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Women in the public life in late medieval England

A study through contemporary sources in the 1400s.

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A STUDY THROUGH CONTEMPORARY SOURCES IN THE 1400s.

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Tämä pro gradu -tutkielma liittyy keskiajan tutkimukseen sekä nais- ja sukupuolihistorian tutkimukseen, joka käsittelee naisten alisteista asemaa sekä heidän toimintamahdollisuuksiaan ja omia tulkintojaan. Keskiajan naisten historian tutkimuksen painopiste on usein naisten toiminnassa kodin ja suvun parissa. Tässä pro gradu -tutkielmassa tarkastellaan oliko naisilla mahdollisuuksia toimia julkisuudessa myöhäiskeskiajan Englannissa. Naisten julkisella asemalla tarkoitetaan toimimista ammatissa, julkisena vaikuttajana tai muuten näkyvänä osana yhteiskuntaa. Lisäksi pyritään selvittämään, millaisia yhteiskunnan asenteet ovat olleet julkisuudessa toimivia naisia kohtaan, ja miten he ovat pystyneet saavuttamaan valtaa ja vaikutusvaltaa.

Alkuperäislähteinä käytetään Pastonin perheen laajaa kirje- ja asiapaperikokoelmaa, Geoffrey Chaucerin romaania *The Canterbury Tales* sekä Margery Kempen teosta *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Lähteet antavat monipuolisen kuvan keskiajan naisten asemasta ja heidän elämästään. Tutkimusaihetta lähestytään kolmella temaattisella pääluvulla. Ensimmäiseksi tarkastellaan siviilisäädyn vaikutusta naisten mahdollisuuksiin toimia julkisuudessa. Toiseksi tutkitaan naisia työelämässä ja keskitytään ammatteihin, joissa naiset ovat joutuneet julkiseen asemaan. Kolmanneksi tutkitaan naisten vaikutusmahdollisuuksia uskonnollisessa elämässä luostareiden ulkopuolella.

Yhteiskunnan normit ovat asettaneet naiset maallisessa elämässä kodin piiriin ja uskonnollisessa elämässä luostareihin myöhäiskeskiajan Englannissa. Tässä tutkielmassa käytetyt lähteet osoittavat, että jotkut naiset ovat kuitenkin toimineet julkisuudessa niin maallisessa kuin uskonnollisessa elämässäkin. Naiset saattoivat saavuttaa huomattavaa vaikutusvaltaa ja valtaa omissa yhteisöissään. Kaikesta huolimatta yhteiskunnan asenteet itsenäisesti toimivia naisia kohtaan ovat usein olleet negatiivisia. Maallisessa elämässä naiset ovat yleensä saavuttaneet valtaa aviomiestensä kautta. Uskonnollisessa elämässä naiset ovat saavuttaneet valtaa puolestaan näkyjensä kautta saaden sanomalleen jumalallisen oikeutuksen.

Asiasanat: Naishistoria, naisen asema, myöhäiskeskiaika, julkisuus, valta, Englanti

Keywords: History, late Middle Ages, women, agency, public life, power, England

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1. Introduction

Men dominated life in medieval England and the subordination of women was based on economic, legal and political institutions as well as Christian beliefs and the science of the time.¹ Scholars and nobility largely defined the official status of women. Most of the scholars belonged to the clerical order that was, at least in theory if not in practise, celibate and religious. This might have influenced their view of women. Nobility, on the other hand, was the only part of society that could afford to treat women as decorative objects. The considerable differences between social classes meant that, at least on some levels of society, the official status of women was somewhat different than their status in everyday reality.

This thesis addresses the question of female agency in public life in late medieval England, roughly in the 15th century. Therefore, it is placed on the field of medieval history, and in addition on the field of women's history that studies not only the submissive status of women, but also their possibilities to influence their own lives. The normal sphere in women's lives in the late medieval England was the family and the private life in homes². However, I will study what possibilities, if any, women had to function in public life that was considered exclusively men's domain. Furthermore, I will study how women's possibilities to function in public life changed with their marital status.

In addition I will attempt to study attitudes of society towards women who functioned in the public sphere of life. Were they well respected or pushed to the margins of society? Even though the status of medieval women is a well-researched subject, most of the research does not directly handle women in the public life. In this study "public life" covers working in a profession, a person of influence in the community or otherwise visible in part of society. It is clear that there are no definite and conclusive answers to questions regarding society's opinions and attitudes, but I will try to make some conclusions based on my sources.

¹ Harris 20002, 17 – 24.

² Lahtinen 2007, 13.

I have given less attention to the work that women did in the privacy of their own homes, as it is a well-researched subject already. Furthermore, the nature of the primary sources has forced me to concentrate most of my study to the women that belonged to the well-to-do part of society. In other words, most of the women I have studied belonged to the gentry and to rich, or relatively well of, merchant families.

History has long been mostly about men, and women were often forgotten altogether or mentioned only in the margins of history.³ When gender is discussed in history, it must be remembered that gender is a relatively complex socially defined concept that is strongly bound to time and place. In addition, women's history has been, and to some extent still is, quite a political subject.⁴ As most of the writers who discuss feminist history writing seem to assume that whoever studies women or gender must be a feminist, it seems reasonable to say a few words about feminist theories.

The roots of women's history are in the 1960s and in the feminist movement. Feminist history challenged the earlier male dominated picture of history. According to Joan Scott, the feminist movement needed historical "heroines" who displayed female agency and provided inspiration for action. Feminist history writers partly tried to create a collective historical identity for women who had just started to step into work life and politics. Women were treated as a homogenous group and the different social backgrounds that created differences were largely left without attention.⁵

In the mid to late seventies women's history moved away from politics and gained momentum on its own right. In the 1980s women's history moved further from biological sex towards gender, and from politics towards specialised history and analyses. In addition, the rise of social history helped to give credibility to women's history, when other forgotten groups such as slaves and workers were included in history research as well. Scott mentions that since 1980s the rise of the social science approach to gender has diminished the connection between the feminist agenda and the study of women. This has

³ Burke 2005, 51; Lahtinen 2007, 11.

⁴ Scott 1991, 43—64.

⁵ Scott, 1991, 42—43, 49—53.

reduced the controversy of women's history and made it academically more accepted. Instead, the conflicts and different theoretical standpoints can now be found within the study of women's history itself, rather than between academically accepted history and feminist history.⁶

Feminist interpretations vary a great deal and one can find opposite opinions within the feminist movement, depending on the primary viewpoint of the researcher. There are questions within the women's history study whether a strong feminist presence is needed or has feminist goal been achieved when women became academically accepted area of study. Multiculturalism has brought new perspectives to women's history as well as universal history. It has questioned whether women can be studied as a homogenous group with a common identity or not.⁷

Furthermore, there are questions whether the move away from studying women towards gender is a good one. The fear is that studying gender takes the focus away from women towards sexual difference that society creates. At the same time, feminism itself has become a contested term, as it carries quite a lot of ideological weight. Researchers rarely describe themselves as feminists, but nevertheless, the assumption seems to be that anyone studying women is automatically a feminist.⁸

In my opinion, the problem with strongly feminist interpretations in history is that the whole concept is a contemporary one and therefore discussing history from distinctly feminist viewpoint has a fundamental problem. Although it is not possible to absorb the whole value system of an era long gone and everyone brings their contemporary baggage into their deductions of past events, reading the events from strongly contemporary viewpoint distorts the values of the era and diminish the worth of the conclusions. However, this is true to all historical research, not just to women's history.

It cannot be denied that women in the historical sources are scarce and rarely active agents with little or no legal authority, apart for few exceptions, such as Margaret of Anjou. There are no women in important political meetings

⁶ Scott, 1991, 42–43, 49–53, 61–64.

⁷ Scott, 1991, 61–64.

⁸ Scott, 1991, 61–64.

and women are largely unseen in different sources. In addition it cannot be denied that women were in subservient positions to men for most if not all of their lives, at least in theory. The normal sphere of agency for women was their own home and family.⁹

However, it is reasonable to ask whether power and authority can only be seen as a top-down process. In the last decades power has been seen as a more intricate relationship in everyday life. It is possible to differentiate between power and authority. Authority is formally recognized and legitimated power, while power is the ability to influence decision-making. Women rarely had authority but they often seemed to have power.¹⁰ One of my goals is to study to what extent women in the late medieval England were able to use power or authority, and what were the attitudes of society towards women who were seen to possess either authority or power.

As a primary source I have used three quite different main sources that give a varied view of women in the late Middle Ages. The first one is *the Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century, Part I* (1971) and *Part II* (1976) edited by Norman Davis¹¹. In addition to the complete collection I have used two selected and translated collections, *The Paston Letters*, also by Norman Davis¹² and *The Paston Women, selected letters. Translated from the Middle English with Introduction, Notes and Interpretive Essay* by Watt¹³. These collections contain some of the letters translated into modern spelling and they proved to be very useful. They obviously made reading the letters easier as it was not necessary to slowly translate all the letters by myself. In addition, comparing the translated letters to the originals helped me to interpret those letters that are not translated.

The surviving letters and documents discussed in this paper date from 1440 to 1495. This first part of the collection contains letters and documents composed by the member of the family, while the second part contains letters to the family members. The Paston family was of humble origins, but William Paston

⁹ Lahtinen 2007, 9–13.

¹⁰ Lahtinen 2007, 11–27.

¹¹ Later I will use abbreviation PL 1971 or PL 1976. In quotes I have used translated texts whenever possible and I have acknowledged the translator in the end of the reference.

¹² Davis 1983.

¹³ Watt 2004.

(1378–1444) was very successful in the legal profession and established the family fortunes.¹⁴ In addition, I have used the second part of the collection that mainly contains letters and documents to the family members from 1425 to 1510. However, I have mostly used letters dating from the 15th century.

Because of the instability of social and political life in the late middle ages, the landholding class realised that legal knowledge was the only way to hold on to their possessions and lawyers became the only secular profession that had its own institutions for training novices. Lawyers were influential outside the law courts as well, as they acted as administrators of royal agencies and as stewards of influential men.¹⁵ The Paston family eventually rose to be one of the most influential in Norfolk and remained so for a century and a half.¹⁶

For the sake of clarity, in this thesis I shall address the men in the family without their title of knight, as they were three men in the family at the time, who were given the same first name. Therefore, during this period the family had more than one Sir John. As I will not follow a linear path, it is easier to keep up without the confusion the title would bring. Instead I have referred to them as John I, John II and John III.

The Paston family collection is the largest written in Middle English that has survived and includes letters and legal documents of the Paston family. Various members of the family as well as some friends and servants have written the letters discussed in this paper.¹⁷ The letters often handle business, but there are several interesting events and remarks that shed light on attitudes towards women in the late medieval England. The women of the family have composed several of the letters in different stages of their lives revealing some of their own perceptions and attitudes to the source.

I have relied on the notes and dating of the letters of both Davis and Watt in order to identify persons and places mentioned in the letters and their notes on the events and family connection have proved very useful in constructing

¹⁴ Finke 1999, 188.

¹⁵ Turner 2003, 113, 133.

¹⁶ Finke 1999, 188.

¹⁷ Watt 2004a, 1–4.

a bigger picture for myself. I have left out those few letters that were written in Latin from this thesis, as they did not seem very important considering the research questions and getting them translated would have most likely proved unnecessary.

There are some problems in using these letters as source material. There is no real knowledge of how many of the letters have disappeared during the centuries, and the dating of the letters has sometimes been less than certain; therefore, some events remain unclear. In addition, they have been written in a formulaic model that follows the conventions of letter writing of the time that may leave some of the meanings hidden to the modern reader. Furthermore, Davis has transcribed the letters I have used, and I have not seen the originals. Although it is not likely that there are any significant errors in the transcription, there is an unknown margin of error. The letters are written in Middle English, which is sometimes hard to understand, when modern translations have not been available.

The letters and documents have belonged to one family and therefore it is somewhat a stretch to make generalizations about society based on them alone. This is why I have chosen other sources as well. Furthermore, Watt suggests that the letters were written to be at least semi-public documents and this would have most likely affected the contents of them. In addition, the authorship of the letters is not always straightforward, which brings its own problems to interpreting these sources.¹⁸ I will attend to the problems of authorship more fully in chapter 2.2: literacy and letter writing.

The second primary source I have used, *the Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer was relatively widely read in the era and is a nice example of secular literature. I have used an edited copy of *the Canterbury Tales*, translated into Modern English by Nevill Coghill.¹⁹ This is one of the most well known books from medieval England. Several manuscripts and fragments have survived from the Middle Ages, indicating that the book was popular even on its own time. It

¹⁸ Watt 2004a, 1 – 16.

¹⁹ Later CT.

was published in several parts and none of Chaucer's original manuscripts have survived.²⁰

The Canterbury Tales contains stories of people from different social classes. Chaucer has probably started writing the book in the end of the 1380s and the book was left unfinished when he died in 1400. All the genres of medieval literature are present in the stories: chivalric romance, fabliau²¹, satire, moral and spiritual allegory and a sermon.²² In writing his book, Chaucer leaned heavily on existing literary pieces and folktales that were circulating around Europe at the time.²³

Considering the wide variety of the stories, it is natural that the women are portrayed quite differently in different stories. The role of women changes from the passive objects of courtly love to the active schemers of the fabliau-stories and to the admired women of moral allegory who take care of their husband's responsibilities. Finke suggests that most secular medieval men, who wrote about women, relied more on received authorities, such as the philosophers and the poets, than their own experiences about women. As these authorities wrote about woman as an image or imaginary concept and not about individual women, the characterisation of the women in medieval literature is strong.²⁴ This makes it a little bit easier to interpret general attitudes towards women from a limited source, but nevertheless, it has to be remembered that it cannot offer extensive information about society.

However, using a novel as a primary source has other problems as well. *The Canterbury Tales* has been subjected to literary criticism very extensively, and it seems possible to find completely opposite readings about the aims of Chaucer in any given question. For this thesis the interest naturally mainly lies in the critics who have discussed his relationship and attitude towards gender. Some researchers have even gone as far as claim that Chaucer deliberately tried to break

²⁰ Brewer 1984, 162 – 165.

²¹ Story in form of poetry, cynicism and humour are common in fabliau-stories.

²² Cawley 1958, vii-ix.

²³ Brewer 1984, 40, 164.

²⁴ Finke 1999, 12 – 15.

down prejudices towards women²⁵. However, As Florence notes, it is important to remember that although in some of the stories female roles are important, feminist reading of these poems is based on our contemporary literary and historical emphases and full and exclusive access to medieval value system is impossible for a contemporary reader.²⁶ In this thesis I have tried to avoid any extreme interpretations.

So what makes *Canterbury Tales* a source to be reckoned with in regard to this thesis? Most critics feel that the characters in Chaucer's book are not individuals but representative types,²⁷ although for example Brewer offers a different opinion. He claims that Chaucer has named them and given them multidimensionality, and that he was actually sympathetic towards women, unlike the original folk tales he leaned on²⁸.

If one adopts the view that the characters are exaggerated images, they cannot be taken at face value. When Chaucer describes women, he leans on the polarized feminine stereotypes typical to the sources of the era. However, these stereotypes offer some insight to the value system that defined the roles of women. The distinction between "good" and "bad" women is very clear. Even though it is clear that stereotypes do not offer a full picture of any society, the events and characters in *the Canterbury Tales* are based on the realities of medieval life and therefore give some insight to the lives of women at the time.²⁹

Furthermore, the *Canterbury Tales* offer an interesting comparison to the Paston letters, sometimes conveying differences and sometimes underlying similarities in attitudes. *The Canterbury Tales* creates a rather diverse picture of medieval women or at least of Chaucer's attitudes and expectations towards women. Chaucer himself was a son of wealthy merchant. He travelled extensively during his life, acted as one of the prince's attendants as well as a civil servant. He had possibly four children, two out of wedlock. When he died, he was already a respected poet, and there were several copies of his books in circulation, even

²⁵ Blamires 2006, 3.

²⁶ Florence 1992, 120.

²⁷ Rudd 2001, 108; Florence 1992, 119 – 125; Saul 1992, 41 – 52.

²⁸ Brewer, 1984, 179 – 189.

²⁹ Florence 1992, 121; Finke 1999, 14.

though making books was labour intensive and expensive.³⁰ Therefore it can be assumed that his book was well read in late medieval England. There is even an inventory of books among the documents of John II that suggests that he had some books by Chaucer in his collection, although not *the Canterbury Tales*.³¹

The third primary source I have used is *the Book of Margery Kempe*. It is part hagiography, part mystical revelations and part travelogue.³² Staley adds to the list revolutionary criticism of an increasingly mercantile society.³³ In her book Margery Kempe describes her stipulations when she aspires to become a true servant of God. She constantly describes herself as the creature, and writes about her mystical visions and her pilgrimages to holy sites. According to *the Book*, after the birth of her first child Kempe saw visions of the devil, until a vision from Christ cured her. In her book she tells about her failures in business, but mostly about her spiritual life. She describes her visions and tells about her pilgrimages and describes the hardships she has to face, mainly the disbelief people show her and the accusations of heresy.³⁴

There is very little evidence about the life of Margery Kempe besides her own book, of which only one surviving manuscript exists.³⁵ This lack of knowledge has led to some speculation about her life among the researchers, but nevertheless, many of them believe that Kempe herself was the author of her text, whether she wrote it herself or used a scribe.³⁶ Lynn Staley has questioned whether the events described in the book ever happened. Staley claims that *the book of Margery Kempe* should be treated as a biography of an exemplary person. In other words, Margery Kempe tells a story about an exemplar called Margery Kempe.³⁷

However, even though this theory is very interesting, there is no way of verifying it to one way or another. Furthermore, whether Kempe actually did what *the book* describes, is somewhat irrelevant for this thesis. Kempe's life was

³⁰ Rudd 2001, 3 – 26; Brewer 1984, 162 – 165.

³¹ John II, Inventory of books, not after 1479, PL 1971, 516 – 518; Bennett 1968, 261.

³² Finke 1999, 177.

³³ Morrison 2000, 70.

³⁴ Kempe, eg. 20, 22, 80, 82, 91, 95; Finke 1999, 177.

³⁵ Finke 1999, 177.

³⁶ Eg. Aers 1988, 73 – 80; Finke 1999, 176 – 179; Lochrie 1991, 107 – 119; Staley 1994, 31 – 38.

³⁷ Staley 1996, 236 – 242.

not unique for the era. There are several married women from 1325 to 1425, who lived outside the convents walls as visionaries and mystics and later became female saints³⁸. Therefore, even if the actual events described in the book cannot be verified, it still gives an intriguing insight to religious life of women.

However, the goals of *the Book* must be taken into consideration. It is possible that *the Book* was written sincerely in order to spread the vision Kempe had. On the other hand, it is possible that *the Book* was written in order to prove that she was worthy of sainthood, or in order to achieve some authority in her own life. Furthermore, it follows the literary conventions of the era, which means that the story in question would be described in certain fashion, which can complicate the message for modern reader. Nevertheless, *the Book* itself describes a woman who acts in the public sphere of life, although not without opposition from society. If the events described actually happened, it tells about the attitudes of society towards an independent woman. On the other hand, if Kempe never experienced these events, *the Book* describes what could happen to an independent woman.

In addition, I have checked some facts from the secondary sources by using Magna Carta of 1215³⁹. Magna Carta is an English charter that acknowledges the King's obligations to his people and some privileges regarding certain groups of people. However, I have not further interpreted the charter in this work. The sources show a fascinating range of contemporary attitudes towards the agency of women in the public life.

It is relatively easy to find research on medieval women. However, most of the studies focus on the status of women within the family or on the part women played in the economic life of medieval England, or in the role they had in religious life. Many of these studies touch the issue of women in the public or the attitudes of society towards women, but so far none that I have found have focused on female agency in public, either in secular or religious life.

Silja Juusela- Heikala has written a pro- gradu thesis for the history department of Jyväskylä University about *the status of the gentry women in the*

³⁸ Atkinson 1983, 159.

Paston England in the 15th Century.⁴⁰ She has used the same Paston letter collection that is used in this thesis and, in addition, a more limited collection of letters as a secondary source, which I have not used. She has studied the possible authority of gentry women and their careers, as well as their family relationship. The thesis is heavily focused on the family relationships and on the private sphere of life. The thesis offered me some guidelines and viewpoints, but very little in actual references. Even though some examples in Juusela-Heikala's pro- gradu thesis are the same than in this one, the viewpoint is different, as she has not discussed the public sphere of life.⁴¹

Among the most useful secondary sources used in this thesis is *English Aristocratic Women 1450 – 1550. Marriage and Family, Property and Careers* by Barbara Harris.⁴² The book concentrates on many of the patriarchal institutions and norms of late medieval England and on women's lives within those norms. The book covers stages that were considered normal in women's lives: being a daughter, a wife and a widow. In addition, Harris discusses women who were left outside these traditional roles, in other words, the unmarried women. Furthermore, she handles the power women could have outside their homes and their possible careers at court. The obvious drawback considering my thesis is that *English Aristocratic Women* does not attend to women in the lower classes at all, and does not directly handle women in public life. In addition, she is sometimes perhaps slightly too optimistic in her views about certain aspects of the lives of women, such as their level of literacy and education.

