CHAPTER 5

WHAT DID MARGARET SEE?

The Pastons are dead and gone. Though they eventually would rise well beyond the gentry-fueled aspirations of John I, the sands of time that were to grind down Mowbray and Bohun and Plantagenet would get to them as well. Their later eminence as earls of Yarmouth was but fleeting, even with their share of the Fastolf inheritance; when Charles Paston, II Earl of Yarmouth, died in 1732, having already outlived his son and heir Charles (who had died without surviving progeny in 1718) the line was at an end. Little was left beyond memories, some heavily mortgaged property now destined for the local market at knockdown prices, and a lot of old family letters and papers that, by good fortune, would eventually come into the hands of James Fenn and then Francis Blomefield and finally into those of the British people in the form of the British Museum/British Library (excepting the items that have gone elsewhere). The manor house at Paston has disappeared, the great barn at Paston dates only from the 1580s, and the family’s sites in Norwich were eventually abandoned for more appropriate houses outside of town as the family moved up in the world, and what is left at Oxnead postdates the Pastons who have been of interest here. Were it not for the fortuitous preservation of their letters the Pastons of the fifteenth century would be just another of those gentry families we would note in passing—perhaps as a footnote to the tale of the Fastolf estate and the creation of Magdalen College, Oxford, and of minor interest were we concerned to trace the roots of a family that rose to a minor peerage in the seventeenth century.

What remains for us in this effort to follow whatever trail of religious utterance and practice Margaret Paston has left behind? We have worked to unravel the world of her saints and saints’ days, the world of her religious expression and practice (and her personal possessions), and finally the world of her spirituality as she spelled it out in her will, an enterprise

J. T. Rosenthal, Margaret Paston’s Piety
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that showed how she directed the transmission of worldly goods for spiritual purposes and happened, while doing so, to unpeel layers of one woman’s life course and identity. In all of this, iteration and activity family and self (and perhaps gender) were tightly woven into the fabric of Margaret’s faith. They gave us a social fabric that was not easily divisible, if it was not quite a seamless garment of faith and identity. Margaret Paston’s will certainly can be read as a case study of this coupling, just as the will shows how a sense of place and of social status can—and perhaps must—be factored into the equation.

In our quest for the realities of Margaret Paston’s spiritual life we are always conscious of the fact (or problem) that we can almost never run down a question about the Pastons to a conclusive ending, to closure. Nothing ever seems to be resolved beyond dispute or doubt, nothing is ever-so clear-cut that no exceptions and no further qualifications can be offered. This is the case whether we turn to what John I asserted about what Sir John Fastolf “really” intended regarding his will, or what Margaret “really” believed about the saints in her epistolary references to their days, or what the family “really” had in mind as they studiously ignored the social (and spiritual) benefits of a common burial site. With no way to estimate the proportion of their letters that has been preserved, and always at pains to stress the pragmatic and hard-nosed raison d’etre that guided the creation and content of the letters in the first place, we can never lose sight of those boundaries within which all our judgments and speculations must be contained.

In summing up the lessons presented by an analysis of Margaret’s testamentary bequests I thought it of some value to pay heed to what she did not cover or mention: no bequests, no gestures, no touching sentiments in the direction of Paston or Caister or Bromholm, nothing of special note to distinguish the Carmelites, those favorites of her mother-in-law Agnes and of Agnes’s family, from the other mendicant orders. There are no references in any of the family wills to the guild of St George that so dominated and helped defined Norwich’s collective identity and civic voice in those middle years of the century. Nor, with a few exceptions, were lay beneficiaries outside the family brought into her loop. Whatever we might wish to make of these omissions, beyond the insoluble issue of lost letters, they just have to be accepted as Margaret Paston’s way of drawing her own boundaries. I suspect there was a considerable element of withdrawal, even of rejection, in some of these silences and omissions. It seems a bit much to say that her silence has to speak for itself, but a roll call of what she did remember does make one wonder about an unvoiced policy of deliberate neglect, and for reasons we can only guess at. Neither her years of widowhood nor her withdrawal to Mautby seemed likely
to rekindle warm feelings about places and people of those last troubled
years of John I and then of her difficulties with her two eldest sons. She
had rocky relations within the family, and she does not seem to have
found another intimate after 1473 to play the role that James Gloys had
played for so long. In addition, she probably outlived many of her friends
and collateral kin. However, to set against this idea of loneliness and
bitterness or self-pity, it does not seem a great stretch to read her will—
especially its last sections—as a statement of reconciliation and of affec-
tion. In her last throw she cast a very wide net.

We have come about as far as Margaret’s own words will lead us.
Accordingly, in this final essay I turn to a search for what we can recap-
ture of the physical and material world in which she lived and moved.
What is still there? Beyond the places to which her words as set down in
her will have led us and the way in which her behavior has steered our
inquiries, what more can we learn by trying to re-create or recapture
this material and physical context of her world as it surrounded her but
was not dependent for its existence upon her articulation—unlike the
world created by her dating clauses and those “god bless” and “god assoil”
throw-ins that we played with above? The search for “what did Margaret
see” is a search or a quest that will follow her lead, with her testamen-
tary bequests blazing the trail. It is a sort of Mautby-Paston pilgrimage,
running first through the countryside and then into town—in keeping
with the order she laid out in her will. Even given all that has befallen
those places and buildings, what still stands after so many centuries and
so many separate acts of destruction and restoration suffices for an evoca-
tive journey, guided as we are by Margaret’s tersely worded bequests to
churches and places, by her occasional snippets of memory or nostalgia,
and by her explicit and deliberate instructions. We follow in her verbal
footsteps; the extent to which her words can guide us on a circuit that
might have been an actual physical journey undertaken at one time or
another by our heroine is impossible to know.6

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In an effort to capture and visit some of what remains of the world that
Margaret Paston actually knew, saw, visited, and even made a little bit
richer by way of endowment or testamentary benefaction, we must not
attribute more agency, more interest, more cultural sensitivity to her than
the records permit or than her general approach to such matters seems
to merit. In my introductory chapter I took a brief look at some of the
varieties of cultural and spiritual experience and activity that figured so
prominently in the tale of upper-class women of fifteenth-century East
Anglia. A treasure chest, but not one stamped with the name of Margaret Paston; she was notable for her absence from (or at least her silence about) virtually every list and every kind of activity we could offer, whether it was guided by a feminine or feminist interest or one dictated more by considerations of class and status. This means that if a final journey, designed to follow in her footsteps as the course we set, it is not going to be a journey with many way stations and rest stops where we pause for an inquiry into literary patronage, certainly not as far as Margaret Paston mapped out our journey. Nor is our journey with Margaret going to halt so we will have time to spend with those intriguing women who were deeply engaged in circles of pious reading, or of book lending and borrowing, or of book purchasing. Nor will we have occasion to pass the time of day with those women and men who could fill us in regarding the pageants staged by the guilds or about the drama cycles of East Anglia—cultural, social, and religious activities and events that Margaret Paston must have known and probably witnessed but to which she never makes any allusion. Were the festivals and pageants and drama cycles high points of the year for Paston children, or for Paston parents? But, as we know by now, intellectual and cultural interests and re-creations almost never made their way into the epistolary vocabulary, whatever role they might have played.

