



HAL
open science

The representation of masculine and feminine domains in the paston letters

Wendy Harding

► **To cite this version:**

Wendy Harding. The representation of masculine and feminine domains in the paston letters. L'articulation langue-littérature dans les textes médiévaux anglais 3, Jun 2000, Nancy, France. pp.435-446. <hal-04674684>

HAL Id: hal-04674684

<https://hal.science/hal-04674684v1>

Submitted on 21 Aug 2024

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



HAL Authorization

Wendy Harding
Université de Toulouse II

The Representation of Masculine and Feminine Domains in the *Paston Letters*

Medievalists are attracted to *The Paston Letters*, a collection of over five hundred letters and papers exchanged among the members and acquaintances of a fifteenth century East Anglian family, for the information they furnish about the language and lived experience of medieval people. Nonetheless, when studying the letters one quickly becomes aware of the limits of the epistolary form, as well as its possibilities. The letters tend to record the exceptional rather than the ordinary events of family life; moreover, not surprisingly, the Pastons' representations of themselves draw on familiar discursive formulae. Nevertheless, the letters show how language can be inflected in different ways, as men and women adapt existing discourses to exceptional circumstances. In this paper I will focus on what the *Paston Letters* tell us about the mapping of space in terms of gender, that is, firstly, how they divide their world into masculine and feminine territories and, secondly, how they represent men's and women's incursions into each other's domains.

I. Gendered divisions of space

The model

To obtain an idea of medieval norms, we can look first at a work whose purpose is, in part, to stake out the boundaries of feminine activity: the late fourteenth century French treatise, *Le Mesnagier de Paris*. Wives, we learn from the treatise, are above all linked with interior, domestic space, while husbands are associated with exterior, public space. In an appealing portrait of medieval home comforts, the

Mesnagier author advises his female reader how to care for her husband when he returns home:

Et pour ce aymés la personne de vostre mary songneusement. Et vous pry que vous le tenez nectement de linge, car en vous en est. Et pour ce que aux hommes est la cure et soing des besongnes de dehors, et en doivent les mariz songner, aler, venir et racourir deça et dela par pluyes, par vens, par neges, par gresles, une foiz moullié, une foiz sec, une foiz suant, autresfoiz tramblant, mal peu, mal hebergié, mal chaussié, mal couchié – et tout ne luy fait de mal pour ce qu’il est resconforté de l’esperance qu’il a aux cures que la femme prendra de luy a son retour, aux aises, aux joyes et aux plaisirs qu’elle luy fera, ou fera faire devant elle : d’estre deschaux a bon feu, d’estre lavé les piez, avoir chausses et soulezz fraiz, bien peu, bien abeuvré, bien servy, bien seignoury, bien couché en blans draps et cueuvrechiez blans, bien couvert de bonnes fourures, et assouvy d’autres joyes et esbatemens, privetez, amours et secretz dont je me taiz. Et l’endemain robes-linges et vestemens nouveaulx.¹

So love and care for your husband. You should always be sure to provide him with spotless linen because that is your place. So to men falls the task of attending to outdoor needs; husbands should occupy themselves with coming and going, running hither and thither in rain, wind, snow, hail, sometimes wet and sometimes dry, sometimes sweating, sometimes shivering, insufficiently fed and lodged, poorly shod and bedded. But none of that matters to him because he is encouraged by the cheerful prospect of the care that his wife will take of him on his return, of the comforts, joys and pleasures that she will give him or ensure that he is given: to have his shoes taken off in front of a good fire, to have his feet washed, to be given clean hose and shoes, to be wined and dined, served and honoured, to be put to bed between white sheets with a white nightcap, covered with fine furs, and to have his needs satisfied with other joys and games, loving intimacies and secrets which I will not mention. And the next day to be given fresh linen and garments. (My translation.)

The passage is structured on a contrast between outdoor space, where men are represented as engaging in a daily struggle against the

¹ *Le Mesnagier de Pari*, eds. Georgina E. Brereton et Janet M. Ferrier (Paris : Librairie Générale Française, 1994), p. 294-296.

elements, and interior space, where women provide the comfort that compensates their husbands for their efforts. Notice that the passage does not really seem to reflect a women's perspective on domesticity. Although the house is represented as the wife's domain, it is organised around the husband, the series of actions that the woman will perform or will have performed are all centered on ministering to him. Exterior space, the world of work, is represented as menacing, and its discomforts and dangers justify the division of space and above all the labour conducted in that space according to gender.

