

NAKED AMBITION THE PASTONS (15TH CENTURY)

The first notable collection of English correspondence, the Paston letters, emerges from the distinctly un-Roman 15th century world of the Wars of the Roses. Although Latin was, in the late Middle Ages, the international language of learning, and Paston boys studied it at school and university, the writers' English is devoid of literary grace, their spelling so irregular that "died" can be spelled "deyid," "dyeid," and "dyid" on the same page, and their minds are little touched by literature or philosophy and only superficially by religion.

The politics of their society is as rough as its culture. While the adherents of the Lancastrians and Yorkists manoeuvre and fight over possession of the kingdom, the throne is occupied first by the pious, ineffective Henry VI, then by the capable usurper Edward IV. An incoherent mixture of law and lawlessness prevails—"A man's death is little set by nowadays," Margaret Paston warns her vulnerable second son, and a duke who claims an estate owned by the Pastons dispatches men to sack its church and force the tenants to help demolish buildings.

From the mass of documents, though they are primarily raw material for historians, a skilful editor can disentangle by judicious selection the gripping, but certainly not exemplary story of three generations of a hard-headed family that is hacking out for itself a place among the upper classes.

Reading the Paston letters is a very different experience from reading the correspondence of Cicero or Pliny the Younger. Legal phrases—English and Latin—that only a lawyer could be expected to understand bespatter the pages, and allusions to persons and events that remain mysterious mingle with accounts of characters and activities that become familiar. Intermittently, passion erupts through the interminable sequences of orders, rebukes and expressions of financial woe. A man of pleasure, Sir John Paston tries to break through the hostility of the man of business who is his father, while his mother pleads for leniency to her errant son. Sir John Fastolf, owner of a castle at Caister, vindictively seeks the identity of the men who spoke ill of him at a Norwich dinner, and he will "with God's

grace so purvey for them as they shall not all be well pleased." Those whose love for a Paston woman or man threatens to frustrate the worldly ambitions behind the arranged marriages that are the norm among them need no literary sophistication to convey their yearning and anguish: Richard Calle, the family bailiff, marries his Margery Paston, but the bride remains in perpetual disgrace; Margery Brews, the daughter of Sir Thomas Brews, weds Sir John's younger brother despite her father's inability to provide the dowry the bridegroom's family calls for.

In the Paston letters, outbursts of personal feeling—especially hostility between generations and between siblings—can be fierce, but the art of evoking a scene is for the most part absent. We learn who was killed in a battle, not what it felt like to be on the field. However, Sir John's younger brother has some success in describing the magnificent wedding of Edward IV's sister Margaret to the Duke of Burgundy (of the Duke's court, he says, "I heard never of none like to it save King Arthur's court"), and, less remarkably, the occasional vivid phrase is sparked by an outburst of emotion. James Gloys, the chaplain who sets Margaret against her two elder sons, is, in the eyes of one, "the proud, peevish, and evil-disposed priest to us all"; the same writer has enough religion to exclaim to his hedonistic brother Sir John, "God keep you this Lent from lollardy [i.e., heresy] of flesh" Piers Waryn, a rival landowner's agent, is "a flickering fellow and a busy"; sick Sir John describes how, "in Westminster Hall and in other place, I have gone with a staff as a ghost, as men said, more like that I rose out of the earth than out of a fair lady's bed."

Moreover, snatches of conversation are happily preserved. We hear Edward IV's furious outburst when John Paston the elder ignores his summons to the court: "We have sent two privy seals to Paston by two yeomen of our chamber, and he disobeyeth them; but we will send him another to-morrow, and by God's mercy, and if he come not, then he shall die for it." The formidable matriarch Agnes Paston records a woman's curse at what she supposes is Agnes's interference with a right of way: "All the devils of hell draw her soul to hell for the way that she hath made!"

Although literary gems like these are rare in the correspondence, the patient reader meets an assortment of unconscious self-portraits augmented by occasional observations from the subjects' friends and relatives. The old soldier Sir John Fastolf is intent on increasing his enormous fortune and also on setting up a college of priests to pray for his and others' souls. Though prickly and grasping, he appreciates loyalty in a chaplain or a friend and is not altogether unreasonable. Old Agnes Paston is a stubborn fighter and a harsh woman who can beat her daughter Elizabeth for refusing an advantageous match and demand that his tutor "truly belash" her son Clement if it is necessary to make him study. Yet, in an uncharac-

teristic fit of piety, she urges her firstborn, John, principal founder of the family's near greatness, "dispose yourself as much as ye may to have less to do in the world.... This world is but a thoroughfare, and full of woe; and when we depart therefrom, right nought bear with us but our good deeds and ill." This man, in his attempt to obtain possession of the late Fastolf's estates, suffers violent seizures of his property, much litigation, and three imprisonments. His wife, Margaret informs him that "My Lord of Norwich said to me that he would not abide the sorrow and trouble that ye have abiden to win all Sir John Fastolf's goods."

Margaret Paston is first seen as an attractive character who compliments her future husband on their first introduction by telling him he is "verily" his father's son and years afterwards laments, when business is to keep him away at Christmas, "I shall think myself half a widow, because ye shall not be at home." In time, though gratitude can make her insist her sons refrain from suing the attorney James Gresham, who has suffered losses through his loyalty to the family, danger makes her less amiable. She is intolerant of her single daughters Anne and Margery, who stay at home too long, and disowns the one who marries beneath her for love.

As a widow, she berates the lackadaisical ways of her eldest son, Sir John, and even interprets the deaths of two men in the Pastons' service as God's punishment of him – but then asks this bachelor to return home to live with her. Sir John himself, who prefers watching a tourney, collecting books or pursuing a lady to attending to the family's business, is variously estimated by scholars. John Warrington accuses him of "hypocrisy and cowardice"; Colin Richmond asserts, "if anyone was a gentleman among the Paston menfolk it was Sir John. His collected, cool but uncalculating demeanour throughout all his vexations comes as a relief"; Norman Davis persuasively describes him as "easy-going and likeable, well-meaning but often ineffectual." His younger brother, also crazily called John, who becomes head of the family on Sir John's death, is another determined seeker of wealth and prestige. He seems, however, honourable and it is a pleasure to see him fall in love with tender Margery Brews in response to the latter's passion for him – even though he bargains hard with her father for a larger dowry before he marries her.