

Department of Humanities, Northumbria University

Honours Dissertation

A feminist analysis of the reinforcement of patriarchal values within families of the late medieval gentry

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Introduction

The profound misogyny experienced by women in the late medieval era is widely known. However, many people take it for granted without analysing the oppressive structures which worked together to keep women in a subordinate position to men. The 'patriarchy' is defined by Arieane Rich as

a familial-social, ideological, political, system in which men – by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law, and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labour, determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male.¹

This dissertation will examine women's agency within the patriarchy, in particular, the way they navigated the oppressive values and barriers that were forced upon them as maidens, wives and widows within the family. It will examine the topic from a feminist perspective; which means analysis will be applied to understand the power inequalities between men and women. The patriarchal nature of the family structure in the Late Middle Ages was evident through the prioritisation of the survival of the patrimonial line. In terms of primary evidence this dissertation will refer to the letter collections of the Plumpton, Stonor and the Paston families; additionally, a variety of historiographical evidence will also be drawn upon in the construction of the argument. The book *English Aristocratic Women, 1450-1550: Marriage, and Family, Property and Careers*, by Barbara Harris, was fundamental to the writing of this dissertation. Her analysis of the 'contradiction between aristocratic women's actual lives and the deeply rooted patriarchal structures that defined their legal rights and material situation', was of particular relevance, and it is upon that which a lot of the research builds.² Similarly, Judith Bennett's feminist take on the Middle Ages and her criticisms of the lack of writing asking the 'difficult questions about the sexual dynamics of power

¹ Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (London: Virago, 1977), p. 21.

² Barbara Harris, *English Aristocratic Women, 1450-1550: Marriage, and Family, Property and Careers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 6.

within medieval society', have inspired the direction which this dissertation has taken.³ It is with this in mind that the dissertation will show the various forces which oppressed women, from the education of girls to the attitudes surrounding widows, and how, if at all, women lived within and around the barriers they experienced.

Gender history is a relatively recent phenomenon, as it intends to study, not just the history of women, but the power dynamics between men and women. Joan Wallach Scott writes that the societal construction of gender (as opposed to the biological classification of sex) can provide dangerous assumptions which twist interpretations of the past, for this reason she instructs historians to 'eschew the departmentalizing tendency of so much of social history that relegates sex and gender to the institution of the family.'⁴ Although this dissertation examines the lives of women within the late medieval family, it avoids predetermined ideas about the 'nature' of female personality, exploring (particularly in the first chapter), the way women were socialised to live compliantly in a patriarchal society.

Much of the study of women's history is not necessarily feminist, it acknowledges the inferior positions of women however it does not analyse the social, economic and political forces which kept women oppressed.⁵ There were several works which provide knowledge and analysis on which this dissertation has hoped to build with a feminist perspective in mind. The older historiography on the letter collections used present the archetypal male view of history; with H. S. Bennett referring to Margaret Paston as 'essentially a housewife', despite the fact that she led sieges and was an active participant in the business of the family estates.⁶ Where possible, secondary literature concordant with feminist perspective has been used to provide an in depth analysis of the experiences and constraints faced by women of the medieval gentry in all stages of their lives.

³ Judith Bennett, 'Feminism and History', in Sue Morgans (ed.), *The Feminist History Reader* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 61.

⁴ Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 6.

⁵ Bennett, 'Feminism and History', p. 61.

⁶ H. S. Bennett, *Six Medieval Men and Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955), pp. 109-110.

The work of Cordelia Beattie has inspired the chapters to be named *Maidens*, *Wives*, and *Widows*, as a reference to the way that the only classification of women within the same social class was judged to be their sexual status, and thus their relationship with men.⁷ The first chapter will explore the way that women were raised and exploited by their families as a means of climbing the social scale. The role that education plays in the conditioning of girls will be discussed, assessing how the contents of this (largely domestic) education would have socialized these women to 'view themselves as future wives'.⁸ It will assess the way young girls were exploited to gain familial influence through their service in other households and through marriage. Kim Phillips' work, *Medieval Maidens: Young women and gender in England, 1270-1540*, was essential to this chapter as it provided an insight into the lives of young women in the Late Middle Ages. It was incredibly useful in providing an understanding of the upbringing of medieval girls and how the methods and subject matter colluded to reinforce the gendered roles that the young women would grow to aspire to.⁹

The lives of women in marriage will be the focus of the second chapter. It will consider the various experiences of married women and where possible will draw upon primary material to look at female agency in the late medieval era. Harris' work was very useful for this, as was the multitude of letters written between spouses, which allowed for direct analysis of the relationships between husbands and wives. These relationships varied and held several points of interest; the fearfulness of women in unhappy marriages, the business-like attitudes of women taking a vital role in the running of their husband's estate, and the romantic musings of love. In reference to the Valentines letter sent by Margery Brewes, the chapter will briefly allude to the origins of the language of the heart.¹⁰

⁷ Cordelia Beattie, *Medieval Single Women: The Politics of Social Classification in Late Medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 15.

⁸ Harris, *English Aristocratic Women, 1450-1550*, p. 27.

⁹ Kim Phillips, *Medieval Maidens: Young women and gender in England, 1270-1540* (Manchester: Manchester Medieval Studies, 2003), p. 203.

¹⁰ Margery Brews, '897. Margery Brews to John Paston', in James Gardiner (ed.), *The Paston Letters* (Reading: Sutton Publishing, 1983), Vol. 5, p. 267.

Finally, the third chapter will consider the way widows operated in a society which valued women's position only through their relationship with men. For this, Sue Sheridan Walker's edited volume of essays held several works of importance. Especially influential was James Brundage's work on the moral questions surrounding the remarriage of widows, as he argues that widowhood was seen as a second opportunity for chastity and the church saw widows as a threat to the moral safety of society.¹¹ For example, Shulamith Shahar informs the reader of the legal right of widows to press charge against their husband's murderer, however this piece will build upon this and analyse the way in which this was another patriarchal attitude being placed upon women; that they were only seen to be useful in a legal matter if they could defend their deceased husband.¹²

The letter collections which are drawn upon in this dissertation have been invaluable in the exploration of female agency while also providing an insight into the attitudes towards women which women themselves had to overcome daily. *The Plumpton Letters and Papers* (ed. Joan Kirby), shows operations of a northern knightly family, members of the gentry with influences across the North and the Midlands.¹³ The sources used in this work primarily concern Sir Robert and his sister Katherine Chadderton, and Sir Robert's son, Sir William, William's first wife Agnes, and his second wife Joan. The collection contains several letters of interest, such as those between Agnes Plumpton and her husband Sir Robert Plumpton exemplifying the partnership between spouses.¹⁴ In a similar strain, *Kingsford's Stonor Letters and Papers, 1290-1483* (ed. Christine Carpenter), gives an insight into the life of a family who rose in station through success in the legal profession, the most successful means of social mobility, considering the unpredictable administration in the Middle Ages

¹¹ James A. Brundage, 'Widows and Remarriage: Moral Conflicts and Their Resolution in Classical Canon Law', in Sue Sheridan Walker (ed.), *Wife & Widow in Medieval England* (Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan University Press, 1993), pp. 17-31.

¹² Shulamith Shahar, *The Fourth Estate: A History of Women in the Middle Ages* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1983), p. 14.

¹³ Joan Kirby, 'Introduction', in Joan Kirby (ed.), *The Plumpton Letters and Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 152.

