

# Quotation and Self-Fashioning in Margaret Paston's Household Letters

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**T**HE PRIVATE CORRESPONDENCE AND PAPERS of the Pastons, a fifteenth-century gentry family of Norfolk, England, have been an invaluable primary source for medieval scholars in piecing together the social, cultural, economic, and domestic details of a gentlewoman's life in the late medieval period.<sup>1</sup> Of particular interest have been the letters of Margaret Paston, whose correspondence represents the largest preserved collection of female-authored letters by a gentlewoman in late medieval England. Despite this abundance of material, few scholars have moved beyond the historical and philological interests of these letters to discover what they can teach us about women's rhetorical skill, compositional practices, and participation in applied rhetorics like medieval letter-writing. Recent scholarly work on the Paston women's letters demonstrates, however, that important steps are being taken in this direction: Diane Watt, for example, explores what she terms "household rhetoric" in discussing the Paston letters, and Roger Dalrymple examines the reactive, consolatory, and redressive aspects of the Paston women's letters. Broader in scope,

1 For sociohistorical discussions of fifteenth-century gentlewomen see Archer, Goldberg, Jewell, Leyser, Power, Shahar, Swabey, and Ward.

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Albrecht Classen's and Malcolm Richardson's respective efforts have worked to provide scholars with a methodology and corpus of medieval women's epistolary writings for further study. Each author's scholarly work not only charts new approaches and directions in studying women's epistolary writings, but also emphasizes the need for and importance of studying the rhetoric of women's household letters to enrich our understanding of women's literary history.

While scholars agree that Margaret Paston's letters display a woman of considerable influence and consequence in the Paston family, less attention has been directed to the language of Margaret Paston's letters to determine how her linguistic and rhetorical choices contribute to this impression of her. One distinctive feature of Margaret Paston's household letters is her frequent reference to and recital of external sources (individuals' statements or words) in her reports. Despite the prevalence of this practice throughout her correspondence, its purpose and rhetorical effects have not been fully explored. One obvious effect of Margaret's incorporation of others' reported speech is that it constructs her authorial position as a reporter, chronicler, and, perhaps, even translator of the household and estate-related events, information, and experience she recounts in her household letters. This reporting role has, however, largely characterized Margaret Paston's subject position in these letters as a passive and peripheral one. This characterization is not entirely surprising given that, in discussions of medieval women's literary history, the authorial roles of chronicler and translator have been identified as strategies of submission used by women to attach themselves to male authorities and participate in male literary activities (Barratt 12–16).

Margaret's own literary activity falls within this purview, for her routine composition of these household letters is attached to the male authority of her husband, John Paston I. Margaret's letter-writing is, after all, primarily motivated by her husband's request that she provide him with an ongoing written account of household and estate matters. Consequently, the report mode that characterizes her speech function throughout her letters is one that speaks of her subordinate position as a wife obligated to provide her husband with frequent written reports in governing estate business in his absence. Taking this social dynamic into consideration, this essay examines the practice of quotation to illustrate its presence not only as a function of Margaret's subordinate reporting role and the social constraints upon her but also as an important rhetorical strategy instrumental in her self-fashioning as an administrative authority on household

and estate matters and as an influential social agent, acting as mediator and ambassador for the Paston family and its interests.

In his essay, “Discourse in the Novel,” Mikhail Bakhtin observes that an individual’s speech is largely guided by, modelled on, and composed of the speech practices of others, and he expresses this idea through a concept he terms *quotation*. According to Bakhtin, to quote or to reference other people’s speech is a recurring motif and inevitable phenomenon in what he describes as the “conversational hurly-burly” (338) of everyday discourse:

Every conversation is full of transmissions and interpretations of other people’s words. At every step one meets a “quotation” or a “reference” to something that a particular person said, a reference to “people say” or “everyone says,” to the words of the person one is talking with, or to one’s own previous words. (338)

