

RACHEL E. MOSS

Fatherhood and its Representations in Middle English Texts

*Tyll he came there as hys father was
Whan he all sawe. he sayde alas.*



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Rachel E. Moss

D. S. BREWER

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For Kieran

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Acknowledgements

The Middle English word *frend* is wonderfully broad; a *frend* can be a friend, an ally, a patron, a comrade, a kinsman. On those terms, over the course of writing this book I have been very rich in *frendshipe*, so much so that I cannot hope to thank all of those friends by name. I hope that they will take this as a note of general but still heartfelt gratitude. A few individuals have particularly earned my thanks. At the University of York, Jeremy Goldberg and Nicola McDonald supervised my PhD thesis; both always challenged me to push myself further, and since I finished my thesis they have remained sources of encouragement and inspiration. The Centre for Medieval Studies proved to be a stimulating environment for my postgraduate studies, and its members were – and are – a source of support and friendship. I would not have been able to undertake my studies without a generous scholarship from the Arts and Humanities Research Council. Mark Ormrod at the University of York and Alcuin Blamires at Goldsmiths, the University of London, were examiners for the doctoral thesis and both have been great sources of guidance in the early stages of my career. My current colleagues at Corpus Christi College and in the Faculty of History, the University of Oxford, have provided me with a pleasant and supportive working environment. Several friends read parts of this book and offered useful feedback: thank you to Lisa Benz St John, Jennifer Bridgens, Amy Burge, Katie Rathfelder, Katy Soar, Julie Sorge Way and Alaya Swann. I owe a great debt of gratitude to my family, particularly my parents and my brother, for their love and support. My final thank you goes to my fiancé Kieran; the process of writing this book would have been much sorrier without him. Accordingly, I dedicate the book to him.

Abbreviations

Letter Collections

- AL Christine Carpenter, ed., *The Armburgh Papers: the Brokholes Inheritance in Warwickshire, Hertfordshire, and Essex, c.1417–c.1453* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1998)
- BL British Library
- CUL Cambridge University Library
- E.S. extra series
- CL Alison Hanham, ed., *The Cely Letters: 1472–1488*, Early English Text Society, O.S. 273 (London: Oxford University Press for the Early English Text Society, 1975)
- O.S. original series
- PL James Gairdner, ed., *The Paston Letters* (Gloucester: A. Sutton, 1983)
- PLP Joan Kirby, ed., *The Plumpton Letters and Papers*, Camden Fifth Series 8 (London: Cambridge University Press, 1996)
- SL Christine Carpenter, ed., *Kingsford's Stonor Letters and Papers 1290–1483* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996)

Introduction

Fictions of Fatherhood

It was told me ye sent hym a letter to London. What the entent therof was I wot not, but thowge he take it but lightly, I wold ye shuld not spar to write to hym ageyn as lowly as ye cane, bescheyng hym to be your good fader ...¹

IN late 1463, Margaret Paston, wife of the Norfolk lawyer John Paston, had just made a visit to Norwich to buy provisions for the winter: but an emotional cold front had already arrived. Her eldest son, the recently knighted Sir John Paston, had without her knowledge left the family estate at Caister. In a letter of 15 November she informed Sir John that his father thought she had assented to his departure, and this had caused some marital discord. 'I hope he wolle be your gode fader hereafter, yf ye demene you welle', she wrote, though she expected that it would take some supplication from Sir John to appease his father. '[W]rite to hym ageyn as lowly as ye cane', she advised, 'bescheyng hym to be your good fader.' The matter may seem strange to modern readers: Sir John was twenty-one years old, and his father not even at home when he departed, yet John senior evidently felt his authority had been challenged. Margaret Paston passed on from this matter to discussion of other domestic concerns – what to do with an injured horse, whether there would be a marriage between two of the servants – as if Sir John would know precisely what she meant by John senior being his 'good fader'. But what constituted a good father, and what he was owed by his offspring, are questions that have hitherto been left unanswered.

Few people can have read the Paston letters and formed a very warm impression of John Paston senior; while opinions have been divided

¹ James Gairdner, ed., *The Paston Letters* (Gloucester: A. Sutton, 1983, microprint of 1904 edition in 5 vols.), no. 552, 4:84–5. Hereafter *PL*. I have chosen to use the James Gairdner *Paston* edition rather than the more recent (and excellent) edition by Norman Davis; the latter chooses to group the letters by author, rather than date, 'to exhibit his or her characteristic language, style and interests as a whole' (1:xxii.) This is a useful way of getting to know particular personalities, but makes following the temporal development of relationships difficult – and also makes it easier to miss incidental details that when read consecutively with other letters become more prominent. The transcriptions of the Gairdner edition are good; there are, however, occasional differences in dating, and here I take the Davis edition to be authoritative. See Norman Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971–6).