¹⁴ Sir Robert Plumpton, '162. Sir Robert to Dame Agnes Plumpton [9 September 1502]', in Joan Kirby (ed.), *The Plumpton Letters and Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 152.

which made political careers considerably dangerous.¹⁵ The letters used in the following chapters will refer to Joan and Thomas Stonor, and their children. Their son William married Elizabeth Ryche, who had a daughter, Katherine, from her previous marriage; Katherine married Thomas Beston who was a business partner in the wool trade with the Stonors – the involvement of Elizabeth in the communications between Beston and Katherine will be analysed in the first chapter.¹⁶ Further exploration will consider other associates of the Plumptons, such as Thomas Mull and Thomas Restwold, and their writings to and about women.

In contrast to the Plumptons, who were noted as a ‘typical’ family by Christine Carpenter, the Pastons were a highly unusual family.¹⁷ The Paston family was an example of the way the Black Death led to an increased social mobility.¹⁸ Clement Paston borrowed money to send his son William to law school, a sound investment, as William became a Justice of the Court of Common Pleas in 1429 (aged 51).¹⁹ A good marriage to Agnes Berry and an heir, John I, set the Pastons on an upwards climb; John I went on to marry Margaret Mautby, who became the famous Margaret Paston, and they had several children, including Sir John Paston (II) and Margery.²⁰

The use of letter collections as a primary source have advantages and disadvantages. One of the most significant positives is the audience of a letter was only intended to the recipient, with few exceptions. This means that the author or sender (many letters were transcribed by secretaries) would have written much of their message at face value, without propaganda, unless they feared interception, making it easier to decode the intent of the sender. Similarly, in collections such as the Plumpton, Paston and Stonor families’, the sheer volume of preserved artefacts help build a picture of the families lives; letters surrounding the same topic, papers regarding the organisation of events,

¹⁵ Christine Carpenter, ‘Introduction’, in Christine Carpenter (ed.), *Kingsford’s Stonor Letters and Papers, 1290-1483* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 2-3.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

¹⁸ Norman Davies, ‘Introduction’, in Norman Davies (ed.), *The Paston Letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), pp. vii-xi.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

and financial records, allow for cross referencing and checking the concordance of the data. Through the examination of these letter collections, alongside secondary research, this dissertation will examine the patriarchal restraints suffered by women of the gentry in the Late Middle Ages as maidens, wives and widows.

Chapter One: Maidens

Although there is no doubt that the period was highly oppressive for women, it was so deeply rooted that most women were unaware of its existence, however this does not mean that the time period cannot be viewed through a feminist lens, as long as modern assumptions are not forced on the past.¹ This chapter will examine the way girls were raised and conditioned to live in and accept the system of patriarchal control that was epitomized in the period. Women from the gentry and the aristocracy growing up in the late medieval era were 'socialised to view themselves as future wives,' and almost everything they were encouraged to do was in the effort to secure a successful marriage.² Furthermore, the way that mothers interacted with their children will be considered as a way of assessing the forces at work in conditioning women into a place of subordination. As children of noble families, the girls in question would have received a relatively good education, with the majority of them being literate.³ For unmarried girls, the pinnacle of their life was seen to be marriage, and for this reason, the emphasis on chastity was inescapable in all aspects of a girl's life. Kim Phillips states that a young woman's 'upbringing, training and experience was aimed at making them uncomplaining members of the useful secondary sex.'⁴ The constant stream of instruction preparing young women for marriage added to the socialisation which ensured girls grew up to view their main purpose to become wives.

¹ Judith M. Bennett 'Feminism and History', in Sue Morgan (eds.) *The Feminist History Reader* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 66.

² Barbara Harris, *English Aristocratic Women, 1450-1550: Marriage and Family, Property and Careers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 27.

³ Debora Youngs, *The Life Cycle in Western Europe, c.1300-c.1500* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), p. 78.

⁴ Kim M. Phillips, *Medieval Maidens: Young women and gender in England, 1279-1540* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), p. 203.

The Education of Women and Girls in the Gentry Class

Women from noble families and female members of the gentry were not representative of their lower-class contemporaries in the fact that they likely received a formal education and were mostly literate. Much of the education that girls received was considered preparation for their life as wives and mothers and to ensure that they could lead the life of a good Christian woman.⁵ For this reason young women were taught domestic skills, upper-class girls in particular were taught how to run households, however this was largely on an informal basis by female relatives and servants so there is very little remaining evidence.⁶ The education that girls received from their female family members trained them 'in the cultures and models of femininity which were undeniably patriarchal', writes Kim Phillips, adding that, 'as producers of most of the texts young women read or had read to them' men also held great influence over the shaping of the female mind from a young age.⁷ Showing that patriarchal ideas were perpetuated by both the men and the women involved in the education of girls, which influenced their perception of themselves and society, adding to the continual conditioning of patriarchal values.⁸

There is more information on the formal education of women and girls, as it was more likely to be recorded. In Thomas Stonor's will (1431), allowances were made for his daughters' education, alongside their food and clothing; '*in victu, vestitutu et doctrina*'.⁹ That fathers would put aside money for their learning shows how important the education of young women was to their families. The issue was further pursued a year later, in which an agreement was made to ensure that the education of Isabel Stonor would be provided for in the event of his death.¹⁰ The growth of the

⁵ Shulamith Shahar, *The Fourth Estate: A history of women in the Middle Ages* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 2003), p. 154.

⁶ Harris, *English Aristocratic Women*, pp. 32-33.

⁷ Helen Jewell, *Women in Medieval England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), p. 77.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Anon., '54. The Will of Thomas Stonor', in Christine Carpenter (ed.) *Kingsford's Stonor Letters and Papers: 1290-1483* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 148.

¹⁰ Anon., '56. Agreement for the Maintenance and Education of Isabel, Daughter of Thomas Stonor', in *Stonor Letters and Papers*, p. 138.

humanist movement worked in favour of women's education as it did not believe in the supposed inferiority of a woman's intellect as contemporary opinion supposed, opinion which they openly argued against.¹¹ Indeed, humanists thought that female studentship of the classics would improve their character in preparation for married life.¹² This purveys a confusing message as to the worth of a woman's education, on the one hand the humanist movement placed value on the formal academic education of women which had previously been rare outside of royal circles, while on the other, the education was only valued for its influence on women's futures as wives.¹³ Even when women were taught to read, the fictitious texts aimed at young girls were done so with the intent of preaching a message to them. One example of such is the *Book of the Knight of the Tower*, which professed the importance of obedience; 'it is in the contrary to a woman great shame and villainy to strive against her husband be it right or wrong.'¹⁴ This shows that texts produced for young women had the distinct intention of conditioning them into becoming the obedient model wife of the time. Harris' analysis states that, even with increasing access to education, there are no sources which could allude to the impact that humanist thinking had on women's perceptions of their own or their peers' mental capabilities.¹⁵ Furthermore, the subjects that women were taught further show that their education was almost solely for the purpose of making them more desirable to potential marriage partners, highlighting the fact that even humanist views on education did not improve women's positions in society, because they were still only valued on their potential relationships with men.

Indeed, in female education, emphasis was placed on religious texts which idolised the Virgin Mary or virtuous martyrs; presenting the chaste woman as the ultimate model for girls.¹⁶

¹¹ Harris, *English Aristocratic Women*, pp. 38-39.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Geoffrey de la Tour Landry, *Book of the Knight*, in Kim M. Phillips, *Medieval Maidens: Young women and gender in England, 1270-1540* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p.86.

