and not to see him 'lost' in prison, Piers, in effect, reminds Margaret that several reputations are at stake here and of the public interface among them. He thus intimates to Margaret that any erosion his good name suffers during his imprisonment would, in turn, have a corrosive effect on hers, bringing dishonour to the Pastons, the Berneys, and, of course, herself. Piers effectively tells Margaret that she can preserve these reputations by urging her husband to show this self-titled poor prisoner some respite. For Margaret to bear witness to his suffering and do nothing would hardly be, as Piers asserts, in the service of honour or charity.

Judging from Margaret's correspondence with her husband both before and after Piers's eventual release from prison, Margaret was never entirely convinced of Piers's innocence. Before having received any of Piers's letters, she wrote the following to John Paston I on 29 October 1460:

Perse is styll in presone, but he wolle not confese mor thane he ded when ye wer at home. Edmond Brome was wyth me and tolde me þat Perse sent for hym for to come spek wyth hym, and he tolde me þat he was wyth hym and examynyd hym, but he wold not be a-knowe to hym þat he had no knowlage wher no goode was of hys masterys more thane he hade knowlageyd to yow I pray to Gode yeue grace þat the trowthe may be knowe, and that the dede may haue part of hys owne goode.

(no. 154)

After Piers's release from prison by royal pardon, Margaret still had her doubts about taking him into her family's service, even when he presented himself to her in tears begging for her forgiveness (no. 169). In casting himself as a martyr then, part of Piers's strategy in writing to Margaret was to use his words to style himself as perhaps more guiltless than he actually was and to give Margaret the opportunity to adjudicate his case in this epistolary 'proceeding' and remedy the wrongs committed against him. In doing so, he also characterizes Margaret as a legal official having the administrative power and authority to help engineer that remedy.

Discernible in Piers's and Thomas's appeals is their tacit assumption or presupposition of their mistress's social needs or desires, and they use that knowledge to influence her decision by underscoring how their requested needs coalesce with hers. In soliciting Margaret Paston's help, both men indicate an

acute awareness of what Brown and Levinson would term her 'positive-face want' to maintain her status as a 'ryght worchepfull mastrese', and present themselves as social agents committed to upholding that reputation. In this way, both servants position themselves as collaborators in the maintenance of their mistress's social self and in the actualization of her social goals. According to Brown and Levinson, this presumption of their female addressee's positive-face needs reflects a class of positive politeness strategies whereby addressors convey to their addressees that they are cooperators working to achieve mutual goals in the context of some shared activity.²⁴ In the context of these servants' letters that shared activity is, of course, service. By underscoring the mistress-servant relationship and couching their requests in terms of service, Piers and Thomas thus use service as a legitimizing framework for their requests and, more importantly, to underscore the reciprocity intrinsic to productive service relations.

Foregrounding the service relationship also figures servant and mistress as collaborators, not only in protecting each other's livelihood but also in the mutual shaping of each other's social reputations. In describing the collaborative, cooperative spirit of medieval service relations, Rosemary Horrox observes that service relationships ideally sought to preserve the honour of both servant and master. 'Service', she explains, 'could confer honour, but it was also expected to engage the honour of those involved – lord and servant alike. A lord's honour, in this respect, demanded that he uphold the interests of his servants.'²⁵ The vested interest and mutual commitment both master and servant share and exercise in the service relation therefore configure service as the social forum where both participants cooperatively work to support and preserve each other's reputations. This reciprocal management of reputation governing medieval service relations corresponds with what Brown and Levinson recognize as the reciprocal management of face governing everyday social exchanges.²⁶ In characterizing face preservation as a collaborative activity, a sympathetic enterprise conjoining the face needs of

24 Brown and Levinson, *Politeness*, p. 125.

25 'Service', in *Fifteenth-Century Attitudes: Perceptions of Society in Late Medieval England*, ed. Rosemary Horrox (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 61–78 (p. 68). On service relations, see also Richard Firth Green, *Poets and Princepleasers: Literature and the English Court in the Late Middle Ages* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980).

