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Social Scripts and Emotional Communities Revealed in the Paston Letters

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10 June 2021

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Abstract

This project analyzes the Paston Letters to better understand the emotional communities of an English gentry family in the fifteenth century. The letters examined are exchanged among - John the elder, his two sons, John II and John III, his wife Margaret Paston and their daughter-in-law, Margery Brews Paston. The textual analysis uses historical and sociolinguistic methods, paying particular attention to the language of emotion, such as swear words, words of endearment, and words of expression. The project relies on Melissa Mohr, Geoffrey Hughes, Alexander Bergs, and Barbra Rosenwein. These letters reveal people's emotions and whether they maintained their emotional community by following a social script or deviated from it.

Key Words: Paston Letters—History, England, History—15th century, Swearing, English, Language—Social Aspects, History—Emotions, emotional community, social scripts

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I. Introduction

Growing up, I was told to act like a lady, cross my legs, don't burp, and don't swear. I realized as I got older that there were gender differences between men and women regarding speech. Men could do whatever they wanted while women had to stand aside and take up as little space possible. This became clear when I studied Marianne Wex, a German photographer.¹ Her work revolved around the observations of different body language between men and women. Men spread their legs and take up as much space as possible, where women take up as little horizontal space as possible. Wex's work inspired me to look at gender differences within society.

Inspiration came to me on a cold rainy day in Seattle. When talking to my best friend, he recommended I watch the show, *The History of Swear Words*, on Netflix.² So, I did what any other college student would do and sat on my couch and began to watch. The show was hosted by Nicolas Cage, featuring Melissa Mohr and the explanatory claims about swearing and the connotations behind them. The show then looked at the swear words through a historical, linguistic, and psychological perspective. That was my introduction to the historical context for words such as "fuck," "bitch," "shit," and many other words that I would rather not say.

I realized that swear words were more than just words, a black mark on a white page, a semiotic expression, etc. In medieval England, words are a conveyance to a world that we ordinarily are not available to because these people are dead. It is also who is affected by them, who can say them, and in what context, as seen by sociolinguist such as Alexander Bers, author

¹ "Marianne Wex (1937-2020)." <https://www.artforum.com/news/marianne-wex-1937-2020-84238>; October 17, 2020 at 11:50 am

² Ben Stoddard, producer, *History of Swear Words*. B17 Entertainment, Funny or Die, 2021. <https://www.netflix.com/title/81305757>

of *Social Networks and Historical Sociolinguistics: Studies in Morphosyntactic Variation in the Paston Letters (1421-1503)*.³ Bergs studies historical sociolinguistics, modern Scots, language change and prominently English historical linguistics. A closer look into the language of swear words provides insights to better understand to understand how swearing conveys emotions. Rather than focusing on a legal or political aspect of swearing, my project focuses on a more emotional connection on who letters mediate emotional connections and relationships. Melissa Mohr's book, *Holy Shit: The History of Swear Words*, ranges from the Roman period to the present day. Mohr, a linguist who talks about how swear words became taboo over the centuries, uses physiological, linguistic, and historical evidence to elaborate on her point of swear words in history. Mohr fails to mention the societal aspect of these words and how they influenced society.

I am interested in the people who wrote these letters, not the mechanics of the letters, so I turned to the Paston letters from fifteenth-century England. The Paston Letters make up a total of six volumes ranging from letters to the family, to the other gentry folk. There are a total of 1,048 individual letters. They give context for familial relations, both in the private and public sphere of life. Many of these letters were written either by or to John Paston, along to his sons John II, John III, or William. The Paston letters are currently being kept in the British Library and The National Archives (Kew, UK). Since the late medieval period many of these papers have been translated. I use Diane Watt's translation and edition of the Paston letters, and James Gairdner's transcription of the Paston letters.⁴ Through their editions I was able to see how language reflects

³ Alexander Bergs, *Social Networks and Historical Sociolinguistics: Studies in Morphosyntactic Variation in the Paston Letters (1421-1503)* (Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 2011).

⁴ James Gairdner, ed., *The Paston Letters* (New York, NY: AMS, 1973); and Diane Watt, ed., *The Paston Women: Selected Letters* (Woodbridge: Brewer, 2004).

an emotional world. Throughout the 1,048 letters written by the Paston family and their associates, over two-thirds of them were written by the women in the family.

For this paper I focus on two prominent women in the Paston family: Margaret Paston and her daughter-in-law Margery Brews Paston. Margaret, the head of household, was wife of Sir John Paston. Margery is the wife Margaret's son John Paston III, and little is known about her and her life before marriage. I focus on these two women because Margaret uses swear words in her letter writing to her sons and writes both through a secretary and through her own hand. This is important because swear words were not often used by men in the Paston letters. At this distance it is difficult to understand what people felt and said, however, we can get a glimpse of these through their letters. However, these are mediated texts, meaning they were words that were uttered, and written down either by a secretary or by hand, then edited translated, and transcribed through modern words.

This research studies unsayable words that were uttered by men and women that are often lost to us because we are not in conversation with us. For instance, unsayable words were not common within letters because of the mediated nature of a letters, or how they tended to omit and "pretty up" the words. Despite this and the use of secretaries to write these letters there are some words within the Paston letters that are not omitted. Through my research I found that women were the ones who swore the most in these letters. For my analysis, I use an intersectional lens looking at gender and class. Gender within the Paston letters is important because by looking at the greetings we can see the gendered difference in who is the dominant person in the relationship, versus who is subordinate. As well, we can tell the nature of the letters and whether the letter was written with disdain or love.

Regarding emotions, psychologists believe emotions to be products of hormones and physical and chemical structures. But socialization affects emotions. "Emotional communities are social groups, that have their own values, modes of feelings and ways to express those feelings."⁵ In letters, we can find emotions to determine what a person may have felt about the other person or the situation, but we only get a glimpse of the past and the past of emotions. Language then becomes a speech act. A speech act is a form of speaking that may refer to a specific situation.⁶ For instance, a speech act is an apology or when someone asks for permission. Through these speech acts we can maintain our social scripts within these letters. Social Scripts are the acts and interactions that people use to maintain a specific characteristic about them.

Social cues are more than the aspects of language that are not the words themselves. They are the speech act. The body language, the tone in which we speak are all important social cues that we use to determine how the other person is feeling and what they may be thinking.⁷ We cannot be certain of this in letters from the gentry in fifteenth century England. Using case studies, such as the Paston Letters helps us to unravel a word to give it a thicker description that can be from emotional letters to the use of medieval swear words. These letters also give us filtered words, since some letters were written by a secretary so I must infer to view the emotional descriptions.

⁵ Barbara Rosenwein, ed., *Anger's Past: The Social Uses of an Emotion in the Middle Ages*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 22.

⁶ Jodi O'Brien, *The Production of Reality: Essays and Readings on Social Interactions*, (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2011).

⁷ Darren K. LaScotte, "Strategies, Scaffolding, and Social Positioning in Interaction," *TESOL Journal* (2018), 262.

We do not physically have Margaret Paston to view as she paces back and forth angry at her son for leaving his brethren behind. Because of this we need to focus on the language behind her letters and infer for ourselves the emotions that she is feeling. Letter writing is a filtered way of looking at language, but by peeling back and seeing these emotions we can determine the relationships between mother and child, husband and wife, family member to friends. These new emotional findings help us discover new ways of knowing those who have lived before us, even if all we have is their letters.

II. Who Were the Pastons?

Being a gentry family meant having privilege. The Paston family is a well-connected family during the fifteenth century. Their origins can be dated back to the fourteenth century where they climbed up the social class ranks to become a part of the gentry after the bubonic plague. With their wealth, they built relationships giving them the privilege to both learn how to write and the privilege to use a secretary unless there are urgent matters.

