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The Language of Courtly Romance in the *Paston Letters*

Sending a declaration of love, as readers of medieval romance well know, is an effective gambit in the game of courtly seduction.¹ Indeed, exchanges of letters not only advance the lovers' courtship; in some romances, they structure the plot. In Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, for example, much of Book II is taken up by descriptions of the lovers' correspondence, while Book V relates how at the end of their affair, Troilus rereads Criseyde's letters, writes to Criseyde once again, and muses over her "straunge" (V:1632) replies.² The motif of letter writing even serves as a metonymy for their affair when the narrator explains why he fails to recount all the details:

For ther was som epistel hem bitwene,
That wolde, as seyth myn autor, wel contene
Neigh half this book, of which hym liste nought write.
How sholde I thanne a lyne of it endite? (III 501-104)

In the eighteenth century, the entire text is sometimes composed of letters, for example in Richardson's protracted epistolary accounts of Pamela's or Clarissa's seductions. But these are fictions, and my subject in this paper is the correspondence of a real medieval family, the Pastons, where among the hundreds of letters exchanged, we find very little touching on love. However, at certain moments in the Paston letters life seems to imitate art, and among the endless discussions of local politics and property management, the discourse of romance appears.

¹ Hélène Dauby mentions their importance in *The Romance of Sir Degrevant*; cf. "Stratégie illocutoire dans *The Romance of Sir Degrevant*" in this volume.

² References to Chaucer's works are from the Riverside edition; Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry Benson (Boston: Houghton and Mifflin, 1987).

Up to now, the Paston correspondence has mostly been studied by historians¹ rather than literary specialists.² Interestingly, their comments on the letters reveal how readers' expectations about what the Pastons might have written to each other have been shaped by fiction. In his chapter entitled "Marriage", J.S. Bennett warns that "many readers will be heartily tired of, and repelled by, the insistence on financial and worldly matters shown by both men and women in discussing marriage proposals."³ He implies, probably rightly, that readers expect to find the expressions of sentiment that are represented in fictional epistolary exchanges. However, the Pastons rarely invested in paper and ink unless important business touching the financial concerns of the family was involved; hence marriage often comes across as a strictly material affair. For this very reason, the scholars who have analysed the letters are delighted to find the hints of romance that appear from time to time in the letters. Bennett's chapter on marriage is followed by a somewhat slimmer section entitled, "Love", where he seems to breathe a sigh of relief in announcing that "amidst the enquiries and sordid grasping that prelude most medieval

¹ James Gairdner's lengthy 1907 introduction to his edition of the letters emphasizes their place in political and constitutional history; *The Paston Letters*, ed. James Gairdner (London: Archibald Constable, 1907). H. S. Bennett's study illustrates their value for social history; H. S. Bennett, *The Pastons and their England: Studies in an Age of Transition*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922). Two subsequent books aimed at more general audiences quote extensively from the letters in order to recreate an impression of "the manners, morals, lifestyle and attitudes" in a fifteenth century family. See Richard Barber, *The Pastons: A Family in the Wars of the Roses* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1993) and Frances and Joseph Gies, *A Medieval Family: The Pastons of Fifteenth-Century England* (New York: Harper Collins, 1998). The preceding quotation is from Gies, p. 1.

² Norman Davis's Oxford edition emphasizes the value of the letters for what they reveal about the history of the English language; *Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Norman Davis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971 and 1976). Following the publication of this edition, a number of linguistic studies of the Paston Letters have appeared.

³ Bennett, p. 28.

marriages, here and there the authentic accents of true love survive in all their freshness.”¹ In this chapter, the sober historian turns to fiction to help him imagine his historical lovers. For example, in speaking of marriage negotiations between John Paston III and Margery Brews, he writes: “She was deeply in love with John; and, although he had given his promise [not to speak definitely to Margery until the details were settled], perhaps she had understood his message though it was unspoken, and ‘Sometimes from his eyes [...] did receive fair speechless messages.’”²

Although the Pastons’ “love letters” may sometimes echo courtly romance, they do not conform to its literary norms, for in the Paston correspondence, the language of love is found side by side with other, alien discourses, producing texts that are difficult to classify. Moreover, the circumstances of their production are very different from those described in fiction. Whereas Criseyde secludes herself in a closet “and gan hire herte unfette / out of desdaynes prison but a lite” (II:1215-16), Margery Brews’s love letters to John Paston were dictated to the family scribe, in all likelihood with her mother’s encouragement.

