

Home or Away? Some Problems With Daughters

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Two tantalisingly undated and unspecific fifteenth-century letters touch on the practice by which young women of good family were boarded out in other households. Some time before 1466 John Paston I received a letter about his 'Cousin Mary' who had lived with the unnamed writer before moving to an Audrey Croxeston, saying that Paston would pay her board there.¹ The writer would never have taken Mary in the first place had she known how flighty and indiscreet she was. Almost everyone in the household knew about her situation, 'and all by her own busyness of her tongue.' One is left to wonder whether Cousin Mary was pregnant or had perhaps been sent away from home to break up some liaison of which her family disapproved.

Mystery also attaches to the identity of the writer of No. 120 in C. L. Kingsford's edition of the Stonor letters.² The conclusion has been lost along with the signature and there is no indication of date or the name of the daughter being addressed. What is clear is that an unlucky Stonor daughter had been placed out, against her wishes and those of her mother, on the queen's orders. Previously she had been with a great-aunt.³ The queen had evidently been importuned or, as John Bocking once put it in a neutral remark about Margaret of Anjou, 'strong laboured',⁴ to arrange the placement as a favour to the host family. Perhaps the girl's parents at first ventured to resist. At any rate their daughter has now begged to come home, upbraiding her mother for her lack of affection and claiming that her hosts have tired of her. 'Methink,' writes her mother with exasperation, 'they should not be so weary

¹ J. Gairdner, ed., *The Paston Letters*, 6 vols., 1904, reduced print reissue Gloucester 1983 (hereafter *PL*), no. 631.

² C.L. Kingsford, ed., *Stonor Letters and Papers 1290–1483*, 2 vols, CS, Third Series 29, 30 (1919), vol. 1, no. 120.

³ The existence of this aunt was unknown to Kingsford or Christine Carpenter (*Kingsford's Stonor Letters and Papers 1290–1483*, Cambridge 1996) because 'awnt' was nonsensically read as 'albeit': A. Hanham, 'Varieties of error and Kingsford's Stonor Letters and Papers', *The Ricardian*, vol. 11 (1997–98), p. 347.

⁴ *PL*, no. 322 (9 Feb. 1456): 'The queen is a great and strong laboured woman, for she spareth no pain to sue her things to an intent and conclusion, to her power.' The last part means simply that Margaret was a sought-after patron because she did her best to see that her petitioners' requests were fulfilled. If Bocking had only used the commoner phrase 'sore laboured' generations of (mostly male) historians would never have suffered the misapprehension that the sentence somehow implied that Margaret was a strong-minded and domineering female. My thanks to B. M. Cron for focussing my attention on the syntax.

of you that did so great labour and diligence to have you.' She and her husband would be happy to receive the girl back, if her hosts proved willing, but dared not do so unless the queen gave signed permission, 'seeing the queen's displeasure afore, for mine husband saith he hath not willingly disobeyed her commandment here afore, nor he will not begin now.'

Kingsford guessed that the author of the letter was Jane Stonor, writing before the death of her husband, Thomas Stonor II, in [March] 1474, in which case the addressee was presumably either the Jane Stonor who had married her father's under-age ward, John Cottesmore, perhaps early in 1470, or her sister Mary, later married, perhaps in 1474, to John Barantyne, who was also a minor. A possible pointer to Mary might be the much later reference in the letters to a writ against her brother, William Stonor, and her mother-in-law, Lady Boteler, for the 'ravishment' of one Barantyne, a ward of the prince.⁵ If Kingsford was right the queen mentioned will be Elizabeth Woodville, who, like any great lady, would be duty-bound to support a supplicant in the way described (and would have further reason to do so if her son's interests were involved).⁶ But uncertainties breed speculation. Was the queen in question really Margaret of Anjou? A curious feature of the letter is that the writer refers throughout to 'my husband' rather than 'your father'. This mode of reference would be appropriate for Alice, wife of Richard Drayton and widow of Thomas Stonor I, in writing to one of her daughters by Thomas. The five girls, Elizabeth or Isabel, Maud, Philippa, Joan and Anne, must have been quite young at the time of their father's death in 1431 since on 1 December 1432 Alice and her new husband bound themselves to educate and maintain Elizabeth for as long as thirteen years.⁷ Alice and Richard both lived until early October 1468 and Elizabeth and at least three of her juniors lived long enough to marry. In view of this possible dating of the letter it is interesting that a Stonor, first name indecipherable, has now been found among the women and girls who received a gold armlet as a New Year's gift from Queen Margaret in 1449. Another recipient, in 1449 and again in 1453, was a Richard Drayton.⁸