In their meticulous tracking and transmittal of others’ words, Margaret Paston’s letters capture the polyphonic quality of social exchange Bakhtin describes. In reading her narratives, one cannot advance very far before arriving at a reference to or a quotation of another’s words. For in rendering her daily accounts of household and commercial affairs, Margaret diligently records the transient words of household and estate servants, merchants, tradespeople, neighbours, civic officials, friends, family members, and even adversaries. Indeed, Margaret’s reports textually trace the dialogic world in which she engages, mapping the constant transmission of words she encounters and dispatches to her husband:

A yonge woman that was somtyme wyth Burton of this town *sent me word* þer-of. I pray yow *send me word* if ye woll þat any thyng þat ye woll be do to hym or ye come hom. Richard Charles *sendyth yow word* þat Wylles hath be at hym here and offerid hym to make hym astate in all thyngys according to there in-denture, and if he do the contrary ye shall *some haue word*.<sup>2</sup> (no. 150; emphases added)

Representative of many passages in her letters, this one illustrates well how words are constantly in transit, circulating, and being exchanged; how words are commodified, spoken of in terms of tradeable goods to

2 All quotations from the Paston letters within this essay are from Norman Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971) vol.1 and are hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

Margaret Paston  
faithfully records  
the transient  
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chants, tradespeo-  
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be forwarded, sent, and received; and how Margaret's letters sustain this transmission process.

Even though Margaret is clearly at the centre of this information exchange, some have considered her subject position to be peripheral or marginalized because of the precedence she gives to others' voices within her narratives. Undoubtedly, it was this perceived absence that prompted Virginia Woolf to comment, upon reading the Paston family letters, that "Mrs. Paston did not talk about herself" (18). Given that the function of her letters is primarily shaped by her husband's request for estate-related information, Margaret does not see her letters as the place for personal self-reflection; however, overtly personal elements do occasionally surface. In one instance, for example, she expresses her disappointment on learning that her husband will not be home for the Christmas holidays: "I am sorry that ye xall not at hom be for Crystemes. I pray you that ye will come as sone as ye may. I xhall thynke my-selfe halfe a wedowe be-cause ye xal not be at home, &c" (no. 153). Margaret's focus, however, is directed towards collecting and communicating news and information only as it relates to her husband, his business affairs, and the daily management of his estates. Rather than view Margaret's seeming absence from her letters as the humble self-effacement of a female writer, I advocate an alternative view: that Margaret's seemingly peripheral role emerges from her self-fashioning as an authoritative administrator and influential social agent in managing household and estate business.

For the most part, Margaret's frequent practice of referencing and citing others' statements within her household reports emerges from the subordinate or accountable position she occupies in relationship to her husband. In fulfilling her role as a wife and as a surrogate governor of her husband's manors and properties in his absence, she is obligated to render a comprehensive and accurate account of her daily estate activities. The letters John Paston I addresses to Margaret strongly indicate he closely monitored her and his servants' activities. In the following letter, he provides her with specific instructions on what matters he expected her to perform and how frequently she should report to him:

I praye yow see to the god gouernaunce of my housold and gudyng of other thynges touchyng my profite, and þat ye, with Daubeney and Richard Calle and with other such of my frendes and seruauntes as can avise yow aftir the mater requirith, wekely take a sad comunicacion of such thynges as be for to do, or oftenner and nede be. (no. 72)

Although often lengthy, Margaret's letters rarely digress from these forecasted themes. Her letters consistently display a serious attitude towards informing her husband of all household and estate-related details. Not only does she speak to the topics with which she is presented, but she also exercises an editor's acuity for including bits of news she knows will interest her husband, such as the death of a landowner and the possibility of purchasing his land. Given the emphasis John Paston I places on receiving news directly related to his "profite," Margaret's messages recount in some detail the social and economic transactions she performs and for which she is accountable.