In studying Chaucer, probably the most useful research has been *Chaucer, ethics, and gender* by Alcuin Blamires (2006). The book is not a historical study, but a literary one. Blamires handles quite a few ethical subjects in his book, such as sexual trading in the Shipman's Tale and the problems of patience and equanimity in the stories. He does not focus solely on women, but deals with gender, which gives the book more range than those studies that only discuss women in Chaucer's writing. On the negative side, the book is written in quite

⁴⁰ Juusela-Heikala 1993. Original title: *Gentrynaisen asema Pastonien Englannissa 1400-luvulla*.

⁴¹ Juusela-Heikala 1993.

⁴² Harris 2002.

complicated language and sometimes the thought processes are relatively hard to follow.

Other useful second hand sources are *Women's Writing in English* by Laurie A. Finke.⁴³ The book offers a good insight in medieval literary culture and of the role women played in it. Diane Watt's interpretive essay "In the Absence of a Good Secretary"⁴⁴ in *The Paston Women: Selected letters. Translated from the Middle English With Introduction, Notes and interpretive Essay*, as well as her "introduction"⁴⁵ in the book has been very informative and gave intimate details of the Paston family. In addition, the *Middle English dictionary*⁴⁶ in the Internet proved irreplaceable in translating some words.

Among the secondary sources, there are a few that are not the most recent. Out of these *Medieval Women* (1979) by Eileen Power is still recommended for further reading in some recent studies and therefore defends its place in the bibliography. The Paston family and their women have been the object of academic interest for a relatively long time, and I see no reason why the older research should be considered inferior as long as newer sources have been used as well. The rest of the more aged sources have been used to illustrate general themes that have not changed during the years.

⁴³ Finke 1999.

⁴⁴ Watt 2004a.

⁴⁵ Watt 2004b.

⁴⁶ McSparran et al, 2001.

2. Late Medieval England

2.1 Ongoing Trends

Studying the middle Ages has its difficulties. Part of the problem is availability of sources. Although the hunt for sources is not as desperate as, for example, for antiquity, the surviving sources are fragmented, scarce, and they can be interpreted in very different ways. Therefore, history of the Middle Ages is often considered in one, almost thousand year stretch, without much differentiation of the centuries. However, clear changes can be seen. Some of these changes that happened in the late medieval England were the gradual strengthening of the governmental institutions, the rise of a monetary economy, and the rise of the English language.⁴⁷

In many ways society in later Middle Ages was unstable and going through a larger change in economic and social structures. Black Death, the bubonic plague that swept across the Europe killing a significant portion of the population, had landed in England in 1348. The Black Death continued its devastation in England and wiped out a large bulk of the population. It took about 150 years before the population numbers reached the earlier numbers. The Black Death increased the value of labour and therefore speeded up the movement away from manorial system. Feudalism and the manorial system of the time was based on serfdom, or in other words, the forced labour of the peasants for the manor owner, in return for the right to lease a part of the manor's land for farming and gain protection from the lord of the manor. The lack of work force in the decades after the Black Death speeded up the movement towards pay labour.⁴⁸

In the following decades the country had several bouts of plague, although not as devastating as the first wave had been. In addition, the plague left a smaller number of taxpayers to face the burden of the Hundred Years' War. It was fought for the crown of France and lasted from 1337 to 1453. Although the fighting was intermittent, the involvement of the English royalty in the war

⁴⁷ Woodward 1947, 36–69.

⁴⁸ Woodward 1947, 55–59; Holt – Rosser 1990, 1.

required funds and the increase of tax burden led to peasant unrest. Furthermore, the gradual rise in the standard of living in the late middle Ages created need for coinage in the households of the nobles and rich merchants, as trade was easier with coinage than with barter transactions with goods. This resulted in gradual change from payment with labour and other services, which was the corner stone of serfdom and the manorial system, to payment with money.⁴⁹

There are indication of these events and changes in the primary sources used in this thesis. The Paston letters sometimes mention plague, but not very many words were spend on it. However, Elisabeth Rothenhale used plague as a means of indicating the date in her letter to William Paston I around the year 1426: "...I was at Jernemouth staying at the Frere Carmes the time of the pestilence..."⁵⁰ Using the plague as a means to prove of date would indicate that it was something to remember in life, similar to other significant event in life, such as pilgrimage or illness.⁵¹ However, plague is not a common theme in the letters and, therefore, it would seem that it was nothing out of the ordinary. It was only worth mentioning when it directly concerned oneself or loved ones.

In *the Canterbury Tales* the plague is of course in the background as a reason for the pilgrimage that frames the stories in the book. However, it is not the main thing in this source either, further indicating that plague was something that belonged to life but maybe did not rule it any more. This trend goes on in *the Book of Margery Kempe* as well. She mentions plague only once, when she hesitates to leave on pilgrimage: "She was loath to go, for it was pestilence time."⁵²

In addition, the gradual move to a monetary economy shows in the Paston Letters. The family was doing quite well economically, and they had risen from a more humble origin. However, when John I died, his son John II became the head of the household, and he was not as careful a businessman as his father. In fact, he was known to spend time in the court and spend too much money in amusements and women. In addition, there was trouble with of their estates, and defending their claim in the law courts and even with weapons further depleted

⁴⁹ Woodward 1947, 55-59; Holt – Rosser 1990, 1.

⁵⁰ Elisabeth Rothenhale to William Paston I, 26 Jan c. 1426, PL 1976, 3.

⁵¹ Morrison 2000, 50.

⁵² Kempe, 148.

the family fortunes.⁵³ Even though the family's possessions were still remarkable, actual money seemed to be on short supply on occasions, and some letters handle ways of attaining money.

For example, in 1470 John II pawned some silverware for a London goldsmith in order to get money. "...Sir John Paston, knight, [...] had bargained, sold and delivered [...] to Edmund Shaa, citizen and goldsmith of London, the said 20 dishes and a saucer"⁵⁴. The document gives John II till 8 October to pay back the goldsmith in order to reclaim the silverware. The lack of money shows not only in John II's letters, but as well in letters to and from his mother, Margaret, and his younger brother John III.⁵⁵ Probably because of his wasteful management of finances, the monetary situation of John II remained relatively poor until 1476, when the Caister estate that had caused trouble earlier was regained.⁵⁶ Margaret did not approve of her son's actions and even writes that she has serious doubts about leaving land to John II in her will, "for I think verily that you would be disposed hereafter to sell or set to mortgage the land that you should have after me".⁵⁷

These ongoing trends towards a monetary economy and away from serfdom, which continued for the next hundred years, were influential in the slow disappearance of the manorial system that was based on barter economy instead of monetary economy. In addition, the late medieval England saw a clear trend towards urbanization that had started in much of Europe in the 12th and the 13th century, even though a majority of the population remained peasants.⁵⁸

The Hundred Years War in France had relatively few battles and even fewer victories for the English. It did have an effect on the English institutions, however. The Magna Carta of 1215 limited the King's right to collect taxes: "No scutage nor aid shall be imposed on our kingdom, unless by common council of

⁵³ Bennett, 1968, 18 – 21.

⁵⁴ John II, indenture pledging plate, 3 July 1470, PL 1971, 417.

⁵⁵ Eg. Margaret to John II, 15 July 1470, PL 1971, 349; John II to Margaret, 18 April 1471, PL 1971, 437 – 438; John III to John II 14 May 1470, PL 1971, 556 – 557.

⁵⁶ Bennett, 1968, 24 – 26.

⁵⁷ Margaret to John II: draft, 11 Aug 1477, PL 1971, 379.

⁵⁸ Woodward 1947, 55-59.

our kingdom..."⁵⁹. In other words, the king could no longer decide to raise taxes on his own. During the War, however, the King needed money for his campaigns in France, and therefore the co-operation of the Parliament. As a result the parliament gained more importance and continued its slow development that was largely based on the Magna Carta.⁶⁰

A succession of Kings who were weak, young or preoccupied by the War in France, while the council was populated with nobles feuding with each other, led to the War of the Roses (1452/55 - 1485/91). In this civil war two houses, Lancaster and York, fought for the crown of England. The fighting lasted for a generation but it was intermittent and proved to have relatively little importance in the history of England, except for the replacement of the Plantagenet dynasty for family of the Tudors.⁶¹

However, even though the battles were intermittent, the feuding did create instability in everyday life. In feudal society of medieval England protection from one's enemies often depended on powerful patrons. In addition the outcome of court cases could depend on the influence of the patron as well. This can clearly be seen in the Paston letters. The Paston family were involved in several ownership disputes over holdings and their success in advancing their own cause was influenced by the current situation in the War of the Roses and with their patron. Both the benevolence of the patron and the situation of the war could change rapidly and the Paston family had to notice this. Both John II, the oldest son of John I and Margaret, and his younger brother John Paston III⁶² were declared outlaws during the war of Roses, although both were pardoned later. John II was even imprisoned in 1453.⁶³

The alliances with patrons could not always be trusted to advance the affairs of the family, but getting into trouble without a powerful patron at this time might even prove fatal. This happened to Thomas Denys in 1461, an acquaintance of the Paston family, when he lost the support of his patron, the earl

⁵⁹ Magna Carta, clause 12.

⁶⁰ Woodward 1947,46-54; Evans 2002, 571; Turner 2003, 132.

⁶¹ Woodward 1947,46-54; Evans 2002, 571; Turner 2003, 132.

⁶² See geneological tree in appendix 1.

⁶³ Barber 1986, 61 - 64, 167 - 171

of Oxford.⁶⁴ Denys was dragged out of his house by one of his enemies⁶⁵ and killed⁶⁶. In addition, there are numerous documents and letters attending to affairs close to home. Several letters mention thievery and unrest in the land⁶⁷ and quarrels at home⁶⁸.

Several letters mention the disagreement over the ownership of the manors of Caister and Hellesdon and lands attached to them. Sir John Fastolf, a long time patron of John I, had named John I as one of his executors. As such, John I took possession of Sir John Fastolf's Suffolk and Norfolk lands after the death of Fastolf.⁶⁹ The manors of Caister and Hellesdon were the principal manors in these lands. However, William Ylverton, another executor of Fastolf's, contested Paston's claim to be the chief executor and legatee. The dispute lasted from father to son and even escalated to a siege at one point.⁷⁰ The war in France, however, showed far less in the Paston letter collection despite the fact that John II and his two brothers, John III and Edmund, were fighting in France at least around 1475.⁷¹

In addition, the English language had replaced French but not Latin in the law courts in the 14th century. Out of the spoken dialects "middle English" gradually became the standard, mainly because it was the dialect spoken in London and therefore also used in court.⁷² However, fluency in Parisian French remained a mark of social standing among the aristocracy. In addition, different dialects as well as the Celtic languages were widely used in the Kingdom. Therefore, the position of the English language as the new language of literacy was far from certain in the 15th century.⁷³ Nevertheless, the increase in the use of the English language made literacy somewhat easier to attain when it was no longer always necessary to learn Latin or French in order to become literate.

⁶⁴ Barber 1986, 61 – 64, 167 – 171

⁶⁵ Eg Margaret Paston to John Paston I, perhaps 2 July 1461, PL 1971, 265; Barber 1986, 64.

⁶⁶ William Lomnor to John Paston I, July 6 1461, PL 1976, 240.

⁶⁷ E.g. John Howard, duke of Norfolk to John III, 10 Oct 1483, PL 1976, 442 – 443; Margaret to John I perhaps 1449, PL 1971, 235; Margaret to John I, 7 Jan 1462, PL 1971, 279.

⁶⁸ Eg. Agnes Paston to John I, 12 May probably 1451, PL 1971, 33 – 34; Davis 1971, liv – lvi, lviii – lx.

⁶⁹ Margaret to John I; 17 Oct 1465, PL 1971, 323 – 324; Barber 1986, 33 – 38; Watt 2004b, 142; Davis 1971, liv – lv.

⁷⁰ E.g. Margaret Paston to John Paston I, 1448, PL 1971, 226–227.

⁷¹ Barber 1986, 188 – 189.

⁷² Woodward 1947, 65.

⁷³ Finke, 1999, 62.

2.2 Literacy and letter writing

Medieval society was prevalently an oral society, and literacy had somewhat declined since the early medieval period.⁷⁴ The new rise of literacy started from the 12th century onwards, and towards the late Middle Ages written documents became more important in legal matters.⁷⁵ However, just because there are more surviving written documents from this era, one cannot assume that literacy would automatically be more widespread than in earlier eras.⁷⁶

There are different estimates about the level of literacy in the middle Ages. Backman suggests that by the 13th century at least ten percent of urban population could read and write well, and goes on to add that in England literacy level was probably higher than in the rest of the Europe. On the other hand, Finke gives an estimate that 25-30 per cent of English adults were able to read in the late middle Ages.⁷⁷ Although these are interesting figures, they are only estimates and cannot be considered very reliable.

However, literacy is a difficult concept to define at best of times. In legal documents people are often described as *sciens* or *idiota*, knowledgeable or uneducated, and *litteratus* or *illiteratus*, literate or illiterate. The exact meaning of these descriptions is unclear. It is not certain whether *litteratus* means that the person can read or read and write, and whether that person is literate in Latin and/or the vernacular. Furthermore, sometimes these terms seem to indicate that the person can speak Latin and there is no indication of his capability to read or write it, and sometimes these descriptions refer to the level of formal education.⁷⁸

Nevertheless, it is obvious that the level of literacy varied a great deal, even within social classes. Some of the most powerful men in England were not able to read, while contemporaries remarked that the lower classes were keen to acquire at least some level of literacy because of the career opportunities literacy

⁷⁴ In this context, Latin literacy as English was not yet a literacy language.

⁷⁵ Finke 1999, 56-67.

⁷⁶ Backman 2002, 345.

⁷⁷ Backman 2002, 346; Finke 1999, 56 – 67.

⁷⁸ Backman 2002, 345 – 346.

offered to an individual.⁷⁹ According to Backman, most peasants were illiterate until the 13th century, but the rise in peasant freeholding in the 12th century created a need for them to acquire some level of literacy in order to understand the written privileges and deeds that defined their freedom. Their level of literacy was probably relatively limited and only a few literate peasants were needed in any given village.⁸⁰

Literacy was most likely higher in the cities, where virtually any kind of trade required at least some level of literacy. The rise of urban schools for the wealthy, as well as the rise in the number of tutors, indicates a rise in literacy. Merchant guilds in Europe often required from their members a school diploma and a proven capacity to read and write both in Latin and in the vernacular.⁸¹ In addition lawyers, clerics, scholars and administrators were often skilled readers and writers of Latin. Some of the readers in the high end of society read mostly for recreational purposes and often in English. Finke estimates that about half of the artisans and businessmen had at least pragmatic skills in reading English and they used those skills practising their trades.⁸²

The level of literacy was significantly lower among women than men. The education of laywomen was increasingly disapproved of in the writings of the churchmen from the 12th century onwards, and these attitudes spread to society at large. Despite this, in the 14th and the 15th century women owned substantially more books than previously. However, this does not necessarily suggest a dramatic increase in literacy among women. Reading of books was most likely organized as a communal activity. Therefore, even if the owner of the books could not read herself, she could have those books read aloud to a group of women.⁸³

However, it is safe to assume that the daughters and wives of wealthy merchants and aristocrats were better educated than the women in the artisan classes.⁸⁴ Women were expected to help in the family trade, and merchants and aristocrats had a greater need for written documents than the less wealthy. Harris

⁷⁹ Finke 1999, 56 – 67.

⁸⁰ Backman 2002, 345 – 346.

⁸¹ Backman 2002, 345 – 346.

⁸² Finke 1999, 56 – 67

⁸³ Finke 1999, 68 – 71.

⁸⁴ Backman 2002, 346.

even suggests that all aristocratic women needed to be literate in English⁸⁵. This seems perhaps overly positive estimation about the level of education in women, however, based on other secondary sources.⁸⁶

The Paston family shows the whole range of literacy in late medieval England. As lawyers all of the men in the Paston family were to some degree literate, both in Latin and in English and probably French as well. Some of the servants of the family were also capable of writing and they acted as scribes to the family members. Norman Davis suggests that none of the Paston women were able to write. However, both Watt and Finke, among others, disagree with him and state that some of the women were most likely literate.⁸⁷ Agnes Paston ended one of her letters “in the absence of a good secretary”⁸⁸ and seemed to have had a nice and practised hand, but Davis overlooked this. According to Watt, Agnes Paston and Elizabeth Clere were most likely able to read and write, while Margaret Paston, a very prolific composer of letters, was most likely illiterate.⁸⁹

The difference in literacy between the sexes is considerable.⁹⁰ Women’s literacy seemed to have been appreciated in the Paston family, as John III mentions it in a positive light in a wooing letter that he wrote to a possible future wife: “Mistress Annes, I am proud that you can read English.”⁹¹ John III never married “mistress Annes” and her real identity remains unknown, but this letter serves as an example that at least some men appreciated literacy in a woman. Literacy would have made it easier for the wife to attend to the businesses of the family when needed without having to always rely on clerks. However, using literacy in flattery would indicate that literacy was not self-evident even among the landed gentry, which is also evident from the lack of literacy of the some of the Paston family women.

In the late medieval society letters were often treated as a quasi-public documents that could be published later or used as evidence at court. This

⁸⁵ Harris 2002, 28; Watt, 2004b, 134 – 138.

⁸⁶ Eg. Finke 1999, 68 – 71.

⁸⁷ Watt 2004b, 135; Finke 1999, 190.

⁸⁸ Agnes to William I, 20 April probably 1440, PL 1971, 26. Translation by Watt 2004, 23.

⁸⁹ Watt 2004b, 135; Finke 1999, 190.

⁹⁰ Watt, 2004b, 134 – 138.

⁹¹ John III to “mistress Annes”, 22 July 1474, PL 1971, 591.

consciousness of a possible larger audience led the style of the letters to be more rhetorical and crafted than one might expect.⁹² Some of the Paston letters are obviously meant for larger circulation. There are, for example, copies of letters from the Earl of Oxford to Sir Miles Stapleton and Thomas Brews⁹³ and a copy of letter from Lord Hungerford and Robert Whityngham to Margaret of Anjou⁹⁴, indicating that these letters may have been circulated as news-sheets or announcements for selected people. In fact, Barber claims that part of the reason why the Paston family letter collection has been so carefully filed, is that "...the value of written evidence was increasingly recognised in the law courts and in business, and letters could serve as a record"⁹⁵.

Furthermore, it is not always clear who is the actual writer of a letter and sometimes the letters are written in somebody else's name with their approval.⁹⁶ There is one very clear example of this in the Paston letters. John II wrote to his brother John III and suggested that John III would write a letter in his own name and in their mothers name making John Halsnothe a proctor⁹⁷ of the testament of John Paston I. John II even gives the exact wording in his letter.⁹⁸ In practise, therefore, he only asks John III to write the letter again so that the handwriting of John II would not be recognised.

In addition, John II asks John III to use their mother's seal.⁹⁹ Perhaps Margaret was one of the executors of the will of her husband, and John II needed to use her name in order to deal with the issue on hand. Even though this would seem that Margaret did not in fact make decisions by herself, it nevertheless proves that a letter from a woman, or at least from a widow, did have importance and could be used as a legal document. Because of the semi-public nature of letters in the late Medieval England, composing them can sometimes be seen as public action.

⁹² Finke 1999, 111-117.

⁹³ copies of letters from the Earl of Oxford to Sir Miles Stapleton and Thomas Brews, PL 1976, 43.

⁹⁴ a copy of letter from Lord Hungerford and Robert Whityngham to Margaret of Anjou, 30 Aug 1461, PL 1976, 252.

⁹⁵ Barber, 1980, 6.

⁹⁶ Watt 2004a, vii-ix and Watt 2004b, 134 – 140.

⁹⁷ an agent, who was engaged to conduct another's case in a court

⁹⁸ John II to John III, late in 1473, PL 1971, 467 – 468.

⁹⁹ John II to John III, late in 1473, PL 1971, 468.

In addition, while considering letter writing in the Middle Ages, it has to be remembered that composing a letter was considered to be an art, while the actual writing was considered to be just a menial task. Even those who could write often used the services of a scribe, either because they were busy, or simply because they could afford it. John Paston, the husband of Margaret Paston, has only left three letters in his own hand. Scribes, his sons, and servants have written the rest. Letters were composed to a certain formula and the austerity of the conventions of letter writing, using sometimes multiple scribes, and the semi-public nature of the letters make it difficult to read the emotions of the writers from them.¹⁰⁰

Most of the letters start with a formal greeting which often gives an indication of the nature of the relationship between the correspondents. For example, Margaret almost always starts her letters to her husband John Paston I with “Most respected and honourable husband, I commend myself to you, wishing with all my heart to hear of your health and happiness...”¹⁰¹; or with similar wording indicating her subservience and a certain amount of attachment to her husband. When she writes to her sons, she uses less submissive form: “I greet you warmly and send you God’s blessing and mine...”¹⁰²; and to more distant relatives and acquaintances the less warm, “I commend myself to you...”¹⁰³. The last form seemed to be relatively common in all the Paston letters where the correspondents did not have a close relationship.