about his eldest son, John Paston himself is generally regarded as a sternly authoritarian figure.² Since the Paston correspondence is the most widely read of the letter collections that survive from this period, John Paston is considered to typify gentry fatherhood. H.S. Bennett's study of the Paston letters may have been published in 1922, but his assessment of them, and his conclusion that in general 'the common attitude of parents towards their children was astonishingly cold', is not one that has been greatly interrogated – at least not in the case of fathers.³ Medieval fathers are assumed to have been autocrats with little interest in their children's lives beyond issues of familial duty, and so the wider issues of what the relationship between John and John tells us about fatherhood, male power and expected family dynamics still need to be explored.

The critical background

The obvious question, following such a statement, is: why? So much of the study of the middle ages has been dominated by analysis of high status white men, and it could be argued that the recent interest in studies in masculinities is merely a fashionable academic gloss on a return to privileging male experience. As Toby Ditz wrote in 2004, in response to the growing field of men's studies, 'the new literature on the history of masculinity and men leaves us with the queasy feeling that, cumulatively, it risks replicating the oppressive omissions of conventional history. It is in danger of restoring men ... to the centre of our historical narrative.'⁴ In the late 1970s and the 1980s medieval women became a dynamic area of interest in medieval studies that revolutionised the study of social history in the field.⁵ Since the 1980s, the work of feminist scholars in medieval

² H.S. Bennett, *The Pastons and Their England: Studies in an Age of Transition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922), 73–5. See also Keith Dockray's assessment of historians' responses to the personalities of Johns I and II: Keith Dockray, "'Why Did Fifteenth-Century English Gentry Marry?': The Pastons, Plumpton and Stonors Reconsidered', in *Gentry and Lesser Nobility in Late Medieval Europe*, ed. Michael Jones (Gloucester: Sutton, 1986), 74.

³ Bennett, *The Pastons*, 78. Colin Richmond provides the most detailed assessment of the Paston family in his three book series. Colin Richmond, *The Paston Family in the Fifteenth Century: The First Phase* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), *The Paston Family in the Fifteenth Century: Fastolf's Will* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), *The Paston Family in the Fifteenth Century: Endings* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000). Mothers have received a little more attention – see for instance Nikki Stiller, *Eve's Orphans: Mothers and Daughters in Medieval English Literature* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1980).

⁴ Toby L. Ditz, 'The new men's history and the peculiar absence of gendered power: some remedies from early American gender history', *Gender & History* (2004): 7.

⁵ Key texts published in the 1970s and 1980s concerned with women's experience

studies has resulted in a flourishing field related to women, family and the household.⁶ The influence of third-wave feminism and postmodern theory gradually moved the emphasis from medieval women to medieval *gender*. Earlier writing on women opened up questions about gender and sexualities, which have been consolidated by the adoption of queer theory into medieval studies.⁷ A book that has a title beginning with the word *fatherhood* would seem to be swimming against the tide of critical discourse.

In fact, studies in masculinities are a rapidly growing area of critical concern. The earliest work began in the 1970s with the New Men movement, which sought to reimagine the role of men in the context of the rise of feminist theory. As the feminism of the 1980s grew increasingly interested in women differentiated by race, nationality, gender and class, there developed amongst social scientists an interest not in masculinity,

include: Derek Baker, ed., *Medieval Women*, Studies in Church History, Subsidia 1 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978); Shulamith Shahar, *The Fourth Estate: A History of Women in the Middle Ages*, trans. Chaya Galai (London: Methuen, 1983); David Herlihy, *Medieval Households* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1985); Barbara A. Hanawalt, ed., *Women and Work in Preindustrial Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); Judith M. Bennett, *Women in the Medieval English Countryside: Gender and Household in Brigstock before the Plague* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

⁶ Significant titles include: on the household, Barbara A. Hanawalt, *The Ties that Bound: Peasant Families in Medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); on women's life cycle and service, P.J.P. Goldberg, *Women, Work and Life Cycle in a Medieval Economy: Women in York and Yorkshire c. 1300–1520* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); on marriage, Constance M. Rousseau and Joel T. Rosenthal, eds., *Women, Marriage, and Family in Medieval Christendom: Essays in Memory of Michael M. Sheehan*, C.S.B. (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1998); on sexuality and the household, Ruth Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing Unto Others* (London: Routledge, 2005); on childhood, Shulamith Shahar, *Childhood in the Middle Ages*, trans. Chaya Galai (London: Routledge, 1990), and Nicholas Orme, *Medieval Children* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