¹⁴ Kim M. Phillips, *Medieval Maidens*, p.86.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 39.

¹⁶ Youngs, *The Life Cycle in Western Europe*, p. 78.

Young women growing up in the late medieval era would have struggled to find a realistic role model to aspire to, with the main teachings around womanhood coming from the contradictory images of Eve and of the Virgin Mary, with one representing the fall of mankind and the other the rebirth.¹⁷ Eileen Power argues that these ideas were developed in the middle ages and continued to be passed down through the generations; presenting girls with a dichotomy, the virgin was idealised, however they were expected to marry and bear heirs, thus coital relations were only acceptable for the means of procreation, and sexual appetite led to sin, as in the case of Eve.¹⁸ Every aspect of a girl's upbringing was engineered to reduce the risk of her losing her virtue, with emphasis being placed on their isolation and pastimes such as needlework, to keep them occupied and prevent them from going astray.¹⁹ The seriousness of chastity for an unmarried woman in the late medieval period is tantamount to the understanding of their lives. In a society which valued the patrimonial line, it was seen as essential for a woman to be a virgin upon marriage because of the threat her infidelity would pose to the legitimate continuation of the family name.²⁰ Female virtue was a guarantee that property would be passed on to the 'correct' heir without dispute.²¹ Thus the emphasis on the chastity of young women was a direct means of reinforcing patriarchal structures, through the repression of female sexuality so as to protect the integrity of the patrimonial name.

There were also practical limitations to the education of women and girls, which augmented the clutches of female oppression. Very few women were taught Latin, which, by default, contributed to their oppression because it limited their knowledge of legal proceedings, which were predominantly written in Latin.²² This is a clear indication of the patriarchy's institutionalised oppression of women; by restricting female access to legal language it increased their reliance on

¹⁷ Eileen Power, M. M. Postan (ed.) *Medieval Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 34.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 34.

¹⁹ Youngs, *The Life Cycle in Western Europe*, p. 78.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 142.

²¹ Anke Bernau, *Virgins: A Cultural History* (London: Granta Books, 2007), p. 33.

²² Harris, *English Aristocratic Women*, p. 37.

their male relatives and associates.²³ This is evident in the case of Dame Alice Ogard, who sought the advice of John Paston in 1456 over the disagreement surrounding ownership of property, in her letter she asked him ‘to be there assisting my counsell in my right as reson and law.’²⁴ Indeed, Phillips states that the women’s exclusion from Latin was political, as it was inextricable from the language of the law and the Church it was not believed that it was appropriate for women to study the topic.²⁵ On the other hand, Jewell argues that female absence from the theological and legal professions were not purposeful omissions, merely that the admittance of women had never even been considered.²⁶

The Exploitation of Women for Social Gain

Young aristocratic women were regularly exploited by their families as a means of gaining social standing. The placement of noble girls in other aristocratic, or even royal households was seen as a valuable part of their education and preparation for married life, as well as being a means of formulating links with important figures.²⁷ In many cases, it was a selfish move of the relatives hoping to gain from their daughters’ host families.²⁸ An example of young women’s exploitation is evident in a letter from Jane Stonor to her daughter, who was placed in the service of a noblewoman and was involved with the court of the queen, Elizabeth Woodville. Jane Stonor had upset the queen in some way and wanted her daughter to look kindly upon her parents because they did not mean to upset her or the queen.²⁹ Jane reassures her daughter; ‘wher as ye thynk I sshuld be unkynde to yow, verrelly þat am I nat’.³⁰ The necessity of a mother to assure her daughter that she has not intended to put her in a difficult position at court supports the idea that the placement of young women in

²³ Ibid, p. 37.

²⁴ Dame Alice Ogard ‘327. Dame Alice Ogard to John Paston’, in James Gardiner (ed.), *The Paston Letters* (Reading: Sutton Publishing, 1983), Vol.3, p. 80.

²⁵ Philips, *Medieval Maidens*, p. 66.

²⁶ Jewell, *Women in Medieval England*, p. 17.

²⁷ Philips, *Medieval Maidens*, p. 108.

²⁸ Harris, *English Aristocratic Women*, p. 43.

²⁹ Jane Stonor, ‘120. Jane Stonor to her daughter’, *Stonor Letters and Papers*, pp. 210-211.

³⁰ Ibid

aristocratic households was a form of exploitation from which the girls themselves did not benefit.³¹ The source shows that Jane was using her daughter as a means of promoting herself, through the denial of intentionally upsetting the queen it is likely that Jane was hoping to return to the queen's favour once more.³² The royal household was responsible for the employment of several ladies, Margaret of Anjou had fifteen women dedicated to her in 1452-3, a combination of four personal attendants, nine ladies-in-waiting, and two chamberers.³³ These women were often a mix of married and unmarried, with many of them employing their own ladies-in-waiting, with a place at court such women were able to achieve more advantageous marriages.³⁴ Johanna Laynesmith writes that the position of these women 'fascinated the contemporary imagination', as they were often in the public eye, accompanying the queen in state duties and in leisure.³⁵ The role of the queen's ladies was largely domestic and their popularity with the public was often a result of the objectifying male gaze, as many of the single women were there in the pursuit of marriage and thus viewed in a superficial level by potential matches.

Even more than the placement of girls in other aristocratic households, marriage was the main manipulation of women for the gain of their families. Marriage was a steadfast way of building links with other noble families and daughters' main value within a family depended upon her marriage potential. Girls were very rarely agents of their own marital fate, Harris states that 'with few exceptions, parents were the actors and daughters the objects in the transactions' of marriage.³⁶ The letters referring to the engagement and marriage of Thomas Betson and Katherine Ryche (Elizabeth Stonor's daughter from her first marriage) show the exclusion of brides from

³¹ Harris, *English Aristocratic Women*, p. 43.

³² Jane Stonor, '120', *Stonor Letters and Papers*, pp. 122-123.

³³ J. L Laynesmith, *The Last Medieval Queens: English Queenship 1445-1503* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 226.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

³⁶ Harris, *English Aristocratic Woman*, p. 44.

conversations surrounding their own marriages.³⁷ Betson predominantly discusses his concerns about his fiancé with Elizabeth Stonor, in June 1478 he requested that Elizabeth would relay the contents of his letter to Katherine; 'wold she knew as mych as you know', he wrote.³⁸ Furthermore, the letter was written very close to the time of their marriage, demonstrating the extent of female omission from a dialogue about themselves, even so close to the union of the two people. Betson's compulsion to talk about Katherine to other people and rarely to Katherine herself further supports Harris' argument that women were merely pawns in the negotiations of their own futures, highlighting the confinements on their lives that was a result of the patriarchal structures innate to their society.