Naturally, we should be cautious about the relation between an idealized representation and actual circumstances. Relations between men and women and the corresponding divisions in space and activity appear rather more complex in the Paston letters than in marital treatises like *Le Mesnagier de Paris*. On the one hand, the letters certainly reveal boundaries differentiating masculine from feminine and, at the same time, allocating power and status to the dominant sex by restricting medieval women's use of space. On the other hand, they also show these boundaries to be somewhat less rigid in practice than the stereotypes suggest, principally because they are blurred by such considerations as dynastic or class interests.

The masculine sphere of public space

Like the suffering husband portrayed in the *Mesnagier de Paris*, the Paston men are frequently represented in the letters as working far from the home, sojourning in London and even France, in order to promote and defend the interests of the family and sometimes the nation in the law courts, the royal court, and on the battlefield.

From an early age, the Paston boys were prepared for their involvement in the public realm. At first, they would have been tutored at home, but since this relates to everyday practice, it does not bear mentioning in writing. Then, as early as the age of thirteen they were sent to university. From there they generally went on to the Inns of Court, for knowledge of law had permitted the family to ascend the social ladder during the fourteenth century, and it was seen as the key to holding on to the properties that had been acquired. In a letter to her

son Edmond, Agnes Paston expresses her husband's convictions on this matter:

To myn welbelovid sone, I grete yow wel, and avyse yow to thynkk onis of the daie of youre fadris counseyle to lerne the lawe, for he seyde manie tymis that ho so ever schuld dwelle at Paston, schulde have nede to conne defende hym selfe.¹

The boys' departure from home naturally occasions exchanges of letters. But contrary to what we might imagine from contemporary family relations, the Paston women do not write to express maternal affection or convey family news, but rather to address the material and sometimes domestic issues, like the provision of clothing, that the boys' distance from home renders more difficult. The only letters containing news about university life are those exchanged between male members of the family. For example, Walter Paston writes from Oxford to his brother John inviting him to the feast celebrating his graduation.² This feast seems to be a strictly male affair; his brother is invited, but not his mother. On leaving home, then, the boys enter institutions from which women are excluded and their separation from the world of their men is not bridged by discourse, but rather reinforced by it.

Legal business kept the Paston men away from Norfolk for extended periods. However, the large number of letters exchanged between Margaret Paston and her husband are completely opaque concerning the business being conducted in London; instead, the recurring topic is the problems connected with the management of family property. Margaret is always deferential about John's work, respecting boundaries by never mentioning affairs beyond the manor and its environs.

Margaret's letters to her husband usually conclude with the vague formula *gode spede in all yowr materis* or more urgently in a letter speaking of difficulties in Norfolk:

¹ *The Paston Letters*, ed. James Gairdner, London: Archibald Constable, 1907, Volume I, No 46. Subsequent quotations from the letters are taken from this edition and will be referred to parenthetically within the text.

² *PL* III, No. 831.

I pray God be your gode spyde in all your maters, and yef yow grace to have a gode conclusyon of hem in haste; for thys ys to wry a lyffe to a byde for you and all youre. (*PL II*, No 502)

Here, curiously, we see an inversion of the portrait drawn by the *Mesnagier* author, the wife claims to be suffering at home while her husband is on business. Indeed, Margaret complains with good cause, for while John was away in London, his enemies were attacking the manor house, and though Margaret never overtly questions her husband's decisions, her requests that he make an end of his affairs in London become more and more pressing:

And at the reverens of God, spyde your maters nowe, for it ys to orybell a cost and trobell that we have now dayly, and most have tyll it be other wyse. (*PL II*, No. 534)

Reading between the lines of the correspondence, one gets the sense that Margaret comes to doubt the real effectiveness of her husband's efforts to hold on to the Paston lands by means of the law courts, but her sense of wifely decorum, or her internalisation of the appropriate gender divisions and hierarchies, prevents her from openly calling into question the justification for her husband's absence from home.