Though less focused on spiritual matters than on the realities and practical considerations of daily life, a household account like that of Dame Alice de Bryene for 1412–13 would certainly flesh out some aspects of our inquiry—were any such documents extant for the Pastons? But there are no comparable documents, nothing that sheds any useful light on the domestic situations of any of the branches of the family, let alone on that household over which Margaret presided during her life with John I and afterwards as its head. Dame Alice’s household book gives a running account of who and how many came to meals, of their social and clerical status, and often of the basis for their claim to her hospitality. Though Dame Alice’s household would have outstripped that of Margaret in size and social prominence, there are enough parallels to make us reflect, rather sadly, on what we do not have. We learn that Dame Alice—or rather the staff at her command—offered meals to 40 or 50 or 60 people on a regular basis, and to more than that on the odd occasion. Though clerics only compose a small proportion of the year’s tally of guests, there were friars from major houses who showed up for a meal (and probably a bed); Austins from Clare or Gilbertines from Rochester, among others. Furthermore, if their numbers were small, such men seemed to have turned up on feast days of special meaning for their order—the felicitous choice of the feast day or anniversary perhaps offering them the
opportunity to seize the day and to dominate family prayers and dinner table conversation.

The guest list from Dame Alice’s household shows the mixed composition of those at her table; family retainers and servants, old friends, relatives of various linkages, passing travelers, and men of the cloth on a variety of errands. As a widow of considerable wealth, her household was a natural meeting ground and resting place for people from many walks of life, many corners of the realm. Can we see Alice as a model or a grander counterpart for Margaret, a widow of some wealth and of serious piety? Dame Alice’s village household was probably at a more conspicuous crossroads in geographical terms, since in Norwich the Pastons were but one of many. But the Pastons certainly did not lack guests and mouths to feed. While we know little of the atmosphere of Dame Alice’s domestic scene with its mixed and ever-changing company, the impression we have of Paston life is that it was fairly secular in a social sense. Gloys was Margaret’s chaplain and confidant of many years’ service, but his influence seems pointed more to family affairs and partisan interference in mother-son relationships rather than to instilling an air of piety. And back in the days when John I and Friar Brackley had been close, it was the Fastolf estate, not the catechism being taught to Paston children or the private devotions of their mother, that was the common bond between the men. Margaret herself does not refer to grace at meals or to a prayer afterward, and the sermons she mentions now and then were those heard in church, not in a domestic setting.

So in comparison to the Alice de Bryene whom we can see in high resolution, at least for one year, Margaret Paston’s domestic scene is never more than a dim and cloudy picture. And if there is little to be learned about Margaret’s piety by contrasting her with others whose high points of patronage or prayer or ecclesiastical benefaction or hospitality can be charted at home, what picture emerges when we follow her away from home? Our imaginative or imaginary journey, our virtual pilgrimage, now picks up the trail she blazed with her testamentary bequests. That we go from rural to urban seems in keeping with life in the fifteenth century, and until we come to Norwich near the end of our wandering, it is very much a journey through the countryside with a series of stops at small churches set in very small villages (with Gresham as perhaps the one exception, being a somewhat more substantial place). And yet in this journey—Margaret’s own journey as spelled out in her will—Margaret Paston is very much the insider at each and every way station. If she has to stand out in the cold when we talk of patrons like Isabel Bourgchier or Katherine Howard, in their support of Osbern Bokenham, or of Margaret Purdons and women reading and
then discoursing about devotional literature and hagiography, Margaret Paston is now clearly in her element for each parish church and village that she mentions in the will. Now she is the lady of the manor, the lady who had the right to be there, the lady who could (and did) claim a privileged status at each stop along the way. This focus on a rural identity and on an insider’s identity is reaffirmed by the string of small but directed bequests we find in her will.

We can offer another contrast that helps sharpen our focus. Margaret Paston as insider, as the lady of the village and its church invariably stands in stark opposition to the identity and role projected by her near-contemporary, Margery Kempe, as the latter woman tells us of her travels over the course of her uneasy years. The contrast brings out the extent to which Margaret Mautby Paston was a village girl who, through her marriage, happened to spend much time in Norwich but who perhaps never quite saw it as her real base. It was marriage that had taken her to Norwich, and it was the end of married life that eventually allowed her to leave Norwich. Such a tale of relative physical stability, and the identity that went with it, can be compared with the difficult peregrinations of Margery Kempe of Lynn, an eternal outsider. If we construct an “index locorum” for Margery Kempe, we touch down all over Christendom: Norwich, Leicester, York, London, Canterbury, Bridlington, Ely, Bristol, among others, and this is without regard for journeys to Jerusalem, Rome, Compostella, and elsewhere, not to mention the many intervening towns. And in each of these places, including her native ground in Lynn itself, Margery Kempe was usually a foreign presence, an uninvited alien, arriving to trouble the waters. That she brought as much or more grief to herself than to others may gain her some sympathy as we read her tale, but it also reinforces the idea that an open road might bring home a traveler who was often less than welcome. Margaret Paston, by way of contrast, mostly stayed home and showed little desire to see much of the wider world. Her mother-in-law wound up living in London, her sister-in-law left East Anglia for the metropolis and the South, her husband and sons were on the road a great deal. Margaret stayed put.8

Before picking up Margaret’s trail of testamentary memory and looking at what we can still see in the East Anglian landscape that might have been familiar to her, there are two further considerations, two things to remember before we set out on the road. One is the sad tale of the physical and material fate of many (or most) of the places we visit; much that we might ask to see is gone. We can track burial sites and read wills, but no Paston tomb or grave remains for us to visit; so much for homage and souvenirs. Whether the burial site had been a parish church or
the cathedral or a regular house (either in London or Norwich), nothing stands today to fill in the blanks. For Pastons buried in regular or mendicant houses this is as we would expect; the “age of plunder” was very thorough. But various other fates have also conspired to bring us to a complete halt, factors in addition to or beyond the rapacity of Henrician go-getters and seventeenth-century iconoclasts. Neither the chantry chapel of William I in Norwich Cathedral nor the parish church burials of Margaret and her beloved Walter are to be found. The family’s physical remains and memorials are no more with us than is the peerage they once held. Bricks and stones may last, but not the Pastons once buried within or beneath them.