However, there are more obvious expressions of love and devotion in some of the letters. For example, one love letter from Margery Brews to John III has survived¹⁰⁴ and another from Richard Calle to Margery Paston¹⁰⁵. There is a sense of family life in some of the letters as they often include shopping lists from one family member to another. Agnes asked her husband William for hair

¹⁰⁰ Watt 2004b, 134 – 136.

¹⁰¹ Margaret to John I, 8 July 1444, PL 1971, 219. Translation by Watt 2004, 48.

¹⁰² Margaret to John II, 10 or 11 Sept 1469, PL 1971, 341. Translated by Watt 2004, 96.

¹⁰³ Margaret probably to James Gloys, 18 Jan, probably 1473, PL 1971, 369. Translated by Watt 2004, 107.

¹⁰⁴ E.g. Margery (Brews) Paston to John III. Feb 1477, PL 1971, 662.

¹⁰⁵ Richard Calle to Margery, 1469, PL 1976, 498 – 500.

decorations: "I entreat you to buy for me two gold threads"¹⁰⁶ while Margaret had a longer list for John I in 1448:

I entreat you that you will undertake to have 1lb of almonds and 1lb of sugar brought for me, and that you will have some frieze [a course woollen cloth] to make your children's gowns. You will get the cheapest and the most choice from Hay's wife, so I'm told. And, if you could, buy a yard of black broadcloth for a hood for me, at 44d or 4s a yard, for there is neither good cloth nor good frieze in this town.¹⁰⁷

Most researchers today believe that even if women were not able to write themselves they are nonetheless authors of their texts.¹⁰⁸ Margery Kempe is a good example of this. She claimed to be illiterate, and used a priest as her scribe. Therefore, the credit of her book has sometimes been merited to the scribe. Aers himself, as well as, for example Finke, Lochrie, and Staley believe that Margery Kempe was indeed the author of *the Book*.¹⁰⁹ However, David Aers cites several earlier researchers who have described Kempe as neurotic, hysteric or even mad. They have based their interpretation on the fact that Margery Kempe did have a habit of excessive weeping and melodramatic conduct.¹¹⁰

Staley even speculates that despite the frequent claims to illiteracy in her book, Kempe might not have used a scribe at all. Staley believes that mentioning a priest as a scribe could have been a way to gain acceptability through male authority figure and to prevent accusations of heresy by emphasizing her connection to the Catholic Church. In addition, as mentioned in chapter one, Lynn Staley questions whether Kempe actually travelled at all. She claims that, instead of autobiography, the book of Margery Kempe should be treated as a biography of an exemplary person.¹¹¹ If this is the case, Margery Kempe skilfully used the conventions of the time to her own benefit. In addition to

¹⁰⁶ Agnes to William I, 20 Apr, probably 1440, PL 1971, 26. Translated by Watt 2004, 23.

¹⁰⁷ Margaret to John I, 1448, PL 1971 226 – 227. Translated by Watt, 52.

¹⁰⁸ Watt 2004b, 134–135; Aers 1988, 73 – 80; Finke 1999, 176 – 179.

¹⁰⁹ Aers 1988, 73 – 80; Finke 1999, 176 – 179; Lochrie 1991, 107 – 112, 114 – 119; Staley 1994, 31 – 38.

¹¹⁰ Aers, 1988, 73 – 74.

¹¹¹ Staley 1996, 236 – 242.

Staley, Finke mentions that even if the scribe did not exist, Kempe would have had to invent one in order to gain authorization to her book through a male authority figure.¹¹²

Although it is impossible to verify the actual events of Margery Kempe's life, for the purposes of this thesis, it does not really matter. What does matter is that the events described in the book apparently were plausible for the contemporary reader. Whether Kempe actually travelled or just wrote *the Book* herself, it represents one of the few literary achievements by women in medieval England. Finke places her in the top five of female writers of the time¹¹³.

In late medieval England literacy was far from self-evident skill in any class of society. However, it was becoming more common, as the importance of written documents increased in law courts and as Latin was being replaced by the vernacular. Literacy among women was also increasing, although most likely literate women were less common than literate men within all social classes. Furthermore, despite the high cost of books, people seemed to own more of them. This does not necessarily correlate directly to higher number of literacy. It nevertheless gives indication of the increased importance of literacy and the increased use of the English language.

¹¹² Finke 1999, 176 – 179.

¹¹³ Finke 1999, 176 – 177.

2.3. The Paston family, Geoffrey Chaucer and Margery Kempe

In this chapter I will provide a short biographical summary of the Paston family, Geoffrey Chaucer and Margery Kempe. I hope that this summary will make it easier to follow the persons mentioned in the examples and perhaps offer some insight to their distinct situations and lives.

The letters in *the Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century, Part I*¹¹⁴ have been written by fifteen members of the Paston family.¹¹⁵ Here I will give a very short summary of the lives of some members of the family, so that it would be easier to follow the events. William Paston I was born in Norfolk in 1378. He was a successful lawyer and a civil servant who steadily advanced in his career and social standing. He married Agnes Berry in 1420. Agnes inherited three manors from her father, Sir Edmund Berry of Orwellbury, as his sole heir, and, therefore, the match was very advantageous to William Paston. William died in 1444 and Agnes, as a widow, managed her own affairs quite effectively until her death in 1466. (Her will is in appendix 2).¹¹⁶

William and Agnes had five children: John I, Edmund I, Elisabeth, William II and Clement II. John Paston I was born in 1420 and he received an extensive education and followed his father to law. The restlessness that plagued the country in his lifetime shows in his life. On the other hand, he had success in his life; he gained more property and land. On the other hand he was accused several times of crimes, and even imprisoned three times. He was one of the executors of the will of his patron, Sir John Fastolf. John I took possessions of Fastolf's lands in Norfolk and the manors of Hellesdon and Caister that later caused trouble to both himself and to his sons.¹¹⁷

John I married Margaret Mautby around 1440. Margaret had been born around 1420, and was related to John Fastolf. Margaret, like Agnes, inherited her father, John Mautby, as his sole heir. She was the most prolific composer of letters among the women in the Paston collection. John I was often away from

¹¹⁴ PL 1971.

¹¹⁵ There is a genealogical tree of the family in appendix 1.

¹¹⁶ Davis 1971, lii – liv.

¹¹⁷ Davis 1971, liv – lv.

Norfolk in business and he left his wife Margaret in charge. She was a strong willed woman who was capable of taking care of the affairs of the family while John I was away. They had seven children together. She, like Agnes, was widowed, and remained a strong influence in the lives of her sons for almost two decades until her death in 1484.¹¹⁸

Elisabeth Paston, the daughter of Agnes and William, was born probably in 1429. She did not seem to have a good relationship with her mother, who at some point prevented her from seeing anyone and even beat her, when Elisabeth refused to obey her.¹¹⁹ Negotiations to marry Elisabeth can be seen in several letters, but in the end she married Robert Poynings as late as 1458. They had one son and Robert was killed in battle in 1461. Elisabeth remarried to Sir George Browne in 1471 and had two children with him. Browne was executed in 1483 for rebellion against Richard III and Elisabeth died in 1488.¹²⁰

As mentioned before, John I and Margaret had seven children. Their eldest child, John II, was born 1442. He became a lawyer, and his father send him to court in 1461 and he spend quite some time in the court during his life. He was knighted in 1463 when he came of age and he travelled to mainland Europe in the retinue of Princess Margaret, youngest sister of Edward IV, when she married the Duke of Burgundy. He fought in the battle of Barnet, a decisive battle in the war of the Roses, in 1471. He had changed his allegiance from the Yorkist side to the Lancastrians, because it seemed best for the business of the Paston family. The Lancastrians lost, however, and John II was accused of treason, but later pardoned.¹²¹

John II was engaged to Anne Haute for years, but the marriage never came true. In the end he never married, but there is evidence of at least two mistresses: Cecily Daune and Constance Reynyforth. Constance bore him one daughter. John II litigated over the manors of Hellesdon and Caister, but failed to achieve a permanent solution. He travelled more later in his life and owned a

¹¹⁸ Davis 1971, lv – lvi.

¹¹⁹ Eg. Elisabeth Clere to John Paston I, 29 June, not after 1449, PL 1971, 31 – 33.

¹²⁰ Davis 1971, lvi – lvii.

¹²¹ Davis 1971, lviii – lix.

considerable library. He was known to be a bit of a womanizer and he spent large amounts of money while he stayed in court. He died in 1479.¹²²

John III was the second son of Margaret and John I, and he was born in 1444. He helped his mother to run the estates until 1462, when he went to serve under the Duke of Norfolk. He followed his brother John II to the mainland in the retinue of Princess Margaret and travelled quite a bit later on as well. In addition, like John II, John III fought in the battle of Barnet, was wounded, charged of treason and later pardoned. He married Margery Brews in 1477, probably because of love, as she was not economically very sound match. After the death of John II he became the head of the Paston family, and he succeeded in securing the manor of Caister to the Pastons. He was knighted on a battlefield in 1487. After Margery's death in 1495 he married again to Agnes Morley. He died in 1504.

Margery Paston, later Calle, was born sometime before 1450. She is mentioned for the first time in around 1458, when an offer of marriage was made. The canon law allowed girls to be married at the age of 12,¹²³ so it can be assumed that she was close to that age at the time. Marriage for her was discussed in more than one occasion, but in 1469 she insisted on marrying Richard Calle, the head bailiff of Pastons. This caused considerable stir in the family and caused a large gap in her relationship to her mother. Margery probably died before 1479.¹²⁴

These members of the Paston family are the most important in my thesis. Their lives demonstrate how restless life could be in late medieval England. In addition, the lives of the women follow quite different paths demonstrating a range of activities and personalities that influenced women's lives in the late medieval England.

Although the life of Geoffrey Chaucer is not discussed in this thesis, he is, nevertheless, an important as the writer of *the Canterbury Tales*. Inevitably, the life he led would have influenced his writing. He was born around 1340 to a well to do, but relatively humble merchant family in Ipswich. His father and grandfather were wine merchants and later on they served at court. There is no

¹²² Davis 1971, lviii – lix.

¹²³ Harrison 2002, 45.

¹²⁴ Davis 1971, lxii.

documentary evidence of Geoffrey Chaucer ever attending school. However, Brewer believes that he did receive schooling. If he did attend school, it was most likely in one of the grammar schools that the Catholic Church kept. The most important subject would have been Latin, the language of the Church, science and literature. However, Chaucer could most likely read at least in English and French as well.¹²⁵

Chaucer became a pageboy in the household of the countess of Ulster in 1357. By 1360 he had become a page or perhaps a squire to Lionell, Earl of Ulster, who had one of the greatest households in Britain. In these positions he learned the all-important manners he needed to climb the social ladder later in his life. In 1359 he took part in a military campaign, was captured, and later ransomed by the office of the King's court. In 1367 he entered the King's household, where he earned a modest but sufficient income. His tasks varied from making beds to diplomatic missions. In 1385 he was made the Justice of the Peace for the county of Kent and a year later, the Knight of the Shire¹²⁶.

However, in the same year his long-time patron John of Gaunt left for Spain in a military campaign. Duke of Gloucester replaced Gaunt as an influence to King Richard II, and Gloucester changed his own men to the posts previously filled by the supporters of Gaunt. This deprived Chaucer of all of his offices and left him with more time for his writing.¹²⁷

Chaucer married one of the Queens ladies-in-waiting, Philippa. There are no records that would show what their marriage was like. However, they did spend long periods separated because of their respective careers. Chaucer did not write any poetry to his wife, but this is not remarkable. At the time, courtly love dictated that the object of that love was often beyond reach and it would have been most unfashionable to be in love with one's wife. Chaucer makes jokes at the expense of wives, but this is no real indicator of the state of his own marriage

¹²⁵ Brewer 1984, 2 – 20.

¹²⁶ Knight of the Shire represented the Shire in question in Parliament

¹²⁷ Brewer 1984, 10, 38, 50 – 55.

either, as these jokes about wives were, and similar jokes still are, quite common.¹²⁸

Chaucer's works show a wide knowledge of the folk-tales that circulated Europe at the time, and he exploited these stories in his own work, as was the custom of the time. During his life Chaucer's saw the horrors of the Black Death, the civic disorder of the Peasants' Revolt in 1381 and the misery of the war. On the other hand, he lived in the mightiest households of England and saw the splendour of court and, therefore, could enjoy the culture of the time. He was able to read books from different parts of Europe and his career took him to two diplomatic missions in Italy, where he could enjoy the more advanced cultural life. His own experiences undoubtedly influenced his writing. Today, he is considered to be one of the most important English writers.¹²⁹

As mentioned before, there are very little other sources to Margery Kempe's life but her own book, of which only one surviving manuscript exists.¹³⁰ Kempe was probably born in 1373, and her father was a part of the bourgeoisie. He was five times the major of the town of Bishop's Lynn and one of the town's members of parliament. In other words, she was undoubtedly in privileged position compared to most of society, but from the point of view of the aristocracy, she was not in a very important position.¹³¹

When Margery Kempe was twenty she married John Kempe, and bore him fourteen children. Kempe had a tendency to cry and scream, which led many of her contemporaries to accuse her of being possessed by demons, and many later researchers to label her hysterical or even mad. She was accused of heresy several times, although she was never convicted. She was an independent businesswoman and during her life, she probably travelled extensively in Europe and the Holy Land, and, furthermore, to the three most popular pilgrimage sites, Rome, Jerusalem and Santiago de Compostella. When Kempe wrote her book, she was

¹²⁸ Brewer 1984, 52.

¹²⁹ Brewer 1984, 4–20, 38–70.

¹³⁰ Finke 1999, 177.

¹³¹ Eg. Finke 1999, 176; Aers 1988, 73.

middle aged and, therefore, a little less “female”,¹³² which made her a little bit more acceptable in public.¹³³

Although Kempe was somewhat exceptional, because she refused to enclose herself to a convent as a nun, or to home as a housewife,¹³⁴ she was not unique in her time. By the 15th century the works of holy women had become a part of Christian culture and between 1325 and 1425 many similar female saints emerged. These women were often married and led mobile lives, relied on their visions and left written records. Margery Kempe most likely personally knew only one such holy woman, Julian of Norwich, who is quite unique in English religious history. She was an educated woman, a mystic and a theologian and she became an anchoress. However, of all the holy women mentioned in Kempe’s book, Brigitte of Sweden (1303–1373) was probably the most influential to Kempe’s life and work.¹³⁵

Although Brigitte was not English, her influence reached continental Europe as well as England. Holy persons were the international celebrities in the Middle Ages and their actions were important new. Furthermore, the Catholic Church was an international institution, which effectively spread the news. Houses of the Birgittine order spread throughout Europe during the century after Brigitte’s death and by the 15th century her cult was widespread and influential in England.¹³⁶

Kempe describes some similarities between herself and Brigitte. They were both married and had children, and both achieved to persuade their husbands to live in chastity later in their marriages. Both women were mystics and acted in the public sphere of live despite the traditional beliefs that dictated that women should not take an active role in religious life. Both had sons, who were sexual sinners and died before their mothers, and both Brigitte and Margery fought for the soul of her son, and helped to save it. However, while Brigitte was of noble birth and very influential, the life of Margery Kempe concentrated in

¹³² Staley, 1994, 241.

¹³³ Finke 1999, 176--177; Aers 1988, 73 – 74.

¹³⁴ Eg. Ashley 1998, 371 – 388.

¹³⁵ Atkinson 1983, 159-161, 168 – 179, 190 – 194.

¹³⁶ Atkinson 1983, 168 – 179.

more local level.¹³⁷ It is quite possible that these similarities have been emphasized in Kempe's book in order to gain credibility and power. Kempe most certainly was familiar with Brigitte's life, as she mentions her several times¹³⁸. Kempe probably died sometimes after 1438, and she was never declared a saint by the church.¹³⁹

¹³⁷ Atkinson 1983, 168 – 179.

¹³⁸ Eg. Kempe, 35; Atkinson 1983, 168.

¹³⁹ Finke 1999, 177; Aers 1988, 73 – 74.

3. Maids, wives and widows. The influence of marital status to agency

Having provided a short summary of the background for this thesis I will continue to the core chapters and I will start by attending to the issue of the influence of the marital status to female agency. The subservience of women in the middle ages was rooted in all aspects of life. The assumptions that women were morally and intellectually inferior to men came from Christianity, the classics and the science of the time.¹⁴⁰ The “biological” views of the deficiency of women can be traced back to Aristotle who characterised women to be “defective males” and therefore unfit to any activity that is not a response to the actions or commands of a man. Therefore a woman who aspired to exercise power or authority over men was going against her nature.¹⁴¹

Furthermore, according to Christian views, woman was created from a man, and was therefore under his command. In addition, it was believed that Satan approach Eve when he wanted to destroy Paradise, because Eve was weaker than Adam and more open to sin. Women were, therefore, often seen as the temptress who could corrupt men. The nature of woman and her vices were more commonly proclaimed through stories, sermons and songs. Commonly surfacing negative traits connected with women were inconstancy and irrationality, foolishness, talkativeness and sexual promiscuity all of which underlined the necessity of male domination in order to uphold social order.¹⁴²

In addition to the theoretical and popular framework that justified the subservience of women, the legal and political arrangements of the time ensured that women had few opportunities to manage their own affairs. The three most fundamental instruments of female subservience were coverture stated in the

¹⁴⁰ Harris 2002, 17 – 24.

¹⁴¹ Harris 2002, 17 – 24.

¹⁴² Maurer 2003, 5 – 6.

common law, arranged marriages based on the jointure and dower¹⁴³, and the primogenital inheritance system with male entail.¹⁴⁴

Firstly, coverture stipulated in the common law that with marriage women became *femmes couvertes*. In other words, the husband “covered” the legal existence of the wife and the wife became subservient to her husband in all things. Wives could not sign binding contracts or initiate and defend lawsuits. The husband had almost unlimited physical authority over their wives. They could, for example, punish her physically, decide where she lived and restrict their contact to other people. Furthermore, women in general had seriously restricted possibilities of owning land and although husbands could not sell or mortgage property that their wives had inherited, the husbands nevertheless received the profits they generated.¹⁴⁵

In addition, because husbands even had rights to all personal property that their wives brought to the marriage, wives could not write a will without the permission of the husband. The common law court only recognised the wills written by wives with the consent of the husband in 1426.¹⁴⁶ Among widows writing wills was much more common, as they were able to master their own property, and in the Paston letters there are for example the wills of Agnes and Margaret, both of whom were widows at the time and had a considerable amount of property to share.¹⁴⁷

Secondly, jointure and dower were meant to ensure the wives livelihood in widowhood, but, in addition, they enforced female subservience. Jointure contained an income from land or tenements donated to the couple by the groom’s family, and it was held jointly during the marriage. The husband was not allowed to sell property belonging to the jointure without the consent of the wife. In case of death, the jointure was left to the surviving spouse. Dower rights, on the other hand, gave widows right to one third of the land that the husband kept in

¹⁴³ Dower and dowry should not be confused. Dowry was the property that the woman brought to the husband and the ownership of that property transferred to the husband. Dower, or the morning gift, on the other hand, was a provision that belonged to the wife, if the husband died.

¹⁴⁴ Harris 2002, 17 – 24.

¹⁴⁵ Harris 2002, 17 – 24.

¹⁴⁶ Harris 2002, 17 – 24.

¹⁴⁷ Agnes Paston, draft will 16 Sept 1466, PL 1971, 44 – 45 (see appendix 2); Margaret Paston, copy of will, 4 Feb, nominally 1482, PL 1971, 382 – 389.

fee. In another words, widow would get one third of the land that was owned with the fullest right under the common law. However, both jointure and dower gave women life rights to the lands, and not the full rights inheritance would have given.¹⁴⁸

These contracts and wealth that marriage brought into the family were often very important. The money and property involved in marriage negotiations made daughters a possible source of income and therefore important. The marriage contracts also ensured that daughters, as assets, were closely monitored and they often had very little choice in their own marriages. However, it has to be remembered that it is unlikely that many parents would want their children to be unhappy. Undoubtedly parents tried to do the best they could by their children.¹⁴⁹

The third main reason for female subservience was the inheritance institutions of the Middle Ages. In the wealthier circles of society the primogenital inheritance system enforced with the male entail restricted the possibilities of a woman to inherit land, which was the most fundamental measure of wealth. According to primogeniture in the common law, sons inherited before daughters, but daughters inherited before other male kin. In other words, when the deceased had sons, the oldest inherited. If there was no surviving son, but only daughters, the land was divided among them.¹⁵⁰

However, from the late 14th century the male entail became more common, and it further restricted women's possibilities to inherit land. An entail restricted the inheritance of land to certain groups. The most common of these entails was the mail entail, which favoured more distant male heirs over daughters. In other words, daughters no longer inherited even if there were no sons, but the property went to more distant male relatives.¹⁵¹

Male entail had some serious disadvantages. Depending on how much of land was held in mail entail, younger sons and daughters might be left

¹⁴⁸ Harris 2002, 17 – 26.