Because Margaret Paston, like most medieval women, was directly involved in managing the household's finances and material resources, significant parts of her messages are dedicated to reporting her management of the family's income and citing evidence to support those claims. In the following example, Margaret Paston refers to Richard Calle's and her son John Paston II's respective statements to explain why so little money was collected: "And as for gadyryng of mony I sey nevyr a werse seson, for Rychard Calle seyth he can get but lytyll in substans of that is owyng, nowthyr of yowyr lyuelod nor of Fastolfys. And John Paston seyth they that may pay best, they pay werst" (no. 168). Interestingly, the way Margaret Paston quotes others' statements when reporting economic activities within her reports is, in fact, analogous to the way medieval accountants reference and cite external sources to substantiate the claims articulated in their accounts (Mertes 77). Stylistically, Margaret's letters also bear the register of an estate agent's report or of medieval writs and memoranda in their short, clipped reportage.<sup>3</sup>

Item, ther be bawt for yow iij horse at Seynt Feythys feyr, and all be trotterys, ryth fayir horse, God saue hem, and they be well kepyd.

Item, yowyre myllys at Heylysdon be late for xij marke and the myller to fynde the reparacion, and Rychard Calle hathe let all yowyr londys at Caster; but as for Mawtby londys, they be not let yet. (no. 154)

Typical of many passages in her letters dedicated to recounting the diverse economic transactions for which she was responsible, her tone possesses

3 See M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record*, on the types and characteristics of medieval record (esp. chap. 3, pp. 81–92). Clanchy indicates that writs (*brevia*) are noted for their "brevity and directness of style" and are defined as "a written command given by one person to another" (90).

the terse detachment readers commonly associate with modern business communications. It is in these senses, then, that Margaret's language reflects the accountable administrative role she performs, not unlike that of the estate agent or the bailiff to which Virginia Woolf alludes.

While the reporting role may appear to position the female author in a subordinate, marginal position—as a passive mouthpiece channelling the words and messages of others—it is, in fact, a position vesting the female author with considerable rhetorical agency. As Mikhail Bakhtin explains, even in instances where speakers repeat or appropriate the utterances of others, these utterances undergo a transformation once integrated with a speaker's or writer's individual utterance. To illustrate how the words uttered in any speech exchange are both “individual and contextual in nature,” Bakhtin describes three ways in which a word functions in human communication:

[A]s a neutral word of a language, belonging to nobody; as an *other's* word, which belongs to another person and is filled with echoes of the other's utterance; and, finally, as *my* word, for, since I am dealing with it in a particular situation, with a particular speech plan, it is already imbued with my expression. (“Speech Genres” 88)

The third aspect of Bakhtin's description is of particular significance to my discussion here in informing how we read the practice of quotation within Margaret Paston's letters. For Bakhtin's conception of the utterance rejects the idea that speakers passively assimilate and imitate others' words and utterances. Instead, he proposes that even in moments of verbatim quotation speakers colour, accent, and align these words with their own intent, speech situation, and overall speech plan. “These words of others,” Bakhtin asserts, “carry with them their own expression, their own evaluative tone, which we assimilate, rework, and re-accentuate” (“Speech Genres” 89). Considered in this light then, the often static, obligatory statements of report characterizing Margaret Paston's speech function within her letters, no longer cast her accountable, reporting role as a passive, marginalized, peripheral one. Rather, the reporting role is one that vests her with considerable agency, enabling her to shape how her and others' utterances appear in her household accounts.

To begin with, Margaret's careful quotation or recital of others' individual statements within her reports enables her to construct her own ethos as a conscientious administrator of and authority on her husband's commercial and legal affairs. As a prominent lawyer's wife, Margaret Pas-

ton often acted as an informal legal assistant to her husband, expected to meet with and interview her husband's clients and to gather oral testimonies and textual evidence at his request. Thus Margaret's judicious report of individuals' statements is also, at times, linked to a legal ethic that demands her reports present an accurate account of the testimonials she hears. In reporting on the legal business she conducts on his behalf, Margaret diligently records the conversations in which she participates. An ongoing witness to the Paston family's land-title disputes, Margaret undoubtedly knew the importance attributed to an individual's personal statements and the value of the written word in legal proceedings. That Margaret Paston adopted her husband's litigious attitude toward her and her family's personal writings is evident in the advice she gives to her eldest son John Paston II:

And in alwyse I avyse you for to be ware that ye kepe wysly youre wrytyngys that ben of charge, that it com not in here handys that may hurt you heraftere. Youre fadere, wham God assole, in hys trobyll seson set more by hys wrytyngys and evydens than he dede by any of his moveabell godys. Remembre that yf tho were had from you ye kowd neuer gyte no moo such as tho be for youre parte, &c. (no. 198)