Placing a daughter in a high-status family obviously brought hopes of enlisting the 'good ladyship' of an influential hostess, not least in promoting a suitable marriage for a girl who still lacked a husband. Not all boarders were in fact unmarried and not all were girls rather than young women. If the host-situation sometimes combined the features of finishing-school and marriage agency, the boarder might find herself playing any or all of the roles, in

⁵ *Stonor Letters*, no. 310 [1482?].

⁶ On Queen Elizabeth, Sutton and Visser-Fuchs, 'Benevolent queen', see Bibliography under 1994.

⁷ *Stonor Letters*, nos. 54 (will of Thomas Stonor I) and 56 (obligation by Alice and Richard Drayton).

⁸ PRO, Exchequer, KR, Accounts Various, E101/410/2; A.R. Myers, 'The jewels of Queen Margaret of Anjou, 1452-3' in the same, *Crown, Household and Parliament in the Fifteenth Century*, London 1985, p. 226.

modern terms, of paying-guest, au pair and gentlewoman-companion. There could be difficulties for both sides.

Perhaps the fact that William Stonor's sisters Mary and Elizabeth were living with the duchess of Suffolk, sister of Edward IV, helped put William's wife Elizabeth, widow of the London mercer Thomas Riche, on the fringes of high society in October 1476. On 22 October she described to William, a little boastfully, how she had joined the duchess's entourage in a visit to Cecily of York and had subsequently helped escort Cecily to the king at Greenwich, where the meeting between Edward and his mother was 'a very good sight' that she did not attempt to describe in any detail.⁹ She left it till later in her letter to raise one awkward matter with her husband. With many additions of an exculpatory 'she saith,' she broke the news that the duchess was rather displeased because the Stonor daughters failed to meet the required standard of dress, 'and she saith, without they be otherwise arrayed, she saith she may not keep them.' 'She saith,' too, that Jane Stonor has disclaimed responsibility for the upkeep of her married daughter Mary, saying that William can perfectly well afford to support his sister. (May one guess that Elizabeth rather enjoyed this opportunity to take a little dig at both her husband and her mother-in-law?)

Clothing indicated status and, naturally, shabby or unfashionable attendants reflected badly on the lady of the house. Anne Paston was short of kerchiefs in March 1469 and her mother, Margaret Paston, was humiliated to be scolded by ('shent of') 'the good lady that she is with.' Determined to redeem the family honour by supplying Anne with a luxurious article unobtainable in Norwich, Margaret commissioned her son to get a kerchief of 'cremil' in London.¹⁰

Anne Paston's own reaction is not mentioned. In one surviving letter, however, we can glimpse feelings at first hand. Dorothy Plumpton, placed in the household of Lady Darcy, her step-mother's mother, felt that her father had abandoned her.¹¹ Like the unidentified Stonor daughter, Dorothy begged to be taken back home. Her father, Sir Robert Plumpton, had failed to answer any of her messages, but at least Lady Darcy's attitude improved when she

⁹ *Stonor Letters*, no. 172 (22 Oct. [1476]).

¹⁰ *PL*, nos. 701 (12 March 1469) and 704 (3 April 1469) – Margaret had to repeat her request. Cremil, a fabric often used for kerchiefs and in borders, is mentioned in an Act of Richard's parliament (1 Ric. III, c. 8, 18) in reference to 'the making of any cloths called Florences with cremil lists'. Some have guessed that it was an open-work or lacy material, others suggest pleated. The ubiquitous kerchief itself offered scope for individuality in choice of fabric and style of wear. In a painting by the 'Master of the Life of Mary' (Cologne, 1463–1480) depicting the birth of the Virgin and now in the Alte Pinakothek, Munich, the attendant women wear similar clothing but each has draped her voluminous head-scarf in a different fashion.