Their fortunes were deeply intertwined with those of the English crown. They were also deeply connected with maritime trade, and rule of Gascony and ties with Low Countries formed the backdrop for their trading activities between the 1280s to the first decade of the fourteenth century.⁸ This had trading nearly double in cities like Yorkshire and Norfolk. Their main production was wool, and thanks to the commercialization of medieval England many of these towns flourished. This was until the bubonic plague hit Dorset County in 1348. The plague wiped out nearly all of the population of England. However, because of this other families were

⁸ Miri Rubin, *The Hollow Crown: A History of Britain in the Late Middle Ages* (London: Penguin, 2006), 40.

able to buy land for cheap. Once this happened many families were able to rise through the ranks and become a part of the gentry. Those in the gentry class were of good social position, who were next below the nobility. Many of these families held their places in the royal court.

The War of the Roses was fought between the descendants of Edward III, who was trying to claim the throne of England. Two different families fought for control of the land, the Lancasters and the Yorks. Essentially the War of the Roses is a series of short battles followed by the deposition of many kings. In all, the Lancasters ultimately lost with the crowning of Richard II, as king.⁹

The Pastons knew that, by doing your civic duty and following the law or turning those in who did not follow the law, a person was a good citizen. Law became the vehicle for advancement which almost every man and women took advantage of.¹⁰ Maintaining a good status was important for gentry families. The rise of the gentry was extremely important in medieval history and can be viewed by the letters of the Paston family.

The Paston family gained its social status through the family's eldest, Clement Paston. He was a figure of a self-made man from a poor background whose success founds a dynasty.¹¹ Due to the bubonic plague Clement was able to make a name for himself and his son, William, by saving and barrowing enough money to send, William I (1378-1444) to school and then become a lawyer. William made a name for himself and was able to work in law courts. William used his land privileges to befriend the other members of the local hierarchy, hence, when he died, much of his family was able to marry into other prominent households. John Senior (1421-

⁹ Michael Hicks, *The Wars of the Roses* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 13-20.

¹⁰ Rubin, *The Hollow Crown*, 299.

¹¹ Helen Castor, *Blood and Roses: The Paston Family in the Fifteenth Century* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004), 9.

1466) was son of William Paston. Once his father William passed away John I, was given opportunities to have fresh claims to his home and had many enemies. Along with enemies John I had allies, one being the Duke of Suffolk. Being of the gentry class John I had to deal with the ongoing of his father, making treaties and dealing with threats. Some of which, even effected his wife and children. In the end, John Senior died 1466 with seven children.

John II, the eldest son of John Paston I, little is known about John II, because John III seemed to be the favorite of the family. John II maintained a good relationship with his brothers and sisters, but ultimately had a falling out with his father in 1464 and was then banished from the household.¹² Little is known about John II due to his early death, of just thirty-seven. John Paston III (1444-1504), is the second son of John Senior, son of Margaret Paston (1421-1484). John III was one of the members who carried the family through difficult times. He was said to be a man of sound sense and fought at the battle of Stoke in 1487 and was knighted and given the status of sir.¹³ Despite this, John II and his brother John III were very close and wrote a great deal to each other. Even decided to save each other's letters. With this we can assume the two brothers shared a close bond with each other.

Margaret Paston (1421-1484) was from a good Norfolk family, the daughter of the Berneys of Reedham. She was an heiress and brought nine manors from Norfolk and Suffolk, into her marriage with John Senior. With great land comes great privilege, which ended up affecting Margaret's children. The land was split between her children but created difficulty between her sons. This ended up with multiple letters about disagreements between the family

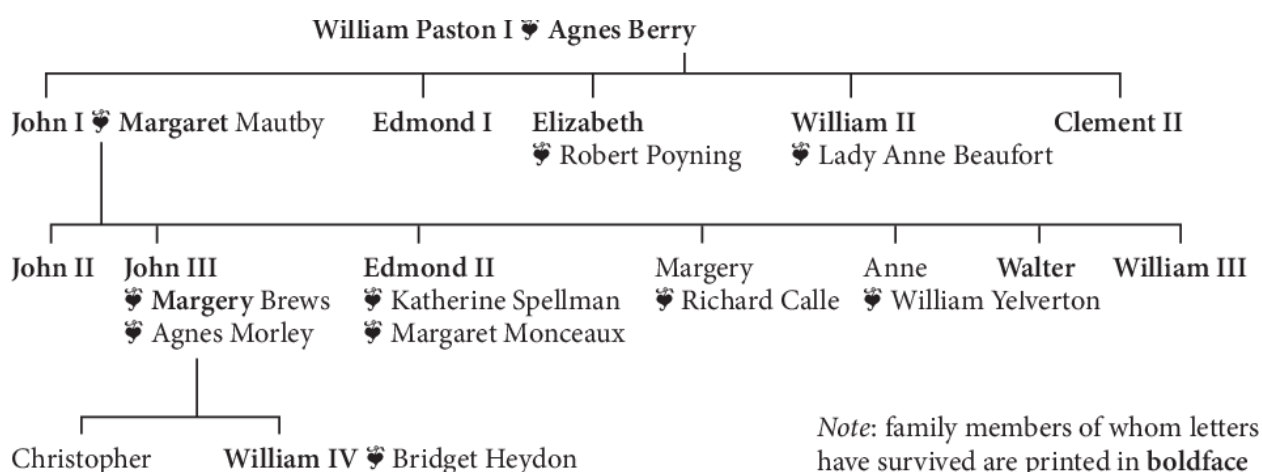
¹² Castor, *Blood and Roses*, 160.

¹³ Colin Richmond, *The Paston Family in the Fifteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1990), 265.

and ended in temporary banishment for some of her children. This is why so many letters were written and saved, because the family was apart.

Women in the family were typically the ones at home during times of crisis, such as during the War of the Roses.¹⁴ These women conducted business through the family, while the men were managing court or at war. Margaret is an excellent example of a woman who also managed a business. Most of her letters to her husband John I, are about business affairs and people coming and going from their home.

Figure 1. The Paston Family Genealogy Tree¹⁵



Biodata (excl. *Generation IV* William IV ?1479–1554)

Generation I

William I 1378–1444
Agnes ?1400–1479

Generation II

John I 1421–1466
Margaret ?1420–1484
Edmond I 1425–1449
Elizabeth ?1429–1488
William II 1436–1496
Clement II 1442–?1479

Generation III

John II 1442–1479
John III 1444–1504
Margery ?1455–1495
Edmond II ?1443–?1504
Walter ?1456–1479
William III ?1459–>1504

¹⁴ Richmond, *The Paston Family*, 262.

¹⁵ Juan M. Hernández-Campoy, Juan Camilo Conde-Silvestre, and Tamara García-Vidal, “Tracing Patterns of Intra-Speaker Variation in Early English Correspondence: A Change from Above in the Paston Letters,” *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia* 54, no. 1 (2019), 290.

III. Letter Writing

Letters served as both a means of communication and as legal documents. Depending on who the audience was two the letters were read out loud. Due to this, "the writer sometimes seems conscious of an audience beyond the immediate one."¹⁶ Although they were written to one individual person, these letters were purposely saved in case of legal disputes. Because these letters were saved for future legal disputes the writer had to make sure there was nothing that could criminalize them, hence the barrier between the letter and their original intent.

Letters are suited for self-expression and communication. In the Middle Ages letters were more accessible to women because of their "directness with which they convey ideas and emotions and because of the immediate availability of audience."¹⁷ This is reminiscent of Margaret because she often writes letters to her sons and husband, some of which have become quite urgent. With urgent letters these were more likely to be written by a secretary. When writing these letters, I analysis if Margaret had more of a say when writing letters, and if she had greater authority compared to speaking to someone in person. Due to the fact that she was a woman.

In the late Middle Ages, the identity of a woman writer was more sharply defined by her status as a religious celibate or a. secular wife and mother.¹⁸ However, it is unclear whether the author is talking about letter writing as something physically done by women or something written by a secretary. If handwritten, an autograph letter, would only be the result for the most

¹⁶ Karen Cherewatuk and Ulrike Wiethaus, "Introduction: Women Writing Letters in the Middle Ages," in Karen Cherewatuk and Ulrike Wiethaus, eds, *Dear Sister: Medieval Women and the Epistolary Genre* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 4.

¹⁷ Cherewatuk and Wiethaus, "Introduction," *Dear Sister*, 1.

¹⁸ Cherewatuk and Wiethaus, "Introduction," *Dear Sister*, 8.

elite of women, because they would need to know how to write. This is the case with the Paston family.