¹⁴⁹ Harris 2002, 17 – 26.

¹⁵⁰ Harris 2002, 17 – 26.

¹⁵¹ Harris 2002, 17 – 26.

with nothing. Furthermore, some men preferred to give their inheritance to their daughters rather than brothers or other male relatives. By using common recovery, a legal trick devised by lawyers in the 15th century, landowners could break the male entail and leave the land to any heirs. However, most of the land was nevertheless inherited through primogeniture or male entail and women who inherited land were relatively uncommon.¹⁵²

Despite the scarceness of heiresses, both William Paston and his son John Paston I managed to marry an heiress who inherited her father as a sole heir.¹⁵³ However, inheriting before male heirs would have been something out of ordinary. John II demonstrates the point in one of his letters to his mother, as he expresses his concern over the marriage arrangement of his brother, John III, and Margery Brews:

Item, an other inconvenience is, whereas I understand that the manor is given to my brother and his wife and to the issue produced between them, if the case were so that he and she had a daughter or more together, and his wife would die and he would marry another later and had a son, that son would have no land, even though he would be his father's heir.¹⁵⁴

The institutions of jointure and dower made the marriage negotiations a relatively complex affair, as can be seen from the Paston letters. Marriages were often negotiated,¹⁵⁵ and even a successful engagement did not ensure the marriage: Anne Haute and John I were engaged for several years, but never married due to financial reasons.¹⁵⁶ Because of the redistribution of property and influence that marriages of the wealthy created, marriages were quite important news in letters and they often appear in them.¹⁵⁷ Both the primary and the secondary sources indicate that for women marriage offered more possibilities to gain power in their own lives and to achieve independent agency.

¹⁵² Harris 2002, 17 – 26.

¹⁵³ Barber 1981, 10; Watt 2004a, 5.

¹⁵⁴ John II to Margaret, 28 March 1477, PL 1971, 500.

¹⁵⁵ Eg. Elisabeth Clere to John Paston I, 29 June, not after 1449, PL 1971, 31 – 33; William II to Margaret, probably 1458, 10 August, PL 1971, 156 – 157.

¹⁵⁶ Eg. Davis 1971, lviii – lix.

¹⁵⁷ Eg. PL 1976, 375: John Wykes to John II, 17 Feb 1466.

Marriage was the norm for women in the middle ages. Among the aristocracy 94 per cent of women married, which clearly defines marriage as the norm. Nevertheless, some women inevitably remained single. Most likely remaining single was not a choice, but it could be a consequence of a physical or mental illness, or lack of possibility to provide a dowry. In some cases the problem might simply be that there was no one available to arrange the marriage. Remarriage after being widowed was common at the time. If the remaining parent was busy in his/her new marriage, the marriage negotiations for a daughter from previous union might simply be overlooked.¹⁵⁸

Single women remained as perpetual daughters until their father died. After that they were free from coverture like widows, but their role in society was immensely different. Even though in principle unmarried women had the same rights and obligations than unmarried men, in reality they had little possibilities to act outside their homes.¹⁵⁹ Single women had hardly any possibilities for agency and they did not have the same independence and influence as widows could have.¹⁶⁰

Those who remained single throughout their lives often lived in their father's house or with their siblings or other kin. There were a few reasons for this. Firstly, most aristocratic single women did not have enough property to set up a house on their own that would reflect their aristocratic status. Secondly, single women who lived alone were considered somewhat suspiciously and thirdly, aristocratic families were expected to look after their own kin. This does not mean that single women were solely at the mercy of the goodwill of their kin, however. They did have some choice over where they lived, although the options were relatively limited.¹⁶¹

John I received a letter from an unknown person saying that Mary, cousin of John I, had moved to live with Awdry [Audrey] Croxeston "and she told me that you would pay for her board there"¹⁶². This reveals that "cousin Mary"

¹⁵⁸ Harris 2002, 18, 89 – 92.

¹⁵⁹ Power 1975, 38.

¹⁶⁰ Harris 2002, 18, 88 – 92.

¹⁶¹ Froide 1999, 238 – 243.

¹⁶² BDMS to John I late Sept not after 1465, PL 1976, 320.

was indeed expected to provide payment for her upkeep, and that she could rely on her cousin to provide the money. In the Middle Ages “family” was much wider concept than it is today. Family outside the unit of married couple and their children was understood more as a wide social network that included different obligations. Exact family relations were not considered very important.¹⁶³

Therefore, it is safe to assume that “cousin” was used much more freely than it is used today and there is no certainty of how close a relative “cousin Mary” really was. Neither is there knowledge of what kind of relationship she had with the afore mentioned Awdry Croxeston. However, the fact that only Awdry has been mentioned indicates that she lived alone and was therefore either a widow or unmarried herself. This seems to confirm the notion of Froide that unmarried women did have some choice in where they lived.¹⁶⁴ I presume “cousin Mary” to have been unmarried or perhaps a poor widow, because otherwise she would be the responsibility of her husband and not John I.

Single women who did live with relatives might help their mothers, sisters or brothers in managing the estates and children. They did not have the status of the married lady of the house, however, and they most often remained in the private sphere of life. In any case single women were not a financial burden to their kin, as they were expected to pay for their living expenses from their inheritances. Fathers often took care that the daughter received their dowry at a specific age even if they had remained single. The women normally received their inheritance between the ages of 18 and 25, and it provided unmarried women with a possibility to pay for their own expenses. However, they were unable to invest their money even after receiving it, and depended on their male kin or married or widowed female relatives to act on their behalf.¹⁶⁵

In the lower classes there were considerably more single women than among the higher classes. Estimated 20 to 30 per cent of the whole population were single women, and the percentage was higher in urban areas. Compared to this estimate, single women are considerably under-represented in the

¹⁶³ Lahtinen 2007, 14.

¹⁶⁴ Froide 1999, 243.

¹⁶⁵ Harris 2002, 92 – 95.

contemporary sources. They had the same legal rights and obligations as the aristocratic single women, but their problems seemed to be more plentiful. If the single woman did not have a dowry from which to support herself, it is understandable if equally poor relatives would have been less willing to take her under their roof and support her. In addition, her chances of finding a husband without a dowry were lower.¹⁶⁶

On the other hand, successfully establishing a home of their own might prove to be difficult even if money was no object. Single women living on their own defied the patriarchal system and evaded the control that male relatives were supposed to have over women. This made single women living on their own suspicious in the established social order. Single women were more easily suspected of prostitution than women living under the supervision of a man, even to the extent that in some documents “singlewoman” means a prostitute. Although obviously not all women living on their own were prostitutes, some of the generalisation can be understood, because single women had considerably more difficulties in supporting themselves. Trades that were considered respectable for women were relatively rare and did not generally pay very well. Therefore, turning to prostitution might be the only possible option for some.¹⁶⁷

However, single women in every class seemed to gain some respectability through age. After menopause, around the age of 40–55, single women seemed to acquire much of the standing of a much more respectable widow. It seems that when women lost the capability to bear children, they became somehow less female in the eyes of society, and therefore lost some of the inconstancy and unreliability attached to women. They were no longer such a threat to social order.¹⁶⁸

Furthermore, it is likely that in the lower classes marriage was not quite as important as among the aristocracy, as large amounts of money and/or land was not at issue. Among the aristocracy sexual agency among single women seemed to be more rare than among the lower classes, as aristocratic women were

¹⁶⁶ Froide 1999, 236–260.

¹⁶⁷ Froide 1999, 236–260; Karras 1999, 127–140.

¹⁶⁸ Froide 1999, 236–260.

more closely supervised because of their importance in the marriage market. In theory, women of all classes were expected to conform to the tight norms of sexual relations, in other words, to have sex only in marriage. In reality, sexual indiscretions were as much present as they have always been, and the attitude towards the woman would have been different depending on her social status.¹⁶⁹

Chaucer acknowledges the influence of the social status to attitudes towards a woman who becomes a mistress, but reminds that her social status should not influence the judgement:

There is no real difference at all
Between a lady-wife of high degree
Dishonest of her body, is she be,
And some poor wench, no difference but this
– That’s if so they both should go amiss –
That since the gentlewoman ranks above
She therefore will be called his “lady-love”,
Whereas that other woman, being poor,
Will be referred to as his wench or whore.
And as God knows (and so do you, dear brother),
One name is just as low as the other.¹⁷⁰

The sexual indiscretions among aristocratic single women or even her rape was a matter of property. Women were considered, in effect, to be the property of their male relative or husband. On top of the woman’s value in the marriage market, the behaviour of women influenced the honour of the family name, making their sexual indiscretions a serious matter. In effect, sleeping with or even raping an aristocratic woman was parallel by stealing. Taking a woman and her purity was similar to taking property from another man. Whether the woman was a victim or an actor was secondary. On the other hand, the sexually active single women of the lower classes were seen to break the patriarchal norms rather than being property.¹⁷¹

Sex and sexuality are rarely mentioned in the Paston letters, but here is one more illustrative example of the attitudes of the Paston men towards sex

¹⁶⁹ Karras, 1999, 135–136.

¹⁷⁰ CT, 480–481. “The Manciple’s Tale”.

¹⁷¹ Karras 1999, 135–136.

outside marriage. Edmond II writes to his brother John III and seems indignant, because her mother Margaret has forced him to fire a servant because he was “feeling randy” and had sex with a girl in a field. This did not seem to be the heart of the problem, but the fact that two ploughmen continued the dalliance with the girl in her stables seems to have been the final straw.¹⁷² There is no mention of the fate of the girl who seemed to be willing participant in the events. The issue would have been on a different level if the girl in question had been high born. Even though Margaret obviously disapproved of this indiscretion, she did provide for the illegitimate daughter of her son John I in her will¹⁷³. This indicates that indeed sex outside marriage and therefore illegitimacy, at least for aristocratic men, was a fact of life.

There are only a few unmarried women mentioned in the Canterbury Tales and generally they have not been portrayed as independent persons but as the objects of chivalric love or simply mentioned as working in the household¹⁷⁴. The Paston women wrote relatively few letters before they married, or at least not many letters from them have survived. In comparison, letters from unmarried male members of the family are relatively common in the collection. The Paston women hardly ever even mention their own daughters unless they have been difficult or disobedient, while letters to, from and about their sons are much more frequent.¹⁷⁵ On the rare occasions when unmarried women are mentioned it is normally in the case of possible marriage. Unmarried women are even excluded in the conventions of letter writing as they are rarely mentioned in the greetings of the letters, indicating further that they were really not significant enough to mention.

However, this near invisibility in public does not necessarily mean that unmarried women had no control in their private life and future marriages. Parish guilds, where women came together and worked for the benefit of their local Church, offered some visibility in public and collective agency to unmarried

¹⁷² Edmond II to John III, 16 May 1472, PL 1971, 365.

¹⁷³ Margaret, copy of will, 4 Feb nominally 1482, PL 1971, 388.

¹⁷⁴ E.g. CT, 30 -34. "The Knight's Tale"; *ibid.* 223-234. "The Clerk's Tale".

¹⁷⁵ Watt 2004b, 158.

women.¹⁷⁶ Furthermore, even though wealth was undoubtedly extremely important in marriage negotiations, it would be unreasonable to deduce that the happiness of the child to be married would mean nothing to the parent. Margery Brews and John Paston III apparently made a love match despite the fact that the marriage was not economically a good one.¹⁷⁷ A love letter from Margery to John III has survived, where she asks him to settle with less money and tells of her love for him:

And if it pleases you to hear how I am, I am not in good health in body nor in heart, nor will be until I hear from you. For no one knows what pain it is I suffer and even on pain of death I dare not disclose it.

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

But if you love me, as I truly believe you do, you will not leave me because of that. Because even if you did not have half the wealth you do, and I had to undertake the greatest toil that any woman alive should, I would not forsake you.¹⁷⁸

A cynical person might claim that Margery Brews saw an opportunity to marry higher and seized it, which is one possibility. Nevertheless this and another surviving love letter¹⁷⁹ demonstrate that an unmarried woman could go after what she wanted, and that her parent (in this case the mother) would try to fulfil her wishes whether the “ulterior” motive was love or wealth.

Furthermore, some unmarried women took a risk in order to achieve what they wanted despite the objections of the family. Margery, the daughter of Margaret Paston, married a family bailiff, Richard Calle, in spite of the opposition of her mother and brothers.¹⁸⁰ In her letter to her son, John II, Margaret describes how she and her mother-in law, Agnes, went to meet the bishop of Norwich in

¹⁷⁶ French 1998, 339–425.

¹⁷⁷ Harris 1986, 195–196.

¹⁷⁸ Margery Brews to John III, Feb 1477, PL 1971, 662. Translated by Watt 2004, 127.

¹⁷⁹ Margery Brews to John III, Feb 1477, PL 1971, 663.

¹⁸⁰ Watt 2004a, 2–3.

order to get the marriage annulled. Unfortunately for Margaret and Agnes, the bishop demanded in no uncertain terms that Margery should be allowed to be questioned by the bishop: "...and ordered me, under threat of excommunication, that she should not be put off, but that she must appear before him the next day".¹⁸¹ The bishop spoke to Margery and tried to persuade her by reminding her of her situation:

And the bishop spoke to her very plainly and reminded her of her birth, who her relatives and friends were, and how she should have more, if she would be ruled and guided by them. And if she would not, what rebuke and shame and loss it would be to her if she would not be guided by them, and the reason for her being abandoned in terms of material help or comfort she could have from them.¹⁸²

The bishop's warnings were no help and Margery "...repeated what she had said, and that if those words did not make it sure, she said boldly she would make it surer still before she went from there."¹⁸³ Her marriage to Richard Calle stayed in effect, as Margaret refused the divorce John II had suggested.

Nevertheless, Margery paid a high prize for her insubordination as Margaret refused to let her back into her house and erased her from her will.¹⁸⁴ Margaret's anger towards her wilful daughter is evident in the ending of her letter: "Because, you can be sure of this, she will bitterly regret her foolishness in the future, and I beg God that she may do so. I entreat you, for my heart's ease, take heart in all things, I trust God shall help, and I entreat God to do so in all our affairs..."¹⁸⁵

Later Margaret and Margery seemed to make at least a partial reconciliation and Margaret provided for the children of Margery and Richard in her will.¹⁸⁶ This letter shows quite clearly the status of a daughter. She was

¹⁸¹ Margaret to John II, 10 or 11 Sept 1469, PL 1971, 341 – 342. Translated by Watt 2004, 96.

¹⁸² Margaret to John II, 10 or 11 Sept 1469, PL 1971, 342. Translated by Watt 2004, 96 – 97.

¹⁸³ Margaret to John II, 10 or 11 Sept 1469, PL 1971, 342. Translated by Watt 2004, 97.

¹⁸⁴ Margaret to John II, 10 or 11 Sept 1469, PL 1971, 341 – 344.

¹⁸⁵ Margaret to John II, 10 or 11 Sept 1469, PL 1971, 344. Translated by Watt 2004, 98.

¹⁸⁶ Margaret, copy of will, 4 Feb nominally 1482, PL 1971, 388.

supposed to marry someone suitable, and above all to behave obediently, or the consequences could be harsh. However, even the bishop wanted to hear from the maid herself whether she really was married, the word of relatives was not enough to gain annulment, so her word carried some weight in this matter that was made public.

As illustrated above, marriage was an important business in late medieval England. When a woman married, her husband took the duties of her former guardian and covered her legal existence. Paradoxically, the law gave married women even less freedom than unmarried women and widows. A wife was completely subordinate to her husband, even more so than a vassal to his lord. However, The husbands seemed more eager than the fathers to allow women some responsibilities.¹⁸⁷

Wives were a respected commodity in everyday life. A skilful wife could take care of many affairs and chores, making the life of the husband much easier; and therefore they were given much more authority, or at least power, and therefore more possibilities to agency in public life.¹⁸⁸ Dame Elisabeth Brews wrote to John III, who aspired to wed her daughter, Margery Brews: "And, cousin, that day that she is married my father will give her 1 mark. But we accord I shall give you a greater treasure, that is a witty gentlewoman, and if I say it, both good and virtuous"¹⁸⁹. This might be to some extent advertisement, as the match was far from settled at the time¹⁹⁰, but it seems to follow the general attitudes towards the usefulness of a good wife.

Many sources from the Middle Ages emphasize the importance of obedience in a wife and remind of the mastery of the husband over the wife. However, the marriage sermons discuss marriage from slightly different perspective. They describe an ideal marriage containing love, fidelity, temperance and honesty, mutual help and education of children. Marriage sermons do not solely describe the ideal marriage but they acknowledge the possible

¹⁸⁷ Harris 2002, 61 – 62.

¹⁸⁸ Harris 2002, 61 – 65.

¹⁸⁹ Dame Elisabeth Brews to John III, probably 1477, PL 1976, 435.

¹⁹⁰ Harris1986, 195 – 196.

shortcomings of both spouses equally, and aim to give practical advice to problem situations in marriage.¹⁹¹

The pragmatic approach towards marriage and abandoning the viewpoint that a man has an absolute authority over woman's acts and thoughts is rare in the discussion at the time. The subservience of women is noted and reasserted in the marriage sermons, but it is acknowledged that the most humble and obedient wife cannot make a good marriage if the husband does not acknowledge her work. Therefore the sermons distribute blame for unsuccessful marriages to both parties, and reinforce the picture of medieval marriage as a mutual collaboration, although between a senior and junior partner.¹⁹² The idea of junior and senior partner is visible in the Paston family, especially in the rich correspondence between Margaret and John I.¹⁹³

The difference between the agency of unmarried women and wives is evident in the primary sources. In *the Canterbury Tales* married women are not portrayed merely as objects like unmarried women, but in addition as schemers or as the loyal and competent helpers of their husbands. Some married women even achieve agency in public. *The Clerk's Tale* in *the Canterbury Tales* is a good example of the difference between an unmarried and married woman. A poor man's daughter, Griselda, marries the king. As an unmarried woman she is a passive object of admiration, but after the marriage she becomes a celebrated wife who in the absence of the king skilfully judges the quarrels of the nobility and works tirelessly for the benefit of the community:¹⁹⁴

She could advance the public good; --
She, in her husband's absence, did not cease
Her labours; if the noble of the land
Fell into enmity she made their peace.
So wise and ripe the words at her command,
Her heart so equitable and her hand
So just, they thought that Heaven had sent her down
To right all the wrongs and to protect the town.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹¹ Schnell & Shields 1998, 771 – 786.

¹⁹² Schnell & Shields 1998, 771 – 786.

¹⁹³ Eg. Margaret to John I, 15 Oct, perhaps 1453, PL 1971, 251 – 252; Watt 2004b, 141.

¹⁹⁴ CT, 223–234. "The Clerk's Tale".

¹⁹⁵ CT, 333. "The Clerk's Tale".

However, Chaucer praises Griselda in equal matter for her ability to bear children and, above all, for her obedience to her husband. Griselda's husband decides in his insecurity to test her loyalty. He tells her that he has decided to kill their two children, he divorces her and finally commands her to serve his new wife. However hard he tests her, Griselda stays unvarying in her obedience, love and loyalty. This subservience earns her the undying love of her husband in the end.¹⁹⁶

Griselda in the story is a Christian exemplar, whose role is to suffer. Nevertheless, her experiences evolve from the realities of medieval women who sometimes had no choice but to suffer patiently. As mentioned before, coverture and the court's acceptance of physical violence towards wives left women without many possibilities to resist their husband's treatment. Furthermore, the canon law, the ecclesiastical law governing the Roman Catholic Church, stipulated that women could be married at the age of twelve, like Griselda in the story. Griselda seems to personify the ideal woman for Chaucer, and the story concentrates on praising feminine patience and humility. However, Chaucer does not advocate the actions allocated to the husband.¹⁹⁷

Patience and virtue were considered to be female virtues in the middle Ages. In this story, Chaucer connects inconstancy to Griselda's husband, even though it was considered a vice which women were especially inclined to commit. In contrast to this, Griselda stays constant throughout the story, further enhancing her model behaviour and subtly denouncing the actions of the man through his inconstancy.¹⁹⁸ Although Griselda is wise and competent in public, in the end she is unerringly loyal and obedient to her husband even though he chooses to test her severely. This makes her the exemplar of a woman and a wife.

For a medieval woman, becoming a widow was a relatively common state of affairs. Harris estimates that in late medieval England, approximately 70 per cent of men who had married at least once during their lives, left widows

¹⁹⁶ Ibid. 330–353.

¹⁹⁷ Florence 1992, 119–130.