Combined with the meticulousness with which Margaret documents conversations and events within her letters, Margaret's cautionary words to her son arguably suggest that, for her, every piece of correspondence one composes could potentially become evidence, either in the advancement of one's causes or, if arriving in the hands of one's adversaries, one's defeat. For Margaret Paston, then, letters are not only a means of communicating practical information but also lasting evidentiary documents, and that legal accountability is partly reflected in her recurring insertion of individuals' statements within her letters. Not surprisingly then, Margaret presents a thorough account of her verbal exchange with Lady Isabel Morley who, discontented with John's management of her legal suit, threatened to sue him:

I was wyth my Lady Morley on þe Satyrday next after þat ze departyd from hens, and told here qhat answeze þat ze had of Jon Butt.... And sche seyde sche wyl þat ze delay jt forþe þat sche xuld nowth have þat longyth to here ryth. And sche told me hw jt was payd in Thomas Chawmberys tym, qhan here dowter Hastyngys was weddyd; and sche seyde sythyn þat ze wyl make none end wyth here sche wyl sew þer-fore as law wyl. I conseyyd be here þat sche had cwysel to labore azens

3w þer-jn wyth-jn ryth schort tym. And þan I prayd here þat sche wuld vwche-save nowth to labowre azens 3w jn þis matere tyl 3e kom hom; and sche seyde nay, be here feyth sche wuld no more days 3eve 3w þer-jn. Sche seyde sche had sett 3w so many days to a-kord wyth here and 3e had broke þem þat sche was ryth wery þer-of; ... þan I prayd here azyn þat sche wuld teryn tyl 3e kom hom, and I seyde I trostyd veryly þat 3e wuld don qhan 3e kom hom as jtt longyth to 3w to don; and jf 3e myth have very knowleche þat sche awyth of ryth for to have jtt, I seyde I wist wel þat 3e wuld pay jt wyth ryth gode wyl, and told here þat 3e had sergyd to a fownd wrytyng þer-of and 3e kwd non fynd in non wyse. And sche sayde sche wist wele þer was wrytyng þer-of j-now, ... And jn no wyse I kwd not getyn no sewnthe of here to sesyn tyl 3e kom hom. (no. 128)

Margaret Paston's use of reporting verbs to identify Lady Morley's speech exhibits not only her determination to give a complete, accurate report of what Lady Morley said to her, but also her prescience in recognizing that her report could conceivably function as an evidentiary record of what was said by both parties should circumstances later escalate beyond what she describes here. Hence, in recording Lady Morley's speech, Margaret also enables her addressee, John Paston I, to "hear" Lady Morley's testimony and judge it accordingly.

In quoting or citing her and Lady Morley's words, Margaret is able to present a complete, accurate account of their conversation, but this practice also enables her to foreground her efforts in serving her husband's interests. For in satisfying her husband's need for a full report, Margaret's account also describes in detail her verbal efforts to dissuade Lady Morley from taking legal action against her husband until he could return home and speak with her directly. One would imagine the conversation was a reciprocal one, with the two women actively involved in intense dialogue. But Margaret Paston's attention to reporting Lady Morley's words initially presents the exchange as an unidirectional one dominated by Lady Morley's concerns. By prefacing Lady Morley's words with reporting phrases like "sche seyde," and "sche told me," Margaret's subject position within this report is that of a passive listener or receiver of this information, which she duly chronicles. However, a notable shift occurs in Margaret's narrative when she stops reporting on Lady Morley's response to instead comment on her intellectual response to and rationalization of Lady Morley's claim: "I consevyd be here þat sche had cwnsel to labore azens 3w þer-jn wyth-jn ryth schort tym." This transitory statement marks a critical shift in Margaret Paston's subject position within this account from that of a