⁷ Notable titles on sex and gender include John Boswell's classic *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980); Marilyn Desmond, *Reading Dido: Gender, Textuality, and the Medieval Aeneid* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); Karma Lochrie, Peggy McCracken and James Alfred Schultz, eds., *Constructing Medieval Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Sharon Farmer and Carol Braun Pasternack, eds., *Gender and Difference in the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); and Glenn Burger and Steven F. Kruger, eds., *Queering the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

but in masculinities.⁸ Yet these masculinities, marked out as different because of issues such as race or sexuality, were still imagined by providing a contrast with constructs of the heteronormative model of the white heterosexual male, which as the hegemonic norm was assumed not to require explication. Most recently, theorists have begun to tackle the issue of where patriarchy originates, work aided by postcolonial and poststructural understandings of gendered and racial privilege. Although 'men's studies' is not a typical part of the university curriculum, it is a growing field of interest that contains notable scholarship.⁹

Whilst work on men and masculinities has been going on in the social sciences for well over thirty years, it is only since the 1990s that this has begun to be reflected in the output of historians and literary scholars. In a 1994 article John Tosh identified why there has been resistance to the idea of studying masculinities. He argued that the first major reason is that identified by Ditz: a perception that a history of masculinities is an attempt to blunt the polemical edge of women's history. The second Tosh blames on historians' 'weary scepticism' in believing that it is a fashionable irrelevance: 'men's history' is modish rather than of serious academic value.¹⁰ Tosh has played a particularly prominent role in the development of the history of masculinities. His work throws down the gauntlet that understanding masculinities is not an issue that can be relegated to a niche sub-specialism of history, but is vital to an understanding of Western society. In the years since Tosh's seminal article was written, the humanities have seen much growth in studies in masculinities. Scholars in medieval studies were a little slower to respond to this trend than their colleagues working in modern history: the first essay collections on medieval men appeared in the late 1990s, but only in the last decade have monographs been written on masculinities.¹¹

⁸ On the chronology of men's studies, see Michael S. Kimmel and Michael A. Messner, eds., *Men's Lives* (New York: Macmillan, 1989), xiii. See also Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality* (Chichester: Tavistock Publications, 1986), which coined the term 'masculinities'; Harry Brod, *The Making of Masculinities: The New Men's Studies* (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1987); Michael S. Kimmel, ed., *Changing Men: New Directions in Research on Men and Masculinity* (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1987).

⁹ A good overview with a useful bibliography is provided by the introduction to Michael S. Kimmel, Jeff Hearn and R.W. Connell, eds., *Handbook of Studies on Men and Masculinities* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2005), 1–11.

¹⁰ John Tosh, 'What Should Historians Do With Masculinity?: Reflections on Nineteenth-Century Britain', *HistoryWorkshop Journal* 38 (1994): 179–80.

¹¹ The essay collections include: Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler, eds., *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages* (New York: Garland, 1997); Dawn M. Hadley, ed., *Masculinity in Medieval Europe* (London: Longman, 1999); Jacqueline Murray, ed., *Conflicted Identities and Multiple Masculinities: Men in the Medieval West* (New York: Garland, 1999). Until 2007, Ruth Mazo Karras's *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity*

Perhaps unsurprisingly, much of the work on men thus far has been concerned with masculinities that are in one way or another queer.¹² There has, however, been an increasing interest in the white heterosexual male – the ‘default’ of English society – particularly amongst scholars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This has resulted in a renewed interest in defining ‘masculinities’ as an analytical category and has resulted in some dynamic panhistoric discussion, perhaps best articulated in John H. Arnold and Sean Brady’s persuasive edited collection that seeks to provide ‘a route in to the serious, collaborative attempt to question what masculinity *was* and *is* over space and time’.¹³

This weight of scholarship, whilst impressive, does not in itself refute the point articulated by Toby Ditz: that by focusing our attention on masculinities we risk legitimising the dominance of men both historically and within academic discourse. I would argue, as Ditz in fact goes on to state, that ‘studies of masculinity and manhood might more reliably or consistently foreground gendered power’.¹⁴ The invisibility of particular individuals or groups within society as a result of their marginalisation by that society is an idea with which we should all be familiar. Curiously, however, invisibility can also be a by-product of privilege. Michael Kimmel and Michael Messner note that maleness is often treated as the default within Western society to the extent that a man’s gender is almost invisible to him in a way it can never be to a woman.¹⁵ As Jean Jacques Rousseau put it, ‘The male is only a male at times; the female is a female all her life and can never forget her sex.’¹⁶ Because patriarchal culture makes men and masculinities the touchstones for ‘normal’ behaviours

in Late Medieval Europe (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002) was the only monograph on medieval masculinities. Since then the field has widened: see, for example, Isabel Davis, *Writing Masculinity in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) and Derek G. Neal, *The Masculine Self in Late Medieval England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008). Joel T. Rosenthal’s monograph on patriarchy is useful, but has surprisingly little to say about masculinity per se. Joel T. Rosenthal, *Patriarchy and Families of Privilege in Fifteenth Century England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001).