The other form of loss is more understandable, if even more sweeping than that of buildings and bodies. Here I refer to the disappearance of any and all personal or household items from the Pastons, be they of religious use or any other that—in the best of all possible worlds—might have made their way into such collections as those of the Victoria and Albert Museum or the one in Norwich Castle Museum. Though finding “MP” (or even better yet, “MMP”) engraved on items intended for use in a private chapel is a bit much to hope for, the family did talk of such possessions in various of their letters, wills, and inventories. Obviously, between family heirlooms that had come down from William I or the Mautbys or the Berrys and their looting of the Fastolf estate, with its vast inventory of household and personal possessions, and the normal course of purchasing and acquiring, the stock of family treasures would have mounted up over the years. But few items are described in striking detail—as we saw in those snippets from John I and William I—and without family wills from the very late fifteenth and the sixteenth century, the chain of transmission snaps after a link or two.

In our interest in the family’s stock of personal possessions of value or interest, it is possible that we place a greater premium on their books than did men and women of the day, and Colin Richmond has argued that Margaret Paston was not a great reader—nor, by extension, a serious collector of books. But by the provisions of her will the church at Mautby was to be enriched by “a complete legende in oon book and an antiphoner in an other book,” both to abide there “as long as they may endure.” Beyond this we have “my premer” for her daughter Anne Yelverton and “my massebook, with all myn awterclothes” for daughter-in-law Margery (Brewes) Paston. Not an impressive library, but there were some books and some concern for their fate. The books Margaret designated for Mautby parish church would move outside any line of family transmission and would no doubt succumb to the wear
and tear of many hands, whereas the “premer” and “massebook” were to be kept within the family and might have gone down the generations. Furthermore, if Margaret herself was not deeply attached to the world of books, they were fairly familiar items in her immediate family: the “grete book” of John II, the books that went to William II upon the death of Edmund I, and that mysterious library of Gloys that was being disbursed to unknown recipients before John II could get hold of some of its prize items and for which Margaret had been the intended go-between.10

But none of these books can be traced down through the years, and the letters that tell of them are the only indication of their existence and ownership (except for the “Grete Boke” of John II). Other items of religious usage were also elaborated in Margaret’s will; they too disappeared without a trace. Daughter Anne received “bedes of siluer enameled” along with her primer, though again they may have had no more special value than “ij peir of my finsest sheets ich of iij webbes” and other such household items. Margaret’s goddaughter Marie Tendal was to receive “my peir bedys of calcidenys guadied with siluer and gilt,” and her executor Simon Gerard came in for a little bed “in my chapel chaumer at Mauteby” and a featherbed “lick as it nowe in the seid chapel.” But this argues that the chapel was also a sort of lumber room for miscellaneous goods, rather than pointing us toward a collection of pilgrim badges or a jeweled pyx that Margaret’s cousin Sir John Fastolf might well have left her—had he only been good enough to say so.

Though we cannot put them into Margaret’s hands or the safekeeping of her chest, there are items of interest that we can track from the inventories that John I and William II made when they surveyed some of Fastolf’s vast world of possessions (I, 64). Relevant here, among the “goodes that somtyme were Ser John Fastolfes” would be the “ryng of Sent Lowes with a ston therin” and an arras with scenes of the Coronation and the Assumption of Our Lady. Though this latter item seems a goodly catch, we should note that it also had scenes of “the sege of Phalist . . . another of the Morys daunse, an other of Jason and Launcelet, an other of a batayle.” Another inventory mentions a “table of gold with an image of Sen James set with precious stonyes weyng xiiij vnc. . . . (a) box of siluer and gilt for the sacrament, with a crosse in the height and chased with lilis” (I, 68). But no links that we can trace between the Fastolf estate and Margaret in terms of personal bequests, no will of John I, and nothing in the other family wills that offers much help. All we can do is generalize and say that these are the sorts of items that members of a wealthy household could be expected to have and then to transmit. A bit out of the ordinary
would be the “pece of the Holy Crosse” of Elizabeth Poynings Browne, sister to John I. It was eventually passed along, with a great quantity of pedestrian household goods, to Elizabeth’s daughter Mary (about whom we know nothing). Even when we learn a bit more, as with Elizabeth’s instructions about “an image of saint Antony apon it” and her “auter clothe with the jmage of our Lode” we have to set these occasional reference against the long lists of linens and kitchenware spelled out in the will. Religious items, like all that bedding and furniture, were a normal part of a household, and their transmission was unlikely to be specified in a way that makes them stand apart from the vast quantity of secular items now passing along the line. Our focused interests give these items, as with books, a privileged place that they did not have to those involved in the transmission. The bequest of a pyx and of a pillow may have been equally valued and esteemed, despite the pecking order we are quick to assign to these items.

Buildings, we might say, should be made of sterner stuff; the sad fate of so many of those that once held Pastons can serve as an object lesson about the passing of all things. If we begin with an other-than-Margaret journey, we will not be on the road for long. Since the family really got started with the rise of Clement and Beatrice, we can begin by turning to their joint burial site—the parish church of St Margaret at Paston. Not only is there no sign of their grave (or graves), but the coffin that may contain the remains of John I, brought to Paston from Bromholm at the dissolution in deference to his standing in the neighborhood, is a putative burial at best. Pevsner described three “plain tomb-chests, no doubt of Pastons, the one at the east end said to have been brought from Bromholm Priory and may well be what is left of John Paston.” The current guidebook for the church is just about as circumspect: “if (tradition) is correct this tomb is no doubt that of John Paston,” and as for the other tombs in the church, they have been moved around so that “there is apparently no authority for stating to which particular members of the family they belong.” The great glory of the church, and one that would have been familiar to Margaret, is the large wall painting of St Christopher. Even though Christopher was among the most commonly depicted saints, and even though he was to be found throughout East Anglia, the wall painting at Paston is impressive. In addition, though hardly to be seen in anything like its original glory or moral impact, there are visible remnants on the walls of what probably was a scourging of Christ and a Three Quick-Three Dead. So if we follow the “what did Margaret see” theme, in the parish church at Paston, dedicated to her own patron saint, she would have seen the burial site of her grandparents-in-law and some powerful
fourteenth-century art. If such memento mori were too familiar to inspire horror, they were at least sober reminders that the family into which she had married was of some stature in this world, though the message in the church was also that all such triumphs were but fleeting ones. However, Margaret never refers to the church at Paston—it being one of those notable omissions in her will—and her references to other members of the family do not go further back in time than her father-in-law, William I.12

If we felt cheated by the condition of the parish church at Paston, do we fare any better when we look to the cathedral of the Holy Trinity, Norwich Cathedral? Here, in a purpose-built chantry in the lady chapel, Margaret’s father-in-law William I had been buried in 1444. Once again, the fates are against us. It seems that the cathedral, desperate for revenue in the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century, demolished parts of itself that were no longer needed for the simplified liturgy of Protestantism.13 The sacrifice of the lady chapel was not so much for the purification of prayers but rather for the cash realized from selling the stones of which it was built. In any case, and in some fashion that somehow went unchronicled, the lady chapel is no more, a fate it shared with what had been the attached parish church of St Mary of the Marsh and the cathedral clocher. Chantries in the cathedral, other than those of its bishops and of a few great men of the region like Sir Thomas Erpingham, seem to have had short lives, at least when compared with the hopes and intentions of their founders.