compiler or receiver of information to an active participant in the narrative who then proceeds to use her speech to dissuade Lady Morley from taking action against her husband. Margaret documents not only Lady Morley's arguments for proceeding with her suit but also her own counter-arguments for halting further action: "And þan I prayd here þat sche ... and sche seyde nay, ... þan I prayd here azyn þat sche wuld teryn tyl ze kom hom, and I seyde I trostyde veryly þat ze wuld don qhan ze kom hom as jtt longyth to 3w to don" (emphases added). Although the outcome is one of defeat for Margaret ("And jn no wyse I kwd not getyn no growth of here to sesyn tyl ze kom hom"), the verbal exchange documented and represented here nevertheless displays Margaret's tenacity as a negotiator in helping to mitigate a potentially volatile situation, and the vigour with which she represents and defends her husband's legal interests and honour in his absence. Margaret's report also illustrates how her use of quotation enables her to satisfy her husband's need for a full report of her involvement and yet also assert her administrative talents, thus projecting to her husband a positive portrayal of her effectiveness in governing his affairs. Consequently, every household report Margaret composes is a space of opportunity to move from the seemingly marginalized and subordinate position of a reporter to that of a recognized and influential authority on the household and estate matters she administers on her husband's behalf. For within this and other household reports, she is the person who possesses the valued information her husband seeks, who provides a complete and accurate account, and who speaks knowledgeably and authoritatively on household and estate matters.

In addition to displaying her effectiveness in administering her husband's affairs, Margaret's quotation and mediation of other people's speech enables her to fashion herself as a social agent, using her letters as a forum in which to introduce the concerns and requests of others. In doing so, Margaret brings a political dimension to her reporting role as she mitigates these requests, thus complicating the subject position initially ascribed to her and creatively redefining the purpose of her reports. Indeed, her attention to incorporating others' speech into her discourse suggests she regards her letters not only as a space for reporting business transactions and estate information but also as a space for presenting and promoting others' causes and petitions to her husband. In this sense, Margaret becomes a medium of sorts giving others' voices the opportunity to speak to her husband through her letters:

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estate matters  
she administers.

Item, my cosyn Crane recomandyth hyr to yow and prayith yow þat ye wole wychesaue to spek to Jamys Gresham for to swe forthe the mater betwyx Dame Margaret Spurdans and hyr; and sche prayith yow at the reuerens of God þat ye wole tendyr þat mater well, for all hyr troste is in yow.

Item, the tenauntys at Sweynysthorp prayid me for to wryte to yow for to pray yow for Goddys sake þat ye wole help forto get hem a good baly of the hundryrd þat they be in, for they sey þat they haue be gretly hurte by swyche offyserys as they haue had ther be-for tyme. (no. 164)

The manner in which Margaret re-cites other people's concerns or requests demonstrates how she shapes their presentation to ensure their positive reception by her addressee. In the above case, and in others, Margaret not only recounts the person's request but also provides contextual cues to accent the urgency of the request. In the case of the Pastons' tenants, she emphatically describes the physical force the tenants experienced at the officers' hands to encourage her husband to assist them. In relating her cousin Crane's request, Margaret chooses to accent her cousin's claim that "all hyr troste" is in John Paston I to appeal to his sense of honour and duty to help this kinswoman.

In other instances, Margaret not only reports the request but also what Bakhtin refers to as the *intonation* with which it is reported, consequently bringing a double-voiced quality to her utterances. In a letter to her eldest son, John Paston II, Margaret describes the tone of the tenants' speech to incite him to act immediately on their behalf: "Therefore purvey an redy remedye, or ell ye lese the tenauntes hertes and ye gretly hurt, for it is gret pety to here *the swemefull and petowse compleyntes* of the pore tenauntes that come to me for comfort and socour, sumtyme be vj or vij to-geder. Therefore, for Goddes love, se that thei ben holpyn" (no. 200; emphasis added). And in telling her husband of the urgent need to find a suitable husband for his sister, Elizabeth Paston, she communicates the tone in which his mother addressed her: "My modere prayith yow for to remembre my suster, and to do your parte feythfully or ye come hom to help to gette here a gode mariage. It semyth *be my moderys langage* þat she wold neuer so fayn to haue be delyueryd of her as she woll now" (no. 150; emphasis added).