As the Paston family rose in status, the sons were sent to royal or noble English households, a practice that entailed significant expense for uncertain returns, for during the Wars of the Roses, alliances and centres of power were in constant flux. There are a number of letters exchanged among family members while John Paston's eldest son (John II or Sir John, for he was later knighted) was at court. In the letters, the king's court is represented as a largely masculine domain. Extending outward from the king, a network of male connections could be mapped out, in which subjects vie with each other to secure an advantageous position.

The picture of courtly life given by John is somewhat different from that found in literary texts, for women are conspicuously absent from his descriptions. For example, in describing a tournament, he makes no mention of the female spectators whose role in romance is to move knights to acts of chivalry. The tournament that Sir John describes to his brother is represented as a strictly masculine affair:

My hand was hurt at the torney at Eltham upon Wednesday last. I would that you had been there and seen it, for it was the goodliest sight that was sene in Englande this forty yeares of so fewe men. There was upon the one side, within, the Kinge, my Lord Scales, myselfe, and Sellenger; and without, my Lord Chamberlyn, Sir John Wodvyle, Sir Thomas Montgomery, and John Aparre, &c. By your brother,

John Paston, Mil. (*PL II*, No 572)

In participating in this tournament with the King and other noblemen, Sir John was both accruing honour to himself through his role in the social spectacle (*the goodliest sight*) and strengthening links with the powerful men that he lists in his letter.

According to Bourdieu's analysis in *La domination masculine*, masculine action alone produces the honour that is the symbolic capital of nobility:

Les femmes sont exclues de tous les lieux publics, assemblée, marché, où se jouent les jeux ordinairement considérés comme les plus sérieux de l'existence humaine, tels les jeux de l'honneur. Et exclues, si l'on peut dire, *a priori*, au nom du principe (tacite) de l'égalité en honneur qui veut que le défi, parce qu'il fait honneur, ne vaut que s'il s'adresse à un homme (par opposition à une femme) et à un homme d'honneur, capable d'apporter une riposte qui, en tant qu'elle enferme aussi une forme de reconnaissance, fait honneur.¹

Although the evidence from medieval texts and images suggests women were not excluded from tournaments as spectators, the fact that they are excluded from Sir John's consciousness seems to bear out Bourdieu's claim that accruing honour is an affair undertaken in a public forum among men. Sir John is at court, risking injury in the ritualised display of mock battle, in order to earn the social and symbolic capital that, according to Bourdieu,² is of vital importance in pre-modern societies.

Surprisingly, though, Sir John's report of the tournament earns a reproach from John Paston III, who, in the absence of his elder

¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *La Domination masculine*, Paris : Seuil, 1998, p. 54.

² The terms *capital social* and *capital symbolique* are Bourdieu's. See especially pp. 51-54.

brother, was sharing with his mother, Margaret, the responsibility for managing the family's estate at home:

wher as it pleyssyth yow for to wyshe me at Eltam, at the tornay, for the good syth that was ther, by trowththe I had lever se yow onys in Caster Hall then to se as many Kynys tornay as myht be betwys Eltham and London. (*PL II*, No 573)

John III challenges the value of his brother's public activity and urges him to return to domestic space. This inversion of the conventional boundaries of space is done in the name of another code of values, which will be explored later. But before looking at departures from the model that separates masculine and feminine space, we will examine women's references to domestic experience in the Paston letters.

The feminine sphere of domestic space

From the closing formulae of the letters mentioning their place and date of composition, we know that the Paston women mainly occupied the home, where they presumably devoted much of their time to the repetitive diurnal or cyclical activities associated with domestic space. Education, for the Paston daughters, consisted in being sent to another household to aid with domestic tasks until a husband was found and the girls could set up house themselves. Once they became mistress of the household, in a division of space and labour not so very different from that envisaged by the *Mesnagier* author, the Paston women would have been responsible for providing food, clothing and other sorts of attentions for the male members of the family.