For those numerous Pastons who had been buried in regular houses, whether we look at the London White Friars or Black Friars or the Cluniac priory at Bromholm or the White Friars of Norwich, total disappearance is what we expect, all swept away by the tides of dissolution. Of the London houses—where Agnes and perhaps Edmund I and John II had been buried—nothing remains but some historical markers to tell of what once had been. John I went to burial at Bromholm amidst much splendor and expenditure, as we have seen, but there too nothing remains of the glories of a venerated if middling-level pilgrimage site. Set somewhere in the fields of what is now a working farm are some visible ruins, but they stand on private land and neither tourist curiosity nor archaeological work has gotten much of a return. Since John III did not seem to carry through his talk about moving John II from London to Bromholm—so father and son could be reunited—and since it seems difficult to determine whether he or his uncle William II moved Agnes from her first interment in London to the Carmelite house in Norwich, we can say
Figure 5.1  The Church of St John the Baptist, Reedham—“There as I was born”.

Figure 5.2  St Mary, Bessingham.
Figure 5.3  St Christopher Wall Painting, St Edmund, Fritton, Suffolk.

Figure 5.4  Seven Sacrament Font, All Saints, Gresham.
Figure 5.5  Danse of Death, Rood Screen, St Mary, Sparham.

Figure 5.6  Elm Hill, Norwich—where the Pastons lived in town.
Figure 5.7  Arch of the Gateway, Carmelite Friary, Norwich.

Figure 5.8  St Peter Hungate, Norwich: exterior view.
Figure 5.9  St Peter Hungate: interior view.

Figure 5.10  St Peter Hungate: interior view.
that none of it made much difference at the end in terms of our search for physical remains and reminders.

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Having gone down a series of dead ends in terms of revisiting the burial sites of Margaret’s family-by-marriage, let us return to her own trail as she blazed it in her will—that pilgrimage of self and identity about which she was so deliberative. As Margaret began it, the trail picks up at Mautby, or more specifically, with the parish church of St Peter and St Paul at Mautby. Before we look at the church itself, as Margaret detailed how it was to look when her bequests had been carried out and as it stands today, a few more general reflections on the style of her will and the pilgrimage on which it is now leading us. In many wills of the day the testator’s most favored institutions and beneficiaries, and especially the burial church, are named toward the head of the document and then, as we move toward the end and the disposal of the residue of the estate, they reappear for some further share of what still remained. But this is not Margaret Paston’s style. Her will is a straightforward progression; no doubling back. Once a church or a village here and tenants there or some deserving individual or institution had been dealt with, that particular beneficiary of her largesse never reappears. No second thoughts, no inclination to return to give out any leftovers—which is why I use the term “deliberative” in describing her style. It was all thought out in advance; those deemed worthy of a bequest were named, rewarded, and then dismissed.

Margaret’s testamentary journey began at Mautby, in its church. It was here, with church and manor house and its chapel, that Margaret had made her headquarters for the last decade of her long life. Despite this, as we have noted, there is no indication today of the family matriarch, let alone of her distinguished forbears. The parish church, atop a small rise that might explain some of the aging Margaret’s insistence on her own domestic chapel, has but few features of great interest; the anti-Paston vandalism of some unknown time and for unrecorded reasons has removed all traces of that south aisle that was to be built to accommodate her chantry with its elaborate monument. Nothing remains except a visible scar in the wall to tell us of the aisle, “newe reved, leded, glased, and the walled thereof heyned conuenyently and werkmanly.” Vanished are any and all markers of that Mautby lineage that Margaret had traced back to Lord Loveyn and Sir Roger Beauchamp and the Berneys of Redham. A few bits of heraldic glass still remain—Mautby arms, azure, a cross—small hints of splendor and the pride of family that had once towered over this little and
rather isolated place—Mautby being a bit off the main road to Yarmouth, though but a short walk over the fields to Caister and the headquarters of the Fastolf world. Though we might like to say that Mautby was meant to be Margaret’s personal Westminster Abbey, we also have to recall that no one else of the Pastons was buried there. This reinforces the idea that her removal to Mautby was a step in the construction of an invisible wall between Margaret’s natal family and her marital one.

After Margaret made her bequests to Mautby she moved through her litany of bequests toward “Fretton in Suffolk” (and she inserted the county designation, Fritton being just across the border) and then back to Basyningham (Bessingham), Matlask, Gresham, Sparham, and Reedham, before coming to and winding up in Norwich (with some parallel bequests to Yarmouth recipients). In casting a net that includes Matlask, Bessingham, and Gresham in Norfolk and Fritton in Suffolk she alighted on four of the 160 or so round tower churches that dot the East Anglian landscape, though this bit of architectural lore is of interest to us but presumably not to her. The round towers themselves were all much older structures, though there is disagreement over their approximate age as well as their purpose. Except for Gresham these churches are in tiny villages, so far off the beaten track that they may have suffered less damage and fewer changes than churches located in more central locations (though they too generally underwent “restoration,” mostly in the nineteenth century). Restoration, but pretty certainly not much rebuilding or significant enlargement since Margaret’s day, which means it is possible that these little parish churches may not be so different from their fifteenth-century incarnation, as Margaret knew them (with Redham as the exception, treated below). If we are poorer for the loss of the wall paintings and colored images and rood screens and stained glass in the windows, we may, as visitors, get some compensation in the form of electric lighting and rudimentary heating systems. These churches were cold and dark when Margaret’s tenants sat and stood in them, no doubt offering the women and men of her villages an interior setting that was more conducive to turning thoughts to the mystery of the mass than to bodily comfort.

Since Margaret Paston is leading us, following her entails taking a look, after Mautby, at the church of St Edmund at Fritton, tucked just below the Norfolk border near Lowestoft. As it is largely a fourteenth-century church with a round tower that probably antedates the rest of the structure, it is just possible that we see pretty much what Margaret saw, though we trust that its powerful scheme of wall paintings was easier to follow then than it is today. The chancel is attached in a asymmetrical fashion to a tunnel-vaulted nave and it leads to a low, dark Norman chancel. The
asymmetry is a reminder of the piecemeal building that was not uncommon, in this case a sign of how the church was extended, probably in the fourteenth century. There is a screen of that vintage and a very impressive group of wall paintings, now badly faded. In the curve of the chancel we have the tale of St Edmund, local king and martyr. Still discernible are the king himself and the wolf that led his followers to his mutilated body, plus some faded images of what may be his pagan persecutors. Along the walls there is the familiar St Christopher and what is perhaps Thomas of Canterbury (whom we know from Margaret’s letter dating had some regional cachet). Depictions of Edmund seem natural for churches in the region and they are well distributed in the area. Fritton was a part of Margaret’s Mautby inheritance but it is nowhere mentioned in the family letters (as far as the indices of Davis and Gairdner are a guide). It should be thought of as another small bit of that private or personal pre-Paston world over which she was, at the end, reasserting herself (though only to the tune of 6s for “ich household being my tennaunt there” and the church itself to receive “a chesiple and an awbe” for its emendation).

