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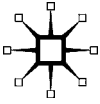
*Margaret Paston's Piety*  
by Joel T. Rosenthal

*Heloise and the Paraclete: A Twelfth-Century Quest* (forthcoming)  
by Mary Martin McLaughlin

# MARGARET PASTON'S PIETY

*Joel T. Rosenthal*

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MARGARET PASTON'S PIETY

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*To: Caroline M Barron, Carole Rawcliffe, and Carole Hill*



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## PREFACE

A long look at the religious life and practice of Margaret Paston, matriarch of the Pastons through much of the middle of the fifteenth century, can be characterized as an exercise in trying to learn more and more about less and less. This is a case study, a close reading, of sources that offer us the unusual opportunity to see how conventional religious conviction, expression, and behavior were integrated into the long, busy, and complicated life of a pious laywoman. What has drawn me to Margaret Paston is the premise that while she carried her spirituality with her at all times and in all circumstances, she never became a woman of enthusiasm; never given to mystical visions or inner revelations, let alone waves of revulsion against the life she was leading. In fact she almost never talked about her faith *per se*. She was a worldly figure—heiress, wife, mother, widow, and one who does not seem to have had any ambivalence (let alone any guilt or remorse) about either her sexuality or her rather lofty economic and social status. And since it behooves a social historian to look for what we can learn and reconstruct about daily—if not quite ordinary—life, Margaret Paston steps forward, an unwitting but informative subject for our inquiry.

Margaret Paston has drawn my interest over the course of many years. An interest in women's lives, in the religion of the late medieval laity, in family structure and intrafamilial interaction, and in the nature of epistolary expression have all come together in this study as I have worked my way through her letters and her will. Though she has hardly been neglected by historians (albeit her role as an author has been slighted), little effort has been made to gauge the extent to which Margaret Paston can stand on her own. We mostly know her as a vital link in the chain of the Paston family enterprise and correspondence, and we think of her in this setting. However, I try to work in these essays to separate her from the others and to see how much individualization we can extract from (or impose upon) her own words.

I first learned about the Paston letters and the family that produced them when H. Stanley Bennett came to the University of Chicago as a

visiting professor in the late 1950s. Though the family's letters and papers had been edited and published by John Fenn (starting in 1787, and he got knighted for his efforts), and then by James Gairdner in the late nineteenth century, and most recently (and definitively) by Norman Davis in the 1970s, and have been well explicated by Colin Richmond and Helen Castor in recent years, it was Bennett who really put the Pastons into the agenda of social history with his marvelous *The England of the Pastons: Studies in an Age of Transition* (1922 for its first edition). When he came to Chicago Bennett had recently completed his little volume *Six Medieval Men and Women* (1955), much in the model of his friend Eileen Power's classic *Medieval People* (1924 for its first edition) and in Bennett's deceptively learned collection of biographical essays he had chapters on both Sir John Fastolf and Margaret Paston. In his seminar, as we read and discussed the letters, he made the Pastons—John III and his love match, the fierce mothering of Agnes and Margaret, the amiable John II, and the others—into distinct people with personalities and eccentricities. If I have followed in his footsteps and have been able to add to our picture of Margaret Paston, I like to think that I absorbed something from his lectures and seminar, and I pay tribute here to the guidance and the enthusiasm that he shared so long ago.

As prefaces are wont to say, books seem to be a long time coming and many friends and colleagues have been supportive and sympathetic. I want to indicate a debt to Roger Virgoe, an old friend with whom—long before I expected to write about them myself—I discussed ways of focusing on the Pastons. Questions about the family that we mulled over in Robin DuBoulay's seminar in London, when I was a graduate student, are among the issues I have tried to address in these essays. And every historian owes a debt to the institutions within which he (and she) has been able to work. The Institute of Historical Research of the University of London and the New York Public Library have been my main historiographical hunting grounds, with help for manuscripts from the British Library, the Bodleian at Oxford, and the Spencer Collection of the New York Public.

Over the years colleagues have invited me to air bits of this work at conferences and seminars at Leeds, Cambridge, San Francisco, Chicago, and London. Gail McMurray Gibson had enough faith in my treatment of the family letters to invite me to write about them for the *Oxford Encyclopedia of British Literature*. Naomi Braun Rosenthal has been casual about my long-term affair with Margaret Paston, assuming that in due course it would prove to be just a passing infatuation. Many thanks to Bonnie Wheeler, editor of the "New Middle Ages" series, as well as to the in-house and always helpful editors ensconced in the Flatiron Building

and to the anonymous reader who advised me on how to tighten and focus my comments. Special thanks to N. W. Benson and C. M. Benson for their cheerful tolerance of the inconvenience caused them when I came to London “to look things up.” And regarding those friends to whom I dedicate this volume; in various combinations and at numerous times they have discussed Margaret Paston with me, read earlier versions of this work, encouraged me to finish it, and—neither last nor least—have taken me on tours of churches and pubs in Norwich and through the lonely and often bitterly cold countryside of rural Norfolk, all in an effort to help me run down what is left of “what did Margaret see.”

## ABBREVIATIONS

Blomefield—Francis Blomefield (and Charles Parkin), *An Essay towards the Topography of the County of Norfolk* (11 vols., London, 1805–10).

Cely—Alison Hanham, ed., *The Cely Letters and Papers, 1472–1485*, EETS, o.s. 273 (1975).

EETS—Early English Text Society

Gairdner—James Gairdner, ed., *The Paston Letters, 1422–1590 A.D.* (3 vols., Westminster: Constable, 1895).

NA—Norfolk Archaeological Society

ODNB—*Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

Plumpton—Joan Kirby, ed., *The Plumpton Letters and Papers*, Camden Society, fifth series, 8 (1990).

Stonor—Christine Carpenter, ed., *Kingsford's Stonor Letters and Papers, 1290–1483* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

VCH—Victoria County History

References to Norman Davis's edition of the Paston letters are simply given by volume and the number of the letter or paper (for example: I, 230).