Bearing in mind that the majority of extant fifteenth-century letters are usually oriented toward gaining a legal or financial advantage,³ I intend to reexamine the love letters that have enthused the historians, reading them not as the spontaneous expressions of the heart, but as productions created in order to secure social and sometimes financial capital. Though my analysis of these letters may appear somewhat cynical in comparison with prior discussions, I hope that it will shed new light on the discourse of courtly love that appears in the Paston correspondence.

¹ Bennett, p. 42.

² Bennett, p. 47. The allusion is to Bassanio’s fairy-tale meeting with Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, I.i.164.

³ Of course this impression may result from the choices made about which letters to save, as well as the rhetorical structure of the letters, which tend to begin with business, keeping personal messages brief and relegating them to the end.

In predicting that readers will be repelled by the approach to love and marriage found in the Paston letters, Bennett assumes that we are influenced by contemporary Western attitudes, which have of course been shaped by literary romance. To place the letters in perspective, we should bear in mind that even today, in societies where marriages are arranged, common wisdom holds that love comes after the wedding and that parents are best suited to choosing suitable marriage partners. Financial status and social rank take priority over beauty or temperament in the decision-making process. Shocking as it seems, if no better prospect could be found for Elizabeth Paston, she was, according to a letter written by her cousin, Elizabeth Clere, prepared to marry a man who was thirty years her senior and either disfigured or feeble-minded (“symple”) as long as he was financially sound. The young girl consoled herself with the thought that she would be all the more esteemed for obeying such an unlikely husband.

In fact, it took ten years and numerous failed attempts to conclude a marriage agreement for Elizabeth Paston. In the only extant letter signed by her, or rather signed by the newly married Elizabeth Ponynggs, in 1459, we find the coexistence of contradictory discourses that characterizes the Pastons’ writing about love. The new bride is describing her situation to her mother: “And as for my mayster, my best beloved that ye call, and I must nedes call hym so now, for I fynde noon other cause, and as I trust to Jesu non shall; for he is full kynde unto me, and is as besy as he can to make me sur of my joyntor [...]”¹ Elizabeth uses two different epithets to describe her husband. The first, *mayster*, denotes his legal and moral status as the head of the couple. The second, *best beloved*, comes from another order of discourse; the superlative term of endearment recalls courtly poetry.² Elizabeth’s somewhat self-conscious use of these words, which she attributes to her mother, may be a response to a legal and social change that had taken place in the course of the Middle Ages. To be valid a marriage contract needed the willing consent of the two

¹ Letter 322, Gairdner, Vol. I, p. 435.

² We find the term in Chaucer’s short poem, “A Complaint to his lady”, line 58. *Riverside*, p. 642

partners (“I must needs call him so [...]”). Nonetheless, Elizabeth’s justification of her use of the term (“for he is full kynde unto me, and is as besy as he can to make me sur of my joyntor [...]”) suggests that her affection for her husband derives not so much from her personal preference as from the financial security and independence from parental rule that he offers her.

Canon law condemned and invalidated marriages made without the consent of both partners. Yet, in spite of the growing emphasis on love in marriage, in the letters of the married Pastons, expressions of desire, the principal refrain of letters in courtly romance, are very rare. Even during long separations, men and women convey their desire or affection only obliquely through requests for letters or concern over health.¹ An exceptional admission of desire is tellingly relegated to the periphery of the text in a letter from Margery Brews Paston to her husband John III. Margery first offers news of the estate, then of the family, and finally adds in a postscript: “Sir I prey yow, if ye tary longe at London, that it wil plese to sende for me, for I thynke long sen I lay in yowr arms.”² Even this apparently simple and natural wifely request appears quite surprising when we consider the circumstances of the composition of the Paston women’s letters. All Margery Brews’s letters are penned by a scribe, and this is the general rule for the women’s letters in the collection. Letter writing, for women in particular, was a somewhat official and public act.³ Such scenes as the one in which Criseyde goes to her closet to write to Troilus, or May in the “Merchant’s Tale” replies to Damian “in her owne hond” seem mainly to have been restricted to romance.

The general impression given by the Paston letters, and this is borne out by most extant medieval correspondence, is that expressions of intimacy between men and women are out of place in writing. Curiously, letters from servants to masters or vassals to lords contain much more extravagant declarations of affection than those between

¹ E.g. Letter 185, Gairdner, Vol I, p. 251.

² Letter 865, Gairdner, Vol. III, p. 293.