Medieval women have power through letter writing emotional and family ties. These letters are private but also public because there is a mediated person. "Secular women writers always appear to have had access to informal routes of power through emotional or familial ties, even if the direct exercise of political power was barred."¹⁹ This direct tie to power through letter writing explains why there are more letters from women than men in the Paston family.

Judith Bennett gives a method on how to read the Paston Letters, specifically with the first valentine letter on February 1477 between Margery Brews and John Paston III. The letter from Margery to John is, "the first reference in English to the celebration of the feast day of St. Valentine as a romantic day for lovers."²⁰ The Paston letters are an important artifact for historians because there is so much context within the letter that we can know about gentry women in the late medieval period.

Letter writing has its own structure. For women in the late medieval period many letters from women "were written a style appropriate to their function as household correspondence."²¹ This shows that women dominated the domestic sphere, thus defining her status as a religious celibate or a secular wife and mother. The different styles women wrote in were the rhetoric of service, and plain style. We can determine that the Paston women knew about these styles by how these women devise their letters.

¹⁹ Cherewatuk and Wiethaus, "Introduction," *Dear Sister*, 11.

²⁰ Judith M. Bennett, "Primary Sources: The First Valentine," *Medieval Europe Online*, <http://www.medievaleuropeonline.com/Paston%20Valentine.html>.

²¹ Cherewatuk and Wiethaus, "Introduction," *Dear Sister*, 124; see also p. 131

he letters exchanged among the Paston friends and family document legal records, local and national and personal news, and family matters. The letters are one of the largest surviving collections of the fifteenth century English correspondence.²² The Paston letters give context to the late medieval period and the emotional intent of letters and letter writing. Due to the high status of the family many were likely to be written by a male secretary. However, there were instances where some letters were written by the hand of the sender. These letters were saved due to their evaluability in potential lawsuits of land and money. The family themselves had risen from peasantry to aristocracy in only a few generations.

Historians speculate that the Paston letters were written by a secretary, which complicates the interpretation of each letter.²³ The Paston letters follow a similar structure. These letters maintain the same structure throughout. The way these letters were created is a product of their generation and how women were taught to write and specifically write letters. Although both men and women follow the same letter structure, women are in a muted group "given asymmetrical power relations, women were at a disadvantage in formulating their ideas, concerns and experiences because rules for the public were controlled by the dominant group"²⁴

The letters are written in a plain rhetorical style, typically fitting for general household correspondence. These letters use common speech and could be described as "colloquial, bearing a striking resemblance to, and having its origins in the spoken idiom"²⁵ This has the potential to be a dramatic prose or letters. Margaret Paston is one of the few family members that is lively in

²² Richmond, *The Paston Family*, 290.

²³ Watt, ed, *The Paston Women*, 111.

²⁴ Cherewatuk and Wiethaus, "Introduction," *Dear Sister*, 5–6.

²⁵ Diane Watt, "No Writing for Writing's Sake: The Language of Service and Household Rhetoric in the Letters of the Paston Women," in Cherewatuk and Wiethaus, *Dear Sister*, 122–138, esp. 131.

her letters, whether that be with detail or swearing. Although women writers are typically defined by their status as a religious celibate or a secular wife and mother, Margaret's letters are also identified by the words she uses in them.

When looking at the salutations of the different Paston letters, the women have similarities when it comes to writing.²⁶ Looking at Margery and Margaret Paston's salutations both use the word honorable. Margery, with very honorable master, and Margaret with honorable husband.²⁷ This would be both women using the rhetoric of service. "Margaret's letters show her understanding of law and court politics and depict her as a formidable player in the social and political affairs of the family".²⁸ Having this understanding is important for women in letter writing. The formality of these letters is generally found in the Paston men and women alike. Looking at the salutations of these letters written by both Margaret Paston and Margery Paston we can see how these women were treated by their husbands, and how women maintain the social norms of medieval society. These letters include three major emotional communities: spousal, maternal, and heterosexual amorous relationships. After the salutation the letter contains its purpose. The body and the content are of secondary importance to me.

The closing of letters entails the ending remarks of a letter. This can range from questions on asking what to do, or a way to sum up the meaning of the letter. Occasionally, as we will see in Margaret's letters whether that be regarding a different topic or simply stating she wrote in haste. Closing remarks are often what people forgot about in letter, or matters that are of grave importance.

²⁶ Cherewatuk and Wiethaus, "Introduction," *Dear Sister*, 5.

²⁷ Gairdner, ed., *The Paston Letters*, 256.

²⁸ Cherewatuk and Wiethaus, "Introduction," *Dear Sister*, 2.

Once the letter has been closed the sender then signs their name or initials. My theory is that if the full name of the sender is signed then the letter was intentionally written by a secretary. Whereas, if the letter was signed with the initials, then it was written by the sender themselves. For example, Margaret Paston wrote her most urgent letters "in haste" and often signed her initials, M.P. Based on the importance of the letters we can infer that Margaret wrote these on her own accord. Despite these assumptions there is no way to know unless we look at the Paston letters.

Dating of the letters is problematic some can contain internal dates, such as Valentine's Day. Some refer to an event, but often we do not know. I am relying on archival notations and the editing of Gairdner and Watt as a guide for the dating of the letters.

IV. Historiography

Scholarly Work on the Paston Family

Most scholars who look at the Paston letters through either a family context, for example, Diane Watt and Colin Richmond, Miri Rubin, or for religious context, Joel Rosenthal.²⁹ look at the letters through the context of language. Rubin does an excellent job at describing Paston daily life. In *Margaret Paston's Piety*, Joel Rosenthal looks at Margaret Paston's religious motives behind her letters and explains her piety by looking at her letters. Margaret has a religious expression within her letters to other than her family members. Margaret speaks in these letters about her religion as if she is speaking to the public. She writes to priests about how she has kept God in her heart and blessed her family. But why does she feel the need to explain her piety in private letters. Could it be to maintain yet another emotional community between

²⁹ Joel Rosenthal, *Margaret Paston's Piety* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

teacher and student? Margaret also is involved with the cult of the saints. Her calendar is important in her letters, where she dates many of her letters by the ecclesiastical calendar. This gives us a database that points to various favorites, saints chosen from many different categories of Christian history.³⁰ By using an ecclesiastical calendar we can see what faith Margaret is and also see what she considers important to her faith.

Innovative research by Melissa Mohr, a literature scholar, forms the heart of my paper. Her work, which I discuss in greater detail later looks at the history of swear words, their meaning, and how those words have changed over time. Mohr is a literature scholar, who focuses on history of English known for her work, *Holy Shit: The History of Swear Words*, examines popular swear words to identify how they have changed throughout history. Oaths that invoke God could be seen to damage a smooth-running society and even injure God himself. The Catholic church, as a religion, worships the death of Christ during their ceremonies and often has crucifixions and crosses as their symbol of their religion. This transgression of a theological tenet had two powerful implications. First, the violation of a norm disrupted society, but then the community's reactions had the power to restore society. The crucifixion brings people together under the same religion to worship the Catholic church; however, by saying anything that is against Christ or personifying him disrupts the flow of the community.³¹ Swear words may not have been said every day. In the Middle Ages, a person who swore was punished by friends and neighbors in a way that could result in banishment.

The Paston letters are not only used for social linguistics but also religious allegories. Kirkland C. Jones's article, look at the elements of proverbs and proverbial saying in these letters

³⁰ Rosenthal, *Margaret Paston's Piety*, 15.

³¹ Melissa Mohr, *Holy Shit: A Brief History of Swearing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 91.

because they have been overlooked for years.³² Jones found that the use of proverbs is used in various letters which has heavy biblical content.