26 Brown and Levinson, *Politeness*, p. 61.

both interactants, they identify the discursive element of social interaction as the forum in which the positive public image each interactant claims for him or herself is managed and negotiated with each social contact. Considered from this perspective, the reciprocal management of reputation assumed to be operating in service relations occurs not only through the physical performance of service but also through the discursive practices enacted in the performance of service. Translated to mistress-servant relations, the social intercourse between mistress and servant, be it verbal or written, becomes the dialogic interface through which social face and reputation are attentively and collaboratively managed. The mistress-servant nexus, and the social exchanges enacted there, consequently emerge as an important locus in the formation of women's social reputation.

Ideally, service relations were mutually beneficial, so servants had little to gain from compromising the good name of the men and women whom they served. But given the social currency attached to one's honour, it is not surprising that Piers and Thomas both use the social value they know their mistress places on her worship to exercise the little social leverage available to them to elicit a favourable response. Through this leveraging of reputation, these servants engage in a 'politics of reputation', a political wrangling in which 'a good name is conferred in exchange for adherence to a certain code of conduct'.²⁷ Implied in Piers's and Thomas's letters is that to reject their request is also to reject their respect, loyalty, and social recognition as well as the honourable virtues and social properties they attribute to her. That these social privations adumbrate the language used in formulating these requests points up the potential vulnerability of Margaret's reputation in the course of negotiating the requests put upon her and the way in which each encounter with her servants, including face-to-face conversation, would have been a forum in which her social self was appraised and her honour and reputation negotiated. The collaborative nature of face maintenance and reputation management thus brings into sharp relief how a woman's reputation or honour could be negotiated through the course of these mistress-servant exchanges and underscores the vulnerability and instability of her public face or honour in the face of those exchanges.

That servants could use their words to enhance or erode their master or mistress's honour was a social cruelty of which Margaret Paston was acutely

27 James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 185.

aware and which she actively worked to prevent, as is evident in the counsel she offered family members. On 27 May 1478, Margaret wrote to her son, John Paston II, expressing her concern about a conflict that had erupted between him and Robert Clere, a conflict instigated by William Pecock, a Paston family estate servant:

Also as I vnder-stand þat my cosyn Robert Clere thynkyth gret onkyndenesse in delyng wyth hym of Pecoke for certeyn pasture þat ʒe grawntyd hym to haue, and Pecok hath latyn it to othyr suche as he lyste to lete yt to. Not wyth-standyng my cosyn hath leyd þe pasture wyth hys catell, and Pecok hath strenyd [distrained] them. I thynk þis delyng is not as yt xulde be. I wolde þat iche of yow xulde do for othere, and leue as kynnysmen and frendys; for suche seruawntys may make trobyll by-twyxe yow, wheche where a-geynste cortesey, so nyhe newborys as ʒe be. He ys a man of substaunce and worchyp, and so wylle be takyn in thys schyre, and I were lothe þat ʒe xulde lese þe good wylle of suche as may do for yow. (no. 228)

In duly chastising her son for permitting a servant to stir up trouble with such an influential kinsman, Margaret's counsel bespeaks her awareness of the subversive activities some servants participated in, either to advance their own interests or to compromise the interests of those whom they served, and her clear identification of Pecock as one of that cadre of servants likely to do so.