¹¹ T. Stapleton, ed., *Plumpton Correspondence*, CS, Old Series 4 (1839) (reduced print reissue with intro. by Keith Dockray, Gloucester 1990), no. CLXV, 'To my most entirely beloved, good, kind father', 18 May; no year given but later than Sir Robert's marriage to Isabel Neville about 18 Sept. 1505.

came to hear about them. She has now promised Dorothy her 'good ladyship' and will do her best to promote her 'to the uttermost of her puissance' and help find her a more congenial situation. So will Sir Robert please thank her by messenger 'and show by your fatherly kindness that I am your child.' His aloofness has given the impression in the neighbourhood, among 'those persons that list better to say ill than good, that ye have little favour to me.' Also, Dorothy concludes, will he please send her a fine hat and (predictably) some good-quality cloth to make kerchiefs.¹²

By contrast, about 1527 Mary Zouche, daughter of Sir John Zouche of Harringworth, was desperate to escape the home environment where she and her sister(s?) were living 'in the greatest thralldom of the world' to a step-mother whom it was impossible to please and who had their father under her thumb.¹³ Mary wrote dramatically to her 'Cousin Arundel' that sorrow had killed her own mother (Dorothy, a daughter of Sir William Capell, one-time mayor of London, and grand-daughter of Sir Thomas Arundel of Lanhorne) and Mary and her sister(s) will perish likewise if not rescued. 'We see nothing that should be to our comfort or preferment in any cause but as we were "fond-erlengs" that had neither father nor friend to trust to.' Could Cousin Arundel please approach Cardinal Wolsey in the hope that his influence would obtain them places in service with the queen (Katherine of Aragon) or the Princess Mary.

It was of course taken for granted that for a well-born girl a good marriage constituted her 'making in the world,' as it did for the orphaned daughters of Edward IV. Dorothy Plumpton obtained a husband, with or without the help of Lady Darcy. In his will of 1474 Thomas Stonor II had specified the requisite dowry for any daughter who might wish to enter religion,¹⁴ but from what one can gather about the young women visited here, they probably felt that joining a religious community was all very well for the old but at present they would rather be in a position to write love-letters, as Margery Brews did to her valentine John Paston III in 1477,¹⁵ and sing what we now know as *Asprès de Ma Blonde*, of which

¹² Lady Darcy was Edith, widow of Ralph, Lord Neville, who m. 2ndly Thomas, Lord Darcy of Templehurst. Stapleton commented unjustly (p. 203, n.) that it could be presumed that Dorothy had 'been placed in some menial position in the household of Lady Darcy, which the young lady did not think meet for her rank.' Lady Darcy may, however, have taken her to help the Plumptons, who were in dire financial trouble, and Dorothy seems to have made no allowance for the fact that she was only one of Sir Robert's many children (5 boys and 8 girls).

¹³ BL MS Cotton Vesp. F xiii (II), no. 210, f. 114, printed, *Letters and Papers HVIII*, 2nd edn, vol. 4, pt. 2, no. 3479 (written at Notwell, 8 Oct. [1527?]). The step-mother was Susan, previously widow of Nicholas Davenport. The addressee, 'Cousin Arundel,' was probably Sir Thomas Arundel (executed 1552) who was then gentleman of the privy chamber to Wolsey (*DNB*). The wills of Sir William (proved Mar. 1516) and Lady Capell (April 1527) are printed *Testamenta Vetusta*, vol. 2, pp. 532-33, 595.

¹⁴ *Stonor Letters*, no. 137.

¹⁵ *PL*, no. 897.

the refrain then went: *Serai-je nonnette? Oui ou non? / Serai-je nonnette? Je crois que non!* ('Shall I turn nun? Is it yes or no? Shall I turn nun? I don't fancy so!').¹⁶