Phrases such as "for God's sake" have a powerful meaning in late medieval England. By looking at these phrases I determine whether the sender of the letter is using a particular emotion, or if they are using it to break or maintain a social script and emotional community. While Jones focus on allegories, I focus on swear words and the use of medieval swear words in context of letters. While reading Jones's work, I found no mention of "for God's sake"

For example, in the letters, a line here and there to help us unravel her dealings with a priest of a chaplain or about attending church³³ Margaret speaks in these letters about her religion as if she was speaking to the public. She writes to priests about how she has kept God in her heart and blessed her family. But why does she need to go the extra mile if this is a private letter. Could it be to maintain yet another emotional community between teacher and student? We do not know unless we look at those letters in a closer depth. Margaret also is involved with saints. Her calendar is important in her letters, where she dates many of her letters by the ecclesiastical calendar. This gives us a database that points to various favorites, saints chosen from many different categories of Christian history.³⁴ By using an ecclesiastical calendar we can see what faith Margaret is and see what she considers important to her faith. It seems that these letters are widely used among historical linguists. I look at them as a historian through a

³² Kirkland C. Jones, "Biblical Sayings, Paraphrases, and Allusions in 'The Paston Letters,'" *CLA Journal* 20, no. 2 (1976), 155-163; quoted in *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800*, ed. James E. Person, Jr. (Detroit: Gale, 1992); <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/H1420009889/LitRC?u=seat38459&sid=LitRC&xid=42404fd6>; accessed May 16, 2021.

³³ Rosenthal, *Margaret Paston's Piety*, 15.

³⁴ Rosenthal, *Margaret Paston's Piety*, 15.

sociolinguists point of view. I look at these letters through a sociologist perspective and look at how the words help us better understand society.³⁵

Juan Hernández-Campoy, Juan Camilo Conde-Silvestre, and Tamara García-Vidal study research based on historical correspondence, particularly researching language change and sociolinguistics.³⁶ The chronological diffusion of change that the authors study does not necessarily look at the individual Pastons. The closest remark the author makes is about language and how language changed within society. However, there is no mentioned about language and emotions. The closes remark the authors make about language and how language change but without mentioning language and emotions. Hernández-Campoy, Conde-Silvestre, and García-Vidal graph of the different men in the family and how many letters they wrote, the number of words used, and how much one word was used throughout the letters. It is important to note that the authors only study the men in the family. They are not interested in women, and I am. There is little mention about the women, and no mathematical variables about the women of the family.

With the help of the Paston letters we are able to not only understand the gentry class, but also the royal court. Rubin also uses the Paston letters to focus on law and legal training, and the social status of the members of the gentry through single generations.

History of Emotions

We live in an emotional word and tend to know what they are. However, these emotions have a history. Emotions come out of conflict, love, within families and loved ones. Barbra Rosenwein is the primary theorist that can help us understand the history of emotions. She begins

³⁵ Valerie Creelman, "Margaret Paston's Use of Captенesse." *Notes and Queries*, 275.

³⁶ Hernández-Campoy, Conde-Silvestre, García Vidal, "Tracing Patterns," 287-314.

her work by looking at Cicero and emotions. Cicero drew on traditions when he wrote on emotions for the Latinate audience of the Roman West. After time his writing was inherited and eventually read through a Christian lens. The Latin vocabulary was ratified by Augustine, and thus through Cicero's emotional writings and Augustine's vocabulary emotions were named.

Emotions may be different among cultural groups. In an Anthropologist state of mind there is an idea of pancultural emotions. "The way in which feelings are organized in different cultures undermines any idea that feelings are common to humanity, even that feelings unite us as humans"³⁷ Emotions are expressive, yet objective but through societies standards and devaluation of emotions. Emotions are contained within the body and over time they become visible. This can happen physically, through verbal and non-verbal signs, or in the shape of art"³⁸ When this happens people try to constrain themselves when they are within an emotional community, until they are along or cannot hold it any longer. This leads to a variety of emotions.

Emotions are very objective, in that the way that they are interpreted by people and what each emotion means is the same everywhere. The history of emotions is about what people felt and how they created the emotions.³⁹ I'm still intrigued on how these names for emotions were coined. Emotions remain the same throughout time, but their objects alter. For instance, with the objects of fear. What is there a fear of? In the Middle Ages there was a fear of the bubonic plague. As circumstances changes so does our object of fear.

Emotional communities play an important part in letters. Emotional communities are "groups—usually but not always social groups—that have their own particular values, modes of

³⁷ Jan Plamper, *The History of Emotions: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 77.

³⁸ Plamper, *The History of Emotions*, 67.

³⁹ Plamper, *The History of Emotions*, 67.

feeling, and way to express those feelings.”⁴⁰ The emotional groups that I will be focusing is mother and child relationships, husband and wife relationships, and romantic relationships between male and female lovers. Each group has different values that are attributed to whether the emotional community stays intact. By looking at these communities we can interpret what these letters were sent, and why specific words and salutations were said. By looking at this evidence we can ultimately look at people’s social scripts within society.

One such emotional community is the bond between Margery Brews Paston and John III Paston, a married gentry couple in Norfolk. Margery expresses a range of emotion in her letters to John. For instance, she turns away from the advice of her family and friends and agrees that she still wants to marry John. In the emotional community that they share, Margery interprets John’s feelings to be love and in doing so she interprets her own feelings to be love and wishes to be with him forever. “We must interpret even our own feelings according to our own emotional communities’ norms and vocabularies”⁴¹ By interpreting the feelings of a letter we must also understand the vocabulary used in medieval Britain. When it comes to letters regarding Margery Brews Paston there are no oaths or swearing. However, when looking at letters from Margaret Paston one can see her power by being a mother and using oaths.

Women did still express power. Women must have felt power when men were gone off at court or at war. The Paston women were the people taking care of the household while everyone was gone. There was no one to socially control their emotions when writing these letters. Since the secretary was most likely below the women’s class there was nothing, he could do.

⁴⁰ Barbara Rosenwein, *Generations of Feeling: A History of Emotions, 600-1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 3.

⁴¹ Rosenwein, *Generations of Feeling*, 5.

Emotional communities within these letters show the close relationship with personal contact, so much so that women were allowed to swear and there was nothing a man could do about it.

Some emotions are natural and normal while others are seen as outlaws, something that is to be repressed. The emotions that are outlawed are similar today and they were in medieval England. Emotions of anger, frustration and overall, what we concern to be negative is what was forbidden to women. Women needed to control their emotions so there were no outbursts. However, we can see that this was not controlled in letters. It is possible that women were able to get away with presenting these negative emotions in letters because there was no one to tell them no. Which shows the emotional communities can be broken or expressive.

Sociolinguistics: Social Scripts, Norms, and Cues

Alexander Bergs, a social linguist who studies the constructions and language change on English historical linguistics, looks at the Paston letters and the development of language change through the 83 years. While Bergs is looking at the generalization of the Paston letters and looks at the individual words, I take a more personal look at the Paston family, the mechanics of letter writing, and the salutation and closings of the letter, rather than specific words such as Bergs does.⁴²

Geoffrey Hughes, another important person in my research is a professor of History of the English Language, who also looks at swearing, but through a social historian's lens. He uses history, social sciences, and linguistics to determine to determine the historical use of specific words within these letters and look at the systemic relationships of the family and other people in late medieval England. The systemic relationships are similar to what I am looking for act in

⁴² Bergs, *Social Networks*, 120.

terms of social scripts and social cues. These systemic relationships play into the social scripts and cues that are put upon people to act a specific way. While Bergs uses network theory the relation to systemic relationships, I use more qualitative analysis. I look at how the Paston family might have felt when writing these letters by looking at the wording in their letters and relating that to a definitive emotion. Thus, by doing so I can determine what social script the sender is sticking to and if they succeed in maintain that emotional relationship with the other person. While I look at through a sociolinguistic view, I also use language theory as well as emotional theory.

Language was an important aspect in medieval society, whether that be through swearing or taking oaths. Geoffrey Hughes looks at a large span of history in particular a few decades. Hughes looks at the royal family of Henry VIII and how much he swore.⁴³ Hughes also looks at swearing not only in England, but in other countries such as the Americas and Australia. Within these places each has different words that are negative, and a rebirth of swearing due to imperialism and xenophobia. He focuses on swear words through history by using a socio-historical lens. He argues that language, "tended to be very powerful at primitive stages, taboos have traditionally grown up around offensive usages"⁴⁴ Hughes, never mentions the Paston letters or the Paston family, but these taboos, are seen in two specific letters written by Margaret Paston. Hughes discusses legal proceedings and the formality of making oaths, which is the most common type of swear in the Paston Letters. Although I do not look at taking oaths, I find it important to mention that oaths and swearing are two different definitions which will also be mentioned later.