The arrangement of the marriage of Margaery Blount and William Stonor further demonstrates the subjugation of women as a consequence of the institution of marriage. When Margaery was not immediately forthcoming with her agreement, a priest and a messenger were instructed not to leave her residence until they received a reply from her.³⁹ The forcefulness of the groom and his associates shows the vulnerability of women in this situation, at the whims of their male contemporaries. Similarly, a letter between Edward and Sir Robert Plumpton refers Agnes Drayate (the potential bride) and the influence of her 'friends' on the marriage negotiations. The third chapter will consider the case of Margaery Blount and Agnes Drayate in further detail, particularly in reference to their status as widows, which would have influenced the amount of authority they would have had over their own lives. Nonetheless, the letters still have value in a chapter talking about 'maidens' and first marriages, because of their reference to the aforementioned 'friends' and the power that they had over the future of a prospective bride. Lawrence Stone defines the phrase: 'used in the plural, as "my friends", the word before the

³⁷ Kim Philips, *Medieval Maidens*, p.68.

³⁸ Thomas Betson, '217. Thomas Betson to Dame Elizabeth Stonor', *Stonor Letters and Papers*, pp. 310-311.

³⁹ Thomas Mull, '124. Thomas Mull to Thomas Stonor', *Stonor Letters and Papers*, pp. 215-216.

eighteenth century always meant no more than “my advisors, associates and backers”⁴⁰. Such people were involved in the decision making process in both the gentry and aristocratic classes and, except for the occasional involvement of mothers, the majority of these friends would have been male, for it was men who could offer the legal advice and the financial endorsement.⁴¹ The involvement of male relatives in the arrangement of women’s marriages shows how effective the systems of female oppression were, until widowhood, women were not free of male authority, passed from father to husband with little or no input of their own.

The extent of the misogyny that women had contend with is demonstrated in a letter between Thomas Restwold to Sir William Stonor, in which Restwold discusses the many ‘flaws’ of an anonymous lady.⁴² He wrote that, despite the fact she owned land worth 500 marks, ‘she was so fowle’ and at the age of 27 she was not a good prospect for marriage.⁴³ This blunt assessment of the unidentifiable figure shows how women were valued; her age for the sake of childbearing, the price of her land and her outward appearance. This supports the idea that in most cases, men decided whether a woman was a worthy marriage prospect, the criteria for which was decided on how far the men themselves could benefit from their own or their daughter’s marriage, with women having very little say in the matter.

This chapter has explored the way young women were raised within the oppressive social structures that confined their experiences. The informal education of young women began at a young age, and as a result they were socialised to see themselves only through the misogynistic lens that typified the culture of the time. The emphasis on chastity for the primary benefit of the patrimonial line is an example of the manifestation of male chauvinism in the legal and social confines of the later Middle Ages. Furthermore, the way that young women were manipulated and

⁴⁰ Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (London: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1977), p. 97.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 98.

⁴² Thomas Restwold ‘290. Thomas Restwold to [Sir William Stonor]’, *Stonor Letters and Papers*, pp. 125-6.

⁴³ *Ibid*, pp. 125-6.

exploited for familial gain demonstrates the way they were viewed as tools to aid the dynastic climb up the social scale.

Chapter Two: Wives

This chapter will explore the experiences of married women and their role as wives within the patriarchal institution of marriage in the late medieval period. As a structure which had the predominant function of the creation of an heir in the patrimonial name, women were the disadvantaged party from the outset. Georges Duby states that the rules established by marriage were an institutionalised way of granting authority and power to men for the preservation of the male line of descent.¹ In this vein the institution itself reinforced the subordination of women, they became legally defined as a *femme covert*, and they sacrificed all legal rights to any property they had brought into the union.² When a woman got married she lost all formal rights to her property and was expected to be submissive to her husband. However, the day to day reality of many married women was not necessarily that of constant oppression, or at least it would not have felt like that. Many noble women, as will be shown in this chapter, used their positions as wives to their advantage, working as business partners with their husband in the running of the estate and household, which was a source of power for these women.³ Conducting most of their life in the domestic sphere, the women were responsible for the household and often wise to the ventures of their husband, so much so that they would take on his affairs in his place should he have been absent.⁴ Furthermore, the discussion surrounding late medieval marriage often discounts the agency of women, disregarding the idea that, as autonomous beings, they made their own choices, attempting secure the most advantageous situation for themselves and their families. Furthermore, traditional historiography suggests that women were merely pawns in their family's political strategy and they resigned themselves to life within an arranged marriage, absent of emotional connection,

¹ Georges Duby *Love and Marriage in the Middle Ages* (Chicago: Polity Press and the University of Chicago, 1994) Translated by Jane Dunnett, p. 3.

² Debora Youngs, *The Life Cycle in Western Europe, c.1300-c.1500* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), p. 132.

³ Barbara J. Harris, *English Aristocratic Women, 1450 – 1550: Marriage and Family, Property and Careers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 64.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 64.

however letter collections show glimpses of stories of real, romantic love even within arranged marriages.⁵

Marriage as a Partnership

Women of the nobility were vital for the success of the household and their role cannot be underestimated. Barbara Harris likens their positions to that of their husbands' 'de facto, if junior partners'.⁶ She argues that a woman's agency is often under emphasised, and women willingly worked to please their husbands, which was in both partner's interests.⁷ Indeed, the letters women wrote to their husbands show that they were taking initiative in their running of the household and the estate. However, many of the primary sources confirm that women were primarily undertaking roles within the domestic sphere, and often under direct instruction from their husbands. In 1502, Sir Robert Plumpton wrote to his wife Dame Agnes Plumpton telling her to 'see that the manor and the place of Plumpton bee surely and steadfastly kept'.⁸ This letter shows the reader that Agnes Plumpton was responsible for the household, and yet she was still expected to follow the orders of her husband, even when the matter at hand was directly related to what was considered a wife's domain.

More significantly, there is substantial evidence of married women participating in the financial affairs of the estate. Agnes Stonor received a letter in the May of 1481 which discussed the rent of the alms houses on the Stonor lands, referring to the death of a tenant and the need to replace him in order to continue receiving revenue from the property.⁹ Although Agnes died several

⁵ Elizabeth Stonor, '69. Elizabeth Stonor to William Stonor', in Christine Carpenter (ed.), *Kingsford's Stonor Letters and Papers, 1290-1483* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 266-267, and Margery Brews '897. Margery Brews to John Paston', in James Gardiner (ed.), *The Paston Letters* (Reading: Sutton Publishing, 1983), Vol. 5, p. 267.

⁶ Harris, *English Aristocratic Women*, p. 64.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 73.

⁸ Sir Robert Plumpton, Letter No. 162, in Joan Kirby (ed.), *The Plumpton Letters and Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 152.

⁹ Richard Germyn '289. Richard Germyn to Dame Agnes Stonor, 1st May [1481]', in *Stonor Letters and Papers*, pp. 124-125.

days after the letter was sent so probably never read it, it shows that she was crucially involved in the running of the estate, taking on financial responsibilities, being in a position to make vital decisions which effected the prosperity of the Stonor family.¹⁰ Further evidence of women taking part in the administration of land and produce is seen in the records of the Plumpton, in which Isabel Plumpton (Lady of the manor at the time of writing) was informed of the state of the farm.¹¹ Ralph Aldeburgh's letter briefs lady Plumpton on the status of cereals, 'sswine', and the value of a 'sorrell nag' (horse); showing how the position of knowledge that she would have been in, even in the typically male aspects of the estate.¹² The idea that women and their husbands were in a relationship which worked towards the collective interest is evidenced by the financial balance which Robert and Agnes Plumpton appear to have had at the start of the sixteenth century. Although the dates are not certain, within two years there is evidence of both spouses writing to ask the other for money; in doing so they contradict the idea of the wife balancing the accounts while the husband carefully holds the drawstrings to the purse.¹³ In her advice for noblewomen's conduct, Christine de Pisan, one of the only published women of the time, notes the importance of a wife's financial knowledge because 'in order for such a woman to act with good judgement, she must know the yearly income of her estate.'¹⁴ This shows that, although women's lives were predominantly played out in the home, the issues in which they were involved were very public, and masculine from a traditional perspective of gender roles.