¹² For example, in medieval literary studies, Glenn Burger, *Chaucer’s Queer Nation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); in literary theory, Tison Pugh, *Queering Medieval Genres* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

¹³ John H. Arnold and Sean Brady, eds., *Introduction to What is Masculinity? Historical Dynamics from Antiquity to the Contemporary World* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 13.

¹⁴ Ditz, ‘The new men’s history’, 27.

¹⁵ Kimmel and Messner, *Men’s Lives*, x.

¹⁶ *Emile for Today: the Emile of Jean Jacques Rousseau*, trans. and ed. William Boyd (London: Heinemann, 1956), 132.

and standards within society, maleness is taken for granted, creating the paradox of simultaneously privileging men and making them invisible.¹⁷

Until recently, medievalists have not fully engaged with this issue; just as medieval society is frequently described as 'patriarchal' without further explanation, so too is 'masculinity' assumed to be a term with commonly understood meaning rather than a concept that needs exposition. As a result, the father is nearly always assumed to be an integral part of the medieval household, but he is rarely described. Philippe Ariès' groundbreaking 1960 work *L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'ancien régime* posited that in the middle ages children did not have a distinct culture, and that they were mostly of interest to their parents only once they could be put to practical use.¹⁸ While work on parent-child relations has begun to develop beyond these assumptions, the father, if he is mentioned at all, still appears as a stereotype: an emotionally distant authoritarian figure who has little interest in developing a relationship with his children, particularly his daughters.¹⁹

The curious position of the father – both absent and central, a negative space within our portrait of the medieval family – is a reflection both of critical trends in studying gender and of broader cultural blindspots created by the privileges of patriarchy. Even though significant feminist writers like Kate Millett have long said that patriarchy's 'chief unit is the family', critics have tended to ignore the 'pater' part of 'patriarchy'.²⁰ The privileging of the father within patriarchal societies is part of its essential nature, but by assuming that we know what a 'father' means, we effectively make the father a totem, a figurehead of the whole system, while at the same time losing any real sense of who the father is. Moreover, whilst 'patriarchy' in dictionary terms may be defined simply, it is a concept that in reality has proved to be so confusing that one gender theorist gives

¹⁷ Allan G. Johnson, *The Gender Knot: Unraveling Our Patriarchal Legacy*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005), 155.

¹⁸ This text was translated into English in 1962 with the title *Centuries of Childhood*. Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood*, trans. P.A. Wells (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 30, 125. Despite Ariès' analysis of the medieval approach to childhood being based almost entirely on artistic depictions of children, *Centuries of Childhood* remained the classic text regarding childhood until very recently.

¹⁹ Ariès' view is now challenged by, amongst others, Nicholas Orme, who has argued that children had a distinct culture (Nicholas Orme, 'The Culture of Children in Medieval England', *Past and Present* 148 (1995): 48–88), and Shulamith Shahar, who points to evidence of affection towards infants and young children (*Childhood in the Middle Ages*, 106–7 and 139–44). The stereotypical view of the medieval family is seen in Lawrence Stone's *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500–1800* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977); his conclusions about the middle ages are now mostly discredited.

²⁰ Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 33.

the first 130 pages of his book on the topic the subtitle ‘What is this thing called patriarchy?’²¹ Neglecting so central a part of patriarchy as the role of the father surely makes its explication impossible.

Understanding fatherhood should be particularly important to medievalists, since it is in medieval Europe that many fundamental aspects of our patriarchal heritage were established. Despite medieval society’s preoccupation with inheritance, particularly from father to eldest son (primogeniture), and the key role of patrilineage in cultural as well as legal discourses, there has been surprisingly little significant critical interest shown in fatherhood, apart from some writing on father–daughter incest, on patricide by sons, on heirs, on the role of fatherly permission in marriage making, and on didactic literature that references father–son relationships.²² Even these tend to draw no broader conclusions about the role of fathers and fatherhood within society, or the wider context of father–child relationships. This cannot be considered simply a problem for historians of the family, as late medieval society is saturated with images of the father that go beyond the household: God the father, the king as father to his people, a priest as father to his congregation. ‘Father’ is clearly a potent term with socio-political resonance in many contexts, so it seems an odd critical lacuna to have neglected the role and nature of medieval fatherhood. In short, medievalists are interested in the products and processes of patriarchy, but they have very rarely been concerned with the lynchpin of the system, the father himself.