⁴³ Geoffrey Hughes, *Swearing: A Social History of Foul Language, Oaths and Profanity in English* (London: Penguin, 1998), 11.

⁴⁴ Hughes, *Swearing*, 5.

Hughes focuses on swear with his long list of euphemisms for other words, he has an entire list of euphemisms for God in use from the 1350s to 1909. Euphemisms are flexible among adjectives where certain swear words and phrases have formulas that are interchangeable. "For Christ's sake" and "for fuck's sake" can be interchangeable. Both have the same negative meaning, but one is more religious than the other. In two of the Paston Letters Margaret swears using "for God's sake" when talking to her sons.

Melissa Mohr has been of great influence for this research. When it came to words dealing with excrements, such as *shit*, people in the medieval ages were often unconcerned since back then, nothing was private. However, biblical swearing, such as referring to oaths by God could be seen to, "wreak havoc with the smooth running of society and even to injure God himself."⁴⁵ Using swear words was not something that was done every day, like it may be today. In the medieval ages, swearing was punishable by a population that could result in ostracization.

Mohr's work is an entire history of English swear words, beginning in Rome, over two thousand years ago and continues her work to today. She approaches the topic of swearing through a physiological, linguistic, and historical lens. We both look at swear words through a linguistic and historical lens. However, she does not look at the Paston letters whatsoever. Instead, Mohr looks at sources such as the *Canterbury Tales*. She also looks at holy exploitative and oaths, defining the two and explaining how the two uses have changed throughout history.

Much of Mohr's definitions on oaths, and swearing Because Mohr is looking at a large range of time with her work, she is very broad and focuses more on events rather than people. I look at swear words of individual people rather than on a larger societal scale. Although Mohr

⁴⁵ Mohr, *Holy Shit*, 91.

has extensive research, she does not look at emotional communities and social scripts within gentry families.

V. Elaborate Eavesdropping as a Methodology

When looking at the Paston Letters, I focus on specific swear words, epithets, terms of endearment, and emotional formalities. I examine the introduction of the letters, to whom they are addressed and how the forms of address change over the years. I defined the words that were used in medieval context. Then looked at how the words operate in a sociolinguist setting. Finally, I look at the salutations and closings. By looking at these greetings I can analyze and interpret the emotions that the sender felt towards the other person. I can infer their emotional attachment, through a meta reading of the letters. It's interesting because no one else has looked at this topic on the Paston letters.

Definitions

We all know what "fuck" means but do you know what "By Gods Bones" means? It's not about God's bones, but an oath expression anger. Linguists tell us, for example, the verb "to swear" means both to take an oath and to take God's name in vain. Swear is often the word used today to express a negative emotion, such as saying, "fuck" and is used typically as a noun, verb, adjective, adverb, and conjunction, but swearing is also an act that can prove one's honesty or innocence, to show hatred or love for someone. A speech act is a motion typically done with the

body, whether that be a kiss or someone giving you the middle finger. A speech act is the difference between saying and writing a swear word.⁴⁶

Swearing is an expletive. It is, "to make a solemn declaration, solemnly or profanely." To use swear as a verb has negative connotations. In medieval society it can be related with an appeal to God or a sacred object, hence, "by God's bones. The first mention of an oath in the early medieval epic, *Beowulf*, which says all "God's hate it when people break oaths". Like "swear," an "oath," is a formal declaration invoking God as a witness to the truth of a statement. The word oath has a legal meaning behind it because it automatically invokes God or a secular being, to get witness to a promise that you are making. An oath is typically made to a family member, a legal or government official, or someone of the royal court. "An oath was primarily used with promises people would make, whether that be a knight to a king, or a peasant to a landowner, or in a legal context. Swearing an oath was an important part of medieval society. To swear an oath kept society together and created order and provided consequences for those who broke their oaths. Breaking an oath could end in being shunned and even death. Swear and oath, can be used interchangeably If an oath or swear is broken then either the community around the person or God will be the one to punish.

Vain swearing, on the other hand, was the negative swearing, which trivializes God's name. Vain swearing was often used to insult someone and was added as an intensifier. The use of these words and phrases often shocked and offended people when they heard it, which seemed to be the point of them.⁴⁷ Whether these words were used to judge, used for life, death or simply

⁴⁶ Jonathan L. Cohen, "Searle's Theory of Speech Acts," *The Philosophical Review* 79, no. 4 (1970): 545-57; accessed June 8, 2021. doi:10.2307/2184294.

⁴⁷ Geoffrey Hughes, *Encyclopedia of Swearing: The Social History of Oaths, Profanity, Foul Language, and Ethnic Slurs in the English-Speaking World* (Armonk: Taylor and Francis, 2015), 205.

while playing cards, God was the one who had to judge a person, not the society. It seems that with vain swearing, despite the fact that many people may dislike it, and think negatively of you, occasionally they were not able to do anything being God was the one who was supposed to judge you. For saying anything like, "by Gods bones", swearing is has the power to touch God's physical body. There are hundreds of ways in which we can see these phrases in action in medieval literature, from Chaucer to the Cely and Paston Letters.

Blasphemy is risk because it has a more religious connotation. As a noun, blasphemy means, "profane speaking of God or sacred things; impious irreverence."⁴⁸ It is the worst form of swearing in medieval England. It meant that one was slandering God's name, which was a sin. Hence, therefore saying phrases such as "by Gods bones or "Gods nails" giving God physical human attributes. It is a high form of blasphemy.

Historical Linguistics

Nowadays, when we say words like *fuck*, and *shit*, people are taken aback and offended. In medieval England, swearing altered throughout the period. In the early medieval ages, even the most minor of vulgarities such as, "by my faith," were considered bad to say; however, over time they went from mild phrases to profane. By the early modern period, saying anything relating to Christ as a suffering entity was highly forbidden. This in turn meant that if people were to say, "by Gods bones" or "By Gods corpse," they would be rightly punished. These forms of heresy were a danger that could only be defeated by vast public involvement, when it came to detection. Meaning, all the community would look for people who swore. If people were found,

⁴⁸ Mohr, *Holy Shit*, 124.

those who turned them in would be considered a lawful neighbor. By turning in someone for heresy and swearing, you contribute to the stability of society and the church.

The church's response against words denoting God in any way, shape, or form, and phrases like "God's Wounds" were often paradoxical. Alluding to the death of Christ was of the most profane in medieval society. "Medieval condemnation of such swearing was that such blasphemous oaths were regarded as a renewal of the crucifixion."⁴⁹ Saying anything that had to do with the renewal of the crucifixion was seen as grotesque. Despite this, Catholic theology, as a religion, worships the death of Christ during ceremonies and often has crucifixions and crosses as their symbol of their religion. This both disrupts and brings society together. The crucifixion brings people together under the same religion to worship the Catholic church; however, by saying anything that is against Christ or personifying him disrupts the flow of the community.

When it came to oath swearing, or using God in a negative term, there were two kinds, each having different effects. The first, sincere swearing, which is more of a promise to God. Sincere swearing was extremely important in medieval culture and society. Swearing is taking an oath not just to God but also to other people. Making these sincere oaths meant that if you were to break them, it angered society, but they were not the punishers. God did the enforcing. "If you broke your oath God was supposed to punish you, either directly, by visiting a plague upon your children or livestock, or indirectly."⁵⁰ These were harsh punishments, that only affected the individual person; thus, there was no immediate effect on society.

⁴⁹ Mohr, *Holy Shit*, 91.

⁵⁰ Hughes, *Swearing*, 56.

VI. Analysis of Three Emotional Communities: Spousal, Maternal, Romantic

Emotional communities typically create rules for themselves on how to be and act, and by looking at history and how people act within that society. Following certain rules, we can determine what structure people are a part of and acting in. Some examples would be maternal: mother to son, romantic, as in lovers, and spousal, or husband to wife. We can hear their individual voices with the immediacy of an overheard conversation.⁵¹ We can study their words and interpret what the Paston family says to one another, and what is not said to other members of the family. Through that we can become eavesdroppers and interpret their meaning. These letters are not chronologically places, but rather thematically by emotional community.