¹⁰ Ibid, pp. 124-125.

¹¹ Ralph Aldeburgh, '251. Ralph Aldeburgh to Mrs Isabel Plumpton, 2nd February [?1551/2]' *Plumpton Letters and Papers*, pp. 226-7.

¹² Ibid, pp. 226-7.

¹³ Robert Plumpton, '185. Sir Robert Plumpton to Dame Agnes, 13 February 1503/4', in *Plumpton Letters*, pp. 169-70, and Agnes Plumpton '186. Dame Agnes Plumpton to 'Sir Robert Plumpton, 19th March [1503/4]', in *Plumpton Letters and Papers*, p. 171.

¹⁴ Christine de Pisan, 'Christin de Pisan: Advice for Noblewomen (1405)', in Emilie Amt (ed.), *Women's Lives in Medieval Europe: A Sourcebook* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p.64.

The idea of the two partners working in unison is further shown in Lady Agnes Plumpton's reaction to the arrest of one of the Plumpton's tenants, Edmund Ward.¹⁵ Three days after receiving the news from William Normanville Agnes informed her husband that 'they have taken Edmund Ward at Knaresbrough and arest him'.¹⁶ This was crucial to the state of the manor because it meant a loss of income from his rent payments (which he could no longer pay and his neighbours could not substitute), again demonstrating the way in which wives took part in the running of the estate outside the realms of the household.¹⁷ The three day gap between the letters being written is also significant; Agnes took initiative, wrote to the sheriff and made her own attempts to resolve the situation that had arisen. She then wrote to her husband to inform him of the events and the actions that she had taken, sending him copies of the paperwork involved in the case, and then appeals to him to 'get some commandment to the scherefe þat the prosses may be stoped'.¹⁸ It also demonstrates female knowledge of the legal system, as Agnes liaised with the various men responsible for the sake of her servant. This shows the way in which women acted in their own interests within the undoubtedly patriarchal structure that was marriage.

Women and Politics

The common assumption of medieval women is that they did not take part in the political domain of the country, which is the public sphere. Although there were very few women with significant political influence outside of the royal family, many noble women followed the affairs that were conducted at court, and often taking part in the vital discussions that it involved. In the social structure which they operated in it would certainly be in a married woman's interest to know the political climate, so that they and their families could steer themselves in a way that would best improve the family's social standing. The letters of Margaret Paston give great insight into female

¹⁵ Agnes Plumpton, '188. Dame Agnes Plumpton to Sir Robert Plumpton, 12th April [1504]', *Plumpton Letters and Papers*, pp. 171-2.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

involvement in politics; with the family's complex association in the War of the Roses. One example of this was in a letter written by Margaret to her husband in the aftermath of the battle of St Albans in which she uses strong language to describe the events that had taken place, showing how passionate she was about the outcome of the conflict.¹⁹ The letter itself was sealed tightly with precautions against interception; demonstrating the priority that Margaret placed on the letter arriving to her husband safely and intact.

Margaret Paston also later described the complex relationships between the elites and royals when writing to John Paston, information that would have been essential to the successful navigation of royal courts. The letter stated that 'the Duke of Suffolk is pardonyd, and hath his men azen waytyng up on hym, and is rytz wel at ese and mery, and us ub the Kyngs gode grase, and in the gode conseyt of all the Lords, as well as ever he was', showing that the duke of Suffolk was in the kings favour once more.²⁰ For Margaret to know this shows that she was very up to date with current affairs, demonstrating her political shrewdness. It is also important to consider the fact that Margaret is informing John of political context. This shows that Margaret is receiving her information from correspondents other than her husband, dismantling the image of the two spouses in separate spheres; one in the domestic and one in the public, as separate entities which never overlap. Further evidence of this is Margaret's role in the Paston's military involvements, in 1449 she defended the Gresham manor house against Lord Moleyns' men.²¹ Showing that Margaret's role as the female authority in a socially climbing family presented challenges which put her outside of the normal expectations of a medieval woman.

Marriage as a Romantic Union

Marriage in late medieval England was primarily a functional transaction; and although many couples grew to like each other, it is rare to see romantic correspondence between betrothed

¹⁹ Margaret Paston, '432. Margaret Paston to John Paston', *The Paston Letters*, Vol. 3, pp. 252-3.

²⁰ Margaret Paston, '106. Margaret Paston to John Paston', *The Paston Letters*, Vol. 2, p. 136.

²¹ Helen Jewell, *Women in Medieval England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), p. 147.

couples. This explains the fame of the Valentine's letter sent by Margery Brews to John Paston, confessing her love for him:

'Ryght reverent and wurschypfull, and my ryght wele-beloved Voluntyne, I recomande me unto yowe, ffull hertely desyryng to hear of yowr welfare, which I beseche Almyghty God long for to preserve un to Hys pleasur and your hearts desyre. And yf it please yowe to hear of my welfar, I am not in good heele of body, nor of herte, nor schall be tyll I hear ffrom yowe... Myne herte me bydds ever more to love yowe, truly over all erthely things.'²²

This was of course a rare occurrence. This is an exceptional glimpse into the intimate thoughts of a medieval woman; highlighting, yet again, the beauty of letter collections as primary sources. For later on in the letter, Margery wrote that 'this bill be not seen by any non earthly creature save only yourself,' showing that her words were written with the intention of only being read by John Paston.²³ Margery's mention of her 'full hearted desire', and poor health of heart allude to the medieval perceptions of emotions. The use of the heart as a symbol of love was a result of Galenic thinking states Fay Bound Alberi, writing that the 'heart warmed the blood in order to generate and sustain particular emotional states; it moved in response to the sensations of anger, love, and fear'.²⁴ This expression, which is still employed metaphorically today, shows the understanding of emotions in the Middle Ages. The letter itself gives the reader valuable insight into the agency of women, they were not merely pawns in their family's political agenda, but they were humans with their own thoughts and emotions. Likewise, Elizabeth Stoner repeatedly showed genuine affection for her husband, and there is evidence of him returning her sentiment, as she wrote to tell him how pleased she was that he had wished for her company.²⁵ Similarly, when Stonor suffered an outbreak

²² Margery Brews, '897. Margery Brews to John Paston', *The Paston Letters*, Vol. 5, p. 267

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Fay Bound Alberti, *Matters of the Heart: History, Medicine, and Emotion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 3-4.