¹⁹⁸ Blamires 2006, 172–175.

when they passed on.¹⁹⁹ As a widow, a woman gained more independence and the right to rule her own life, at least in theory. Magna Carta entitled widows to receive their marriage portion and inheritance within forty days of the husband's death, and to remain unmarried if they wished so.²⁰⁰ It was relatively common for wealthy husbands to leave their wives considerable amounts in addition to their legal share. Moreover, many widows acted as the executors of their husbands' wills. These things enabled women to dominate considerable amounts of family possessions.²⁰¹ This happened in the Paston family in the 1470s, when Agnes and Margaret Paston controlled a large portion of the family heritage.²⁰² They, for example, produced wills and (rent) leases in their own name²⁰³, while married women needed the approval and trust of their husbands in order to act for the family in business matters.

However, it has to be remembered that widowhood did not automatically mean social and economic independence. The Magna Carta gave widows some rights to inheritance, but this was often not enough to provide for the widow and the children, except in a very narrow part of society. In addition, pressure from other family members might influence the widow's decisions about economic affairs and a new marriage.²⁰⁴ Laurie Finke notes that in common law women were usually treated as legally incompetent and in need of guardianship, even in widowhood. If there were no male relatives, the guardianship passed to a feudal lord.²⁰⁵

Through dower rights²⁰⁶ widows had traditionally a right to one third of their late husband's land that was not tied in entail, but even this depended on the area. For example, in the archdiocese of Canterbury women with children had the right to one third of the estates only if the husband died intestate; otherwise they only had the right to their personal things, if the husband did not make any

¹⁹⁹ Harris 2002, 127.

²⁰⁰ Magna Carta, clauses 7 and 8.

²⁰¹ Harris 2002, 127-129.

²⁰² Watt 2004a, 4-10.

²⁰³ E.g. Agnes Paston: indenture of lease, 30 October 1446, PL 1971, 28; Draft Will, 16 Sept 1466, PL 1971, 44-45.

²⁰⁴ Lehmijoki-Gardner 2002, 295.

²⁰⁵ Finke 1999, 43.

²⁰⁶ Dower was a right for certain property that the bride got from the groom or his family, traditionally in the morning after the wedding.

provisions for her in his will. Nevertheless, paying debts took precedence over the wife's right to inherit, so in practice the widow might be left with nothing despite a beneficial will. The precariousness of a widow's situation was in theory dealt with by jointure and dower, as mentioned before. Unfortunately these did not always ensure sufficient income for widows, especially if the husband had overstepped his rights by selling land held in jointure.²⁰⁷

As the discussion in this chapter show, in late medieval England the marital and social status of women greatly influenced their possibilities for agency in public life. Unmarried women had fewer possibilities to act in public and they were expected to live under the rule of a guardian. However, it is likely that women from the lower classes more often had to adopt agency when earning a living. As they were not seen as a commodity like unmarried aristocratic women; they may have had a little more freedom. However, their problems seemed to have been bigger as well. If they wanted acceptance of society, they had to balance between the norms created by the wealthy, and at the same time break those norms in order to earn a living. Those who did not fit into the social norms often found themselves pushed to the margins of society.

Practically the only accepted possibility was marriage, if the woman wished to remain outside the convent walls. In marriage coverture erased the legal existence of the wife, but paradoxically married women often gained agency when they helped their husbands. In addition, society recognised that a wife could have some power towards their husbands and his affairs. As widows women achieved most freedom and social acceptance without direct connection to a man. However, being the sole person responsible for one's own affairs was not always straightforward or easy, and earning a living might prove to be difficult yet again.

²⁰⁷ Harris 2002, 17 – 24.

4. Women and Work

4.1. Working as a team with their husbands

In the Middle Ages, marriage was the most common way for a woman to earn her upkeep. Married women may have had less legal rights than unmarried women, but paradoxically they seemed to achieve much more power and even authority. Furthermore, their agency in public became more acceptable, especially among the higher classes. Marriage was virtually the only acceptable choice for aristocratic women. A well-selected wife could bring considerable wealth and important connections to the family as both Agnes and Margaret Paston did.²⁰⁸

Furthermore a skilful wife could be very helpful in the managing of the family estates and married women often managed the estates with their husbands. The other path available for aristocratic wife was a life and a career of sorts in life at court.²⁰⁹ Society of the time dictated that an ideal wife was capable of handling and promoting her husbands affairs and, at the same time, she would be virtuous and obedient. In addition the norms of society expected women to adopt a conciliatory role, although there is ample evidence that at least on some occasions women were not able to abide by this rule.²¹⁰

Legally wives had very few rights. The husband was her absolute master according to law and custom. The law allowed husbands to beat their wives if they so wished. The husband ruled the income of the family, which left the wife unable to support herself without his help. However, the husband was not strictly speaking allowed to sell property from the wife's dowry without her approval. Considering his complete mastery over her, it is more than likely that the husband could force her to approve of the sale if he so wished. Some widows took precautions against the risks of coverture when they discussed a new marriage. However, because they were trying to protect themselves from coverture, which erased their legal existence, they could not make the contracts in

²⁰⁸ Harris 2002, 61–67; Watt 2004a, 4–5.

²⁰⁹ Harris 2002, 61–67.

²¹⁰ Maurer 2003, p. 1–13.

their own name. Instead, they needed male relatives to sign them, so that the men could sue the husband if need arose, as the wife could not sue anyone or sign a binding contract in her own name.²¹¹

The wives sometimes needed to act within the public life when their husbands were absent. The businesses needed to be tended despite long travels. Therefore, when the husbands were absent, the wives needed some power and authority in order to get things done. Wives seemed to achieve credibility and power through their husbands, on the basis that she was acting according to his instructions. In reality, however, it can be assumed that some women were able to act without advice from their husbands. It was probably important that the authority of the husband was seen to influence the actions of the wife.

In addition, it can be assumed that wives had some power towards their husbands. Evidence of both, authority and power, can be found in the Paston letters. Margery Paston received several letters that ask her to recommend the correspondent to her husband.²¹² The underlying assumption is that she really had power to influence his opinions. In addition, she possessed some authority when she, for example, oversaw the collection of rents while her husband was away²¹³.

Aristocratic women were often considered to be a valuable commodity in the running of complex and time-consuming family affairs. In the medieval world distances were long, and men were often required to travel. Because larger estates needed a considerable amount of managing, women were required to step up and take on the responsibility.²¹⁴ For example the men in the Paston family mainly worked in law; they practised their profession in the court and the households of the aristocracy, while the women of the family remained relatively stationary in the various family estates in Norfolk.²¹⁵

Therefore the “job description” of aristocratic women included managing the household(s) and commanding the servants, as well as taking care of the extended family that lived in permanent residence. Some wives even kept separate

²¹¹ Harris 2002, 66 – 67.

²¹² E.g. Piers to Margaret, about 1461, PL 1976, 343.

²¹³ Margaret to John II, 7 Jan. 1462, PL 1971, 280–282.

²¹⁴ Power 1975, 35,53; Harris 2002, 61–67.

²¹⁵ Harris 2002, 33, 61–67.

accounts of their own expenditure. In addition, wives were expected to be able to treat minor medical problems.²¹⁶ John Paston III asks her wife Margery to send an ointment for their friend who has hurt his knee and reminds her that:

...When ye send me the plaster ye must send me writing how it should be laid to and taken for his knee, and how long it should abide on his knee unremoved, and how long the plaster will last good, and whether he must lap any more cloths about the plaster to keep it warm or not.²¹⁷

John III seemed to trust the ointment, and the letter indicates that Margery really did know how to use it. In addition, women sent information to each other. Alice Crane asked Margaret whether the medicine worked, the one she had told Margaret about in her earlier letter.²¹⁸ Sometimes the wives even arranged the tangled affairs of the heart of their servant's²¹⁹. In her letter to her son, Margaret Paston ask John Paston II to make inquiries on behalf of a female servant:

Also, I want you to speak with Wykes and find out how he is disposed towards Jane Walsham. She has said, that unless she can marry him she will never be married [...] and if he will not have her, let me know hastily, and I shall arrange something else for her.²²⁰

The letters of the Paston women show that even though they were not always fully literate and had had no formal education, they still had a good working knowledge of the law and knew how to manage the household and the estates.²²¹ The surviving fragments of the drafts of the will of Agnes Paston demonstrate her ability to understand, and even produce, legal text. In the first surviving draft she

²¹⁶ Harris 2002, 33, 61–67.

²¹⁷ John III to Margery between 1487 and 1495, PL 1971, 628. Translated by Davis 1963, 257.

²¹⁸ Alice Crane to Margaret, 29 June perhaps about 1455, PL 1976, 339.

²¹⁹ Watt 2004, 69 [notes].

²²⁰ Margaret Paston to John Paston II, 15 Nov 1463, PL 1971, 287–289. Translated by Watt 2004, 70.

²²¹ Watt 2004b, 142,158; Hawkes 2000, 158.

claims that her husband has, before his death, asked her to provide for their younger sons. (See appendix 2).²²²

One of the drafts is most likely even written in her own hand²²³, which would even more strongly suggest that she really did understand legal matters rather than just rely on somebody else's expertise. There is evidence in the letters that, as well as Agnes Paston, at least Margaret Paston was familiar with legal terminology.²²⁴ In one of his letters to Margaret John I wrote: "I marvel that I hear no tidings from you how you have done at court"²²⁵ which indicates that he trusted her to be able to deal with the situation and report back to him.

Some gentlewomen in late medieval England seemed to be well informed and experienced legal agents in common law courts and equity courts. However, there seemed to be a difference in female activity in the law courts of King's Bench and Common Pleas and the equity court of Chancery. King's Bench and Common Pleas were the major law courts at the time. King's Bench had developed in the 13th century as the King's personal court, and although the King rarely personally attended the court any more, it had the right to correct all errors in all other courts except Exchequer.

Equity court of Chancery, or the Exchequer, developed in the early 15th century. It was concerned with cases that could not find a solution by the usual course of the law or in cases where, because of the power of the defendant or because of the unsettled state of the land, the ordinary courts could not act. The third court mentioned, the Common Pleas, on the other hand, had the right to supervise the older local courts, but in fact its jurisdiction had somewhat eroded and by the late 15th century the most important part of its jurisdiction was actions between one private litigant and another. In other words, the Common Pleas dealt with the common pleas.²²⁶

The jurisdictions offered women very different roles in these courts. Women were mostly involved in cases over land in the Common Pleas. Widows, for example, could recover the land they brought to the marriage if the husband

²²² Agnes Paston's Draft Will, 16 Sept 1466, PL 1971, 44-45.

²²³ Watt 2004, 36 [notes].

²²⁴ E.g Margaret to John I, 7 Aug 1465, PL 1971, 311-314.

²²⁵ John I to Margaret, 7 Aug 1465, PL 1971, 139; Hawkes 2000, 158.

²²⁶ Hawkes 2000, 145-147.

had sold it, or given the land to someone in exchange for a pledge of service. However, it was not very common for women to be litigants in the common law courts. When they did, it was normally in order to gain their dower and inheritances. It is hard to tell whether the women themselves initiated the litigation or did their male relatives do it for them.²²⁷

In the Paston Letters there is an example of litigation including a woman. John III writes to his brother John II and warns him that John II was accused as an accomplice in a shooting incident. John III advises him: "I pray you not to let this matter sleep, for I can think that my lord of Norfolk's council will cause the widows to take an appeal and turn it up into the King's bench at the beginning of this term."²²⁸ This letter quite nicely illustrates that women did have some legal agency, but that they leaned on the support of men, especially if the matter was going to court.

Women were proportionally larger group in equity courts than in common Pleas, but they were still most often litigants in cases over land. The reason why women normally went to courts over land is probably because their legal standing was not strong, and therefore unnecessary litigation was not wise. Land, however, as the base of wealth, was important enough to fight for despite the expenses of a lawsuit. Furthermore, because of coverture, wives could not sign contracts and therefore women were rarely in court over failing to fulfil the statutes of contracts.²²⁹

However, the fact that women used equity courts more shows legal knowledge in itself, as the outcome was often more favourable for women than in common law courts. In addition, women often emphasized their lack of experience and insecure position as females and widows, and leaned on the chivalric idea that women could ask for protection. As the judge of the equity court, the Chancellor was the representative of the King who was supposed to care for the undefended children and widows.²³⁰ In her petitions against William Paston one Julian Herbert repeatedly describes herself as "poor widow and continual humble servant

²²⁷ Hawkes 2000, 150.

²²⁸ John III to John II, 22 June 1470, PL 1971, 560.

²²⁹ Hawkes 2000, 145–161.

²³⁰ Hawkes 2000, 150–155.

woman"²³¹ or with similar words illustrating this convention. 'However, it is more than likely that women generally received advice for their appeals and this cannot be held as sole proof of legal knowledge.

Nevertheless, there seems to be considerable difference between the legal knowledge of the women and their activity in court. Behind the scene they helped their husbands in legal matters and in the process acquired important knowledge, but the courts, as the public places of agency, were the domain of the men.²³² This is understandable, considering that the law courts are undoubtedly categorised as public places. Agency in these requires some extent of knowledge and agency that women, according to law and custom, should not have had at the time. Allowing women an active role in courts would have challenged the patriarchal idea of women as inferior beings, whose matters should be promoted by a male.

However, widows and married women could act in courts to a certain extent, because they needed either to regain their dowry or dower rights, or to advance the interests of their husbands. According to Lewis, some women did achieve legal agency by writing wills and writing the narrative of their lives into them.²³³ However, it must be remembered that even though a will was in a way a display of legal power, it was not very public outside the ring of beneficiaries.

In the Paston family, Margaret actively took part in the affairs of the family estates during as well as after her marriage to John I. In her letters Margaret sometimes conveyed tender feelings towards her husband: "most respected and honourable husband, I commend myself to you, wishing with all my heart to hear of your health and happiness..."²³⁴ However, she more often addressed business in different forms. She often asked advice from John I: "I entreat you to let me know how you want me to proceed, whether you want me to stay at Caister or come to you in London."²³⁵ She ultimately held herself accountable to her

²³¹ PL 1971, 513: Petition of J. Herbert against W. Paston I, about 1437.

²³² Hawkes 2000, 160.

²³³ Lewis 2000, 59.

²³⁴ Margaret to John I, 14 Dec probably 1441, PL 1971, 216–217. Translated by Watt 2004, 45.

²³⁵ Margaret to John I, 17 Oct 1465, PL 1971, 323–324. Translated by Watt 2004, 88.

husband²³⁶. John I, in turn, often asked her to deal with business and offered her advice.²³⁷

On the other hand, Margaret seems to have been proficient in handling the business on her own as well. She oversaw gathering of the rent²³⁸, protected the family's interests in front of the law²³⁹ and even with weapons²⁴⁰. She was quite capable of making her own decisions about managing the estates. In her letter to John I she informs him that she intends to visit the manors of Hellesdon and Drayton, the two manors that were a part of an inheritance dispute: "And this week I intend to go to Hellesdon on Wednesday or Thursday and to stay there for a week or two and send our men out to collect money at Drayton and Helleston."²⁴¹ In addition, she often wrote to her husband about business she had conducted²⁴².

Margaret sometimes even offered John I advice concerning business. In his absence Margaret had first hand knowledge of the attitudes and feelings of the tenants and servants. Therefore, she especially advised John I in regard to what he should do in order to win the public opinion on his side. For example, in 1449 it came to Margaret's knowledge that many of the tenants of Swainsthorp [spelled Sweynysthorp in the letter] would support John I, if he had the backing of the Lord of Suffolk. This in mind Margaret writes to him:

"Therefore I pray you with all my heart that you will do your part to have his good lordship and his love for the good of all the maters that you have to do, and in easing my heart also"²⁴³.

In a way she seemed to work as his personal assistant who wielded a little bit of his authority in public and had some power over him. In her letters to her sons

²³⁶ Watt 2004b, 141.

²³⁷ Eg, John I to Margaret, 7 Aug., 1465, PL 1971, 138 – 139.

²³⁸ Margaret to John II, 7 Jan. 1462, PL 1971, 280–282.

²³⁹ Margaret to John I, 10 or 11 Sept 1469, PL 1971, 341–344.

²⁴⁰ Margaret to John I, 1448, PL 1971, 226–227.

²⁴¹ Margaret to John I, 3 May 1465, PL 1971, 293–295. Translated by Watt 2004, 72.

²⁴² E.g. Margaret to John I, 20 May 1465, PL 1971, 301–302.

²⁴³ E.g. Margaret to John I, 9 May probably 1449, PL 1971, 235 – 236.

Margaret offers more advice with more noticeable briskness in her tone²⁴⁴, clearly indicating that her relationship to her sons was more equal or even authoritarian.

Margaret was left with difficult tasks and to make decisions as well, and it is evident that John I believed her capable of dealing with the issues. In his letter to Margaret and two of their servants in 27 June 1465, John I asks her to travel to the manors of Hellesdon and Drayton in order to speak to the peasants there and confirm the claims of the family to the said manors in an unstable situation:

Nevertheless ye be a gentlewoman, and it is worship for you to comfort your tenants: wherefore I would ye might ride to Hellesdon and Drayton and Sparham, and tarry at Drayton and speak with them, and bid them hold with their old master till I come, and that ye have sent me word but late, wherefore ye may have none answer yet.²⁴⁵

There are less surviving letters from Margaret's mother-in-law, Agnes Paston, and only one of these was from her husband. Therefore it is impossible to make deductions about the nature of the relationship Agnes and her husband, but the tone of the surviving letter is very similar than many of the letters from Margaret to John I.²⁴⁶ As both of these women were skilful in handling the affairs in widowhood, it is relatively safe to assume that Agnes did take part in business even during her marriage as well.

Even Chaucer, in "The Shipman's Tale", recognizes a woman's role as the guardian of the household and economic affairs. The husband must travel and he advises his wife to take good care of their property and at the same time reminds her not to spend money on new clothes:

Therefore, dear wife, I beg of you to be
Courteous and meek to all in place of me.
Look after all our property with care,
See to the house; here's plenty and to spare.

²⁴⁴ Eg. Margaret to John II, 28 Oct 1470, PL 1971, 350; Margaret to John III, 5 Feb 1472, PL 1971 363 – 364.

²⁴⁵ John Paston I to Margaret Paston, John Daubeney and Richard Calle, 27 June 1465, PL 1971, 131–134. Translated by Davis 1963, 120.

²⁴⁶ .Agnes to William I, 20 Apr probably 1440, PL 1971, 26.

Govern it well, I'll see you have enough.
But still, be thrifty over household stuff.
You've all the clothes you need, and all the stores.
I'll put some silver in that purse of yours.²⁴⁷

Women were expected to conserve their husbands' goods on his behalf. Because wives were considered to be part of the husband's property, conserving her body to the husband was a part of this duty. In this scene in "the Shipman's Tale", the wife has already decided to cheat the husband, as another man has offered her money for sexual favours. By trading her body to another man she breaks her duty to govern well the "goods" of the household.²⁴⁸

So in this story the husband's trust is ill advised. It does not change the fact that wives were in real life expected to be able to deal with the economic situation of the family. Therefore, wives were trusted, in the absence of the husbands, to take care of the household affairs. This gave wives limited agency and authority, and sometimes gave wives visibility in the public life through business affairs.

In extreme cases women were even left to handle the affairs of a kingdom. Chaucer writes admiringly of a wife who is beautiful, obedient and capable of taking care of a kingdom while her husband, the King, is away. Chaucer mentions that she was greatly loved by the subjects²⁴⁹, which implies that she had a visible and public role in society. In addition, in "the Man of Law's Tale" a sultan's mother has influence over the affairs of the state, and she tries to become the ruler of the country.²⁵⁰ As the Muslim world was probably unknown to Chaucer, this story has not necessarily a real connection to society that Chaucer lived in. Muslims might have much the same status as the mythological women rulers and -warriors of other stories in *the Canterbury Tales*²⁵¹.

However, women in positions of power in reality were not unheard of. Margaret of Anjou was the queen consort of King Henry VI of England from 1445 and she led the Lancastrians in the Wars of the Roses. Margaret had influence

²⁴⁷ CT, 163. "The Shipman's Tale".

²⁴⁸ Blamires 2006, 135.

²⁴⁹ CT, 234. "The Clerk's Tale".

²⁵⁰ CT, 132-135. "The Man of Law's Tale".

²⁵¹ CT, 26-27. "The Knight's Tale"; *ibid.* 441-443. "The Monk's Tale".

over her mentally unstable husband and the politics of the Country.²⁵² She was generally held to be unpopular among her contemporaries, as well as some later writers and historians, and described as a harsh, determined and severe queen.²⁵³

The intriguing question is what made Margaret of Anjou so unpopular. It seems unlikely that the contempt sometimes directed to the queen would be solely based on the War of the Roses, or neither on her actions, as they were hardly catastrophic compared to the actions of some other monarchs. Neither can the whole problem be that she lost her cause in the end. History is, as it has often been pointed out, undoubtedly written by the winners, but even this cannot explain completely why Margaret has been described so critically. Therefore it can be assumed that at least a part of the problem was her gender.