Margaret Paston: Wife to Husband

In July 1465, Margaret Paston wrote his letter to John I, encouraging him to vanquish his enemies.⁵² His enemies being the Yorks, who fought against the Lancastrians in the War of the Roses. Due to the Pastons status they had to fight in the war, including John Paston I. In Margaret's salutation she claimed John I to be her "most honorable husband." This is a clear indication that John is worthy of being honored and follows her social script.⁵³ Above all others his honor reflects on her as his wife. By claiming that John I is entitled to honor and respect, she establishes and keeps her role in the emotional community of matrimony. By being a good wife and having that positive salutation with a compliment, she maintains herself as John's supportive wife, being supportive.

⁵¹ Castor, *Blood and Roses*, 7.

⁵² Watt, ed., *The Paston Women*, 84.

⁵³ Gairdner, ed., *The Paston Letters*, 166.

By giving this encouragement to John, Margaret is holding herself accountable for his success and counts herself as one of the reasons for his triumphs. She continues to maintain her role as the wife of John, who will be there for her husband. Margaret also maintains the social script of Catholic women by continuously stating that she's praying for her husband's safety and well-being. She concludes, she "commend[s] myself to you and pray you with all my heart out of reverence of God that you be of good comfort, and trust in the in the grace of God that you shall overcome your enemies and your troublesome business completely."⁵⁴ She is clearly solidifying her role as the women of God, and a respectful wife. When signing off, she signed with her initials, and states that the letter was "written in haste on Saturday." This signature is not unnatural for Margaret, she seems to be in haste a lot. Because Margaret wrote this by hand, we can infer that this is her authentic language not filtered through a secretary.

Margaret is attentive to legal actions and asked for directions and what to do. During the War of the Roses, she was to stay home and protect the household. Particularly from unwanted guest. She asked for permission from her husband before doing something, for example in October of 1465 Margaret, frustrated at guest who would not leave, wrote to her husband saying: "therefore I would like a writ sent on to remove him if you think it should be done," This letter has a legal tone to it because writ is a legal document.⁵⁵ A write is a legal document that subjects someone to do something. Margaret was subject to the laws of coverture, meant that husband, she was "covered" by her husband. Therefore, she could not initiate legal proceedings on her own. In these letters Margaret was asking for permission because her husband was her lord and had legal authority where she did not.

⁵⁴ Watt, ed., *The Paston Women*, 84.

⁵⁵ Watt, ed., *The Paston Women*, 88.

Margaret still knew what to do regardless of her husband's directions. For instance, Margaret owned three estates before her marriage to John. She knew how to run a household.⁵⁶ In the same letter to John I, Margaret also continues to go the lawful Christian wife route and says, "out of respect for God, if any honourable and profitable way can be found in your business to free us from our trouble and great costs and expenses that we have . . . do not neglect it."⁵⁷ It is difficult whether to discern Margaret was a woman who needed permission and direction from her husband. However, due to Margaret's background we can infer that she is the strong women that she is. Margaret can maintain a household without her husband but knows her place when it comes to legal matters. Margaret is one of the many women in the family who were the social and emotional glue to the family.

Margaret, later in 1465, had accusations made against her and her colleagues making her frustrated and ultimately afraid for her life. This letter commemorates her court hearing for her husband who has been imprisoned. He was imprisoned for the third time due to trespass, outlawed, meaning he was not protected by the law. On August 7, 1465, Margaret once again writes to her husband with these frustrations. With her signature salutation, she writes in haste to her husband and commends herself to her husband.⁵⁸ "She commends and respects her husband on all his hard work".⁵⁹ However, Margaret had a hard time finding a man to claim John's right of possession. This problem is due to two reasons. One, because of the accusations made against Margaret, makes people trust her less in her community. Trust is an important factor of late medieval communities, and without some people had a difficult time in society.

⁵⁶ Barbara Harris, *English Aristocratic Women, 1450-1550: Marriage and Family, Property and Careers*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 10.

⁵⁷ Watt, ed., *The Paston Women*, 90.

⁵⁸ Watt, ed., *The Paston Women*, 81.

⁵⁹ Watt, ed., *The Paston Women*, 81.

Another reason why Margaret had a difficult time finding someone to help her and her husband is because she is a woman and subject to coverture.⁶⁰ This was a big obstacle for women, especially Margaret, since her husband was in jail. Throughout the letter Margaret explains who will be helping in this case and how she was advised. She ends the letter asking what else she should do and prays that God will protect her husband.⁶¹ Thus, maintaining that ideal of a religious wife.

On May 20, 1465, Margaret sent a letter to her husband John, informing him of the recent developments of their properties, as well as her solutions to those problems. She begins the letter by writing, "'to my most honorable husband John Paston, may this be delivered in haste.'"⁶² Margaret's letters have a similar salutation throughout all of her letters. Margaret must remind John that he is honorable, and her honorable husband, by default Margaret too, is honorable.

Margaret's dilemma as mentioned in the letter was about her tenants refusing to pay for their livestock. Her reply, taking everyone's cattle until they paid. This is not something that just any owner would think of. This tactic required skill and years of understanding people and their reactions. Margaret knew exactly what she was doing. She was the one that took charge of this problem, and untimely solved it. Although Margaret typically writes to John whenever there is a problem, this is one of the few times that she solved it by herself. By doing this and solving the problem successfully she was able to maintain her status as a lady within a feudal society, and as an honorable wife to John.

The letter ends with Margaret explaining that she cannot write about all the other business because she does not have time. Then, ends the letter with, "may the blessed trinity

⁶⁰ Rubin, *Hollow Crown*, 163.

⁶¹ Watt, ed., *The Paston Women*, 82.

⁶² Watt, ed., *The Paston Women*, 76.

protect you, by yours, M.P.”⁶³ time is a delicate thing; the fact that Margaret decided to write to John about her own triumphs rather than regular business explains Margaret’s ability to control the estates without her husband, thus changing the emotional community between her and her husband. Margaret is reassuring her husband that she has everything under control, because there is no other man present.

Compared to Margaret’s popular salutation she changes it on August 18, 1465 from honorable husband to honorable master.⁶⁴ This abrupt change is due to the nature of the letter. This letter is Margaret updating John I on current affairs, deaths, and her concerns for not answering her last letter. By using the word master, she gives control over to John, in hopes that framing herself as subordinate, John would finally answer her letter and ask for advice. Margaret then begins the actual letter by repeating “most honorable husband,” and gave John even more praise for being her husband.

An entire section of his letter is about much Margaret respects God, and how she wishes God can do something to bring her husband home.⁶⁵ She does not take an oath to God; she simply wishes that she would have favor with her family and bring her husband home. The way that Margaret tries to further convince John to come home is by stating that it would be most profitable for John.⁶⁶ She once again uses her knowledge about her husband and says that it would benefit John, himself to come home, and never mentions her own opinion. By doing this Margaret maintains a part in her emotional community with John. Margaret does not sound like a

⁶³ Watt, ed., *Paston Women*, 77.

⁶⁴ Watt, ed., *Paston Women*, 83.

⁶⁵ Rosenthal, *Margaret Paston's Piety*, 23.

⁶⁶ Watt, ed., *Paston Women*, 84.

wife desperate to have her husband near, but a woman whose best interest is with her husband and his company.

After her closing statement Margret has a postscript about her cousin and John's mother, because she believed it to be important. A man would want to know about his mother's business. And as a fellow mother, Margaret understands how sons work. With her closing signature she uses "By yours, M.P" to show that Margaret is still one with John, she is still his wife. In using her initials, we can see that Margaret wrote this letter herself, hence the tangents and attachment to her husband.