Based on her previous experiences with Pecock, Margaret had good reason to pronounce him a trouble-maker. About six years earlier, in a letter addressed to her chaplain and servant, James Gloys, Margaret clearly questioned Pecock's loyalty to her in the face of what she saw in him as an increasingly self-interested attitude: 'And I porpose þat Pacoke schall haue les to doo for me another yeree than he haith had, if y may be bettere porvayed, with youre helpe, for he is for hym-self bott not for me' (no. 220). The self-serving behaviour Margaret recognizes and critiques in Pecock at this earlier juncture clearly blossomed into the arrogant independence that led him to lease land 'to othyr suche as he lyste to lete yt to' with complete disregard for the pasture rights John had already granted to Clere and for the social repercussions the Pastons would have to endure for having treated a notable kinsman with such 'onkyndenesse'. From Margaret's perspective then, Pecock's efforts to cause some discord between her son and the reputable Robert Clere undoubtedly provided further evidence of his tacit efforts to sabotage the Paston family's name, this time by initiating a public rift with a kinsman renowned for his

‘substance and worchyp’, the type of deviance from social expectations that would easily add grist to the rumour mill and sully the Paston family’s name. Over the long term, it would seem that encounters with servants like Pecoock took their toll on Margaret cultivating in her an increasing mistrust of servants. Frustrated with John Paston II’s negligence in the management of his affairs and the people designated to conduct them, an exasperated Margaret writes in 1472:

I am so trobled in my mende wyth your materes, that thei be so delayd and take no better conclusion, and wyth þe ontrowth þat is in seruauntes now a days but if þer maysteres take better heed to þer handes, that such thynges as I wuld ratherst remembre I sonest for-gete.

(no. 214)

The concern and audible anxiety Margaret Paston voices about the ‘ontrowth’ she increasingly sees as the norm rather than the exception in servants’ behaviour also finds expression in the advice authors of household and estate management treatises offer their female readers. In their counsel on how to manage household and estate servants, authors convey a palpable mistrust of servants, characterizing them as given to misrule, laziness, and deceit if not closely monitored.²⁸ Resonant in the advice some authors give is an underlying anxiety about the social damage disgruntled servants could do to their mistress’s social reputation. In his advice on hiring seasonal workers at harvest time, the Goodman of Paris explicitly warns his wife to negotiate servants’ payment before their labour begins to circumvent any manipulative grievances and disparaging criticism they may bring against her later. Should she fail to do so, ‘they will’, the Goodman explains, ‘cry and shout foul and outrageous blame upon you ... they have no shame and [will] spread abroad evil report concerning you, which is worst of all’. He also advises her to ‘graciously and quietly’ dismiss those servants who prove ‘arrogant, proud scornful, or [who] give foul answers’ to ensure that she relieves herself of disagreeable servants in a way that protects her and her reputation from their ‘slander and wrangling’. In hiring domestic servants, he likewise cautions her that if she were to ‘engage a maid or man of high and proud answers’, she can expect that ‘when she [the maid] leaveth she will miscall you if she can’.²⁹

²⁸ See, for example, ‘Rules of Robert Grosseteste’, p. 399 and *Treasure of the City*, p. 131.

²⁹ *The Goodman of Paris*, pp. 206, 207, and 209 respectively.

Although the Paston archive does not offer an example where the unkind word of a servant directly crippled Margaret's honour, Margaret performed a critical role in repairing the damage done to her husband's good name on more than one occasion. She successfully mended fences, for example, between her husband and the notable Lady Felbridge after her servant, Sawtre, purportedly circulated false statements about John Paston I, causing him to question Lady Felbridge's friendship and support (no. 141). As well, the deteriorating effects of one servant's dishonourable behaviour on his master's reputation did not escape Margaret's critical comment as she urged her husband to intervene:

In gode feyth I here no man sey but that Bosvytle is right a mys gouernyd yong man ... I suppose but if his mayster voyd hym he shall repente hym be-cause of his mys gouernauns with-in short tyme. His mayster hath many moo elmyes [enemies] than he shuld haue be-cause of his mys gouernauns. I wold fayn that ye myth conceyle hym that he myth a-voyd hym assone as he myth wyth his wurchep, for he shall ell repent hym.
(no. 143)

Given the mistrust with which the intractable, resistant, or outspoken servant was regarded and the potential threat he or she represented to a mistress's reputation or 'honour', we can better appreciate the sense of urgency expressed in Margaret's recommendation to her husband that the household servant refusing her request to record a daily account of his buttery be replaced:

I pray you that ye woll asay to gett sume man at Castere to kepe your botry [buttery], for the mane that ye lefte wyth me woll not take vp-on hym to breue [record] dayly as ye commandyt. He seyth he hath not vsyd to geve a rekenyng nothyre of bred nor alle tyll at the wekys end, and he seyth he wot well that he xuld not con don yth; and therfor I soppose he xhall not abyd'.
(no. 153)

Within the late medieval household, the language or vocabulary of service was the primary means by which the service relationship was expressed and the social activity of service conducted.³⁰ Among the household members of the Paston family, the language of service infused their epistolary expression

30 David Starkey, 'The Age of the Household: Politics, Society and the Arts c. 1350-c. 1550', in *The Later Middle Ages*, ed. Stephen Medcalf (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1981), pp. 225–90 (pp. 251–53).

and contributed to what Diane Watt terms the ‘household rhetoric’ displayed in their surviving letters.³¹ As a slice of the Paston family’s household discourse, the epistolary rhetoric of servants’ petitionary letters therefore showcases one facet of the rhetoric of service in which Margaret Paston and her male servants engaged and offers some insight into the attentiveness with which servants worded their letters when addressing their mistress. Indeed, tracing the mitigative language and rhetorical manoeuvres servants use when voicing their requests enables us to witness male servants’ careful negotiation of female power and to re-assess our perception or understanding of Margaret’s power, agency, or ‘maistrye’ within the mistress-servant relationship. While the servants’ requests considered here clearly provide the necessary conditions for the exercise of female power, they also display evidence of a simultaneous concession and manipulation of that power in their recognition of and thinly veiled buffets and challenges to their mistress’s ‘worshep’ in developing these requests. As it is displayed in this specific set of mistress-servant relations, female power appears less an unequivocal, stable possession and more a protean and consensual byproduct of social interaction.³² Thus we can see how even a woman like Margaret’s ‘maistrye’ was, to varying degrees, circumscribed by the ways in which her servants could potentially use their words to challenge their mistress’s desire to protect her good name.

To arrive at a fuller understanding of how influential mistress-servant transactions could be in cultivating or diminishing a gentlewoman’s ‘worshep’, however, requires further exploration of a broader spectrum of mistress-servant relations. Whereas the letters male servants address to Margaret bear gendered appeals to her honour, one has to wonder, for example, what shape a female servant’s appeals might take in a petition to her mistress. As well, what rhetorical cast would requests from lower-ranking domestic servants take as opposed to those higher-ranking estate servants with administrative training and a more intimate knowledge of the family’s household and estate affairs. Only by directing attention to the rhetorical and stylistic differences across a range of mistress-servant communications can we begin to arrive at a more complete description of the diversity of speech genres that constituted the social rhetoric of mistress-servant service relations. Indeed, further exploration of this aspect of the language of service represents an important step in charting

31 Watt, ‘No Writing’, pp. 126–31.

32 Julie Diamond, *Status and Power in Verbal Interaction: A Study of Discourse in a Close-Knit Social Network* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1996), pp. 151–53.

a comprehensive account of the rhetoric of the late medieval household.

While much work remains to be done in this area, servants' letters nonetheless represent an important part of that polyphony of voices we encounter when reading the Paston letters. From them, we gain access not only to a frequently overlooked part of Margaret's social network and sphere of influence but also to a cluster of voices that collaborated in the chiselling of her social self and its various facets. In addition, these letters enable us to appreciate the mistress-servant relationship, both as a complex social matrix enabling women to participate in the provincial gentry's system of honour and as a means to achieve individual honour within it, although that honour and the influence and authority it bolstered may, at times, have been hard won as women like Margaret Paston negotiated their way through the politics of honour and reputation that determined and shaped social interaction in late medieval English society.³³

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