³ The letters often refer to additional, more private or less urgent information that will be transmitted orally by the bearer.

husbands and wives. Nevertheless, as I mentioned in my introduction, there are the exceptions to this general impression which Bennett and others have identified and quoted at length. I will now turn to those letters to study the contradictions that I believe reveal the hidden purposes underlying their exceptional recourse to the discourse of *fin'amor*.

Perhaps the most surprising of the Paston love letters is the one from John Paston to his wife Margaret, which begins with the uncharacteristic address: "Myne owne dere sovereyn lady".¹ Bennett quotes this courtly salutation as proof that "her husband loved her as deeply as his nature would allow him to love anyone."² The historian's qualification is understandable, because John Paston's letters to his wife normally consist of lists of directives concerning property, servants and children. Is this one venture into courtly discourse a sudden revelation of the passion that has been simmering in the prosaic lawyer for over twenty years? Perhaps, but if we read on, we find that the letter does not continue in the same vein. John goes on to thank his wife for "the gret chere that ye mad me here to my gret cost and charge and labour. No more at thys tyme [...]"³ Immediately, in this reference to Margaret's visit to her husband who was at the time detained in Fleet prison, the focus changes to money ("my gret cost and charge"), introducing a bourgeois concern that clashes with the opening aristocratic flourish. The body of the letter is in keeping with John's usual style, for it is a list of instructions to his wife concerning purchases and debts. But the last item in the letter is written in an even more uncharacteristic style, as John resorts to rhyming couplets to immortalize the "tale" of Margaret's stay in the Fleet. Nevertheless, the subject of the poem is not the beauty or the virtue of the "sovereign lady", but the money that John and his servant Pampyng have borrowed from her: "Pampyng and I have picked your male / And taken out pesis v."⁴ Apparently, the "gret chere" that the couple

¹ No 528, Vol II, p. 235.

² Bennett, p. 61.

³ No 528, Vol II, p. 235.

⁴ No 528, Vol II, p. 237.

enjoyed during this conjugal visit was not wholly at John's charge but paid for by money borrowed from Margaret. The poem constitutes John's elaborate promise to repay the debt once his servant Richard Calle has taken care of "the resevyng of my livelod."¹ The letter's courtly language and use of poetic form do not serve to plead the lover's cause, as they would in romance. Although the idea of Margaret and John Paston secretly playing the roles of Dorigen and Arveragus is attractive, John's letter, with its competing discursive fields, is better understood as a humourous expression of his embarrassment over the reversal of roles that his prison sentence has occasioned. Normally, Margaret waits patiently in Norfolk addressing appeals to her husband to visit, to write, or to make purchases for her. John's arrest has made him powerless and passive — the position of the courtly lover — and he resorts to the language of love to express this new role in writing.

The most romantic of the Paston letters are surely those exchanged between Margery Brews and John Paston III in the opening stages of their marriage negotiations. Like other readers, I am seduced by the two extant letters addressed by Margery to John, but I intend, nevertheless, to resist the temptation to read them simply as the stuff of courtly fiction even though Margery imitates courtly discourse with much more skill than her father-in-law. The letter she addresses to "my ryght welebeloved Voluntyne", relays her anguish as a lover in a rhyming couplet: "For there wottys no creature what peyn that I endure, / And for to be deede, I dare it not dyscure."² This poetic declaration of secret suffering is wholly in keeping with the conventions of romance, but rather difficult to square with, first of all, the fact that the letter is written in the hand of the family servant and scribe, and secondly, with Margery's subsequent admission that "my moder hath labored the mater to my ffadur full delygently, but sche can no mor gete then ye knowe of [...]."³ The relationship between Margery and John, far from being a clandestine affair, is a tough

¹ No 528, Vol II, p. 237.

² No 783, Vol III, p. 170.

³ No 783, Vol III, p. 170.

financial wrangle between the families involved. In another letter Margery goes over the details of the contract: “my fader wyll no mor money parte with all in that behalfe, but an Cli. and l. marke, which is ryght far fro the acomplyshment of yowr desyre.”¹ This frank declaration of her price and her lover’s desire for a bigger dowry would be out of place in romance, but it prepares for a moving declaration of love: “Wherfore, yf that ye cowde be content with that good, and my por persone, I wold be the meryest mayden on grounde; and yf ye thynke not yowr selffe so satysfyed, or that ye myght hafe mech mor good, as I hafe undyrstonde by yowe afor; good trewe, and lovyng volentyne, that ye take no such labour uppon yowe, as to come more for that mater, but let is [*it?*] passe, and never more to be spokyn of, as I may be yowr trewe lover and bedewoman duryng my lyfe.”² Margery’s very literary depiction of herself as either “the meryest mayden on grounde” (the happy betrothed) or “yowr trewe lover and bedewoman” (the loyal lover) addresses a winning appeal to John to accept her father’s terms. Indeed, Margery uses the discourse of courtly love as an argument in bargaining for a husband. At the same time, she issues a warning to her parents who were surely informed of the content of the letter. If the deal falls through, there is the tacit threat that their daughter will give herself away for nothing, and all their efforts will have been wasted.