There is no written discourse detailing these everyday occupations, however. For example, Margaret Paston's daily effort of securing provisions for a large household is never mentioned in letters to her husband or her sons. This "feminine" concern is represented in writing only when it requires that the spatial limits of the household and the local market be exceeded, and that the collaboration of male members of the family be solicited. In other words, the work of procuring food for the pantry only finds its way into discourse when some provision is in short supply or is too exotic to be had in Norfolk. Similarly, the task of clothing the family, which for the Paston women

meant buying cloth and converting it or having it converted into garments, is only referred to in the letters if the right quality or price is not available locally, in which case, male members of the family are asked to send goods from London. Another domestic activity that is occasionally mentioned in the letters is the care of the sick. We find evidence of this activity in Margaret Paston's requests for *triacle*, her favourite remedy, and in her son's report of his return home from London when he becomes ill and his grateful thanks afterwards for the care that he has received. When John Paston becomes ill in London, Margaret expresses her doubt concerning the professional physicians who usurp her domestic function when members of her family are absent from the home:

Also fore Goddys sake be ware what medesynys ye take of any fyssyanys of London; I schal never trust to hem be cause of yowre fadre and myn onkyl, whoys sowlys God assoyle. (*PL II*, 490)

In general, when the Paston women send letters from home to the absent men their concern is to communicate information about dealings outside the domestic sphere, in property, legal matters or local politics, business that in the normal division of space and labour, would be dealt with by male family members.

The *Paston Letters* suggest that for members of the landed gentry, the home is a space where public and private concerns overlap. In the letter examined above John Paston III reproaches his brother for his participation in the tournament because his presence at Caster Hall is seen as essential to the family's welfare. In the absence of the male head of the family, the wife or widow seems to stand in for the man, so that the boundaries between masculine and feminine domains become blurred. With the extended absences of the Paston men, the women appear in a very different light from the idealized portrait of the bourgeois wife sketched by the author of *Le Mesnagier de Paris*.

II. Blurred Boundaries

The household

Though divided by gender, men and women were linked through marriage and birth as members of a family. The Paston letters show

that this identification took priority over other interests. John Paston spells out this law in a letter to his wife:

Also remembir yow in any housold, felaship or cumpany that will be of good rewle, purvyauns must be had that every persone of it be helpyng and furtheryng after his discrecioun and powyr, and he that woll not do so without he be kept of almes shuld be put out of the houshold or felachep. (*PL Supplement, LIX*)

The medieval household is compared here to a group of business associates, a *cumpany*, a group of equal members motivated by mutual profit. In spite of this comparison, John's letter is an assertion of his own dominance. As the head of the household, he has the authority to expel unproductive members, and in this particular letter he is warning Margaret not to be sentimental about his exclusion of their eldest son. Nonetheless, the letters do reveal how the interests of the family could push its members to make incursions into territory from which their gender would otherwise have excluded them. The Pastons' discussions of financial and military negotiations furnish some interesting examples of such boundary crossings.

Men and women in the marketplace

The market place is a space where the genders often collaborate to further the interests of the family. As the women's letters to London show, the Paston men were frequently asked to shop for food and fabric if a better bargain could thereby be obtained. In families whose livelihood depended on trade, women could enter the marketplace alongside their husbands or in independent ventures, as did "Hay's wife", who is mentioned in a letter in which John is asked to buy cloth for the children's gowns. Speaking of his sister's secret betrothal to a family servant, John Paston expresses his disapproval of the marriage by describing her change of status as a change of space and activity:

he shold never have my good wyll for to make my sustyr to selle kandll and mustard in Framlyngham. (*PL II, No 607*)

John's disapproval is an expression of the violation of class, not gender boundaries, for the man in question comes from merchant stock. Though John is exaggerating the descent in status, he takes for

granted that a woman of the merchant class would join her husband in his commercial activity.

Although the idea of one of the Paston women selling goods at the market is portrayed as unacceptable, they were expected to take on the responsibility of selling the produce of the manor and of renting the farms when the men were absent. In fact, most of Margaret Paston's letters to her husband discuss negotiations concerning family property. In order to justify her incursion into the realm of masculine responsibility, she makes it clear that she is acting on his behalf:

Item, as for your wolle, I may selle a stoon for xld., so that I wol geve half year day of payment. I pray you sende me word how I shal do in this matre and in all other, &c. (PL II, No 518)

The letters show that she is an astute businesswoman who is perfectly capable of negotiating, but she is tactful in always preserving the appearance of male authority. The possessive pronoun (*your wolle*) assigns the property to John and the modals *may* and *shall* allow him the decision-making prerogative. Moreover, as we see in a letter describing her bargaining over a piece of land, Margaret is not above appealing to gender divisions as a way of obtaining a better price:

I have spoke with Newman for his place, and I am thorow with hym therfor, but he wold not lete it in no wyse lesse than v. marc. I told hym that sekyrly ye shuld not know but that I hyrid it of him for iii li. I seyde as for the noble, I shuld payt of myn own purse that ye shuld no knowleche have therof. (PL I, No. 189)

In order to obtain a good bargain, she has obviously set a limit beyond which (she claims) her husband has not authorised her to go. In order to sustain the pretence of his authority and to uphold his honour, she asserts that part of the price will be paid secretly from her own funds.