Approaching fatherhood in Middle English texts

Given the paucity of writing about medieval fatherhood and the current critical trend favouring studies in masculinities, it would be tempting, but problematic, to attempt a volume entitled *Medieval Fatherhood*. Those working in gender studies are increasingly aware of the necessity of

²¹ Patriarchy is given by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as meaning a ‘form of social organization in which the father or oldest male is the head of the family, and descent and relationship are reckoned through the male line; government or rule by a man or men’. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989). The monograph mentioned here is Johnson’s *The Gender Knot*.

²² For example: Elizabeth Archibald, *Incest and the Medieval Imagination* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001); María Bullón-Fernández, *Fathers and Daughters in Gower’s ‘Confessio Amantis’: Authority, Family, State and Writing* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000); Noël J. Menuge, *Medieval English Wardship in Romance and Law* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2001); Shannon McSheffrey, *Marriage, Sex, and Civic Culture in Late Medieval London* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); Helen Cooper, ‘Counter-Romance: Civil Strife and Father Killing in the Prose Romances’, in *The Long Fifteenth Century: Essays for Douglas Gray*, ed. Helen Cooper and Sally Mapstone (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 141–62.

embracing intersectionality – ‘the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations’ – as a category of analysis.²³ Patriarchy, understood through an intersectional lens, is not simply a system of male dominance over women. It is a system built on multiple intersecting power differentials. Patriarchy not only privileges men over women, but also men over other men, based on factors such as race, wealth, social status and gender expression (how ‘masculine’ a man is perceived to be). With the father theoretically providing the totemic central figure of patriarchy, any book on fatherhood therefore needs to engage with intersectional perspectives. However, with studies in masculinities still an emerging sub-discipline in medieval studies, it is too early to write a book that would seriously engage with the concept of ‘the father’ across the centuries of the middle ages. Thus far, too much work in studies in masculinities has been hampered by a desire to come to broad conclusions about men in medieval Europe, which results in a simplification of the multiple social relations at work within gender identity formation. I have chosen therefore to locate this book in a particular social and cultural context: the texts of gentry and mercantile society in late medieval England.

A narrower scope is, then, not a narrowing of ambition, but instead a way of opening up an area that deserves more attention than it has hitherto been afforded. Returning to the passage that opened this Introduction, on reading Margaret Paston’s letter I was struck by her assumption that not only would her son understand her idea of what it meant to be a ‘good fader’, but that her husband would too. Margaret Paston was a pragmatic and steely woman; she wrote letters which had practical purpose. Her advice that John ask his father to be his ‘good fader’ is predicated upon an expectation that all parties involved shared a similar concept of (successful) fatherhood. Their perspectives on fatherhood would not be generated in a vacuum, and having read several other collections of gentry and mercantile correspondence from late medieval England I noted many points of comparison between their representations of fatherhood, which made sense in texts created in similar social milieus.

Remarkably little has been written about these letter collections. Four substantial collections of correspondence (and one slighter but not insignificant one) survive from the fifteenth century, but with the exception of the Paston correspondence the critical attention paid to them has predominantly come only from their editors.²⁴ Beyond those academics,

²³ Leslie McCall, ‘The Complexity of Intersectionality’, *Signs* 30 (2005): 1771.

²⁴ The editions of the letter collections are: *PL*, as note 1; Alison Hanham, ed., *The Cely Letters: 1472–1488*, Early English Text Society, O.S. 273 (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), hereafter *CL*; Joan Kirby, ed., *The Plumpton Letters and Papers*, Camden

gentry letters have been used as source material particularly by historians writing about marriage formation, and there has been some interest in the language of letters. There have also been a small number of monographs based on the letter evidence.²⁵ Nonetheless, given the large body of material provided by the letters, they have not been extensively used. Even the Paston letters have suffered: only a very small selection of their content has been closely scrutinised, with a few letters such as Margery Brews' 'Valentine' and John Paston's vitriolic letter comparing his son to a 'drane amongst bees' given prominence outside of the wider context of the rest of the collection.²⁶ With a few exceptions, gentry and mercantile letters have been overlooked, imagined by many to be hastily composed and formulaic business notes; as Virginia Woolf described the Paston letters, 'there is no writing for writing's sake', and this has until recently seemed to make them less attractive to scholars.²⁷

Woolf was wrong, of course. Whilst the Paston letters were certainly not written simply for the pleasure of writing, they and letters by other

Fifth Series 8 (London: Cambridge University Press, 1996), hereafter *PLP*; Christine Carpenter, ed., *Kingsford's Stonor Letters and Papers 1290–1483* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), hereafter *SL*; Christine Carpenter, ed., *The Armburgh Papers: the Brokholes Inheritance in Warwickshire, Hertfordshire, and Essex, c.1417–c.1453* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1998), hereafter *AL*.

