
Each volume in the Library of Medieval Women series raises useful questions about including or excluding authors and subjects on the basis of gender. These questions become especially complicated in the case of the Paston letters, which mostly figure forth conversations between women and men. The issue is not, however, the absence of responses to particular letters, which Diane Watt addresses as a "problem" in her preface. In fact, epistolary theory challenges assumptions about the very meaning of reciprocation within the genre. Instead, these questions concern isolating the women's letters from the epistolary context with which they are intertwined both formally and socially. Does this exercise highlight exclusively the mechanisms of female power within a social network? How does it affect other discussions about the definition of literacy and epistolary voice for women in the late Middle Ages?

In her interpretive essay, Watt makes astute observations about women, power, and networks. Her discussion of the ways that the letters both obscure and illuminate relationships among women is especially valuable. She complicates Ann Haskell's and Nancy Stiller's arguments about an emotional dynamic in which "it would have been virtually impossible for women to love or nurture one another" (156). Watt reads Margaret Paston's ostensibly vitriolic words as "betray[ing] the depths of her attachment" (157) to her daughter Margery and examines the letters' evidence of alliances among women in the furthering of matrimonial agendas.

In addition, Watt provides important devotional context for the letters, pointing out that their East Anglian setting demands our attentiveness to the women's expressions of piety, their resonances with female devotional writers in the area,
and their spiritual and economic connections to the local clergy. Surrounding these points is the broader claim that these letters emphasize how "women played a major role in the running of the household and the estates, were informed about issues of politics and patronage, and took responsibility for the piety of the family and health matters" (158). Watt draws upon her own earlier work on Margaret Paston and the ability of her letters' "household rhetoric" to acknowledge female "maistrye." At the same time, however, she cautions that women's "autonomy was limited and their authority often circumscribed" (141). In examining female power Watt also investigates the Paston women's literacy by asking who wrote various letters. She outlines evidence for the use of scribes and also conjectures that some women wrote for themselves. She frames these speculations within a statement that "[i]n some important respects the extent of the Paston women's literacy is incidental" (135). The letters display and enable the exertion of influence either way. But rather than being incidental, such indeterminacy of writership instead contributes to a widening discussion about the meaning of literacy. This point moves the selection of letters beyond the question of female power in particular social spheres towards other theoretical issues pertaining to gender. In Reading Families, Rebecca Krug points out that letters and documents were an important part of women's lives whether or not they read or wrote. Dido's Daughters, Margaret Ferguson's study of female literacy in late-medieval and early modern Europe, claims that we cannot simply ask who is literate, but must instead ask what defines literacy for what populations. These works suggest that instead of trying to determine the extent of the Paston women's reading and writing abilities, we might understand the letters' reflection of a multi-voiced scene of composition as an opportunity to revise some of our definitions of literacy and its relationship to female subjectivity.

Manipulating this epistolary oeuvre through gender-based selection makes it especially
important to consider the relationship between gender and the formal aspects of epistolary narrative. Such an investigation would further enrich the book’s critical apparatus. While acknowledging that many medieval letters do not systematically follow the rules of the *ars dictaminis*, Giles Constable still draws a distinction between learned and household letters. Karen Cherewatuk and Ulrike Wiethaus perpetuate this model by distinguishing, in *Dear Sister*, between Margaret Paston’s household letters and Christine de Pizan’s philosophical debates. Although the Paston women’s letters do not engage in the humanist inquiry evident in Christine’s, they do potentially provide opportunities for challenging these distinctions between learned and domestic. The oft-cited example of Margery Brews’ poetic Valentine letter to John III indicates a more than cursory knowledge of classically-derived epistolary conventions. In what other ways are these formal conventions observed and undermined, and how might these choices constitute a form of learned practice fitting itself into a colloquial context?

It is also important to recognize that excluding men’s letters potentially causes readers to misperceive the characteristics of certain letters as gendered female. John I’s September 20, 1465 letter to Margaret discusses worsted for making doublets, paralleling the numerous textile references in the women’s letters. The letters in Watt’s edition might lead one to consider the regulation of social custom as the province of the female letter, as in Margaret’s December 24, 1459(?) letter about appropriate Christmas games following the death of John Fastolf. But a letter from Edmond II Ganuary 27, 1481) establishes and observes etiquette by combining highly mannered epistolary rhetoric with genuine anxiety to apologize for having neglected to visit his mother Margaret. And the contrast between male and female discussions of the material household are more subtle than the distinction between domestically-oriented and publicly-oriented lives. Juxtaposed with the men’s letters, the women’s exhibit a
strikingly curatorial and even fetishizing tone in the discussion of objects, as in the case of Elizabeth Poynings’ descriptions of her silver (May 18, 1487 will). None of this means that letters from men should not be excluded; rather that drawing on theories of both literacy and epistolary practice would produce a more self-aware examination of the effects of the collection’s arrangement.

Editorial infelicities—typographical errors and vague annotation—mar an otherwise solid translation. The glosses of unfamiliar terms are often no more specific as definitions than what the reader infers about the word in context. An undergraduate audience would also benefit from a clearer account of certain letters’ ties to their turbulent political background. But the collection effectively reinforces Watt’s point about levels of female influence, and encourages readers to sharpen their focus on the concept of female literacy and the complex role of gender in the interrelated aesthetics of households and letters.

Seeta Chaganti
University of California, Davis

“To be in love is to stretch toward heaven through a woman.”

Uc de St. Circ,
13th-century troubadour