Additionally, Margaret often comments on paralinguistic cues to accentuate the pathos of an appeal. In her effort to repair the fractured relationship between her cousin Elizabeth Clere and John Paston I, she writes the following:

She sayth there ys no man a-lyff that she hath put here truste in so moch as she hath doon in you. She sayth she wote well such langage as hath be reportyd to you of here othere-wyse then she hath deseruyd causyth you to be othere-wyse to here then ye shold be. *She had to me thys langage wyppyng*, and told me of dyuers othere thyngys the whych ye shall haue knowlych of heraftere. (no. 190; emphasis added)

Margaret's attention to how the request is rhetorically framed demonstrates how she insinuates herself into her texts to maximize the rhetorical effect of the requests she forwards. In mediating and advancing others' requests, Margaret is also able to display to her husband the social agency and influence she has outside the space of her letters as others solicit her aid and counsel. The number of requests Margaret Paston forwards on the behalf of women also indicates how women without the authority to act on their own behalf enlist the assistance of gentlewomen like Margaret to advance their concerns.

Margaret's self-promotion through her letters as a mediator and ambassador for the Paston family is solidified in her self-quotation, that is, the recounting of her own words and actions, particularly when reporting her role in defusing household and estate crises. Surveying the range of activities Margaret Paston recounts in her letters indicates that the moments where Margaret's influence and authority in estate management come to the forefront are those in which she mitigates crisis situations. Margaret's letters demonstrate that her mettle and managerial talents were keenly tested in her efforts to protect the Pastons' estates and tenants from the Duke of Suffolk's repeated attempts in 1465 to make claims, albeit tenuous ones, to the properties at Hellesdon and Drayton, which the Pastons had inherited from Sir John Fastolf.

The politics of this situation placed the tenants based at these estates in a particularly precarious position. Harassed, threatened, and intimidated by the Duke of Suffolk's men, tenants paid their rental fees to the Duke for fear of being ousted from their lands or imprisoned, but doing so often left them unable to pay the Pastons the rents that were duly theirs. In the following passage, excerpted from a lengthy letter addressed to John Paston 1, Margaret Paston describes her efforts to procure the tenants' rental fees. In doing so, she recounts her response to a group of tenants who arrived at the Pastons' estate at Hellesdon, requesting the return of seventy-seven head of cattle she had instructed estate servants to distrain for the rental fees the tenants had owing in arrears:

Fyrst on the same Satour-day the tenauntys folwyd vppon, and desyryd to haue there catell a-yen, and I awnnsweryd hem yf thay wold do pay such dewtys as they oght for to pay to you, that then they shold haue there catell delyueryd a-yen; or els, yf they were not a powere to pay redy money, that then they to fynd suffycyant suerty to pay the money at such a day as they myght agrye wyth me, and there-to to be bonden to you by obligacyon. And that they seyde they durst not for to take vppon hem for to be bonden, and as for money they had non for to pay at that tyme; and there-fore I kept styll the bestys. (no. 182)

In relating her response to the tenants' appeals, Margaret's account of the exchange figures her words prominently in a way that gives more weight to her contributions to the exchange rather than to those of her tenants. Whereas she reports her speech in an apparently verbatim manner, she presents the tenants' speech in paraphrased form. Identified only in general terms as "the tenauntys" or by the personal pronoun "they" throughout her account, the tenants are characterized as an amorphous, unified group speaking the same message in the same voice, whereas she and her voice are presented as distinct and forceful entities.

In addressing the tenants during this confrontational encounter, Margaret also displays a remarkable equanimity evident in the measured control and logical balance of her speech. Her response is characterized by a series of "if ... then" clauses that syntactically trace the logical and diplomatic manner in which she informs the tenants of the payment options available to them: "I awnnsweryd hem *yf* thay wold do pay such dewtys ... *then* they shold haue there catell"; "*yf* they were not a powere to pay redy money, that *then* they to fynd suffycyant suerty" (emphasis added). Thus in tracing for her husband the rationale motivating her decision not to return the distrained livestock, she also succeeds in demonstrating to him her fair and politic treatment of the matter.