²⁵ Keith Dockray uses gentry letters to consider marriage formation in 'Why Did Fifteenth-Century Gentry Marry?'. So has Shannon McSheffrey in *Marriage, Sex and Civic Culture*. M. Kendall has useful comments on the letters in his work on English political life: *The Yorkist Age: Daily Life During the Wars of the Roses* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1962). More recently, Kim M. Phillips has made intelligent use of the letters in her *Medieval Maidens: Young Women and Gender in England, 1270–1540* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003). The linguist Alexander Bergs has written on the language of the Paston letters in *Social Networks and Historical Sociolinguistics: Studies in Morphosyntactic Variation in the Paston Letters (1421–1503)* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2005), whilst Joel T. Rosenthal considers the Pastons as letter writers in *Telling Tales: Sources and Narration in Late Medieval England* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2003), as does Diane Watt, "'No Writing for Writing's Sake": The Language of Service and Household Rhetoric in the Letters of the Paston Women', in *Dear Sister: Medieval Women and the Epistolary Genre*, ed. Karen Cherewatuk and Ulrike Wiethaus (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 122–38. Most monographs on the families of the letters are by someone who has edited the letters, such as Alison Hanham's *The Celys and their World: An English Merchant Family of the Fifteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). Elizabeth Noble's *The World of the Stonors: A Gentry Society* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2009) is a rare exception.

²⁶ *PL*, no. 897, 5:267 and no. 575, 4:122. Richard Beadle makes a dry note about the 'repeated anthologising of a few celebrated items'. Richard Beadle, 'Private Letters', in *A Companion to Middle English Prose*, ed. A.S.G. Edwards (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), 294.

²⁷ Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader* (London: Hogarth Press, 1925), 37.

families like them were not guileless records of business and family affairs. Furthermore, the formulaic nature of letters does not prove that they were casually composed or impersonal. The form as well as the content of letters served specific generic functions, and these point to the construction of models of social interaction within the constraints of the genre. Letters were used not only to transmit information, but also to reinforce social norms and strengthen social bonds.²⁸

Gentry and mercantile letters have typically been used to map the experiences of gentry and mercantile people: they are used as purely historic documents. Given the general sense amongst academics that, with a few exceptions, most letters are not particularly interesting in and of themselves, it is not surprising that the *textual* value of these documents has not been interrogated. Letters are in a sense fictions: not because they are filled with false information – indeed much of their content can be verified through other sources – but because their generic conventions have ideological agendas, consciously or unconsciously adopted by the writer, and because they have constructed narratives with intentions beyond merely passing on information. Nowadays historians are well aware that even such formal and official documents as legal cases have carefully crafted narratives, and that unpicking the narratives reveals preoccupations of the authors and audience that are as valuable as the details of the cases themselves.²⁹

Treating letters as narratives allows for the breaking of generic boundaries. Suddenly we are left with hundreds of Middle English texts ripe for analysis in a way that differs from their usual use of telling us what happened in fifteenth-century life, and instead they give us an opportunity to see how life was *imagined*. I use this word carefully, because I do not wish to imply that what medieval people ‘imagined’ is to be contrasted with what ‘really happened’. ‘Imaginacioun’ in Middle English could mean a fantasy or delusion, but also as the *Secreta Secretorum* put it, ‘Ymagynacion ... Seruyth to the vndyrstondynge, and hym presentyth the lykkenesse of bodely thynges.’³⁰ To imagine is to form ideas of objects, persons and situations both hypothetical and real, and to integrate sensory data – things that have been experienced – into the process of perception. So narratives can integrate lived experience with the ability to hypothesise, speculate – and, yes, fantasise.

²⁸ More on the composition and structure of letters follows in Chapters 1, pp.26–8 and 3, pp.74–81.

²⁹ Noël James Menuge does a superb job of considering legal fictions in her *Medieval English Wardship*. Her methodology is outlined in her Introduction, 1–23.

³⁰ R. Steele and T. Henderson, eds., *Three Prose Versions of the Secreta Secretorum*, Early English Text Society, E.S. 74 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1898), 218.