Basyngham (Bessingham), both as a church and as a village of Margaret’s tenants, was next as she arranged the queue; another of that group of round tower churches that had come her way. Unfortunately, the parish church of St Mary suffered the unhappy fate of being “severely restored” in the 1860s, though the carstone (rather than flint) tower is probably true to its medieval exterior. Given the church’s small size and what must have been a perennial shortage of funds, the triangle headed doorway and the fifteenth-century pulpit and font still in place may be much as they were in 1482 when Margaret singled the church out for “emendement” in her usual bequest of a “chesiple and an aube.” The village of Bessingham seems so isolated that it evokes a feeling of an earlier world, though it is quite possible that the rural poverty that blankets so much of contemporary Norfolk has come to replace a medieval prosperity that rested on the rich fields of corn and the flocks of sheep one would have seen from atop that rounded tower. The present church has been characterized as “very plain” and its tiled roof is probably later than Margaret’s day. The windows are mostly perpendicular, though as we see them they reflect that Victorian restoration rather than their medieval identity. The sanguine attribution of the round tower to the tenth century tells us more about local pride than serious architectural history.

From Bessingham the journey to Matlask is but a few miles at most, though we have no idea if Margaret herself ever paced it out. The church of St Peter, Matlask, also boasts a round tower and one that incorporates what may be Roman tiles among its flints, offering some return to the visitor to make up for the disappearance of the medieval chancel. The
story is that during services in 1726 the chancel walls just gave way and collapsed, though no parishioners were injured, as the walls fell outwards rather than inwards—either a sign of divine providence or of a very small congregation that day. The church does have eight medieval corbels that are of reasonable quality, at least by the standards of a small and remote parish church; a tower arch and some fifteenth-century pews also add to its charm. The summation of the place as “a very attractive little church with a feeling of warmth and calmness” seems a reasonable one, well deserving of that “chesiple and an aube . . . to the emending of the church” that it was to receive under the provisions of Margaret’s will.

Gresham was a larger place and, as one of the Paston home manors until they were driven out in 1449 by Lord Moleyns, a place that loomed much larger in the family’s history than did the remote villages through which we have been passing so quickly. Moreover, Gresham was not one of the Mautby dowry manors, but rather one the Pastons had bought from Thomas Chaucer earlier in the fifteenth century. When she moved on in the course of her bequests from Matlask to Gresham, Margaret may have had mixed feeling, given the humiliation and defeat she and her partisans had suffered there. However, as far as her will opens the window on her feelings (apart from her piety), it was business as usual, that is, another terse bequest of “a chesiple and an awbe . . . (for) emending of the church.” No comments about the good old days, or the not-so-good old days. As Gresham is a more substantial place, so its church is a more substantial house of worship. The church of All Saints is another of those round tower churches (and it too was “renovated” in the nineteenth century). Features of interest, other than the tower, include a two-story porch that offers “an imposing entrance,” an east window with flowering tracery, and a fourteenth-century chancel. But the church’s best claim to something out of the ordinary—“the pride of this church,” as the guidebook says—is the octagonal seven sacrament font, one of 25 still to be found in the country. The font, probably preserved from destruction because its depictions of the sacraments had been plastered over at a critical time, may have been in place by 1480—when Margaret might have seen it, had she made a last visit to Gresham—though closer to 1500 is more likely. Again, it is nice to speculate that at least one of “ich of myn . . . godchilder,” as she refers to them in her will—might have been baptized in this font and in Margaret’s presence. The odds, or cold reality, argue against this.

From Gresham Margaret’s spiritual meandering next takes us to Sparham. Here we find the attractive little church of St Mary, “entirely restored” to its present condition in the 1880s, though with various bits of ornamentation that might have been seen by Margaret, had she come
this way. Because of extensive but oddly or poorly planned rebuilding in
the fifteenth century, the chancel is (once again) out of line with the nave,
as was the case at Fritton. At Sparham the building operation progressed
from east to west and the width of the arches varies, which probably gives
an insight to the quality and architectural planning of small-church con-
struction, as well as to the shaky budget on which such enterprises rested.
The tower, probably from the mid-fifteenth century, was separate from
the church at first and only integrated with the main building when the
nave was rebuilt and lengthened, probably in Paston times. Bits of glass
have been preserved in some of the windows and there is a medieval pul-
pit, again perhaps one that has suffered a good deal through restoration.22
The most interesting feature of the interior—far and away ahead of any
of the other features—is a rood screen depicting the various saints and
the dance of death. Duffy talks of “fashionably well dressed cadavers who
leered at the congregation,” a touch by the artist that would no doubt help
convey their grim message.23 The depictions of Becket and the local hero
St Walstan were powerful reminders of the imminence of earthly death,
as well as of heavenly reward; the monumental brass of a late-fifteenth-
century rector, William Mustarder, added further verisimilitude to the
theme. Though the churches of East Anglia are still rich in rood screens,
Sparham stands alone in this regard among those on Margaret’s list of
recipients, at least as her churches now present themselves.

In what seems a kind of “saving the second best for last and rating only
below Mautby,” Margaret concluded her rural peregrination at Redham
(Reedham). Here, and only here, did she step outside her own laconic
boundaries: “there as I was born,” as she says in her will, and the church’s
reward for this came in the form of more generous bequests, running to 5
marks and a chesiple of silk with an awbe, “with myn armes thereupon.”
The church of St John the Baptist may well have housed tombs and mon-
uments of the Bernays, since Margaret’s maternal ancestors had had their
roots here. Alas, a serious fire in March 1981 destroyed most of the medi-
eval interior; the present church, handsomely rebuilt and modernized and
well illuminated, is literally an era away from “what did Margaret see.”
Much of the exterior withstood the fire and the attractive outer walls,
composed of blocks of freestone interlaid with bricks and (Roman?) flat
tiles, probably look much as they did when Margaret was presumably
christened there in the early 1420s.24 A tower that was built around 1447
was probably subsidized by a bequest from (her uncle) Thomas Berney,
and the brass to Elizabeth Berney, a cousin, dates from the late fifteenth
century. Tiles from the church’s fourteenth-century floor are now in the
Norwich Castle Museum; the mermaid corbel still to be seen over the
chapel door would no doubt have smiled upon Pastons and Berneys in
Margaret’s day, as she does upon the occasional visitor today. The village of Redham, still served by a local railway line, has moved about a mile down the road from the medieval waterside site that made this handsome church a good deal more accessible for those who sought its services in the days of the Berneys and Mautbys than it is today.25