Having visited her husband in prison Margaret writes a letter to inform him of another successful attempt to prevent rivalry violence to take place. This was on September 27, 1465. The interesting thing about this letter is that there is no address or signature. Therefore, it's more difficult to determine whether Margaret wrote this letter herself or with a male secretary. However, based on the salutation of the letter I am inferring that this was written by a male secretary. The letter beings, "Most honorable husband, I commend myself to you, wishing with all my heart to hear of your health and happiness, thanking you for the warm welcome you gave me."⁶⁷ Reading this salutation starts off to sound like Margaret but is simply a lot of thanks to her husband, which Margaret has not done in another of the other letters I have analyzed.

Margaret Paston: Mother to Sons

On May 23, 1475, Margret was worried about her younger son in battle, so she sent a letter to her eldest son John II asking how her family is doing. This was still during the War of the Roses, and could have been battles in Barnet. She began the letter, "to Sir John Paston", for

⁶⁷ Watt, ed., *The Paston Women*, 85.

at this moment in time John II had been knighted. She greets him warmly and gives him a blessing. Margaret then acts surprised that she has not heard anything from her son. She is acting like a concerned mother because she was concerned, and she wanted to keep that emotional relationship with her son.

Margaret is the only person in the Paston family who swears in her letters. Most of the words have been written to her eldest son John II. In this letter she states, "for the love of God, if your brothers go overseas advise them as you think best for their safety."⁶⁸ This is the second time that Margaret has sworn to her son, because she is a concerned mother whose sons are off to war. It makes sense to have a great worry if all your sons are going off to war. As well, the way this is stated and from what we know about motherhood in the late medieval period, Margaret understands that some of her sons are but young soldiers who do not know the way of the battlefield. The way this letter is ended is engaging. Margaret does not sign her name. Instead, she just states, "by your mother."⁶⁹ By doing so it shows how concerned Margaret was for her children. She also maintained her emotional community with her children by caring about them. So much so that she swore.

Through anger Margaret was able to display her forms of power. Not just by being a good wife, but a fearsome mother. Margaret did not show her power through swearing, but through exhibiting her disappointment. When Margaret's son abandoned his troops in 1469, she took invasive action. In the spring of 1469, Margaret set a letter than began with "warmly." She then said, "if you want my blessing, I order and request you to see that your brother gets help quickly."⁷⁰ She directed her son to do something that revolved around the military. When people

⁶⁸ Watt, ed., *The Paston Women*, 111.

⁶⁹ Watt, ed., *The Paston Women*, 111.

⁷⁰ Gairdner, ed., *The Paston Letters*, 45.

think about mothers and women in the Middle Ages, we don't think of them as military leaders. Margaret is not a military leader, only a mother, but by ordering her son to do show showed that despite her son growing up she still had control over him. This letter also shows the small disruption that Margaret causes with her son and the community around him. Of all people to call John to man up and do his duty, is his mother. This disrupts the idea that men are the dominant ones in a relationship. When writing to one's mother, one does not swear, however, Margaret's son, John was not happy.

John reassured his mother that he sent soldiers, and everyone would be saved by the time they get there. He created an oath to his mother, promising that he and his siblings will be safe. With Johns reply he took God to witness that he has done is duty, making an oath both to his mother and to God that this rescue would be done.⁷¹ This oath is something that kept the family together. If it were to be broken John would have to answer to both God and his mother, which is something no child wants to do. Despite this oath and his reassurance to his mother, Margaret did not believe him.

Women too can disrupt society with their words rather than their actions. By swearing, taking an oath, or committing blasphemy, women can do it all. Although Margaret does not outright swear, the language she uses to convey her voice exhibits power. In the Paston letters she exclaimed, "you think I wrote fables and stories, but I do not so."⁷² She's maintaining her power over her son. She does this even more by bringing God into the conversation she mentions how good God has been to John, and how he should never disobey him. "And for the love of God, remember this well and thank God and accept it patiently."⁷³ To society saying for the love

⁷¹ Gairdner, ed., *The Paston Letters*, 47.

⁷² Gairdner, ed., *The Paston Letters*, 735

⁷³ Watt, ed., *The Paston Women*, 99.

of God can either be sincere or exclamatory. It all depends on the tone. For the love of God is an oath of shock, annoyance, frustration of anger. In this letter, Margaret is so fed up with her son that she swore using God's name. This disruption caused no further letters to be written on this topic.

We can infer that Margaret did not have any punishment for her actions. With this letter to her son, John II. There are two reasons for this claim. One, could be that no one else besides Margaret, her secretary, and John saw this letter. Being sworn to confidentiality the secretary did not have the right to say anything to anyone. The second claim is that this was not physically said. The secretary could have exaggerated, or he wrote what Margaret said to make this matter more serious than it was.

Typically, the punishments for swearing or taking God's name in vain was either judicial punishment or ecclesiastical denunciation.⁷⁴ This one instance where Margaret swore shows her both breaking and keeping with her social scripts. Women do not simply swear, hence why Margaret broke her script. However, in being a fearsome mother Margaret did something that any mother would do and simply broke down. Her sons were in danger and is it possible that out of a fit of rage she swore.

Another intriguing letter is from Margaret to her son John II on April 3, 1469. The letter discusses John's sister Margery along with his new wife or lover, it is never stated whether they are married or not. Margery starts the letter with "to Sir John Paston, I greet you warmly, and send you God's blessings and mine."⁷⁵ When writing her own letters Margaret does simple

⁷⁴ Hughes, *Swearing*, 59.

⁷⁵ Watt, ed., *Paston Women*, 94.

greetings, mostly because she is always writing in haste. Therefore, she still maintains the social script of being a prominent gentry woman who has her own secretary for letters.

The contents of the letter show a mother concerned about the marriage of her son. Margaret continues that she knows nothing about his intent to marry but sees that the woman in mind is acceptable. To keep the emotional community of her and her son strong, Margaret, orders her son, upon her blessing to be as true to his lover as if he were married to her. Margaret ordered John to be faithful, and by doing so she created yet another oath, meaning John must follow this and be good to his lover, or else God will be the one to punish him. She also wants John to take her time with his lover, and not be too hasty about the marriage. And as will be mentioned in the next section, John waits a long time until he marries his wife.

Within the same letter, Margaret says that she needs help from John, regarding her daughter. She needs his help moving his sister to another place because both Margaret and Margery are tired of each other. This entire letter is filled with mother-and-son discussion. A mother who is concerned with her son and daughter, and a son who needs to help his mother. This helps maintain their emotional community of mother and son, and keeps them together via their social scripts in a letter, of being a mother and being a loving son.

Margaret was a busy woman. At the end of her letter to John II, she mentions how she would write more if she had more time. She did this exact thing to her husband. Margaret had to set an example to the rest of the men in her family that women can also be powerful and in charge. By stating that she does not have time to write more inquires that Margaret has other issues to deal with instead of just who her son is marrying, she simply ends the letter with, "by your mother."⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Watt, ed., *The Paston Women*, 95.

Margaret doesn't just have problems with her first son, but also her second son, John III, and especially with her daughter Anne. In July around 1460 Margaret sent a distressing letter to her second son, John III about her younger daughter Anne, John's sister, and how she needs funding and housing. Margaret said that, "[Anne] will often annoy me and cause me great anxiety."⁷⁷ Being uneasy is not typically an emotion felt by a mother, especially about her own child. There is no given reason for why Margaret was uneasy about her own daughter. I am inferring that Anne may not be the best daughter based on the rest of the letter. That Margaret inferred that Anne angered the people she was staying with, and that to stabilize Anne, she was to find a husband. This troublesome state of mind continued to the ending of the letter where no name was present as a sign off, only "by your mother."⁷⁸ I argue that this ending was used because John III already knew about his mother and who the letter was write from the greeting and the use of son. Along with John III's problems with his sister, he also had other matters to deal with his wife, Margery Brews Paston.

Margery Paston: Woman to Male Lover

There is not a lot of information about Margery Brews, other than what is in the Paston letters. It seems that all Margery is known for is her love letter from her to John Paston III, letter 898. The letter in discussion inquires her plea about marrying her without a larger dowry because her parents are unable to pay it. She begins by stating her "right and worship-able valentine," To show that her and John III are not married yet, only courting. We can infer that Margery loved John, by all the sweet words she used to describe her love for him.

⁷⁷ Watt, ed., *The Paston Women*, 101.