As a queen Margaret of Anjou had an especially difficult position to fulfil in public life. On the other hand she had the same possibilities to influence her husband as other women, but because her husband was the king, she had the most access to power among the women in England. The fact that her husband was mentally unstable brought even more pressure on her, as understandably King Henry VI was not very efficient ruler while he was in catatonic state for over a year in the first half of 1450s and not too capable later on either.²⁵⁴

Margaret of Anjou was bound by the same moral codes as other women, or even more so, as she was expected to be an example of womanly virtue to her subjects. However, in order to do what was expected of her, she needed to break the norms and the role imposed on women. The contemporary criticism seems to be mostly based on the fact that Margaret did not act as a proper queen and woman should, as a peacemaker and mediator. Instead, she chose an active role that, in the end, was not accepted.²⁵⁵

This is the difference between Margaret of Anjou and Chaucer's Griselda in "the Clerk's tale". While Griselda gains acceptance by building the peace, Margaret of Anjou gains disreputability by enforcing the claims of the

²⁵² Levin 2002, 335–337.

²⁵³ Maurer 2003, 2.

²⁵⁴ Maurer 2003, p. 1–13.

²⁵⁵ Maurer 2003, p. 1–13.

Lancastrians.²⁵⁶ Other women lower in the social ladder might break the code of conduct enforced on women without anyone raising questions, while anything that the queen did was under public scrutiny and much more open to criticism, as she was supposed to be an example of the theorized gender roles. This explains why Margaret Paston could protect the interests of her family even with weapons, without opening herself to criticism, while the queen got herself a bad reputation from similar actions.²⁵⁷

Margaret of Anjou lived in a society that denied, at least in theory, political power to women. However, women were capable of action that had political consequences and this enabled Margaret to act in public and even have followers. Nevertheless, the conventions demanded that she should have presented herself as the King's wife, not as the Queen. Furthermore, she should have legitimized her authority through her husband or her young son, however incapable they were of carrying on the duties of a monarch.²⁵⁸ In the end, the Lancastrians, whom Margaret of Anjou supported, lost the War of the Roses, and Margaret's goals were defeated. She was imprisoned until the King of France ransomed her. She ended her days in poverty and isolation in France in 1482.²⁵⁹

Even though women had limited possibilities to agency and even to influence their own lives, they had an important role in medieval economic life. In peasant- and artisan families the work that women did was of great importance to the economy of the family. The servants as well as wife and both male and female children often helped the man of the house in his work in the family business. Wives could also gain additional income from subsidiary trades such as brewing beer or weaving.²⁶⁰

The reason why wives from the lower classes do not especially show up in the primary sources may be that they often did their work in the privacy of their own home. It was the responsibility of the husband to provide for his family,

²⁵⁶ CT, 322–354. "The Clerk's Tale"; Maurer 2003, 1–2.

²⁵⁷ Maurer 2003, 1–13.

²⁵⁸ Maurer 2003, 1–13.

²⁵⁹ Levin 2002, 335–337.

²⁶⁰ Power 1975, 53.

and he was the undisputed head of the family.²⁶¹ However, women were expected to help their husbands, and therefore, the work women did was most likely not considered to be separate “profession” in any case, but more of a task that women did anyway. Any subsidiary income from these tasks was probably not considered a great accomplishment from the woman.

In short summary, it can be said that despite the coverture that stipulated that restricted the agency of wives, they had an important role in managing and advancing the affairs of their families and they were often quite capable in these matters. A skilful wife with the trust of her husband could achieve considerable agency in the public life, even though the main virtues of women were considered to be patience and humility towards their husbands. In theory the wife fulfilled the instructions of her husband whether she had actually received them or not. Therefore she attained respectability and used at least some of the authority of her husband. Women did do their part in the economics of the household in all social classes, but the work they did was often accounted for the husband. Despite the legal and institutional restrictions, some wives did achieve agency and some amount of authority in public. However, most likely most wives remained within their households.

²⁶¹ Froide 1999, 243 – 252.

4.2 Working in public on their own

All women could not expect to find a husband who could provide a living for them or rely on inheritance for their upkeep. Unmarried women and a large number of widows had to earn a living for themselves and possible children. However, society did not offer women abundance of options. The law gave women no political power and they could not be selected to a public office²⁶². The most common profession for unmarried women was maid. In fact it was so common, that the word became practically a synonym to unmarried women.²⁶³ There is a well-known and common example of the use of the word in the *Canterbury Tales*: "Thou maid and mother, daughter of thy Son..."²⁶⁴ it is quite obvious, that Chaucer doesn't refer to Virgin Mary as a maid by profession.

As maids women were subservient to their employer, in another words the master or mistress of the house, they therefore fitted into the patriarchal social order. This restricted the agency of these women, as they could not make independent decisions of their own lives. However, approximately the same ruled applied to male servants as well, and the post of a maid ensured an accepted place in society.²⁶⁵

Even though women worked in almost all the professions, the public opinion was often against independent women.²⁶⁶ As Larrington puts it "Women were restricted by their domestic responsibilities, by considerations of physical and moral danger, and by the general and widely held cultural expectations that a woman's place is in the home."²⁶⁷ Therefore, teaching women skilled crafts was probably seen as waste of time and effort, as women were expected to marry and start helping their husbands.

One more limiting factor for women's access to skilled trades was the guilds. Unlike many workers in unskilled works, most crafts and skilled trades

²⁶² Setälä 1996, 100.

²⁶³ Stuart 1987, 167.

²⁶⁴ CT, 434. "Invocacio ad Mariam".

²⁶⁵ Froide 1999, 248.

²⁶⁶ Power 1975, 59.

²⁶⁷ Larrington 1995, 88.

had organized into guilds by the 13th century. Guilds regulated the profession by deciding on the pricing and wages, defining trade practices and quality and restricting the number of labourers within the trade. They fulfilled social, religious and charitable functions and, for example, financed pilgrimage for some of their members²⁶⁸. Only the masters of the guilds were allowed to keep a workshop and hire workers and take on apprentices, and masters were always men. They participated in guild politics and made decisions. These actions were not available to workers, apprentices and women.²⁶⁹

Apprenticeship was the primary means to learn a high-skilled profession and gain access to guilds in the middle ages. Guild rules generally favoured men and sometimes excluded women altogether. In practice all guilds were male dominated, and women were not often accepted as guild members. Those women who were accepted were offered economic security, spiritual comfort and social privileges. Nevertheless, they were treated as second class members and second class workers, and even as members they were excluded from politics and decision making, as well as from some guild events.²⁷⁰

In principle women could serve as apprentices just like men, but in practice women were not sent for apprenticeship as often as men. The apprentice had to pay a fee for the master, which could be a considerable sum. Investing that kind of money to a daughter was not necessarily considered wise, as she was very likely going to marry, and therefore benefit her husband's household instead of her parent's home. Furthermore, female apprentices most often worked in the textile industries and under the master's wife rather than the master himself. Nevertheless, the most common way for a woman to learn a profession was to work along with her husband.²⁷¹

Another limiting factor for women who wanted to work as an independent woman was access to capital. Even though women were legally allowed to inherit wealth, customs favoured men over women. Therefore, it would have been almost impossible for women to find sufficient funds to set up a

²⁶⁸ Kowalewski & Bennet 1989, 474–476.

²⁶⁹ Kowalewski & Bennet 1989, 474–476.

²⁷⁰ Kowalewski & Bennet 1989, 474–477.

²⁷¹ Kowalewski & Bennet 1989, 474–477.

business on her own.²⁷² Furthermore, single women were often seen to take living from men who had wives and children to support, and therefore unmarried women could find it quite difficult to earn a living on her own.²⁷³

This said, if a woman learned a profession before her marriage and wanted to continue practising it separate from her husband, she had to obtain a position as a *femme sole*, in other words an independent woman. This way her husband could not be held accountable if she could not pay the possible debts of her business.²⁷⁴ These professional women could then take other women as apprentices, although they were officially bound by their indenture to both the wife and the husband.²⁷⁵ Women who worked in subsidiary trades separate from their husbands were seen as much more respectable than working single women as, instead of competing with other married households, they could be seen to add to the husbands wages.²⁷⁶

For example Margery Kempe established a mill and a brewery in order to add to the family income. Her business was separated from the business of her husband, John Kempe.²⁷⁷ As she had access to capital, she had the possibility to make individual choices despite the fact that her husband was supposed to be her master. Access to capital even gave her the opportunity to buy herself sexual and physical autonomy, when she pays of her husband's debts in exchange for her own sexual freedom.²⁷⁸ This demonstrates that it was most likely possible to bend the rules of society, if one was wealthy and influential enough.

On the other hand, Chaucer mentions a woman who keeps a shop separately from her husband. This woman keeps the shop only in order to hide prostitution, though: "Whose wife kept shop - to save her good repute;/But earned her living as a prostitute..."²⁷⁹. This might illustrate the common attitude towards women who acted in public life. They were something out of the ordinary and therefore an easy target for prejudice and suspicion.

²⁷² Finke 1999, 48.

²⁷³ Froide 1999, 249.

²⁷⁴Power 1975, 59.

²⁷⁵ Finke 1999, 48.

²⁷⁶ Froide 1999, 243 – 252.

²⁷⁷ Kempe, 8 – 10; Staley 1996.

²⁷⁸ Aers, 1988, 75 – 78; Ashley 1998, 371 – 375.

²⁷⁹ CT, 122. "The Introduction to the Man of Law's Tale".

As mentioned above, not all workers organized into guilds. Most tasks that required little or no training did not have guilds for the simple reason that there were no trade secrets to protect. Most women worked in these low skilled works and common tasks for married and unmarried women were servant work, midwifery, brewing, preparing and selling food and other small goods. In addition women often worked in textile production and they could run lodging houses and alehouses, and they assisted the sick and the poor.²⁸⁰

All of these tasks could be conducted in the privacy of their own homes and required relatively little skills. The lack of required skills in these tasks might be why women hardly ever organised into guilds, and therefore never received the benefits and security that guilds offered to their members. Another reason might be the household economy. When women were expected only to assist the breadwinner of the family and their agency in public was not readily accepted, organizing into a guild seemed difficult.²⁸¹

Those widows who needed to earn their own living had a little better circumstances considering the attitudes of society. There are some surviving wills, in which guild masters order their apprentices to serve the widow until the end of their contract. This allowed the widow to continue practising the profession of the late husband. As it is likely that the widow had worked alongside with her husband while he was alive.²⁸² However, the guilds generally restricted the working possibilities of these widows by not allowing them new apprentices. Furthermore, if the widow remarried, she was often dismissed from the guild. The decision to dismiss widows who remarried was based on the household economy that was prevalent in the middle Ages. The widow was expected to leave in order to work in the profession of the new husband. At the same time the guilds tried to inhibit the new husband entering the guild in irregular fashion.²⁸³

Despite the prevalence of the household economy, some women came in contact with the public sphere of life when they sold their goods. It was probably not very uncommon to see a woman selling her products in late medieval

²⁸⁰ Power 1975, 57–71; Kowalewski & Bennet 1989, 475; Froide 1999, 244.

²⁸¹ Power 1975, 57–71; Kowalewski & Bennet 1989, 475; Froide 1999, 244.

²⁸² Power 1975, 55–56.

²⁸³ Larrington 1995, 88; Kowalewski & Bennet 1989, 479.

England. Chaucer mentions a poor widow who provides for herself and for her two daughters by selling milk products. Chaucer does not even add a derogatory remark about the widow.

Since the sad day when last she was a wife
Had led a very patient, simple life.
Little she had in capital or rent,
But still, by making do with what God sent,
She kept herself and her two daughters going – –
She was in fact a sort of dairy-woman.²⁸⁴

She is poor, which is a somewhat redeeming factor in the eyes of Chaucer.²⁸⁵ Furthermore, she provides for herself and therefore is not a burden to society, and at the same time possesses patience and humility in her simple life. "The Wife of Bath's Prologue" and "-Tale", on the other hand, seems to be a good example of the common attitudes towards independent women. The story is a fabliau, and contains cynicism and rather mean humour that is typical to Chaucer. In the prologue, Chaucer mentions that the narrator of the story was a widow from near Bath and that she had been three times on pilgrimage to Jerusalem and travelled extensively.²⁸⁶ Even her travels can be seen to speak against her. In a relatively stationary society travellers were often seen disruptive as they were not tightly under control. In addition, the possible relaxation of tight norms of society during pilgrimage made women who engaged in them somewhat suspicious.²⁸⁷ Chaucer therefore takes a jab at her moral standing.²⁸⁸

...a worthy woman from beside Bath city
Was with us, somewhat deaf, which was a pity.
A worthy woman all her life, what's more
She'd had five husbands, all at the church door,
Apart from other company in youth:
No need just now to speak of that, forsooth.
And she had thrice been to Jerusalem,
Seen many strange rivers and passed over them;

²⁸⁴ CT, 214–215. "The Nun's Priest's Tale".

²⁸⁵ Saul 1992, 41 – 52.

²⁸⁶ CT, 15,258–292. "The Prologue" and "The Wife of Bath's Prologue and -Tale".

²⁸⁷ Morrison 2000, 53 – 56, 107 – 119.

²⁸⁸ CT, 15,258–292. "The Prologue" and "The Wife of Bath's Prologue and -Tale".

She'd been to Rome and also to Boulogne,
St James of Compostella and Cologne,
And she was skilled in wandering by the way.
She had gap-teeth, set widely, truth to say."²⁸⁹

The widow is a skilled cloth maker and apparently rather wealthy. In her prologue the widow tells how she ruled her five husbands with an iron hand, and speaks about the yearning for freedom all women have. In her story women are active and outsmart the men. Even if Chaucer describes her as a half-dead, bad-teethed old crow, she is, nevertheless, an independent actor and quite a successful one.²⁹⁰ Ridiculing her reminds the reader that she has broken the norms of society.

Widows had fulfilled their role in society by marrying, but were sometimes handicapped in earning a living after their husband's death, either because of lack of skills or because of the restrictions to female agency. However, the authorities were much more willing to help widows than single women to earn their living. However, helping widows was not based on any belief that they were somehow more entitled to work than single women. Instead, the urban authorities believed in supporting the household economy, and the widow was the deputy of the late husband. By allowing her to continue her husband's trade, the town ensured that she and her children did not become a burden to the town.²⁹¹

Furthermore, both unmarried women and widows were legally allowed to rent land if they wanted to farm it. This enabled some peasant women to earn a living on their own. In these cases they had the same rights and obligations as the men. The lot of a land worker was not easy, however. The work was very hard even for families, let alone for women with little help from possible children.²⁹²

For aristocratic women, the only real career option separately from their husbands was to undertake a life at court. There was a considerable difference between those aristocratic women who chose the life at court and

²⁸⁹ CT, 15. "The Prologue"

²⁹⁰ CT, 15, 258–292. "The Prologue" and "The Wife of Bath's Prologue and -Tale".

²⁹¹ Froide 1999, 250–252.

²⁹² Setälä 1996, 100.

resided there, and those who remained on the family estates. Women who lived in court and held offices in the Queen's household led generally more mobile lives than those who remained on the family estates. Ladies-in-waiting in the Queen's household travelled with the court, as well as between the court and their estates. They were not able to take as much interest in the everyday running of their husband's states, but, nevertheless, had a keen interest and took part in the most important affairs.²⁹³ Among the primary sources of this thesis there are no aristocratic women who had a career at court but the Paston women offer ample evidence of the capability of women to handle the business affairs of their husbands and manage the estates.

In the Paston family, the widow Agnes mastered a large amount of the family fortunes at one time. William Paston, husband of Agnes died, in 1444²⁹⁴. Agnes seemed to be strong willed and capable to handling her own affairs. She had a border dispute with a local Church around 1451 and the local people obviously complained directly to Agnes instead of for example to a male relative or employee. In one of her letters she writes: "And I told him it was my own land, and I would manage it as my own",²⁹⁵ when a man accused her of taking hay of his field. Throughout this conflict this pattern repeats in her letters. Men and women complain directly to her, and accuse her, but she holds her own opinion.²⁹⁶ Obviously she would not be very wise to write that she was in the wrong even if this was the case, but nevertheless she is the target of the complaints and her agency as the owner is not questioned.

In addition, Agnes was one of the executors of her husband's will and leased land,²⁹⁷ as well as signed the marriage settlement of her daughter Elisabeth²⁹⁸. There are three surviving indentures of lease in her name. However, in one of the surviving indentures of lease and in the marriage settlement Agnes

²⁹³ Harris 2002, 68–70.

²⁹⁴ Davis 1971, liii.

²⁹⁵ Agnes to John I, 21 Nov 1451, PL 1971, 36–37. Translated by Watt 2004, 30.

²⁹⁶ Eg. Agnes to John I, 12 May, probably 1451, PL 1971, 33–34; Agnes to John I, Probably 1451, PL 1971, 34–35; Agnes to John I, 8 Nov, probably 1451, PL 1971, 35–36.

²⁹⁷ Indenture of lease 29 Nov 1447, PL 1971, 29–30.

²⁹⁸ Draft indenture of marriage settlement, perhaps about 1454, PL 1971, 40–41.

has been identified as “Anneys [Agnes] Paston, late the wife William Paston”²⁹⁹, rather than being mentioned on her own right.³⁰⁰ In the end of another indenture of lease she has been identified as “Agnes, one of the executors of William Paston”³⁰¹ and only in one of the indentures she has no male reinforcement joined to her name³⁰².

It is possible that the mill she leased out in this indenture was on land that originally belonged to her own dowry, but I have no knowledge of whether this is the case or not. It would explain why she did not have need to underline her right to sign this indenture with the name of her husband. On the other hand, this might mean nothing at all, and it would be unwise to make strong suppositions based on this detail.

Furthermore, the papers contain one indenture that defines that one “John Davy and Alice his wife, late the wife of John Gyggys of Burnham” shall keep some silver cutlery for William Paston II and Jeffrey Hunt.³⁰³ It is interesting that Alice has been mentioned as the wife of John Davy, but also as the widow of John Gyggys. It is possible that she has remarried quite soon after she was widowed, or perhaps John Gyggys had been acquaintance of either Paston or Hunt. If this is true, it is possible that this indenture was made because of Alice’s, or her late husband’s, connections, rather than because of any involvement of John Davy. He would have had to be included in the legal proceedings, as Alice had no right to sign the legal document on her own.

In addition, there is another case in the Paston letters, in which the former husband’s name is mentioned. John Paston II and two other men were accused of shooting a man. The widow of the deceased was advancing the case.³⁰⁴ In a later letter, the widow has remarried and the name of her former husband, as well as the current one, is connected to her name.³⁰⁵ This would indicate that the names in the letters and documents could be meaningful to the content of the

²⁹⁹ Indenture of lease 10 Nov 1446, PL 1971, 28 – 29.

³⁰⁰ Indenture of lease 10 Nov 1446, PL 1971, 28 – 29; Draft indenture of marriage settlement, perhaps about 1454, PL 1971, 40.

³⁰¹ Indenture of lease 29 Nov 1447, PL 1971, 30.

³⁰² Indenture of lease 30 Oct 1446, PL 1971, 28.

³⁰³ Indenture depositing plate, 7 July 1479, PL 1971, 185.

³⁰⁴ John III to John II, 2 June 1470, PL 1971, 559-560.

³⁰⁵ R.L. to John III, 21 Oct 1471, PL 1976, 433; Davis 1976, notes.

letter. However, there is no evidence in the letters to one way or another, so again, it is impossible to make strong suppositions based on these small details. Nevertheless, these examples show that women were mentioned in legal papers. It was not very common, however.

Like Agnes Paston, Margaret Paston became an influential widow. Her husband, John I, died in 1466.³⁰⁶ Her sons repeatedly wrote to her and asked her for money³⁰⁷. It is quite obvious in the letters that she did not feel herself answerable to her sons the same way he had felt herself answerable to her husband. She reprimands her sons if they had done something badly and lets them know her opinions without sugarcoating them or veiling them into suggestions. In one of her letters to John II she reprimands him about his debts: "I put you in certain that I will never pay him a penny of that duty that is owed to him even though he sued me for it, not from my own purse, for I will not be compelled to pay your depths against my will".³⁰⁸ This indicates that she did have some influence over the affairs of her sons, as she could tighten the purse strings if she wanted to.

In addition to manipulating her sons she continued to handle business, and her documents also include an indenture of lease that she approved as "Margaret Paston, late the wife of John Paston"³⁰⁹. For the Paston women, therefore, widowhood meant a time of greater independence and power, but in addition, more responsibilities as they became the main caretakers of their own assets and did not have the advice and support of their husbands at hand any more. They could rely to a certain extent to their sons but undoubtedly the situation was very different for them despite the fact that they were adept in dealing with arising problems.

Something should be said about the women who worked in the "oldest profession in the world". Although prostitution has always been more or less disapproved of, it has always existed. Many feminist historians have handled prostitution as sexual work making prostitutes agents in their chosen profession.