This completes the rural component of our pilgrimage. The late medieval riches of rural Norfolk made Margaret’s inheritance a valuable one, and its intrinsic value, plus her esteemed genealogy, made her a good catch for William and Agnes Paston’s oldest son and heir. We have seen that the inheritance was very much a rural one, a phenomenon that tells us something about the geographical distribution of wealth and serves as a warning against seeing too much of fifteenth-century Norfolk life as being centered in Norwich. This latter view—like that of overestimating the importance of books when we talk about material possessions—may push us toward an anachronistic reading of late medieval county society. It may also be the key, or at least part of the key, to why Bromholm and Mautby, and not the cathedral in town, beckoned to John I and then to Margaret when it came to choosing a burial site. The bequests in Margaret’s will show us someone divided in her allegiance and even in her identity; partially a maiden/wife/widow of the countryside, partially a proud and influential townie. Following Margaret’s pathway through the little places to which she left her string of small but deliberative benefactions takes us, today, to isolated churches in isolated villages. Though the landscape was probably livelier and more populous in her day than in ours, touching all these Paston-Mautby bases evokes the idea of deep roots and of unchanging or slowly changing life patterns. That conventional beliefs and conventional lives drew their strength from this background is easy to understand. What might puzzle us, though it is hardly our problem to deal with in these essays, is why and how so much heretical, radical, and rebellious thought and action could more or less coexist in this same corner of the realm.

When we get to town the situation changes. Here, as we noted when looking at Margaret’s will, she abandons the role of lady of the manor and seems to accept that she now is but one out of many; that is, but one of many matrons and widows of comparable wealth and status. This was hardly an insignificant identity, but it was a step down from her rural persona. Margaret touched a lot of bases in Norwich, widely distributing her bequests and showing a fairly thorough knowledge of what was going on in town. She opened the urban section of her will with a bequest to each of the four friaries of Norwich and of Yarmouth. In Yarmouth nothing remains; archaeology has filled in a few details about the Franciscan house. In Norwich, by good fortune, the Dominican house
has been partially incorporated into the parish church and church hall of St Andrew, and some of the arches of the imposing Dominican cloister stand in the courtyard of a nearby office or factory block. Supposedly the arms of John and Margaret, from the 1450s, are carved into the great south door of St Andrews. Of that Carmelite house that loomed so large in the tale of family burials and of Agnes’s influence (or would-be influence) upon those around her, a handsome stone arch from what may have been the gate or the cloister can still be seen, standing guard duty just above the banks of the Wensum. The Great Hospital not only stands but has had the good fortune to have its own tale in detail and at length. If Margaret would no longer recognize the institution to which her bequest had gone, she might be proud to be found among the long list of patrons. The house of nuns at nearby Carrow has gone the way of the world, and if there are successors to “iche leper man and woman at the v Yates,” they are the homeless and the street people who still ask for alms and freely offer a “god bless you” in return, just as did those “ankers in Consford” to whom Margaret left 3s 4d.

The “mother church,” as Margaret says in her will: the cathedral church of the Holy and Undivided Trinity. Family ties with the cathedral went, in a personal or direct sense, at least as far back as the arrangement made regarding the construction of the chantry of William I in the Lady Chapel. John I left nothing to the cathedral, as the scattered documents about his wishes guide us, and no one else in the family other than Margaret has left a record that tells of a different tale. But her bequest of 20s for “a dirige and masse” suffices to put this great building into the category of “places seen” (and of places endowed). Margaret had lived very near the cathedral, over the years, while it was undergoing one of those great bursts of building and rebuilding that are part of the long history of such structures. The fifteenth century was an eventful and busy one in its history: a major fire in 1463, the majestic Erpingham gate and Sir Thomas’ chantry finished some years before the fire, the wonderful program of bosses in the great cloister (into which we assume Margaret had access, whatever St Benedict had said), and the choir stalls that were being built under the lead of various bishops. There is some uncertainty regarding the roll of different bishops concerning these stalls, but whether it was the lead offered by Wakeryng (1416–25) or Lyhart (1446–72) or Goldwell (1472–99), they were in place for Margaret to admire (if she entered the choir) before her final farewell. Though we know nothing about the chantry that William had staked out for himself, we are told that the revenues of the family’s manor at Sweynthorpe were dedicated to its support: “the anuyté fore hys perpetuell masse,” and there were no complaints about procrastination or short dealing toward
its upkeep, unlike the interminable controversy regarding building the tomb of John I.

In approaching the cathedral, coming a short way downhill from the Paston town house, Margaret would have seen a façade perhaps not too different from the one of today, though this too is a matter of some debate. Atop the structure was that great new spire, now nearing completion and being built (or rebuilt) to replace the steeple that had recently come to ground. The choir vaulting was built on Bishop Goldwell’s watch. The wall paintings still visible in what is now the cathedral’s treasury were already old as far as decorations go, and the Despenser Retable was probably on display somewhere in the church’s interior. It is hard to imagine that most of these various features, including the newly made bosses for cloister and nave, would have been unfamiliar to Margaret, or that the almost constant stream of building projects would not have made an impression on her. After all, she knew what was going on. She was a woman who had access to the prior of Norwich without notice or appointment when she and Agnes sought his help in their celebrated street quarrel in 1449, and if Margery Kempe could come into town and have an audience with the bishop we can assume the Pastons had his ear when they sought it. We can think of Margaret’s bequests to the cathedral as a sign of her understanding of how one made a mark in the town beyond the small boundaries of one’s own parish. The “mother church” was a marketplace of spiritual exchange; where better to display one’s wares?

Of the many parish churches of Norwich, two were singled out in Margaret’s will: St Peter Hungate and St Michael Coslany. The latter comes as a surprise, it being near the Paston’s neighborhood or parish but, to the best of our knowledge, with no other or prior recorded connection with the family. Margaret was quite openhanded toward St Michael Coslany, again perhaps on the idea that if one wished to make any splash in Norwich it had to be a bigger splash than what was sufficient when dealing with Sparham or Bessingham. Her bequest of 4d to each priest, 2d for “ich clerk in surplys,” 6d to the parish clerk, “the curat that shll seye high masse [to] have xxd,” 6s 8d for “reparaction of the bellys of the same church,” and finally xxd to the sexton to ring bells was a fair sum in all, well beyond what she had left to her own manors and those little parish churches of the countryside. What Pevsner refers to as “the enthusiastic display of flushwork” on the exterior walls of St Michael is handsome enough to rate a picture in his Buildings of Norfolk (Plate 16A), though the walls we now see were built at the very end of the fifteenth century or very early in the sixteenth, therefore seeming to add nothing in a literal sense to the quest for “what did Margaret see.” Entering
the church today, thoughts readily turn to the large number of children produced by John and Margaret—that full nursery with its demands on time, the family budget, and the hiring (and firing) of nurses and tutors and servants—since the empty and presumably deconsecrated nave of St Michael Coslany is now the children’s science museum of Norwich, filled with young sages playing games with gravity and optics.\textsuperscript{30}

The real plum of Margaret’s urban benefaction, as we might expect, was the small and much-abused parish church of St Peter Hungate, the clear winner of the Norwich segment of the “what did Margaret see” treasure hunt. This was the church whose living John I and Margaret had acquired in 1458 and had then moved, around 1460, to rebuild in an extensive and elaborate fashion. In 1460 John was on the brink of getting his hands on the Fastolf estates, and he must have anticipated some of the Fastolf money to cover the large and ambitious plans that he and Margaret were subsidizing for the church of their parish, just up the street from their town house on Elm Hill. As a small church, located in one of the smallest and poorest parishes of the central city, it was easy for the Passtons to play the role of heavy patrons, and it would be here, in 1479, that Margaret buried her favorite son Walter.