At a later point in the same letter, a similar foregrounding of her speech occurs in recounting her exchange with Harleston, the Duke of Suffolk's steward, when he approached her at the Hellesdon manor requesting the return of the distrained livestock:

And on the sam day at evynsong tyme Harleston com to me to Haylesdon, desyryng me that I wold delyuer a-yen the seyde dystresse ... And I seyde I wold not delyuer hem soo, and told hem that I wold delyuer hem as ye wryten a-fore, and othere-

wyse not; and othere-wyse I wold not delyuer hem but by the form of lawe. And othere comynycacyon was had by-twene vs at that tyme of dyuers maters whych were to long to wryte at thys tyme, but ye shall haue knowlych therof in hast. (no. 182)

Cast in paraphrased form, Harleston's words are de-emphasized while Margaret's response gains emphasis through the detailed and emphatic way in which she re-cites her response to his request. While Margaret's stalwart allegiance to her husband's commands is certainly displayed here in her refusal to comply with Harleston's request, the syntax of her response contributes to a rhetorical force complementing the immovability of her position. In a compound complex sentence, the declarative form of her sentence ("And I seyde I wold not delyuer hem soo, and told hem that I wold delyuer hem as ye wryten a-fore, and othere-wyse not; and othere-wyse I wold not delyuer hem but by the form of lawe") captures her unequivocal position on the matter. As well as a statement displaying her pragmatic knowledge of tenant and estate law, her response to Harleston bears a litigious register in pronouncing the terms upon which she will deliver the tenants' livestock.

Towards the end of her narrative, Margaret Paston's enumeration of what ensued after she refused Harleston's request enables her to display the acuteness of her decision-making and management abilities:

And on Monday next aftere at ix at klok there com Pynchemore to Haylesdon wyth a replevyn whych was made in Harleston ys name as vnderstewerd of the Duché, sayng that the bestys were taken vppon the Duché fee; wherfore he desyryd me to mak hym levery of the seyde bestys so taken, and I seyde I wold not delyuer hem on-to the tyme that I had examenyd the tenauntys of the trough [truth]. And so I send thedere Wykys wyth Pynchemore to vnderstond what they wold say, and the tenauntys seyde that there was taken non vppon the Duché at there knowlych, ... and so we wold not a-bey that replevyn, and so they departyd. And at iij at clock at aftere-non Pynchemore com to Haylisdon a-yen wyth ij men whych broght wyth hem a replevyn from the shyryff, ... whych requyryd me by the same replevyn to make them delyuery of the seyde bestys taken at Drayton. And so I, syng the shyryffys replevyn vndere hys seall, bade my men delyuer hem, and soo they were delyueryd. (no. 182)

We can begin to see the critical role Margaret's discursive practices perform in the formation of her subjecthood.

The events Margaret describes here all feature her as the principal agent: it was she who refused to accept Pynchemore's replevin until his claims had been investigated and concrete evidence discovered; she who sent a delegate with Pynchemore to discover if the cattle were indeed removed from the Duchy's fee; and she who instructs her men to return the cattle.

Taken together, the above passages map the events leading from the initial distraintment of the Paston tenants' livestock at Drayton to the presentation of the replevin that forced Margaret to return the livestock. On the one hand, Margaret's account of events demonstrates the objectivity she exercises in her reporting role in the careful attention she gives to documenting the time and day on which the events she describes occurred. Indeed, her report bears the register of legal testimony or an eyewitness account. On the other hand, however, the way her account focuses on her speech activities, while those of other participants in the letter (the tenants, William Harleston, John Wykys, and Thomas Pynchemore) are consistently paraphrased or glossed throughout her report suggests a certain subjectivity in what, on the face of it, appears to be an objective or disinterested estate report. Thus, while Margaret Paston's report features the vulnerable and precarious situation in which the Paston estates and tenants often lay, it also features the significance and portentousness of Margaret's actions and words in defending them.