³⁰⁶ Davis 1971, lv – lvi.

³⁰⁷ Eg. John III to John II. 1 March, 1470, PL 1971, 554.

³⁰⁸ Margaret to John II, 11 Aug 1477, PL 1971, 379.

³⁰⁹ Margaret, Indenture of lease 1 Aug 1480, PL 1971, 381.

Even though it is entirely possible that some women chose the at least semi-public profession of prostitution, it would be a great simplification to treat all sexually active women as prostitutes, or, indeed, all prostitutes as consenting or willing ones.³¹⁰

Although both widows and wives worked in prostitution, it seems that single women living on their own were regarded to be most vulnerable for sliding to prostitution, because of their position outside male control. This was most likely true in any case, as single women needed money. It was more difficult for a single woman to earn a living than for example for widows, as society did not have a place for single women on their own.³¹¹ In addition, it does not seem likely that prostitution would have been a willing choice for many contemporary women as a way to demonstrate their own agency. More likely it was an act of necessity rather than a choice.

However, there were different shades between prostitute, and the “promiscuous woman”. Despite the church’s opposition, sexual indiscretion before marriage was most likely not considered to be a great sin among the lower classes. Not everyone could afford to marry and sexual purity of women was not necessarily as valued when it did not play such a large part in family honour and wealth. In addition, it is more than likely that some women lived in stable relationship outside marriage for different reasons. Priests often had lasting relationships with their housekeepers, and women might live with men who already had a wife somewhere else, or simply accept gifts from their lovers. This would undoubtedly earn them negative attention and they would not always be readily accepted within the community, but neither had they exactly the same position as professional prostitutes.³¹²

As Karras suggests, sexual agency might have been a matter of choice for a single woman but the social stigma and a possible prosecution were harsh consequences.³¹³ Even though some feminist historians regard prostitution as a free choice of profession and the actions of a “common woman” might have at

³¹⁰ Karras 1999, 127 – 140.

³¹¹ Karras 1999, 127 – 140.

³¹² Karras 1999, 127 – 140.

³¹³ Karras 1999, 127 – 140.

least a semi- public position, they certainly did not have an established position or respect in the public life.

The primary sources give very different picture of prostitution and sex outside marriage. Chaucer follows the norms of his time and he has ethical suspicion towards sex. This dates back from classical stoic writers and is enforced through the ideas of Christian morality. Women were not expected to express their sexual desires and they were often described as animalistic, without norms or moral or spiritual qualities. On the other hand, even though women were seen as the temptress, they were, in addition, the weaker sex. As such, women were seen unfit to any activity that was not a response to the actions or commands of a man. Therefore, women were, at least in theory, recipients in sexual acts and not agents in them. This made women less culpable in sexual indiscretions than males.³¹⁴

In *the Canterbury Tales* Chaucer uses sexuality to show faults in the characters, both in male and female characters. Sexually active females, like the wife of Bath, lack virtue and it is relatively occurring theme in the stories. On the other hand, in some stories women really are helpless bystanders when it comes to sex and sexuality. In “the Millers Tale” Allison is described as a sexual object without her own personality³¹⁵ and in “the Reeve’s Tale” the miller’s wife and daughter are merely objects of revenge and they have no power or will either to agree or object to sex.³¹⁶ In these stories the men are the agents. They take an active role and, apparently, take women without the fear of being refused. And indeed, they rarely are. The men are the only active agents in these sexual encounters and therefore responsible for them.

In the Paston letters and documents marriage is aspired to and John III wrote to his brother John II: “I pray get us a wife somewhere, for ‘it is better to marry in God that to burn’ [the citation is in Latin]”³¹⁷. This does not paint the whole picture of sex in the Paston letters, however. John II had at least two known mistresses, Cecily Daune and Constance Reynyforth and at least one illegitimate

³¹⁴ Blamires 2006, 53 – 56, 79 – 86.

³¹⁵ CT, 87 – 106, “the Miller’s Tale”; Blamires 2006, 53 – 54.

³¹⁶ CT, 106 – 119, “the Reeve’s Tale”.

³¹⁷ John III to John II 1 March 1470, PL 1971, 555.

daughter with the latter.³¹⁸ Of the two, at least Cecily Daune seemed to have been financially dependant on John II:

What is more, sir, if it pleases your mastership to understand that winter and cold weather draw near, and I have only a few clothes apart from those you have given me, God bless you. Therefore, sir, if it pleases you, I beseech your good mastership to agree to remember me, your servant, with some livery, such as pleases you, in preparation for this winter, to have a gown made for me to protect me from the cold weather...³¹⁹

Whether she was actually a prostitute or a “promiscuous woman” is a matter of guesswork and depends on the definition where the line is drawn. It seems obvious that Cecily was not of the same social standing as the Pastons. Margaret made provisions in her will “to Constance, illegitimate daughter of John Paston, knight, when she is 20 years old, to be arranged by my executors.³²⁰ Interestingly, John II does not make any provisions for her, even though he lacks other heirs.³²¹

As the examples show, sex outside marriage was not perhaps a part of life for everyone, but common enough. It is relatively safe to assume that among the women of the lower classes stable extramarital relations were more common than among the nobility, as the fortunes in stake were not as big, and the family honour perhaps less valued. If a woman became a “public woman”, she assumed a semi-public position. However, this would have violated the norms of society in several levels. Firstly, she would act in a relatively public role, without an accepted male guardian. Secondly, she would offer the property of one man, in other words her body, to another. This not only transgressed the norms of sexual propriety, but could be on some level considered theft as well, as the role of the woman was to keep the possessions of her master intact. Therefore, it is understandable that society pushed these women to the margins and did not accept them.

³¹⁸ Watt 2004, notes 125–126.

³¹⁹ Cecily Daune to John II, 3 Nov, between 1463 and 1468, PL 1976, 389. Translated by Watt 2004, 125–126.

³²⁰ Margaret, copy of will, 4 Feb nominally 1482, PL 1971, 388. Translated by Watt 2004, 115.

³²¹ John II, copy of will, 31 Oct, nominally 1477, PL 1971, 506–508.

Undoubtedly the most accepted and perhaps the easiest way for a woman to work in all social classes was to work under her husband in the family trade. Women who, for one reason or for another, needed to earn a living on their own faced the objection of society and the problems of legal non-existence. Single women living alone faced perhaps the most opposition, but, on the other hand, married women were, according to the law, utterly under the rule of their husbands. While widows living alone had the best legal standing, and they faced perhaps least hostile attitudes, not all were able to support themselves. The unskilled subsidiary trades that were traditionally regarded as fitting work for women paid relatively little and it could have been hard to find enough work to live on. Therefore, different kinds of religious movements and the opportunities religious life offered to women living alone were attractive.

5. Women and religious life

Women had no authority in the affairs of the Roman Catholic Church in the middle Ages. They could not act in any official post within the Church and officially women could take part in religious life behind the convent walls, outside of secular life. Convents were not very common in late medieval England, however, and they could not take on everyone who wanted to join. In addition, not all women could afford the life of a nun. Nuns were expected to bring a dowry with them when they became a bride of the Christ.³²² Among the aristocracy, who could afford the dowry, relatively few women became nuns. This is partly because of the overwhelming pressure towards marriage and the high marriage rate.³²³

On the other hand, piety was seen particularly as a female virtue in late medieval Church³²⁴ and that might have given women some small amount of power in religious life. Taking part in Church service can be seen as a public act, as practically everyone in society was there. However, women were supposed to stay silent in the congregation.³²⁵ For example, a friar forbade Margery Kempe to attend service, because her abundant weeping affronted him.³²⁶ Kempe's excessive weeping could have very well been annoying, but, in addition, it brought attention to her, a mere woman, in a very much male dominated public space.

Another public way to take part in religious life for a woman was to go on a pilgrimage or join one of the lay movements or parish guilds. There are relatively few primary sources of Parish guilds, but they were single-sex associations sanctioned by the Church that worked for the upkeep of the parish. In the late middle ages parish guilds for women were found mainly from the western and southern parts of England, in both rural and urban parishes. The guilds often arranged themselves into groups according to marital status or age. These groups achieved agency within their parish when they publicly acted for the benefit of the parish by, for example, collecting money for renovations. In addition to this

³²² Lehmijoki-Gardner 2002, 294-295.

³²³ Harris 2002, 88 – 89.

³²⁴ Eales 1998, 86.

³²⁵ Eg. Atkinson 1983, 168 – 179.

³²⁶ Kempe, 109 – 112.

women often dealt with cleaning and decorating the churches and were responsible of washing the church textiles.³²⁷

The parish guilds gave agency even to unmarried women. In these groups they could take collective part in public activities, such as raising money. This would have otherwise been impossible according the norms of the era. The maidens' guilds gave unmarried women the additional benefit of being able to meet possible husbands in respectable surroundings. The maidens' guilds were still under the supervision of the married women, which enforced social order and added to the respectability. Furthermore, the parish guilds enforced the norms of society by segregating women into their own groups that were mainly active in the issues that were considered to be acceptable for women.³²⁸

The parish guilds originated from the years after the Black Death when public shows of devotion became more popular in the face of fear of imminent death. The guilds gave women opportunities to gather for devotional needs but, in addition, they offered social and political networks and sometimes even economic help for their members. They enforced the norms of society by directing the interest of the guilds towards socially accepted topics for women, such as household management, marriage and children, but nevertheless gave women public agency in Church-sanctioned activities.³²⁹

Chaucer makes a reference to the parish guilds in the Reeve's Tale when Alison goes to the parish church "...one holiday. To search/ her conscience and to do the works of Christ"³³⁰. Typically for Chaucer, this is event does not remain as a mere show of religious life. For the parish clerk, "this Absalon, so jolly in his ways, / would bear the censer round on holy days/ And cense the parish women. He would cast/ Many a love-lorn look before he passed"³³¹ Indicating that the parish events were a way to meet the opposite sex, even though Chaucer disapprovingly comments on the actions of the parish clerk.

³²⁷ French 1998, 399 – 402.

³²⁸ French 1998, 402 – 412.

³²⁹ French 1998, 399 – 425.

³³⁰ CT, 91 – 92, "the Miller's Tale".

³³¹ CT, 92, "the Miller's Tale".

In addition to parish Guilds, Lay movements offered another form of religious devotion for women outside the convent walls. Lay movements were especially important to widows who might need the modest economic security and social acceptance that the group was able to offer. Joining in one of these movements may have even offered a possibility to avoid another marriage the widow did not necessarily desire, and allowed her to remain free of coverture.³³²

The lay movements were diverse in the middle Ages, but Lehmijoki-Gardner suggests that the peculiar spiritual half-status the movements had was common to all of them. Their members belonged to both secular and clerical orders. The women who lived in the religious groups followed some of the basic rules of monastic life, such as poverty, obedience and chastity. They did not commit themselves to the orders for life, however, and they could leave them if they so wished. Lay orders offered women a community that answered to their religious needs, as well as giving them an accepted place in society.³³³

In the lay movements women on their own could earn a living, and even a possibility for some action in the secular and religious life through social critique.³³⁴ However, being a part of lay movements had risks as well. If the movement was seen to step outside the control of the Catholic Church, accusations of heresy were possible. For example, in the 14th and 15th century England Lollardy, a religious and political movement, outraged the Church officials. The Lollard heresy emerged in the 1370s and 1380s from a circle that was led by John Wycliff. It was as much a social rebellion than a doctrinal one, and they challenged the monopoly of the clergy on devotional practises.³³⁵

The Lollard movement was based on the idea that laymen could perform the tasks of the priests: read, interpret and spread the Gospel. The Lollards did not especially advocate female preachers, but they did not forbid women from speaking in the congregation, like the official Church did. The Lollards encouraged the reading of the bible translated into vernacular and were against pilgrimages and the worship of the saints. Instead, they emphasized a

³³² Lehmijoki-Gardner 2002, 294-295.

³³³ Lehmijoki-Gardner 2002, 289-295; Heinonen 2002, 83.

³³⁴ Kempe; Lehmijoki-Gardner 2002, 291.

³³⁵ Lochrie 1991, 107--112; Finke 1999, 181.

more personal connection to God. All of these principles went against the teachings of the official Church.³³⁶

The largest following of the movement came from the artisan groups and the bourgeoisie, with some support from the gentry. Lollardy was considered a heresy, and both secular and religious authority wanted the problem solved. In 1401, the parliament passed a law that enabled the state to execute heretics and many Lollards were accused of heresy and sometimes burned at the stake.³³⁷

For example Margery Kempe was accused of Lollardy: “Then she [Margery Kempe] went out of the monastery, they [monks] following and crying upon her, ‘You shall be burned, false Lollard.’...”³³⁸ The Lollards were often said to be able to read the English translations of the Bible, and this was used against them in the trials. This might be one reason why Kempe emphasized her own illiteracy and described how her priest explained the Gospel to her.³³⁹ However, according to Finke, there is no real reason to believe that Kempe was a Lollard. She did go to pilgrimage, fasted often and was very interested in the saints and their worship. All of this would indicate that she did not belong to the movement.³⁴⁰

Like some other aspiring holy women at the time, Margery Kempe refused to live in a convent and lived as a visible part of secular society. She was a self-proclaimed mystic and gave instructions to clergy and criticized the profit seeking of her contemporary society. She was accused of heresy, but with the help of her priest and supporters she managed to avoid convictions.³⁴¹ Margery Kempe achieved quite a visible role in public through her religious visions, and her book emphasises how she managed to convince doubting priests several times about her sincerity and devotion³⁴².

These men play an important role in Margery’s life, as they time and again validate her actions, even though she is acting against the norms by

³³⁶ Lochrie1991, 107 – 112; Finke 1999, 181 – 182.

³³⁷ Lochrie1991, 107 – 112; Finke 1999, 181 – 182.

³³⁸ Kempe, 22; Lochrie1991, 108 – 110.

³³⁹ Lochrie1991, 107 – 112.

³⁴⁰ Finke 1999, 182.

³⁴¹ Kempe, eg. 21 – 23, 39 – 43; Staley 1996; Atkinson 1983, 159-161.

³⁴² Eg. Kempe, 20, 80, 90 – 95, 96.

assuming authority in religious matters. Another important part in her success is undoubtedly the acceptance her confessor showed her. The priest assured that her visions were pure and according to Church doctrines and therefore acceptable. In addition, the priest fulfilled the social need for a woman to have a male master and made the female mystics acceptable in the patriarchal society.

However, the priests were not always the masters in the relationship between himself and the mystic. Some of these women undoubtedly knew how to take advantage from the close relationship between them and assumed the role of the leader. Undoubtedly sometimes the priest did believe in the visions, but, in addition, it can be assumed that “finding” a saint would bring glory to the priest as well.³⁴³

So, what was there for the woman? Again, undoubtedly some genuinely believed in their visions. However, it has to be taken into consideration that as a mystic, a woman could achieve power and admiration in otherwise very male dominated area of life. Some of the powerful women of the Middle Ages were later declared as saints and many of these saints achieved their power through the lay orders. For example, Margery Kempe writes:

“There came once a vicar to this creature, praying her to pray for him and learn whether he should more please God to leave his curacy and his benefice or to keep it still, for he thought he profited not among his parishioners.”³⁴⁴

This clearly indicates that she did have at least some amount of power even among the clergy, something she could not have achieved as a “normal” woman.

Furthermore, the saints were the celebrities of the time. The Catholic Church, as an international institution was a powerful media, and roughly the same saints were worshipped throughout Europe, although some local variation was possible.³⁴⁵ A good example of this is Brigitte of Sweden, who has been mentioned in *the Book of Margery Kempe*. Brigitte was a well-known saint in late

³⁴³ Heinonen 2002, 82.

³⁴⁴ Kempe, 39.

³⁴⁵ Atkinson 1983, 159 – 161.

medieval England. Kempe's life, as described in *the Book*, has many similarities with the life of Brigitte.³⁴⁶ *The book of Margery Kempe* follows the conventions of a hagiography, a narrative of saint's life.³⁴⁷ Therefore, I believe that one of the goals of *the Book* was to gain sainthood for Kempe.

Another relatively common religious phenomena for women in the public sphere of life was pilgrimage. Pilgrimage seemed to be relatively common in a life of a woman, and in a life of a man as well. There is ample evidence that married and single as well as rich and poor women alike had travelled to Rome. There is information about the pilgrimages of women in papal letters, secular and religious literature, letters of protection and *inquisitions post mortem*³⁴⁸ as well as in wills and from these it can be assumed that pilgrimage was common enough occurrence among the landed gentry. However, they suggest as well that it was something that was commonly remembered like other extraordinary affairs in life such as marriage or the birth of a child. This indicates that pilgrimage was relatively common, but not everyday occurrence in one's life. Often women were recorded as undertaking a pilgrimage in their husbands place. This could happen during their marriage if the husband was indisposed, or after the death of the husband. This undoubtedly made female pilgrims more acceptable, as they had legitimate reason for their public action.³⁴⁹

The Paston letters offer some insights into pilgrimage. For example, in one of her letters, Margaret promises to go on pilgrimage to both Walsingham and to St. Leonard's, so that her husband John I would recover from a serious illness.³⁵⁰ On the other hand, Margery mentions that "My Lady Calthorp has been on pilgrimage to Ipswich, and visited my Lady of Norfolk on her way home",³⁵¹ indicating that sometimes the reasons for pilgrimage, like Morrison suggests, could have been something else than purely religious. At least it seems that it was

³⁴⁶ Staley 1996; Atkinson 1983, 168 – 179.

³⁴⁷ Staley 1996.

³⁴⁸ These documents usually try to confirm the death or birth date of a person in order to determine property rights.

³⁴⁹ Morrison 2000, 44 – 53.

³⁵⁰ Margaret Paston to John Paston I, 28 September, probably 1443, PL 1971, 217 – 219.

³⁵¹ Margery to John III, 1 Nov perhaps 1481, PL 1971, 664.

logical to handle other affairs during the same trip, as travel could be quite arduous and sometimes even dangerous.³⁵²

Perhaps because of the popularity of pilgrimage, the official documents often reveal the need to control pilgrims. Travelling abroad and even within England was controlled in the late middle ages. People needed permission to leave the country and to take money with them, and in England the masses of pilgrims moving around the country were sometimes perceived as unruly vagrants who needed to be controlled.³⁵³

A pilgrimage was not always easy, however. It might become a perilous journey, especially for the women, as the routes travelled through uninhabited areas and banditry and other crime was not unusual. Rape was one danger that women exposed themselves to, and Margery Kempe repeatedly expresses her fears of theft and rape. Even Agnes Paston tells her son, John Paston I, about a crime committed against pilgrims: "They [robbers] took two pilgrims, a man and a woman, and they robbed the woman and let her go and led the man to the sea. And when they knew he was a pilgrim, they gave him money and let him again on the land..."³⁵⁴

This attitude of pilgrims as an unruly mob can be seen in the secular literature as well. Not all pilgrimages seemed to be undertaken because of piety, but more because they offered a chance to travel and get away from the everyday norms and rules. For example, pilgrimage offered more possibilities for sexual affairs than everyday life that was relatively closely monitored, because most people lived in small communities, which made social control easy. Secular literature readily seized this aspect of pilgrimages and repeatedly depicted women, undertaking pilgrimage as morally suspicious. Chaucer takes up this theme, and the Lady of Bath is, yet again, a prime example. She is well travelled and has gone to a pilgrimage, and has therefore stepped outside the private sphere designed for women. As in her case, a woman on her own in public was open to

³⁵² Morrison 2000, 43–48, 56–60.

³⁵³ Morrison 2000, 53–54.

³⁵⁴ Agnes to John I, March 11, 1450, PL 1971, 32–33; Morrison 2000, 57–58.

accusations of sexual promiscuity.³⁵⁵By the 14th century, pilgrimage was connected with religious activity but in addition with lying and disorder as well.³⁵⁶

Pilgrimage is very visible in *the Canterbury Tales*. The whole book is based on a number of people embarking on a pilgrimage during the plague and telling stories on their way. However, the only truly honest and pious persons in the tales seem to be poor. They cannot afford the hypocrisy of the wealthy³⁵⁷ and furthermore, Chaucer emphasizes that true gentility is not defined by economic means or birth only, but by virtue, which explains why, he sometimes ridicules aristocracy. As he himself was not an aristocrat by birth, but rather a social climber or a self made man, his attitude is understandable.³⁵⁸

However, there is more than one viewpoint to women pilgrims in primary sources of the era. Women pilgrims were described in very different ways in religious literature. Piety was considered to be more characteristic to women than men³⁵⁹. This tendency towards piety gave women some justification in their religious travel. In religious literature women were often depicted as showing obedience to God through the pilgrimage. For example, Margery Kempe describes her pilgrimages in her book and the ordeals that they involved.³⁶⁰She mentions her fear of rape several times in her book,³⁶¹ and problems in finding suitable company and transportation.³⁶²

However, despite the fact that Margery Kempe had access to money and acted quite independently, in order to leave for pilgrimage, she needed permission from her husband.³⁶³ This, once again, shows the subservient position of women in late medieval culture. Furthermore, when Margery, after fourteen children, wishes to live “chaste” in her marriage, she needs to persuade her husband to agree with her. Her husband did not agree with her first, and she writes: “He would have his will, and she obeyed with great weeping and

³⁵⁵ Morrison 2000, 107 – 119.