²⁵ Harris, *English Aristocratic Women*, p. 74.

of smallpox she pleaded with him to return to London, writing 'ffor in trowth I hadde will hopid that your horsis shulde a ben here as pis night'²⁶ Margery Brews' letter in particular shows female manipulation of the contemporary 'ideal woman' to her own advantage; Margery used typical feminine ideals to promote herself to John, promising to be an obedient and grateful wife should he marry her, despite her small dowry her father could offer.²⁷ This exemplifies the way late medieval women internalised the oppressive structures and reinforced them themselves, through affirming her eligibility Margery placed herself in an a submissive position typical of the time; whilst arguably using them to her advantage through gaining an advantageous marriage.²⁸

Unhappy Marriages

Unfortunately, the cases of Margery Brews and Elizabeth Stonor were highly irregular, and many wives suffered greatly at the hands of their husbands. In the 1450s, George Plumpton received a letter in which his sister Katherine Chadderton expressed her concern over their sister, who she claimed 'liveth as heauy a life as any gentlewoman borne'.²⁹ She then goes on to describe Katherine's husband, who 'is all rong, he is eur in trouble, and all the ioy in earth hath she when my husband cometh to her'.³⁰ The letter demonstrates the fear Katherine feels for her sister's welfare, which was highly justified considering the little power that women were able to wield in marriages in the fifteenth century. Women and children were seen as subordinates to their husbands in the way the population was subject to the commands of a king.³¹ The price of defying her husband was incredibly high, because of the philosophy that men were the 'king' of the household, for a family

²⁶ Elizabeth Stonor, '69. Elizabeth Stonor to William Stonor, 12th September, 1476', in *Stonor Letters and Papers*, pp. 266-267.

²⁷ Kim M. Phillips, *Medieval Maidens: Young women and gender in England, 1270-1540* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 185.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Katherine Chadderton, '2. Katherine Chadderton to George Plumpton, [c.1450 x 1455]', in Joan Kirby (ed.), *The Plumpton Letters and Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 24-5.

³⁰ Ibid, pp. 24-5.

³¹ Jean-Louis Flandrin, Richard Southern (trans.), *Families in Former Times: Kinship, Household and Sexuality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 1.

member to attack him was considered 'petty treason,' and could result in capital punishment.³² In contrast, the patriarch had the freedom to run his household, as was his God given right, and in most cases, it was only God he had to answer to, as few would have questioned the way he ran his home.³³ Katherine's appeal shows that women themselves acknowledged the risks of marriage within the era, their husbands too in this case, as Katherine mentions how pleased her sister was to see him. The significance of Katherine's husband and brother's involvement shows that unhappy marriage was not merely seen as a 'women's issue,' showing the range of women's positions as wives.

The reality if most noble women was to marry a man who their family had picked out, however it was not always as simple and many families had to deal with the scandal of clandestine marriages. Margaery and Anne Paston were both involved in marital scandals; Margaery married the Paston's bailiff and Anne's liaison with a family servant was resolutely ended with his dismissal.³⁴ As a result of her elopement, Margaery was outcast from the family, with her own mother complicit. The treatment of Margaery demonstrates how the structures which oppressed women operated; for many women, as long as they followed the behaviour which was subscribed to their gender, then the oppression was often invisible, however, those who deviated from the social norms were met with complete repression, as was Margaery. This was particularly the case when it came to crimes and deviations of a sexual nature. Female sexuality was strongly repressed in fifteenth century society; Eve's original sin was supposed to act as a warning against lust.³⁵ Indeed, women who committed adultery would be much more at risk of punishment than their male counterparts. Sir John Paston himself had a child born out of wedlock, however there is no substantial evidence of disapproval from his family, quite in contrast to that of his sister Margery.³⁶ Indeed, Margaret Paston

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Harris, *English Aristocratic Women*, p. 56.

³⁵ Jewell, *Women in Medieval England*, p. 23.

³⁶ Anon, '977. Margaret Paston's Will', *Paston Letters*, Vol. 6, p. 52.

bequeathed the illegitimate child ten marks, should she reach the age of twenty, showing that the outcome of Sir John's fornications had been accepted into the family well enough to receive a substantial monetary sum, Margery's child however, did also receive a substantial dedication, showing that Margaret's original anger had subsided.³⁷ Additionally, in the *Book of the Knight of the Tower*, a contemporary fiction aimed at young women which places such priority on female virtue and loyalty, the Knight warns his daughters against jealousy should their husbands commit adultery, noting that they could win back his favour through the feminine ideals of good manners and submission.³⁸ Although this inequality is striking to a modern reader, Harris asserts that women were punished more for adulterous behaviour out of fear for the survival of the patrimonial line; which was so highly valued by medieval families.³⁹ It was the importance that was placed on the endurance of the patrimonial line that reinforced the patriarchal structures that kept women oppressed in the late medieval era.

The evidence presented in this chapter shows that the experiences of late medieval married women could vary greatly, even in the narrow context of three noble families and their associates. Most importantly the chapter has shown how married women were not content to be pawns within the battles of their families, but they possessed their own agency, which they used to navigate their way through the patriarchal structures that they encountered. It has also demonstrated the way married couples worked in partnership with one another, with women taking responsibility for the running of the house and the estates in the absence of their husbands, even taking control in situations of political and military uncertainty. Furthermore, the complexities of marriage show there was no universal experience, with women such as Margery Brews and Elizabeth Stonor demonstrating the possibility of romantic love. Margery Paston too experienced such love, however the contrast between the social acceptance of Brews and Stonor with her own unpleasant treatment

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Kim M. Phillips, *Medieval Maidens* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p.153.

³⁹ Harris, *English Aristocratic Women*, p. 85.

exposes the importance that social class held for the Paston family. The chapter has shown the way women navigated the patriarchal restriction that they faced within the family structure, many effectively making successful careers out of management of the lands. Ultimately, however, the legal and cultural structures forced women to fit themselves into a society whose entire function was the preservation of the patrimonial line.

Chapter Three: Widows

As a consequence of marrying men several years their senior, most women in the medieval era anticipated widowhood at some point in their lives.¹ However, Debora Youngs points out the difficulty in drawing comparisons between the widows and widowers due to the way society tied the identity of women to the men in their lives, whereas men were identified in their own right.² The chapter will argue that the identification of women through their male relatives also posed risks for widows' property and physical safety, as it perpetuated the message that without a man a woman was not deserving of as much respect. It will also recognise the difference in legal position that the new status brought about and explore the extent to which widowhood really was a freer state of existence for late medieval women.³ Finally, the chapter will look at the attitudes to the remarriage of widows and consider how these ideas attributed to the issues faced by widows at the time and how they were a backlash against the freedoms that came with a new kind of female independence.

Legal Position of Widows

Due to the position of women as legal dependents on their fathers and then on their husbands, after the death of their husband, many women were theoretically a lot freer than they had been since birth. Women who lost their husbands had more legal independence, with many of them using widowhood to their advantage.⁴ One such change was their ability to press charges against her husband's killer; there is evidence of this in the Paston letter collection. When the Pastons were fighting over Caister Castle with the duke of York, the duke tried to encourage the widows involved to appeal their husbands' deaths, so as to favour his own case.⁵ This right, however, was the only

¹ Debora Youngs, *The Life Cycle in Western Europe, c.1300-c.1500* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), p. 148.

² *Ibid*, p. 153.

³ Caroline M. Barron, *Medieval London Widows, 1300-1500* (London: Hambledon Press, 1994), p. xiiv.

⁴ Philippa C. Maddern, 'Widows and their Lands: Women, Lands and Texts in Fifteenth-Century Norfolk', *Parergon*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (2002), p. 126.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 130.

circumstance in which a woman could press charges, as a widow accusing her husband's murderer.⁶ The fact that women in the Middle Ages could only indict another person when a man had been killed shows how a woman's only value in that society was seen through her relationship with men.