What is so striking about the rebuilding—doubtless the result of much consultation between wife and husband and others drawn into the project—is that nothing about this project has left any record in the Paston letters. Whatever discussions went on between the Pastons and craftsmen and glaziers and masons and clerics about costs, style, ornamentation, iconography, etc., they were either conducted face-to-face or in correspondence and business-cum-legal documents that have not survived. Nor are there building accounts or church records to help us out. The long-term fate of St Peter Hungate has not been a happy one, and those years when it was warmed by the sunshine of Paston munificence were its brightest moments, whether we look before or afterwards. When Margaret’s bequest wore out, as such things are wont to do, the church gradually but steadily declined into genteel poverty and neglect. By the early twentieth century it was held that “it was again so ruinous that it was declared unsafe and threatened with demolition.” After World War II it served for some years as a church museum or repository for the miscellaneous bits of ecclesiastical furniture, sculpture, glass, and ornaments—most items taken from the surplus churches that Norwich could no longer afford and/or from those so damaged by bombs that restoration was unrealistic. Eventually the museum function was terminated and St Peter stood locked against all comes, until a recent decision to reopen it to visitors on select days and—most recently—to give it a new lease on life as a stained glass museum.\textsuperscript{31}
Walking into the almost empty building today is as close as we can come to what Margaret would have gazed upon, perhaps for the last time in those sad moments of that funeral in 1479; she may never have returned to Norwich. The frame of the church and some of its external decorations are almost certainly those put into place under the critical and cost-conscious eyes of John I and Margaret, and the roof bosses hold their own against those of more elaborate and famous churches of the county. Though the stained glass in the windows has been rearranged or collected from elsewhere in town, most of what there is—and there is a very considerable amount—dates to the fifteenth century, and a fair amount of it is Paston glass, if we will. The roof bosses and carving would seem to be those made to order for Margaret and her husband, and the just-visible carving into a beam by the north door has usually been read as saying “1461,” giving us a cornerstone dating for the work, though it takes a bit of imagination or the advice of a guidebook to be certain about the numbers.32

There are no indications of where the burials were sited, no indication of where in the church Margaret had Walter interred, though somewhere near the high altar would seem likely. What stands today, much as it did in the late fifteenth century, speaks to the idea of a proprietarial claim issued by a gentry family, now staking out its special space in central Norwich. Given how small the center of the town was, we can say that the Pastons were but five minutes from the great marketplace church of St Peter Mancroft, and they certainly would have been (envious?) spectators as the monumental east window was installed in the greatest of Norfolk’s parish churches.33 But at a level the Pastons would have considered to be affordable and befitting their own status, they offered their assertion of self in stone and glass and wood, even if no one other than Walter would rest there until the Second Coming. This church stands as the family’s contribution to the glories of Europe’s “most religious city,” as Norman Tanner has termed it, and at least we can say that Margaret was going to leave her mark in town, even if her body was to go elsewhere, back to one of those little villages where she felt more at home and, perhaps, more in control.

The expertise and devotion of David King have given us an idea of the glass that probably was in place as a result of the Paston’s rebuilding project of the 1460s, as well as a survey of what was installed in the early years of the sixteenth century (much of it in place when described by earlier historians and antiquarians but no longer to be found). Most of the fifteenth-century glass that remains, though as fragments and border decorations, dates from 1460–65. As such it is a reminder or remainder of what John I and Margaret supervised in their rebuilding of the church. In
addition, some of the work, both in the church’s architecture and some of the window design, is “almost identical” to work at Stody, whose donor Ralph Lampet was an active figure in Paston affairs, and many similarities between the St Peter Hungate work and the more elaborate work at St Peter Mancroft can still be identified. Beyond what we can see today, printed records and a fragment here and there tell of early-sixteenth-century glass with the heraldic devices of John II and John III, of a shield of Paston quartering Berry. There is a fragment of glass in a window with the word “marger” and this—or so King speculates—may have been from a window or a scroll bearing the name of Margery Brewes, the first wife of John III. This evidence of sixteenth-century additions, set in place a generation or so after Margaret’s death, does indicate a sustained Paston interest in St Peter Hungate. King dates much of the sixteenth-century work to around 1522, which, insofar as it was a Paston project, would put it in the hands of those who were of the generation after Margaret’s own children. But this sustained concern, as well as subsequent burials that might have taken place there, is but another of those many issues that leave no trace in the family letters.34

We have come to the end of the trail. Following Margaret’s footsteps, as she has blocked them out in her will, has led us on a journey to rather modest and out-of-the-way churches and places, to one of the great cathedrals of the kingdom, to two urban parish churches, past some broken arches and odd remnants, given us a passing reference to a long-lived hospital, and kindled memories of such lost glories as town gates, anchoresses, lepers, and a chapel or two. Not as rich a journey as we might have hoped for, given the specificity of our knowledge of the relevant places. Nor did we actually come upon any Paston burials or tombs. Nevertheless, it is a not unimpressive pilgrimage—the historicized path of someone we otherwise know from the written word—for what she says and what others say about her. We began the inquiry into Margaret Paston’s religious life and universe with a look at her calendar. Then we turned to what we could distill from her words. We have come to the end by way of a search for bricks and mortar that could be integrated into the fabric built on words. In this respect, we have had mixed luck, though we knew from the start that this would be the case. There are no remains specific to the Pastons, let alone to Margaret herself, but much remains that is evocative and perhaps not so different from what it had once been.

* * *

Having already played fast and easy with Margaret Paston’s life, beliefs, and physical or material world, I end with some speculations about that
which she kept most private of all—her emotional life and its unspoken links with her religiosity. An institutional church is not hard to reconstruct, but when we come to the realm of belief we enter a realm that is ever-so malleable and shifting. We can look at actions and we can take words at something like or close to face value, but how people internalized what they were saying and doing are mysteries that are in large part beyond us. If those saints whom Margaret named in her dating clauses took on a reality, let alone a historicity through her noting of their feast days, they would also have done so through the visual and oral presentation of their lives, miracles and martyrdoms—all as seen in churches or as known from devotional reading or as heard in countless sermons.