Contracting a marriage was officially the business of parents, but the Paston correspondence reveals that young people sometimes carried on parallel dealings, bartering with the emotional capital that they were able to generate on their own account. For the social connections secured through marriage to be useful, good will had to be maintained on all sides. Consequently, a young man might make unofficial advances to a young woman in order to test out her willingness to proceed further. In a letter from Sir John Paston to his younger brother, John III, the more experienced lover advises the novice how to be his own advocate: “Ye be personable, and peraventure yowr beyng ones in the syght of the mayde, and a lytele

¹ No 784, Vol III, p. 171.

² No 784, Vol III, p. 172.

descovyng of your good wyl to her, byndyng hyr to kepe it secret, and that ye kan fynde in yowr hert, with som comfort of hyr, to fynde the meane to brynge suche a mater abowt as schall be hyr plesur and yowrs [...].”¹ All the ingredients of courtly romance are mentioned, the handsome lover, the confession of love, and the imperative of secrecy, but while Sir John sounds rather like Pandarus here, his younger brother is very different from the suffering Troilus, since he has no particular affection for the lady in question, and yet, paradoxically, she is potentially his future bride.

As the second son, his main motivation for finding a partner was the expectation of financial independence that a good match would bring; hence the increasing urgency of his quest for a bride as the years passed. Evidence of his efforts on his own behalf is found in the draft of a letter from John III to an unnamed “Mastresse”, whom Gairdner suspects to be Margery Brews.² Employing the discourse of romance, the lover promises his untiring service and enduring love. Curiously though, he admits to being “unaqweyntyd” with the lady to whom the letter is addressed.³ This admission makes his subsequent plea for mercy ring rather hollow: “And mastress I beseche yow, in easyng of this poore hert that somtyme was at my rewle, whyche now is at yours [...].”⁴

If this letter was indeed sent to Margery, then it eventually bore fruit, no matter how insincere it may strike us as being. The mothers of the two young people approved the match, which would unite two respectable Norfolk families. In fact, Dame Elizabeth Brews was so keen to have John Paston as her son-in-law that she entered into the courtly game herself. In February 1477, Margery’s mother sent John the following invitation to visit her family: “And cosyng, uppon Fryday is Sent Volentynges Day, and every brydde chesyth hym a make; and yf it lyke yowe to come one Thursday at nyght, and so purvey yowe,

¹ No 570, Vol II, p. 300.

² No 774, Vol III, p. 158.

³ No 774, Vol III, p. 159.

⁴ No 774, Vol III, p. 159.

that ye may abyde there tyll Monday, I trusty to God, that ye schall so speke to myn husband; and I schall prey that we schall bryng the mater to a conclysyon, &c.”¹ The scene is thus set for a weekend that, for a literary scholar, violates the decorum of romance by mixing love (Saint Valentine’s day) with business (the meeting with Margery’s father). How to explain this contradiction? In the letters exchanged between the Pastons and the Brews, we see that the discourse of love served to push the financial negotiations toward a conclusion. Although separate in terms of literary aesthetics, the two discourses are shown to be complementary in the business of contracting a marriage. Since the bargaining had stalled over questions of land and money, Margery’s mother worked to orchestrate an emotional engagement that would increase John’s impatience to agree on the terms and would finally make the settlement a point of honour, since the couple’s affection for each other had become public knowledge.²

The final letter that I want to look at here is the product of the most genuinely romantic liaison in the Paston family, in the sense that it was a secret relationship carried on against the wishes of the family between Margery Paston, daughter of Margaret and John, and the Pastons’ bailiff, Richard Calle. Only one of the couple’s letters survives, and, as we will see, this letter from Richard Calle to Margery Paston contains contradictory discourses. The mode of address is itself multiple: “Myn owne lady and mastres, and be for God very trewe wyff [...]”³ Margery is Richard Calle’s “lady and mistress” in a double sense, for he is both her lover and the family’s employee, a duality that is perfectly in keeping with courtly romance, where the knight is often a servant through feudal obligation and through love. But

¹ No 782, Vol III, p. 169.