In tracing the rhetorical effects of quotation in Margaret Paston's household reports, the foregoing discussion has shown how Margaret's epistolary utterances are partly shaped by the immediate expectations of her addressee, her husband, for comprehensive reports on household and estate-related matters. While this practice emerges as a function of her social and economic accountability to her husband, Margaret's letters reveal that her reporting role also provides her with a discursive space in which to assert herself and demonstrate to her husband the agency and influence she exercises in serving the Paston family's socioeconomic interests. In this way, we witness how Margaret Paston's utterances are not only shaped by her immediate addressee but also have a shaping effect on how her addressee perceives her. For Bakhtin, human utterances are inherently dialogic constructions, shot through with the words and statements of others, and serve an instrumental role in the formation and negotiation of self and selfhood. By examining the dialogic forces encapsulated in the practice of quotation, we can begin to see the critical role Margaret's discursive practices perform in the formation of her subjecthood and in the construction of her social identity within her household and her immediate locality.

The way in which Margaret's use of quotation pluralizes or instantiates a double-voiced quality to her utterances also forces us to reconsider how social exchange is commonly described in existing definitions of the late medieval letter. In defining the generic features of medieval letters, Giles Constable claims the "essence of the epistolary genre, both in Antiquity and the Middle Ages, was not whether a letter was actually sent but whether it performed a representative function" (13). By representative function, Constable means the letter's ability to represent the writer's presence—his or her thoughts, ideas, and, most importantly, voice—to the letter's recipient or addressee. When the letter is vocalized, that is, either read by or (as was common practice in the Middle Ages) to the letter recipient, that representation becomes what Malcolm Richardson describes as a "voiced presence" ("Women, Commerce" 130). Representative function in both of these instances indicates a one-to-one relationship, one absent person addressing another. However, Margaret Paston's diligent representation of others' voices through quotation makes her (the sender's) voice become pluralized in a way that complicates the perception that a letter is a one-to-one relationship between sender and recipient. In addition, the polyphonic or multi-voiced quality of Margaret's letters challenges the notion that a letter acts as "half of a conversation or dialogue between the sender and the addressee" (Constable 13), for her letters are largely comprised of full and half conversations extracted from the daily social exchanges in which she engages. The pluralized nature of her voice also adds an interesting dimension to the idea of the letter as *sermo absentium*, created so that "someone may speak to us when we are absent" (Constable 13), for in Margaret's letters, not just Margaret speaks but people speak, and they speak through her to her husband.

In this discussion of Margaret Paston's household letters, I have focused on Margaret's recurrent use of quotation or reference to demonstrate how Margaret's reporting role does not relegate her to a passive, peripheral role dependent on the voices of others, for in actively employing quotation, Margaret secures and shapes an influential position for herself as an acknowledged ambassador and administrator of her husband's and family's affairs. In doing so, my intention has also been to show how our perception of Margaret Paston as a strong, influential woman is not merely impressionistic but is rooted in and shaped by the language of her letters. My discussion of quotation as a rhetorical practice is, to this point, by no means exhaustive. Rather, my purpose in this paper has been to trace how quotation operates in Margaret's household reports and its rhetorical effects in order to introduce and open up a new approach for reading and

discussing medieval women's letters and the epistolary voices encountered there. Undoubtedly, Margaret Paston's letters provide an excellent example of a female voice participating in one of the few rhetorical forms available to women. While her letters have been mined for the historical, cultural, and socioeconomic details of a medieval gentlewoman's life, it seems the female voice that speaks these details to her contemporary addressees and, now, her unimagined modern readers, has been overlooked. By adjusting our focus, however, we may begin to identify the rhetorical aspects of that voice and what they reveal about her position in the social hierarchy of the medieval household and, more broadly, her immediate community. Finally, examining the language of women's letters provides us with an important means of discussing the rhetorical strategies gentlewomen like Margaret Paston use in their epistolary compositions and their contributions to the medieval English vernacular letter.

## Acknowledgements

A shorter version of this paper was presented at the 1999 ACCUTE Conference as part of a joint panel with the Canadian Society of Medievalists (CSM). Many thanks to those in attendance for their thoughts and suggestions. My gratitude is also extended to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for its continued support of new scholars and the doctoral fellowship which made the research for this paper possible.

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