There are also several instances of widows having legal interactions with their families, particularly when there has been controversy around the settlement of her husband's estate. An arbitration between Jane Stonor and her son William shows that there were disagreements over the will of Thomas Stonor, of which both were executors.⁷ This shows a woman undermining her son, which would have been very rare for the time, as even younger adult males in the family were deemed to be superior to the women in the household in legal matters. Furthermore, the source presents an example of widow's involvement in the execution of their spouses' wills, which was common.⁸ A letter in the Stonor collections provides an insight into the contemporary attitudes to women taking on the role of executor. Thomas Betson, upon falling ill, made a will and named his wife Katherine executor, along with two other associates. Richard Bryan, however, wrote to William that he advised 'that he shuld breke this testament, and mak my mastresse his wyfe sole executrices.'⁹ Bryan's recommendation shows that he saw Elizabeth as a capable figure in the settlement of Thomas Betson's estate should he pass away. His view was compatible with many others from the time, as it was very common for women to be named as executors for their husband's testaments, showing the trust that men had in their wives.¹⁰ However, for Betson to make his wife the only executor of his will is out of the ordinary, as usually the man's male relatives or associates would have been involved.¹¹ This is another example of female involvement in legal

⁶ Shulamith Shahar, *The Fourth Estate: A History of Women in the Middle Ages* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1983), p. 15.

⁷ Anon, '157. An Arbitration between William Stonor and his Mother', *Kingsford's Stonor Letters and Papers, 1290-1483* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 250-252.

⁸ Shahar, *The Fourth Estate*, p. 16.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Helen Jewell, *Women in Medieval England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), p. 22.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

matters, showing that despite societal forces, particularly women's exclusion from Latin schooling, they still played important roles in legal matters.

Relationship with Relatives

There were also cases of widows' positions being exploited by their male relatives. One such example is that of Lady Muleverer, whose son convinced her to sign over her jointure to him in return for an annuity;

'as for my sister enterest, I shall comyn with wyse lerne men, shew to them how þe matter stands between my sayd sister & my nese as nere as I can. I shall shew them of the exchang and of þe closser byside Sober Hell, and also what þe Law will, if my sayd sister was agreed afore wytnesse þat my nephew shold have my sister iointer and dower for termr of hir lyfe, if yt be by indenter. ¹²

This account demonstrates the lengths that men would go to in order to gain a better deal in the family inheritance. To consult the counsel of 'wyse lerne men', Mauleverer cannot have had a lot of respect for the legal rights of widows. Indeed, James Bundage highlights the vulnerability of widows, as their newly independent status could leave them at risk of attack on both their person and property.¹³ Aside from the experience of bereavement, widows would have found themselves in an unfamiliar position in terms of the ownership of property, making them a target for relatives, overlords and even the king, all trying to grasp at the inheritance.¹⁴ This shows that women were not held in high regard by the men who posed a threat to them; alluding to the misogynistic attitudes of the time. In the Paston collection there is a letter alluding to the vulnerability felt by the widow of

¹² Halnath Mauleverer '40. Halnath Mauleverer to Sir Robert Plumpton, Miles Wilstrop, John Pullein and Robert Birnand, 13th May [1480 x 1486]', in *The Plumpton Letters and Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 61-62.

¹³ James A. Brundage, 'Widows and Remarriage: Moral Conflicts and Their Resolution in Classical Cannon Law', in Sue Sheridan Walker (ed.), *Wife and Widow in Medieval England* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1993), p. 25.

¹⁴ Jewell, *Women in Medieval England*, p. 127.

Thomas Deynes after the death of her husband. Margaret Paston wrote to her husband to explain her situation;

‘For as towchyng hyr owne person, she dare not goo home to hyr owne place, for she is thret if that she might be take, she shuld be slayne or be put in ferfull place, in shorting of hyr lyve dayes, and so she standyth in gret hevynes, God her helpe’¹⁵

Lady Deynes’ situation demonstrates the societal respect for women in relation to men. The way that women were more likely to be targeted by male adversaries and even relative shows the poor esteem which women were held in when faced with independence, often for the first time in their lives.

Remarriage of Widows

High rates of remarriage exposed a lot of societies’ ideas about widows as independent women. For the first time in the female life cycle, widows were relatively free from male control, which was considered a threat by many contemporary authorities.¹⁶ The remarriage of widows was a way of keeping women in subversion of men and within the patriarchal confinements of marriage.¹⁷ Indeed, the forcefulness of negotiations between Thomas Stoner and Margery Blount has already been discussed in the first chapter; as a widow Margery’s position was precarious, she had considerable wealth to her name, which she would have been well aware would have been subsumed into the property of a man should she marry.¹⁸ Societal forces may have pushed her to remarry, as remarriage was a means of apportioning her wealth to another male again, sacrificing her legal

¹⁵ Margaret Paston, ‘466. Margaret Paston to John Paston’, in James Gardinair (ed.), *The Paston Letters*, (Reading: Sutton Publishing, 1983), Vol. 3, p. 287.

¹⁶ Barbara A. Hanawalt, ‘Remarriage as an Option for Urban and Rural Widows in Later Medieval England’, in Sue Sheridan Walker (ed.), *Wife and Widow in Medieval England* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1993), p. 141.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Sue Sheridan Walker, ‘Introduction’, in Sue Sheridan Walker (ed.), *Wife and Widow in Medieval England*, (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1993), p. 3.

independence as well.¹⁹ Furthermore, female sexuality was seen to be so dangerous that it had to be repressed; as a maiden her father would have controlled her and as a wife her husband would, however, as a widow a woman was considered a threat to the morality of the population.²⁰ Remarriage itself was a contentious subject in the eyes of moral authorities from the time, although it was practiced by at least half of widows, it was deplored by a large number of religious figures.²¹ Some theologians took the position that remarriage signified a widow's unbridled sexual desire, which was unacceptable in the eyes of God.²² The ideal state for a widow was the idea of a return to chastity, and a new stage of devoutness.²³ For this reason, remarriage was considered to indicate 'shameless slavery to the voluptuous enticements of sexual passion', according to James Brundage.²⁴

Widows as Moral Figureheads within Society and their Families

As widows, women were still an integral part of the family; the relationship between the Paston women and their sons in particular shows that they were seen as a source of guidance and advice. Agnes Paston wrote to her son with words of encouragement, telling him that 'This world is but a thoroughfare and full of woo; and whan we departe therefore, rizth nouzght bere with us nut our good deeds and ylle.'²⁵ Agnes moral guidance for her son, that the world is harsh, but it is a person's 'good deeds and will' that is important, give an insight into the kind of encouragement that mothers would impart to their children, even as adults. Indeed, Agnes outlived William Paston (her husband) by thirty-five years, so for much of her life her status was that of a widow.²⁶ Agnes' advice has clear religious connotations as she mentions what will matter 'when we depart', referring to the

¹⁹ Hanawalt, 'Remarriage as an Option for Urban and Rural Widows in Later Medieval England', p. 141.

²⁰ Ibid p. 141.

²¹ Joel T. Rosenthal, 'Fifteenth-Century Widows and Widowhood: Bereavement, Reintegration, and Life Choices', in Sue Sheridan Walker (ed.), *Wife and Widow in Medieval England* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1993), p. 37.

²² Brundage, 'Widows and Remarriage: Moral Conflicts and Their Resolutions in Cannon Law', p. 17.

²³ Cordelia Beattie, *Medieval Single Women: The Politics of Social Classification in Late Medieval England*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 15.