Beyond assertions of this sort we cannot say how Margaret felt, in any personal sense, about the faith that clearly was bound into her daily life in so many respects. To probe a bit at this speculation about emotion and conviction, we can revisit the death and last wishes of John I, only now it is to try to imagine something about Margaret’s emotional and spiritual condition, rather than to see how the bills were paid and the subsidized prayers apportioned. When John died, 22 May 1466, away from home and amidst all sorts of unfinished business, he left a widow in her early 40s. She had a brood of seven children to worry about, ranging in age from the early 20s for John II to about seven for William III and all of them as yet unmarried. The extensive if unsatisfactory documentation about John’s costly funeral process and burial, with its full measure of baked meats and fish and barrels of wine and all that went with this, proclaims the lavish nature of the proceedings. It was showy and expensive, something we also see in the rebuilding schemes John and Margaret had recently authorized for St Peter Hungate. These were both ways in which John made a declaration of his identity and his position as the Fastolf heir, now free to spend accordingly. It was not out of keeping with the culture of his world that he saved his most lavish display of self and identity for the last act of his drama—his funeral procession, his burial and the accompanying feast, and the prayers that would help him bridge that chasm between purgatory and heaven.

But a funeral is not just a socioreligious affair orchestrated to fuel the local economy, good as it may be for business and for personal reunions. It is also about saying farewell, about burying the dead and severing his or her ties with the living. The ritualization of grief and loss is designed to soften or obscure the finality of death and to offer an emotional bridge between the sorrow and pain of departure and the need of the living to get through to better days. So let us turn to the living, to the survivors of John I, instead of just being bemused by how much it cost to put the Paston patriarch to earth; John’s wife, his children, his siblings
(Elizabeth, William II, and Clement II), and his mother, as we can reach back to them in the spring of 1466. The documents we have talk of the responsibility of meeting costs, of obligations incurred and of purchases made and now to be paid for.

What about the widow’s feelings? We have nothing that even hints at tender or conjugal words, since John died in a rented room in London and Margaret learned of it, a few days later, while managing the household in Norfolk. Was she given special husband-to-wife instructions regarding prayers, or the distribution of possessions, or the care of the younger children? And if so, how was the message conveyed: word of mouth from the messenger who brought the bad news, or from others who followed, or by way of a John-to-Margaret letter that did not wind up in the collection? Had there been some agreement, worked out between John and Margaret about what to do in case of his death, unexpected as it was when it actually came to pass? We just do not know; nothing about his executors or supervisors, nothing about his personal goods. The focus on John’s infamous and long-unbuilt monument and the mother-son tension that centered in part around her sons’ procrastination regarding their father’s injunction deflects us from other aspects of a situation that gives us an absent husband, sudden death in early middle age, and a grieving widow-cum-overburdened mother. And in her grief and mourning, Margaret was accompanied or surrounded by a difficult mother-in-law and an intrusive brother-in-law, by children just at or not yet at legal age, and by a household staff and servants of unknown numbers and costs, not to mention legions of friends, supporters, creditors, partners in business enterprises, people of all ranks and callings who saw a possible opening for profit and advantage, along perhaps with cousins and others who might show up and expect to be given their own share of attention and a portion of the baked meats.

To what extent did Margaret’s religious convictions, her conventional spirituality, offer her a measure of consolation, hope, or stoicism with which to face the problems now dumped, without any warning, into her lap? Of this—perhaps the key moment of her emotional life, at least up to that time—we know nothing. Margaret’s letters take a chronological leap; her last one to John was dated 27 October 1465; her next, to John Berney (and written while John I was still alive, according to Davis’s dating) is dated sometime before 1 May 1466; the following letter and the first we have after her husband’s death, was written from mother to son, to John II on 29 October 1466. Nothing coming hard on the heels of John’s death, nothing from Margaret’s greenest and sharpest days of mourning and grief, nothing bespeaking the early woes and burdens of what was to be a long widowhood.
A little more in this vein. When John I died in 1466 the family was deeply mired in the agenda he had created; the Fastolf estate, the recovery of various other estates and manors being contested, the search for friends and partisans in high places, the choice of men for the shrievalty and for parliament, the opposition of some great figures, and so forth. The Pastons coped, if not always very successfully or cheerfully. By the time Margaret made her will some of these old issues had perhaps lost their urgency, while others had slipped from Margaret’s shoulders onto those of the men of the next generation. But once again, in 1479, emotional crises compounded the socioeconomic woes. Margaret was not called up to deal with the death of old Agnes nor, with more pain and less expectation, the deaths of John II in London and of Walter in Norwich. Again, her resolve was certainly being tested, her faith once more called upon as a bedrock on which she could rest. Was Walter her favorite by the end because his brothers were so problematic, or because he was destined for the church? Or, conversely, was he destined for the church because he was his mother’s favorite? Or are these unrelated issues: sending younger sons into the Church was mainstream behavior for the gentry. It suffices to say that if religion had been constructed to offer personal answers and consolation when fate dealt one a bad hand, Margaret had occasion, certainly in the painful and critical years of 1466 and 1479, to look to those answers; consolation at least, if not a glimpse into the great mysteries. In the assurance of the words of the liturgy, in the repetition of prayers, in the reception of the sacraments, and in the tolling of the anniversaries she had to find what strength her faith gave her. That she might be facing a long widowhood was something she might have imagined from the start, though how much this probability softened the actual blow when it fell is another matter.

Though it is not easy to wax sentimental about the Pastons, if any one of them evokes some sort of sympathy it is apt to be Margaret. Soft hearts may be captured by the clandestine marriage of daughter Margery and Richard Calle, but Margery fades from the scene too quickly and too quietly to compete with her mother, neither does she leave a paper trail to allow us see her up close. Margaret knew that she kept the home fires burning, and for this unfailing devotion she has won plaudits ever since Fenn first published the letters in the 1770s. Wedgwood referred to her as “the indomitable Margaret,” and Gairdner—moved to fulsome tribute perhaps beyond what the record really can support—said that her will shows “how strongly she felt the claims of the poor, the sick, and the needy as well as those of hospitals, friars, and parish churches.” Kingsford too has his turn: “the careful, wise, and prudent mother, feminine and practical but withal human, helpful to her husband, strict but
affectionate with her children.” 38 I have tried to show that the personal and the private were woven together in a garment that covered both her public activities and her matriarchal role within the family. Whether she would have been flattered by my metaphor, or my compliment, or my view of her spirituality, or whether she would have found my assessment presumptuous and even blasphemous is the last mystery I present and for which I have no answer.

The written record that has been preserved has not served us nearly as well as we might have wished regarding matters of faith within the family, wonderful as it is to have the letters at all. We might say the record indicates that Margaret Paston kept her own counsel, despite her many letters. I conclude this search by looking back at the premise with which I began—that Margaret Mautby Paston was pious and conventional, that the evidence argues that she took her faith very seriously, and that she never felt any need or desire to express herself in terms of personal revelation, let alone by raising awkward questions about life and devotion as it was taught and/or received. She was the typical and conventional lady on the Clapham omnibus and she rode it to the end of the line (though she might well have said she was entitled to ride first class). When she reached that end of the line, she probably crossed herself, clutched her book of hours, and prepared to get off when it was her turn to do so.