Thinking of letters in this way, I am able to compare them much more freely with texts with which they have not traditionally been paired. Areas of present critical interest in literary history include the rise of Middle English and the linked literary culture of gentry and bourgeois communities in late medieval England. Scholars working on Middle English popular romances have been responsible for much of this, as they rightly drew attention to a body of literature that had been previously ignored or confined to the status of curios in dialect and manuscript studies.³¹ Popular romances are now widely considered to have had gentry and urban bourgeois readerships, and their production and dissemination have been examined as part of studies into the medieval book trade, the history of early printing and literary culture.³² However, these texts still struggle under the burden of unfavourable comparison to other examples of Middle English literature, and so some critics still feel the need to justify their use of romances. One writer's 2004 description of *Sir Gowther* as 'provocative but not profound' serves as a useful shorthand way of summing up much critical thinking on these texts.³³ Like letters, romances have been perceived as formulaic and inelegant since they use the same plot motifs and vocabulary again and again, but as with letters, the formulaic is a marker of world construction, demarcating what is truly important.³⁴ Moreover, whilst there has been excellent work considering romance as a genre, popular romances are rarely considered alongside other sources, which exacerbates their position as marginalised texts.³⁵ Letters and romances, then, are both substantial sources which

³¹ For a summary of the early critical response to romance, see Nicola McDonald, 'A Polemical Introduction', in her edited collection *Pulp Fictions of Medieval England: Essays in Popular Romance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 1–17. The eighteenth-century editor Thomas Percy's remark that romances were 'more amusing than useful' set the tone for over a century of later criticism. Thomas Percy, *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry: Consisting of Old Heroic Ballads, Songs, and Other Pieces of Our Earlier Poets* (London: Henry Washburne and Co., 1857), xix.

³² All of these receive attention in Chapter 1. [pp.000](#).

³³ Joanne A. Charbonneau, 'From Devil to Saint: Transformation in *Sir Gowther*', in *The Matter of Identity in Medieval Romance*, ed. Phillipa Hardman (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2002), 27.

³⁴ Helen Cooper, *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 3–4.

³⁵ Useful volumes about the genre include: Carol Fewster, *Traditionality and Genre in Middle English Romance* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1987); Susan Crane, *Insular Romance: Politics, Faith and Culture in Anglo-Norman and Middle English Literature* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986); Derek Brewer, *Studies in Medieval English Romances* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1988); Roberta Krueger, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Carol Meale, ed., *Readings in Medieval English Romance* (Cambridge: D.S.

seem to have been neglected because they are perceived as unappealingly formulaic, and their position as 'niche' sources has kept their full potential from being explored in a wider context.

There are deeper reasons for considering these texts together than simply pairing two kinds of 'underdog'. Romances and letters were consumed and produced by similar groups of people, and their existence underscores the significance of the written word in the lives of those at both the lower aristocratic and upper bourgeois levels of society. As I have already said, letters and romances share a number of generic qualities, because both are genres that consciously and unconsciously construct themselves as genres, with very specific forms of structure and content. Letters and romances, however, are not just vehicles through which ideas are expressed; they are also the means by which ideas are created and shaped. The written word, by formalising expression, also makes it more concrete.³⁶ In her monograph on early modern letters, Susan Fitzmaurice argues that the specific vocabulary of letters informs writer and recipient of their respective social places, and affects how closely they relate to one another.³⁷ This is not a mere reflection of an external reality; the language of letters helps create and maintain that reality by giving it formal expression.³⁸ Just like letters, romances have a high degree of genre consciousness; as Carol Fewster notes, it is remarkable how individual romances refer so often to their own production and to their place within a romance corpus.³⁹ For example, *Sir Gowther* says a battle was won 'as tho romandys [sic] seyde' (470), while *Octavian* introduces the Emperor that 'men in romance rede' (15), suggesting the audience may have had a familiarity with the plot through the reading of other romances.⁴⁰ Moreover, these romances were read by audiences who were very aware of their social positions, and were also self-consciously fashioning their identities at a time when gentry and

Brewer, 1994). A good example of how romances can be considered with other texts is provided by Menue's *Medieval English Wardship*, and to a slightly more limited extent by Neal's *The Masculine Self*, but this sort of interdisciplinary approach has not been typical.

³⁶ See Sarah Rhiannon Williams, 'English Vernacular Letters c. 1400–c. 1600: Language, Literacy and Culture' (PhD diss., University of York, 2001), particularly 243–50.

³⁷ Susan M. Fitzmaurice, *The Familiar Letter in Early Modern English: A Pragmatic Approach* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2002), 35–6. See more on Fitzmaurice's argument in Chapter 3, p.76.

³⁸ Williams, 'English Vernacular Letters', 243–8.

³⁹ Fewster, *Traditionality and Genre*, 25.

⁴⁰ *Sir Gowther*, in Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury, eds., *The Middle English Breton Lays* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995); *Octavian*, in Harriet Hudson, ed., *Four Middle English Romances*, 2nd ed. (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2006).

mercantile society was expanding and developing, as I will discuss further in Chapter 1.⁴¹ These sources not only point to a literate culture, but also to the *creation* of that culture by social groups who use these sources to express and reinforce their identities.