² See the letter from Margaret Paston to Dame Elizabeth Brews, where Margaret tries to resume the negotiations that had apparently broken down. She urges a meeting to avoid the consequences of a rupture: “for yf yt dyd, yt were non honoure to neyther partyes, and in cheff to them in whom the defawte ys, consydering that it ys so ferre spokun” No 799, Vol III, p. 193.

³ No 609, Vol II, p. 350.

Richard's claim to call Margery his wife adds an intriguing legal and sacramental dimension to their relationship.

All that was required to solemnize a marriage in the fifteenth century was the verbal exchange of vows between the couple. Because they were certain never to have the consent of Margery's parents, the couple dispensed with the relatively lengthy and contentious process that Margery Brews and John Paston had to go through and instead appealed to God for recognition before announcing their intentions to the family. Hence the moral and spiritual discourse found in Richard Calle's love letter. The writer presents himself not only as the sorrowing lover ("I with herte full sorowefull recomaunde me unto you"¹), but also as the wronged husband ("for thys lyf that we lede nough is nowther plesur to Godde nor to the worlde, consederyng the gret bonde of matrymonye that is made be twix us"²). Indeed, the letter complains that the couple are kept apart and their letters intercepted. Nonetheless, despite the close watch that is being kept on Margery, Richard asks her: "I prey you lete no creatur se this letter. As sone as ye have redde it lete it be brent, for I wolde no man shulde se it in no wise [...]."³ This request for secrecy is perfectly in keeping with the rules of courtly love, but in claiming to be Margery's husband, Richard makes a counter-demand for openness in their relations. Contrary to what the letter states, I believe that it was not intended as a secret message but as an open warning to Margery's family who were expected to intercept it. Indeed, at one point in the letter Richard urges Margery to reveal the truth to her family: "I suppose, and ye telle hem sadly the trouthe, they wold not dampne ther soules for us; though I telle hem the trouthe they woll not be leve me as weele as they woll do you; and ther for, goode lady, at the reverence of Godde be pleyne to hem and telle the trouthe [...]."⁴ Statements like this seem to be addressed to the family as well as to Margery. The letter echoes clerical discourse in speaking of the dire

¹ Ibid.

² Ibid.

³ No 609, Vol II, p. 353.

⁴ No 609, Vol II, p. 352.

spiritual consequences of keeping the couple apart: “Alas, alas! goode lady, full litell remembre they what they doo that kepe us thus asunder; iij tymes in the yere ar they a cursid that lette matrymonye [...]”¹ But the curse laid on the Paston family is only valid insofar as they are aware of the couple’s marriage vows.

In revealing in no uncertain terms the legal and sacramental nature of his union with Margery, Richard addresses a request to the Pastons for social recognition. The very fact that the letter has survived suggests that the warning was received. The Pastons continued to contest the marriage, but at a hearing in ecclesiastical court, the Bishop of Norwich judged it to be valid. Margery went to live with her husband, and was shunned by her mother. Curiously, Richard Calle continued to work for the Paston family, a good bailiff apparently being of more value than an errant daughter.

When the Pastons employ the language of courtly love, they tend to hybridize it with other discourses. Readers who bring to the letters expectations shaped by medieval romance will either be disappointed, as Bennett suggested, or, they will have to readjust their “horizon of expectations” in keeping with the different epistolary genre that is constituted in extant fifteenth century letter collections. The exquisite character of courtly romance derives from its secret and private nature and its rigorous exclusion of social, financial and political concerns. Romance is the play world of the feudal nobility. Whereas canon law tried to incorporate passion into the social fabric through consensual marriage, courtly literature idealized it and separated it from ordinary life.

For the Pastons this discourse has lost its original value but has been made to take on a new one. The discourse of courtly love serves the Pastons in their quest to improve their social status. Margery Brews aspires to wifhood, Richard Calle wants to be acknowledged as a *bona fide* member of the Paston family, and John Paston wants to reassert his position as head of the household. Dominating the Paston correspondence is a bourgeois discourse centering on land, law and money, but it is nevertheless capable of appropriating other, older

¹ No 609, Vol II, p. 351.

forms of discourse to its own ends. The Paston correspondence shows the fifteenth century to be a period of transition in which the discourses that we recognise as medieval are still present and productive but are hybridized with other emerging discourses that are going to become dominant.