⁷⁸ Watt, ed., *The Paston Women*, 101.

On the other hand, he may be proclaiming her love as a method of deception. Because little is known about Margery, we can never fully infer her ideals. This may have been a letter coerced by her family to prove to John that Margery did love him, when she tries to convince John that if he loved her regardless, he would take the small dowry. "But if you love me, as I trust verily that you do, you will not leave me therefore."⁷⁹ In doing so, John III would accept the dowry, even if it was lower than it could be. To figure any of this out we really need to know more about Margery, and the way her and her family worked.

Margery "prays Almighty God to preserve according to His will and your heart's desire"⁸⁰ Margery plays up her idea of this marriage and claiming that she has no real say in this marriage, and for John to not listen to his family, but it do as his heart's desire. In doing so, she complicated John's emotional community with his family in wanting Margery to choose her as his wife despite his father's disapproval about the dowry. Margery continues to use this language throughout the letter, and apologies on behalf of her father. Margery controls her familial community by speaking up for her father, but does not falter when it comes to John III, due to all the passiveness in the letter.

Margery confirms her love for John is real despite what her friends said. She stated that many of her friends say that Margery was acting wrongly. In what way was unknown. I infer that it was writing this letter to begin with. This is one of the most intact valentine letters we have during the late medieval period. As well, as mentioned she's writing for his family to accept the dowry, which probably has not been done in many households. Due to the circumstances

⁷⁹ Gairdner, ed., *The Paston Letters*, 35.

⁸⁰ Watt, ed., *The Paston Women*, 127.

Margery pleads with John that he never show this letter to anyone, asking for a commitment from him.

That same month of February 1477, Margery sends yet another valentine to John III, changing her salutation from the word valentine to the word cousin. However, in the first line of the letter Margery repeats the beloved valentine, thanking him for the letter he sent her. The letter is a simple thank you letter, asking John III to not visit her again for out of fear that he would not have enough time for her and his business. Margery's letter also contains a continuation of her dowry, and that if he could simply be content with what her family offers then she will be the happiest women alive. Having this amount of praise and asking John to accept is a way for her to maintain her social script as a lover and wanting to be more than just a lover to John. She wants to be his wife.

Between 1477 and 1481 we know very little about Margery Brews until she writes another letter to John Paston III, apparently four years after their marriage. It could be that her family did not allow her to write letters to John, or that they were together most of the time. The opening of Margery's letter is quite different than those sent to her valentine. It is a possibility that once Margery married John Paston their relationship changed from one of mutual respect to that of a master servant relationship, or they were simply a familiar married couple. In Margery's opening letter she states, "To my honorable master John Paston in haste", "Most respected honorable sir."⁸¹ There is a drastic change from valentine to master. Little may be known about Margery, but we can somewhat show how she felt based on her letters. When comparing the opening of Margery's letters to John, she uses "most dearly beloved Valentine" to discern how much she truly loved John. As well, Margery believes that John loves her so much that her

⁸¹ Watt, ed., *The Paston Women* ,129.

financial struggles will not overcome his love for her, particularly when Margery states, "my heart commands me to love you truly about all earthly things forevermore"⁸² There is no letters stating whether the dowry was accepted the way it originally was. All we know is Margery eventually marries John.

On November 4, 1481, Margery once again sends a letter to John about a matter of importance regarding both of their families. At this point both are married to each other, and Margery tries to have more responsibility in the household. She once again used the salutation "to my very honorable master John Paston."⁸³ In using the salutation of master Margery puts John first in their relationship with him as the head of household, where she is just a simple servant. This kept their emotional community at bay. Margery does something similar that Margaret Paston did. Both women entrusted God to protect their husbands and maintained the illusion of being a Godly wife. Margery prayed to God to [reserve John and assist him in John's business affairs.

The letter to John III in November of 1481 was written by a secretary, which can be seen by the way the letter was signed. It was signed by Margery's own hand, with her full name, meaning that it was likely that she did not write the letter herself. This letter gives the illusion that Margery purposely fits into her social scripts about being a good Christian wife. Margery also signed this "by your servant and petitioner"⁸⁴ This is the signature that Margery started to use once she was married to John, once again, showing how she is passive towards her husband, to maintain that positive emotional community.

⁸² Watt, ed., *The Paston Women*, 127.

⁸³ Watt, ed., *The Paston Women*, 130.

⁸⁴ Watt, ed., *The Paston Women*, 131.

There are very few letters that Margery wrote to John. In January of 1486 she wrote to John regarding various business affairs. Once more Margery starts off by using "master" when referring to John. This entire letter is about items that John III forgot on his journey and ended up asking his wife if she found any, particularly with a velvet tippet-a scarf- and news about his children. It's a very casual letter stating that his children are in good health, along with other information about his family. Margery writes very few letters to her husband, and really anyone at all. But when she does Margery tries to conform to the social norms placed upon her by society.

Because Margery Brews Paston married into the Paston family, she needed to follow different societal norms, such as being a faithful and religious wife. Because not much is known about Margery before her marriage to John III so we can try to infer that Margery did not need to follow these social norms through letter writing. However, she must have had to follow some form of norms with her own family.

Margery then finishes the letter with "by your servant," however, she leaves a postscript about John. She states, "I pray to God that no ladies overcome you again, so that your business affairs are not delayed any further."⁸⁵ In all the letters between John and Margery there is no mention of affairs or cheating, besides this one line. Because of such little information about this topic, we must assume that either Margery did not know or did not want to cause any further arguments against John. By not mentioning this conflict further Margery keeps her social script as a deairing wife by not arguing with her husband, and especially not making the conflict worse than it may be already. Margery and John continue to stay together until Margery's death in 1495. During this time there is no mention of another women.

⁸⁵Watt, ed., *The Paston Women*, 132.

The last letter Margery wrote to John III was on February 10, 1489. Throughout their years in marriage Margery continued to write to John as her master, and honorable sir. By this point John III started to go as Sir John Paston which Margery was sure to mention in her salutation. By accepting and calling John by his official title Margery established that she respected John and honored his title, by using it in her salutation. Margery's salutation is not over the top for late medieval letter writing, but it is used to sustain her social scripts of being a valued member of the family, and an appreciative wife.

The contents of the letters are of something that Margery has never talked about. The letter is about a fish that washes up on shore in Norfolk.⁸⁶ She seemed really intrigued about this fish explaining everyone who is interested and how much her brother believed it to cost. It's compelling to see why Margery found this amusing, it was possibly due to how many different people were talking about it. Therefore, she felt obligated to tell her husband to keep with that emotional community of husband a wife that tell each other amusing and important facts. Margery then ends the letter referring to John's sister and hoping that the two of them are in good health. Unfortunately, there is no knowledge about why Margery referred to Anne other than she either enjoyed her company or felt obligated because John was with Anne at that moment.

VII. Conclusions

Research on letters of gentry families like the Pastons gives us insights into the family that was highly placed and who had access to the king. These families reveal to us the social

⁸⁶ Watt, ed., *The Paston Women*, 132.

norms that the gentry families had placed upon them and how they maintain their social scripts within letter writing. When looking through their letters we also find glimpses of their emotions, and how these family members felt about another person or situation. These emotions either helped keep the emotional communities in place or disrupted them. One way to do that was through swearing.

The Paston women were the people who swore in letters to convey emotional meaning to their children, and this helped them maintain power. We cannot physically see or talk to Margaret and Margery Paston, and because of this we need to focus on the language behind her letters and infer for ourselves the emotions that they are feeling when the men were away at war. Women then became the head of the households, allowing them to be able to gain power where they would not have normally had. Letters helped maintain family bonds through their emotional communities. By sticking to a script in their writing, the Paston women were able to maintain their community with their husbands, lovers, and sons. By maintaining these emotional communities' women were able to keep their status as a loving wife and mother. Without that these women could have lost their positions in the gentry class by not following the social scripts they were given.

The research and the historical methods used here have not been pursued before. There have been studies of women and power, emotional communities, and swear words, but to date no work links each subject within the context of the Paston Letters. This research into the Paston Letters opens new avenues of research for not only the Paston family, but also other gentry or elite families in the later Middle Ages.

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