The writing of letters, and the composition and reception of romances, need to be seen in the context of the rising use of Middle English as the dominant language in late medieval England. For most of its history, Middle English was a *local* language.⁴² Middle English varied enormously over time and by region; Angus McIntosh notes that there are over a thousand 'dialectally differentiated' varieties of Middle English.⁴³ Indeed, some scholars go so far as to say that Middle English is 'not ... a language at all but rather something of a scholarly fiction, an amalgam of forms and sounds, writers and manuscripts, famous works and little-known ephemera'.⁴⁴ This is a little extreme, but certainly prior to the later fourteenth century Middle English was primarily a *spoken* rather than a written language, and did not have official administrative functions in either a secular or religious context. This has resulted in a critical tendency to place English at the bottom of the linguistic hierarchy of medieval England, with Latin and French as the dominant languages of discourse, instead of seeing the symbiotic relationship between English, French and Latin. As Thorlac Turville-Petre puts it, they were 'not just three cultures but one culture in three voices'.⁴⁵ The rising importance of Middle English in late medieval England is a fascinating chapter in the formation of English identity.

Throughout the high and particularly the late middle ages, the use of Middle English began to reflect a growing sense of nationhood and of a specifically English linguistic identity. Scholars have noted from the twelfth century onward an increasing crystallisation in valuing Englishness: of writers trying to conceptualise what England meant and what it was to be English. The promotion of English as a language really took off, however, in the fourteenth century. An argument regularly used to whip up Parliamentary support for the war with France was that a French victory would annihilate the English language. Of course, this argument

⁴¹ Janet Coleman, *English Literature in History 1350–1400: Medieval Readers and Writers* (London: Hutchinson, 1981).

⁴² Jeremy J. Smith, *Essentials of Early English* (London: Routledge, 1999), 92.

⁴³ Angus McIntosh, 'Word Geography in the Lexicography of Mediaeval English', in *Middle English Dialectology: Essays on Some Principles and Problems*, ed. Margaret Laing (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1989), 86.

⁴⁴ Seth Lerer, *Inventing English: A Portable History of the Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 99.

⁴⁵ Thorlac Turville-Petre, *England: the Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 181.

arose at a time when French was still commonly used by the aristocracy in England! John Trevisa, in his translation of the *Polychronicon*, lamented that ‘now children of gramer scole conneþ na more Frensche þan can hir lift heele’, as English became the primary language of public discourse.⁴⁶ The political value of the English language was appreciated at the highest level; both Henry IV and Henry V actively promoted the use of English in official capacities. Malcolm Richardson identifies Henry V’s second invasion of France as when he was ‘converted to the vernacular’, and argues that he promoted the use of what is known as Chancery English, the increasingly standardised language of government.⁴⁷ This was aided by the increasing levels of bureaucracy in government, which produced ever-more written documentation. The printing press would ultimately spread this more standardised written form to a much wider audience.⁴⁸

It thus makes sense, when considering the rapidly developing cultural milieus of gentry and mercantile society, to approach them through analysis of Middle English texts, since the English language played such an important part in identity fashioning amongst these groups. In Chapter 1, I give an introduction to the literary culture of gentry and mercantile society, explaining the social and cultural changes that characterised this period and situating its literature in the context of a specific readership. This chapter is called ‘Situating Fathers’, because before beginning an analysis of fatherhood it is vital to locate the fathers of this study within their cultural and textual milieu. In Chapter 2, I use characters and texts introduced in Chapter 1 to examine the ways in which fatherhood was an essential part of the formation of adult masculine identity. This chapter considers the move from adolescence to manhood through the lens of fatherhood. Chapter 3 builds on some of these issues of identity formation by focusing on the father–son relationship, a relationship that is a fine balancing act between the need for the father to raise his son to be a man and the requirement that the father remain the dominant male in his family. It will be clear, though, that tense as it might sometimes be, the relationship between fathers and sons is also often affectionate and cooperative. This is true of relationships between fathers and daughters, which I examine in Chapter 4. Whether they are good or bad, father–daughter

⁴⁶ Churchill Babington and J. Rawson Lumby, eds., *Polychronicon Ranulphi Higden monachi Cestrensis; together with the English translations of John Trevisa and of an unknown writer of the fifteenth century*, 2 vols. (London: Joseph Rawson, 1865–86), 2: 159.

⁴⁷ Malcolm Richardson, ‘Henry V, the English Chancery, and Chancery English’, *Speculum* 55 (1980), 726–50. See also his more recent work on bourgeois writing. Malcolm Richardson, *Middle-Class Writing in Late Medieval London* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2011).

⁴⁸ Lerer, *Inventing English*, 127.