Women in arms — domestic space in time of siege

In staying at home, the women were not isolated from the violence of the dispute between two rival claims to the throne in the Wars of the Roses. The civil strife meant that central authority was weak in England. The Paston men's efforts to defend their interests in the courts were of limited value given the atmosphere of lawlessness

that reigned. Working on the precept that possession is as persuasive as legal documents, the family's enemies simply seized Paston property and began claiming rent from their tenants. Thus Margaret witnessed just as much armed conflict at home as her sons on the battlefield. With her husband away, she became responsible for defending family property. Thus in one of her early letters to John she sends a rather surprising request:

Ryt wurchipful hwsbond, I recomawnd me to zu, and prey zw to gete som crosse bowis, and wyndacs to bynd them with, and quarrels; for zour hwsis her ben so low that ther may non man schet owt with no long bowe, thow we hadde never so moche nede.

I sopose ze xuld have seche thyngs of Ser Jon Fastolf, if ze wold send to hym; and also Iwold ze xuld gete ij or iij schort pelleaxis to kepe with doris, and als many jakkys, and ye may. (*PL I, 67*)

In the absence of John Margaret assumes the responsibility for doing battle with hostile forces. In this letter she is requesting arms in order to defend the besieged house at Gresham. Though she speaks as a military strategist here, she does so in the name of her husband. She refers to the property as his (*zour hwsis*), even though Gresham was in fact her jointure. Moreover she seems to minimize the danger of her position by presenting her request for arms in the familiar style of a shopping list. In fact the opening request is echoed in the conclusion of the same letter when Margaret mentions the purchase of more appropriately domestic items:

I pray zw that ze wyl vowche save to don bye for me j.li (1 lb.) of almands and j. li of sugyr, and that ze wille do byen sume frese to maken of zour child is gwnys; ze xall have best chepe and best choyse of Hayis wyf, as it is told me. (*PL I, 67*)

In both texts there is the numeration of desired items, as well as the suggestion of where to obtain them, except perhaps that Margaret sounds somewhat less certain where to buy crossbows than good cloth.

In spite of John's apparent faith in the power of law, in fact, physical possession was a much more persuasive argument than any legal document. Thus while her husband was away in London, Margaret moved from manor to manor in order to make good the family's title to their property. In one exciting episode, which John II

relates in a letter to his father, Margaret arrived at one of the family properties just as a rival claimant, hearing that the Pastons were gathering rents, assembled three hundred men to attack. A Paston servant pretended that the family was raising an equal force and sent a message to the Duke of Norfolk that it would be a dishonour to him if there were to be a battle so near to his seat. In a letter to his father, John III relates how, when summoned before the Duke, he claims that:

at that tyme I had my maistryr within the maner of Cotton, which was my modyr, and in to the tyme that I had spook with hyr I coud geve non answer. (PL II, 531)

The expression “My master . . . which was my mother” is intriguing. Margaret is given a male title and the deference accorded to a patriarch. John’s manipulation of gender specific terms is a kind of linguistic sleight of hand that attempts to cover over the fact that Margaret is assuming her husband’s authority as head of the household rather than the subordinate role that her gender dictated.

Though the limits for male and female behaviour are clearly defined in the Middle Ages, the Paston letters show us that boundaries were in fact crossed. Indeed, in the manor house, masculine and feminine domains coincide, private and public space overlap, and cyclical, domestic time collides with linear historical time. Yet, at the same time, the Paston women hide their instrumental role in assuring the family’s public standing and material profit. The letters show that a good medieval wife is not one who limits her activity to household tasks, but one who also can act like a man, and, at the same time, justify the fictions that uphold male dominance by allowing discursive strategies to mask her transgressions.