²⁴ Brundage, 'Widows and Remarriage: Moral Conflicts and Their Resolutions in Cannon Law', p. 17.

²⁵ Agnes Paston '363. Agnes Paston to John Paston', *The Paston Letters*, Vol. 3, p. 124.

²⁶ Jewell, *Women in Medieval England*, p. 123.

importance of living a good life in order to receive spiritual reward, showing that Agnes is fulfilling her expected role as a pious influence on her family. This alludes to the societal phenomenon of a widow's new sexual status; now unmarried she should prioritise her chastity and dedicate her life to God, in the place of her husband.²⁷ Even in widowhood the behaviour of women was closely scrutinized, because of their position as single women, they posed a threat to the male supremacy that was so well established.²⁸ It was her single status which gave her the 'potential power' to challenge the 'flow of wealth, social control, and ideology that normally ran unchallenged,' writes Joel Rosenthal; supporting the idea that religious institutions were a way of keeping women in their place.²⁹

This chapter has presented the argument that medieval widows had greater independence in widowhood than in marriage or maidenhood, however their apparent freedoms were only there because they no longer had a husband to represent them; and even then, the attitudes towards these women shows the patriarchal backlash against their freedom. This supports the idea that the societal structure in late medieval England actively oppressed women because it perpetuated the idea that women who were single and not under male guidance had to be subdued, either through remarriage or through religious ideologies. The threats that faced widows shows that women were only respected in regards to the men in their lives; women who had ownership of property were targeted in ways their husbands had not been, showing that it was the man who was respected and not the woman. On the other hand, as widows, women were in a position to press legal charges, which was something which they had not been able to do previously; however, the fact that these charges were only in regard to the murder of their husband shows that they were only given legal recognition in regards to their male spouse, and even then it was only when their husband could not speak for himself. Thus, widowhood has been shown to be one of the freest

²⁷ Hanawalt, 'Remarriage as an Option for Urban and Rural Widows in Late Medieval England', p. 142.

²⁸ Rosenthal, 'Fifteenth-Century Widows and Widowhood: Bereavement, Reintegration, and Life Choices', p. 35.

²⁹ Ibid.

positions a woman could be in, however she could still not escape the self-perpetuating nature of the patriarchy.

Conclusion

This dissertation has explored and analysed the patriarchal forces which restricted the experiences of women in the Late Middle Ages throughout their lives. These women were victims of oppression through their maidenhood, married life and even as widows.

The lives of girls and young women were explored in the first chapter, discussing the impact the patriarchy had on the decisions made around their education and upbringing. The way that girls were raised, in a domestic environment and surrounded by female members of the household, began the reinforcements of patriarchal ideals from a young age.¹ Even when young women received formal education, as was encouraged by the Humanist movement; this was primarily seen to be beneficial because it improved the girl's chances of securing an advantageous marriage.² Furthermore, the recommended reading materials for young women were ones that would be instructional to the ways of womanhood; teaching them obedience and piety.³ Thus, by the time girls were of a marriageable age, they had internalised the misogynistic attitudes that were perpetuated by both men, and women. Indeed, when it came to marriage, families routinely exploited their daughters to improve their own social standing; negotiating the deals with little or no input from the children themselves, as was shown in the case of Katherine Rych and Thomas Betson.⁴

Although the first chapter showed that women had been conditioned to view married life as the ideal, the second chapter gave evidence of women working within the patriarchal structures of the family and making the situations fit their own advantage. This is shown most prominently in the Plumpton papers, as Agnes and Isabel Plumpton received letters discussing matters of the estate;

¹ Barbara Harris, *English Aristocratic Women, 1450-1550: Marriage and Family, Property and Careers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 27.

² *Ibid*, pp. 38-39.

³ Kim M. Philips, *Medieval Maidens: Young Women and Gender in England, 1279-1540* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), p. 86.

⁴ Thomas Betson, '217. Thomas Betson to Dame Elizabeth Stonor', in Catherine Carpenter (ed.), *Kingsford's Stonor Letters and Papers, 1290-1483* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 310-311.

concerning finances and legal matters, which was a movement away from the traditional domestic role that was typically expected of wives at the time. The successful partnerships between spouses shows that, despite the arranged origins of the marriages, many women found ways to navigate the oppressive institutions. Indeed, true emotional love was not unheard of within arranged marriages, as in the case of Elizabeth Stonor, whose exclamations of concern for her husband's safety show her feelings of affection for him.⁵ Similarly, Margery Brews' Valentines letter to her fiancé is one of the most interesting artefacts in the collection, showing the medieval perceptions of romantic love. It also gives evidence that the social conditioning mentioned in the first chapter had taken effect on Margery herself, she was promising to be an obedient wife and assuring John Paston that nothing would make her happier than their marriage, advertising herself as the model wife of the era; using her taught femininity to achieve her goal of an advantageous match. Margery Brews' affection for John Paston was viewed favourably by contemporary society because of the apparent appropriateness of the match. This was not a reality for women such as Margery Paston, who were viewed with disdain for marrying below their social station, in contrast to men, whose sexual misconduct was much more tolerated.⁶ The second chapter demonstrated the variety of married women's experiences in the late medieval era and the range of ways they existed within the oppressive institution of late medieval marriage.

The third chapter showed the effect widowhood had on society's perceptions of women. Widows experienced new challenges and freedoms, a drastic change from the constant state of control that had typified their lives thus far. The attitudes that male relatives had towards female ownership of property is shown through Halnath Muleverer's advice to Sir John Plumpton and his associates, encouraging them to take advantage of Sir John's widowed mother as he had with his

⁵ Elizabeth Stonor, '69. Elizabeth Stonor to William Stonor, 12th September 1476', in *Stonor Letters and Papers*, pp. 266-267.

⁶ Harris, *English Aristocratic Women*, p. 56.

own.⁷ This is clearly a lack of respect for women as property holders in their own rights, as Sir John did not appear to have complained when his father held the ownership rights. Furthermore, the right to press charges for their husband's murder has been perceived in historiography as a freedom and an improvement in the lives of women.⁸ However, this dissertation has argued that the changed legal position of women actually disguised the manifestation of patriarchal values, whereas it actually shows that a woman's only value to the court was in defence of a man, when he could not speak for himself. These values are further shown through the attitudes to the remarriage of widows, which was encouraged to ensure the distribution of property in male possession.⁹ Furthermore, remarriage was seen as a way of controlling the sexual threat posed by widows, if they were not able to dedicate their lives to chastity after the death of their husband. The issues widows faced were primarily a backlash against the new level of independence they experienced, exposing the overt and covert misogyny that women endured throughout their lives. Ultimately, the attitudes and influences acting upon women from a young age, right up to the end of their lives expose the self-perpetuating nature of the patriarchy.

⁷ Halnath Mauleverer '40. Halnath Mauleverer to Sir Robert Plumpton, Miles Wilstrop, John Pullein and Robert Birnand, 13th May [1480 x 1486]', in *The Plumpton Letters and Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 61-62.

⁸ Shulamith Shahar, *The Fourth Estate: A History of Women in the Middle Ages* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1983), p. 15.

⁹ Barbara A. Hanawalt, 'Remarriage as an Option for Urban and Rural Widows in Later Medieval England', in Sue Sheridan Walker (ed.), *Wife and Widow in Medieval England* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1993), p. 141.

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