³⁵⁶ Morrison 2000, 111.

³⁵⁷ Morrison 2000, 107 – 119.

³⁵⁸ Saul 1992, 41 – 52.

³⁵⁹ Eales 1998, 86.

³⁶⁰ Morrison 2000, 52, 119 – 121.

³⁶¹ Kempe, 48, 83, 172, 175.

³⁶² Eg. Kempe, 169.

³⁶³ Kempe, 90.

sorrowing because she might not live chaste.”³⁶⁴ However, “three or four years later, when it pleased our Lord, he made a vow of chastity.”³⁶⁵

After fourteen children it seems quite reasonable that Margery Kempe wanted to live without sex. However, abstinence would have elevated her status in religious life. She was married, which gave her more power than being unmarried, but at the same time she was living a chaste life, which elevated her position in the eyes of the Church. As spirituality in a woman was highly valued at the time,³⁶⁶ it is reasonable to assume that her status as married but chaste woman would have given her more power than the status of a married woman.

However, a woman could not just acquire religious importance on her own right. As women were considered incapable of intellectual reasoning, they could not justify their opinions about religion and religious life on theological reasoning. Instead, they relied on visions, as through them women could get a justification to their words from a higher authority. Most often the women claimed to receive the visions from the holy mother or other saints, Jesus and the God himself.³⁶⁷

This authorization from above ensured that the women themselves were not breaking the rules of society by trying to rise above the role of a woman. However, there were still dangers in criticizing the Church. When the political climate changed or the patience of the Church fathers ran out, a woman might find herself in deep trouble. Nevertheless, some women were very popular among the people and had followers in the masses as well as in higher circles of society. They were able to influence on the affairs of the Church and state alike, like Brigitte of Sweden did.³⁶⁸

At first glance the role of women in the Catholic Church of the Middle Ages is non-existent. They could not act in official posts and they were forbidden to speak in the congregation. However, in closer scrutiny some avenues for female agency within the religious life outside the convent walls can be found. Firstly, the

³⁶⁴ Kempe, 10.

³⁶⁵ Kempe, 11.

³⁶⁶ Atkinson 1983, 168 – 179.

³⁶⁷ Heinonen 2002, 82.

³⁶⁸ Setälä 1996, 164 – 182; Atkinson 1983, 159 – 161, 168 – 179.

Church service was very public event, and women were visible there, although they were not allowed agency in them. Secondly, even if the Church did not allow women to act in official posts, it allowed women to gather into Parish Guilds and publicly gather money for the Church and allowed them to take care of the Church textile and decorations. Even if the leaders of the Parish Guilds were women, they still operated under male supervision and were therefore acceptable.

Thirdly, pilgrimages offered women a route for religious self-expression and gave women some agency. However, pilgrimages did meet opposition, because the pilgrims were outside the normal social control. Fourthly, religious devotion was seen especially a female virtue and this gave women some possibility for agency. Although the Church authorities preferred women to express their devotion behind the convent walls, some women assumed a religious role in society. These women could become very famous and respected person, but in addition they could encounter ridicule and accusations of heresy. Based on these sources it can be said that women did have some possibilities for agency within the Church, but most of the possibilities remained male regulated. Furthermore, stepping outside the regulation could quickly change the actions of these women from accepted to unaccepted.

6. Women in late medieval England

The subjects of this thesis are relatively wide. It attempts to cover a variety of women's lives in late medieval England. Therefore, the problem of this thesis was focus. What should be mentioned, and what should be left out. Even though the primary sources were extensive, the relevant information was scattered in them, and finding it was not always easy. Nevertheless, I have tried to raise some facts from medieval life I found relevant. However, undoubtedly many interesting facts and sources have been left outside of this thesis. It would therefore be very easy to further study any of the questions in this thesis: the influence of social and marital agency for female agency in public, women and work and women's agency in religious life. I would have wanted to give more attention to women in the lower classes of society, but these primary sources did not offer many insights to that group of women.

It is not possible to create a comprehensive picture of the social status of women in the confines of a short thesis. Female experiences and agency come in very different forms, depending on social and marital status as well as depending on the personality of the woman. However, there are some general items that can be deducted from the sources. The norms of society that can be found in the sources are the same. However, there is a considerable difference in the attitudes they project about women. In *the Canterbury Tales* the role of women is to be subservient and meek. If they are portrayed as independent actors, they are often ridiculed or described as wicked women. In the Paston letters, on the other hand, the women are subservient to their husbands, but they still have initiative and agency.

The image of women was relatively contradictory in late medieval England. The ideal woman was considered to be under the supervision of a man, because according to Aristotelian ideas, women were defective males and unable to act or think on their own accord. Christian beliefs that categorized women to be more open to sin and weaker confronting it enhanced the need for male domination. Furthermore, the rising economic situation of late medieval England

made it possible for the ruling class to treat women as decorative objects who, at least in theory, needed no authority in order to fulfil their role in society.

One more “female” vice was sexual promiscuity, which is a relatively interesting phenomena. When male pride and possible fortune in marriage negotiations, as well as the authenticity of their lineage, is bound to female chastity, it is quite understandable that the sexual relations of women become a matter of interest and regulation. On the other hand, women were not considered to be active in sexual relations, and guilt for sexual indiscretion often seemed to ultimately lie with the man. Although the woman was weak and therefore open to promiscuity, the man was a thief who stole the possessions of another man.

Sex outside the marriage bed was, and always will be, a reality despite the norms of society. In literature sex was and is a relatively common theme. *The Canterbury Tales* is no exception, and in Chaucer’s stories sex is often used as a means of revenge against another man, the “owner” of the woman in question. In addition, sexually active women are presented as dubious characters, who in one way or another lack morals and defy the norms of society.

On the other hand, late medieval English society did bestow women with particular virtues as well. They were seen as peacemakers and considered more inclined to piety than men. It seems possible that as women had relatively few possibilities for agency, they turned to those roles that were accepted for them in order to advance their own position and to gain what they wanted. As they had little authority on their own, peacemaking was the socially accepted option, and so was concentrating on religious life.

Despite the restricted possibilities, women did transgress the norms of society in their lives, some with more success and others with less. Even society itself sometimes required women to step outside the boundaries of home. For example, wives were often expected to deal with the businesses of their husbands while they were absent. Officially women were subservient to men, and their duty was to obey and take care of their domestic responsibilities. On the other hand, the economic life desperately needed the input of women and would not always have been able to function without it.

Margaret Paston can be considered as an example of a successful agent in public life. She efficiently handled business on behalf of her husband when he was away. Even though she often asked for his advice, she was in addition capable of making decisions on her own, concerning the sale of goods, the family tenements, and some legal matters. She could become a successful actor probably because she fulfilled her role in society. She clearly felt subservient to her husband, but at the same time this subservience gained her some power. As she was a loyal and competent wife, her husband, John I, trusted her to handle his affairs even in difficult situations. Furthermore, Margaret was able to act, because people assumed that she was acting according to the orders her husband had given. Therefore she remained safely within the role of a woman and did not try to gain power to her own name. As a widow she gained more power and was clearly an influential figure in the family.

The law gave unmarried women, as well as widows, some freedom to act independently in public. They had the right to take a post as an apprentice and work independently in order to support themselves. However, unmarried women do not have a visible part in public life on either *the Canterbury Tales*, *the Paston letters* or *the Book of Margery Kempe*. It has to be taken into consideration that wealthy members of society who could afford the upkeep of unproductive members of the family produced the sources used in this thesis.

Most women needed to earn their living, though, either with their husbands and other male relatives, or independently. In the heavily family-based economy of late medieval England most women lived and worked with their family and were therefore acceptably under the supervision of a male relative and outside the public sphere of life. They took care of the house and helped their husbands in his profession, or worked in relatively unskilled subsidiary trades such as midwifery, textile work or brewing.

The most common profession outside the home was maid, which also kept women neatly under a male supervision, in this case under the supervision of the employer. Admittedly women could learn a profession as an apprentice like men did, but it was not as common as among men. A woman could legally even continue her learned profession after her marriage if she gained the status of

femme sole, an independent woman. However, this was only possible if the husband was willing to give her this status. Furthermore, the meaning of *femme sole* was not to empower women and grant them agency, but to protect the husband from possible debts.

There were other obstacles for women to achieve a profession for themselves as well. The guilds often ostracized women in their practices, effectually stopping them from working in skilled professions. Furthermore, women might have considerable difficulties in getting enough capital to start a business even if they succeeded to gain entry to a guild. Even the rare skilled professions that were dominated by women rarely organised in guilds, which left the women without the benefit and stability that guilds created.

Those women who, for one reason or another, nevertheless needed to look after themselves without male relatives were seen as an anomaly, and treated with suspicion. Single women living on their own presented a problem for social order, as they were not under a man's supervision and therefore were more open to "normal" female vices. Furthermore, they presented a possibly disruptive element in society. In addition, working single women were seen to threaten the income of men who had a family to support, making them undesirable in the economic sphere as well. For these reasons women living alone could face considerable problems in supporting themselves and finding a home, and single women living on their own were relatively easily marginalized.

One intriguing inconsistency between reality and law in medieval England was the position of a wife. Legally coverture ensured that the wife was subservient to her husband both physically and economically. Men had absolute power over their wives and the only limitation was that they were not allowed to sell land that the wife had brought into the marriage without her consent. As beating a wife was legally allowed, a sufficiently ruthless husband would not have had many difficulties in obtaining the consent. The ideal wife seemed to have been fertile, wise, and skilful, and at the same time absolutely obedient to her husband.

On the other hand, the husbands seemed to be more willing to give freedom and responsibilities to their wives. Chaucer stresses the obedience of the

wife, but even he acknowledges the wife's role in the running of the household. In the Paston family, wives, especially Margaret, were very capable of acting in public. Wives most likely had power over their husbands and they sometimes gave them advice in business, when they felt better informed about the situation.

Women even gained some amount of power and agency in public, because it was understood that they were acting on the advice of their husbands, whether this was the actual case or not. Some women even gained considerable skills in business affairs and had a good working knowledge in legal matters, as well as matters concerning the home. Nevertheless, the wives seemed quite aware of the fact that they acted under their husbands and only with their consent. Even though marriage in the middle ages has been described as partnership, it was not a partnership between two equal partners.

As widows, women had the most power to influence their own lives and act in public. The law gave them more freedom and the views of society seemed to loosen a little. Widows were legally entitled to one third of the possessions of their late husband and they could have considerable possessions. This happened in the Paston family, when two widows, Agnes and Margaret, owned a large portion of the family fortunes at one point. However, if the land was held in entails widows, as well as younger children, might be left with little or possessions. Even though the aristocracy was expected to take care of their relatives, this could not always be counted on. Furthermore, a debtor's rights were stronger than the rights of the widow and in any case most women could not expect to live and raise their children with the inheritance their husband would leave them.

Therefore, many widows faced the problems of supporting themselves. Widows were generally allowed to continue the profession of the late husband, although with some limitations, unless they remarried outside the guild. Furthermore, widows were regarded with more acceptance than unmarried women. They had fulfilled their role in society, and it was not so much their fault that they were unattended. Some of the "defects" of the female psyche seemed to be erased by marriage and they could be allowed some independence and some power in attending their own affairs. On the other hand, supporting the relative

independence of women could have been seen as supporting the household economy, not the woman herself. When the widow could take care of her children, they did not become a burden to society.

The opportunities for women to gain agency in public were very different in different social classes. In theory the aristocracy was in a visible role in society and again in theory the women in their families did not need to work. This could mean that the women had little or no part in public life, but in reality public agency was sometimes expected from them when they were attending to the affairs of the family. They discussed deals and legal cases in the absence of their husbands and were a visible part of local society and probably as known to the servants and peasants as the master/mistress of the house.

However, visibility also brought more pressure to conform to the norms and ideals bestowed upon women, even though the real situation might require action deemed unfit for women. Margaret of Anjou experienced this, when she tried to do what was expected of her. She was condemned because of the lack of feminine virtues such as making peace while Margaret Paston was able to defend the Hellesdon manor without subjecting herself to large amount of criticism.

In theory, it is possible that sometimes women of the lower classes were able to achieve agency with less difficulty and less backing from a man. It is true that the women in the lower classes did not have the financial or social possibilities that the women of aristocracy had. On the other hand, they perhaps did not need to follow the norms of society as strictly either. They were, to put it bluntly, worth less money for the men in their family, as there were no lucrative marriage possibilities. Furthermore, it is possible that they needed the acceptance of a smaller part of society in order to act in public within their own social sphere. Furthermore, they were not important enough to arise much disapproval in a wider audience. This would be relatively hard to prove, however, as there are far fewer sources from the lower classes.

At first glance female agency in medieval religious life seems to be restricted to behind the convent walls. Women had no right to hold office within

the Church and the priests were at least in theory celibate, erasing the possibility of even wifely power over the priests, which was one route open for female influence secular society. Furthermore, the Church vehemently upheld the notion of female subservience based on the teachings of the Bible.

However, on closer inspection there were a few possibilities for women's public agency within religious life. Pilgrimage was popular in all social classes, and as piety was one of the few "female" virtues, it was acceptable for women to take part. Travelling on pilgrimage was very visible act in a society where people led otherwise relatively stationary lives. Pilgrimages did gain a relatively bad reputation, however, as some regarded them more as a possibility to temporarily detach themselves from the norms of society and travel, rather than as a religious experience. The masses on pilgrimage were an uncontrollable crowd and, therefore a threat to the norms of society.

Another way for women to achieve agency within religious life lies in the parish guilds. The guilds were sanctioned by the Church, which gave them acceptability. Parish guilds gave women agency in public. Unmarried women found public agency within these actions even though the main interest of the guilds remained in matters closest to women, such as home, marriage and children. In addition the guilds offered women the possibility of meeting marriageable members of the opposite sex in respectable surroundings, which might explain at least some of the appeal of the Parish Guilds. In addition to Parish Guilds, women gathered into different religious movements that followed some of the monastic rules but remained within secular life. These orders offered a much needed opportunity for women who had to live without the protection of a man. The movements had sometimes difficulties in gaining acceptance of the official clergy, however.

Last but not least route to public agency within religious life was sainthood. Female saints were often mystics and relied heavily on visions in order to get their message through, as women were not considered capable of theological debate. Sometimes these women had considerable power even among the high-ranking men, but their position could be somewhat precarious. Because they needed to rely on a vision from God, saints or the holy mother in order to

justify their influence, they were left more open to accusations of being influenced by the devil instead of divine power.

The status of an individual woman seemed to have been based not only on her social and marital status, but in addition, it was affected by her own personality and by the relationship with her husband or guardian. In the end, however, even successful women had to obtain their status through somebody else. Women obtained their power and agency through the acceptance of the husband, whether alive or dead, which enabled them to act in public and to be accepted within the public sphere of life. In late medieval England, behind every successful woman, there was at least an idea of a man.

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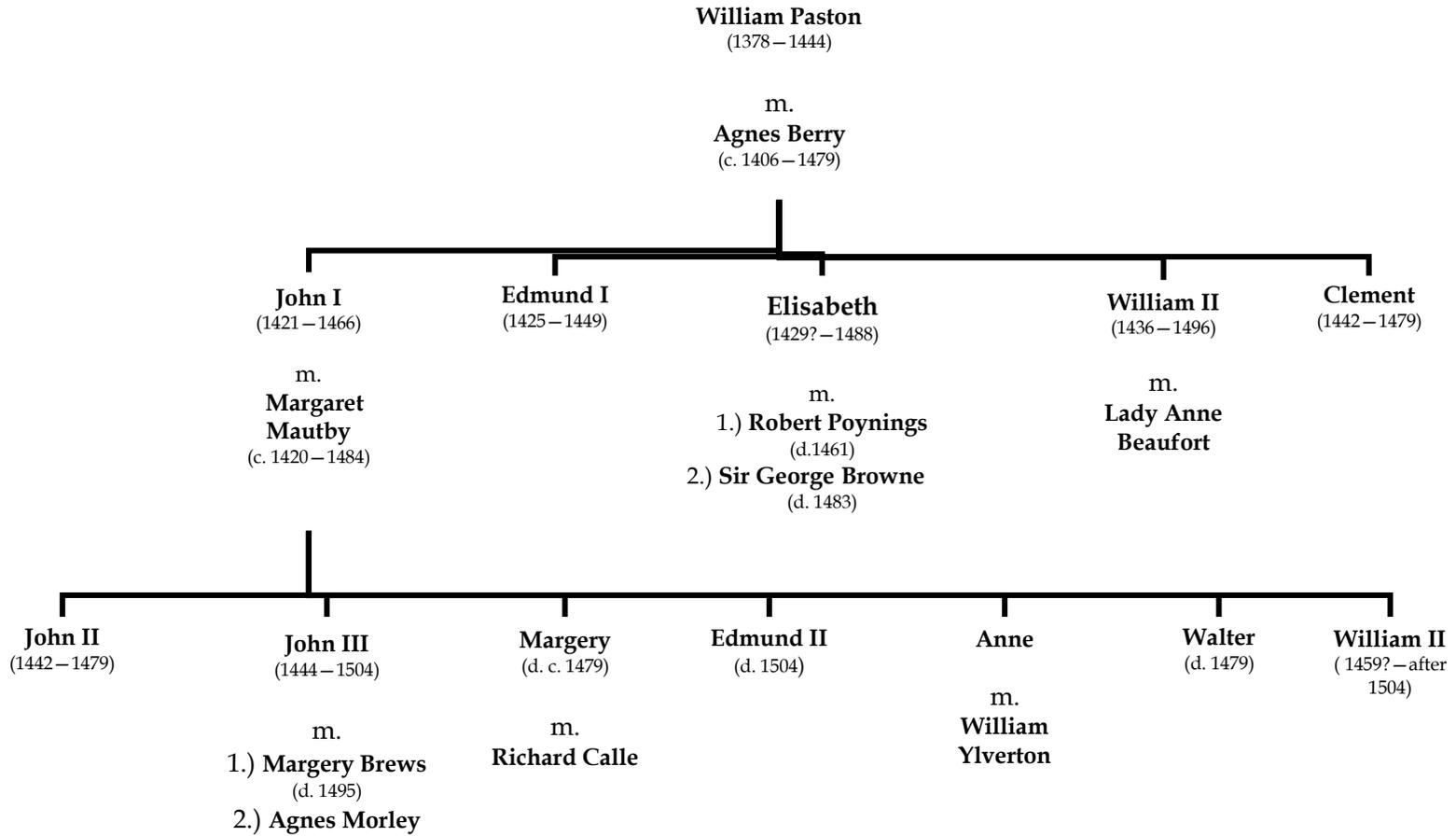
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APPENDIX 1

The genealogical tree of the Paston family.



APPENDIX 2

[Draft of Agnes Paston's will, 16 Sept 1466. PL 1971, 4445. Translated by Watt 2004,]

To all whom this present document must reach, I, Agnes Paston, until recently the wife of William Paston, Justice, send greeting in God everlasting, letting them now that I, the aforementioned Agnes, being of good and sound mind, on the 16th day of September in the 6th year of the reign of King Edward IV, and the year of our Lord 1466, make and order to be made my last will

[...]

And inasmuch as my husband, whose soul may God absolve, on many occasions, and especially, amongst others on the [a blank space has been left to fill later] day of the month, recounted to me that the property which he had assigned to his two youngest, William and Clement, in his written will, has so little that they would not be able to live on it unless they should till the land themselves. And furthermore, saying that he had various other manors, that is to say the manors of Sporle, Swainsthorpe and Beckham, the which manor of Beckham he intended to exchange for the manor of Palgrave if he was able to bring it about, then one of his two younger sons must have the said manors of Sporle and Beckham and no more, and the other youngest son must have all the rest. And the one who inherited the manor of Swainsthorpe should be under and obligation to the Prior of Norwich Abbey to pay a great sum of 4d every day in perpetuity to the monk who on that day sings the mass of the Holy Ghost in the Chapel of Our Lady in Norwich, where he intended to be buried, to sing and pray for his soul sand mine and the souls to whom he and I are indebted or for whom we are bound in gratitude to pray.

And after that on the [blank space] day of the following [blank space], my said husband, lying ill in bed, in the presence of John Paston (his son and mine), John Bacton, John Damme, and me, announced his intention concerning some of his children and me. At this time he assigned to the said John Paston's possession the manor of Gresham, and after my decease, the reversion of such property as he gave me, asking him the question whether he did not consider himself content with this, speaking to him thus, "Sir, if you will not do it, I will do it, because I am not willing to give so much to one that the rest shall have too little to live on".