In this earlier form the song was put into the mouth of a girl rejoicing in the possession of a lover, *Dieu merci!* If Elizabeth, daughter of Agnes and William Paston, was in a similar position when she was about nineteen or twenty, her *ami* was not one who met with her parents' approval. She was being kept at home in strict segregation and frequently beaten.¹⁷ Marriage offered a solution to the problem and some of her family were inclined to think that Stephen Scrope might represent the best match available, although he had a married daughter who lessened his eligibility because she might have children to claim on his estate after death. Scrope and Elizabeth had never set eyes on each other, he was far older than she was and confessedly no beauty. But Elizabeth was now so desperate to escape from home that she told a confidante that she would accept Scrope whatever her mother thought, if her brother approved. He sounded well-off and amiable enough. If he was as ugly as people reported, she said bleakly, the greater merit would accrue from treating him with proper wifely respect: 'men shall have the more dainty of her if she rule her to him as she ought to do.' Nothing came of the proposed match and about eight years later Elizabeth's mother wrote herself a memorandum to pay 26s. 8d. for Elizabeth's board with 'the Lady Pole' and to tell Elizabeth to buck up, become more helpful and so do something towards her own advancement: 'she must use herself to work readily, as other gentlewomen do, and somewhat to help herself therewith.'¹⁸ Elizabeth, by contemporary standards an old maid at the age of twenty-nine, was eventually married later that year to Robert Poynings.¹⁹

Finding a husband for Elizabeth's niece, Margery Paston, also presented difficulties for the family. In 1465, when Margery was visiting London with her mother, Margaret Paston, John III recommended Margaret to make her devotions at the two famous roods at St Paul's and the abbey of Bermondsey. If Margery did the same it might help her to get herself a good husband before she left London.²⁰ We may suppose that such off-hand disparagement fuelled Margery's obstinacy in making a disgraceful marriage with Richard Calle, the family's trusted servant. When, in September 1469, the Pastons were finally

¹⁶ The song, in its earlier but easily recognisable form, is quoted by E. Power, *Medieval English Nunneries c. 1275 to 1535*, Cambridge 1922, p. 606.

¹⁷ *PL*, nos 93, 94.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, no. 362 (28 Jan. 1458). Lady Pole was probably the widow of either Sir John or Sir Alexander de la Pole, younger brothers of William, duke of Suffolk, both of whom died in France in 1429.

¹⁹ Robert Poynings, who had twice been imprisoned and pardoned for treason, was killed at the 2nd battle of St Albans in Feb. 1461. Elizabeth's next husband, Sir George Browne of Betchworth, joined Buckingham's rebellion and was executed in 1483. Elizabeth herself died in 1488.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, no. 607 (14 Sept. 1465).

forced to accept that their contract was indissoluble, Margaret ordered her servants to forbid Margery the house (as she had warned her would happen if she did not repudiate her vows under examination) and told one or two other families not to accept her. In the upshot the bishop of Norwich placed her temporarily 'at Roger Best's . . . God knoweth full evil against [Roger's] will and his wife's if he durst do otherwise. I am sorry that they are encumbered with her.' Margaret bitterly recommended her son Sir John to write Margery off as a hopeless loser: 'remember . . . that we have lost of her but a brethel and set [it] the less to heart.'²¹ Relations had already reached breaking-point the previous April, when Margaret had asked Sir John to arrange to board Margery with the countess of Oxford or the dowager duchess of Bedford (the queen's mother) or in some other worshipful establishment, 'for we be either of us weary of other.'²²

Although Mary Stonor was married by October 1476, her husband, John Barantyne, was then only about sixteen and Mary was living with the duchess of Suffolk. But John's step-father, Sir John Boteler, wanted her in his own household – some suspected so as to give him better control over her young husband's property. For such under-age couples marriage did not spell independence. In 1531 the dowager marchioness of Dorset meant to break up her household, her husband Thomas (Grey), grandson of Elizabeth Woodville, having died in October 1530. This created the problem of what to do with her daughter Anne and Anne's young husband, Henry Willoughby, who had lived with the marchioness since their marriage in 1528.²³ So the priest William Wybe wrote to Henry's father suggesting that Anne should go to Henry's uncle, Sir John Willoughby, and Henry be trained as a lawyer at the Inns of Court or, perhaps better, placed in the king's service. Compassionately, Wybe added that word of some provision for their future would ease the heart of the anxious young wife.

A different predicament befell Lucy Brampston, 'daughter-in-law' (presumably meaning step-daughter) of Master Walter Lemster, doctor of physic at Cambridge and future physician to Richard III and then Henry VII before he died in 1487.²⁴ According to the petition that Dr Lemster presented to the chancellor, Archbishop Rotherham, in 1481, Lucy had been formally affianced back in May 1469 to Richard Narborough or Norborough, doctor of civil law. Immediately after their betrothal Richard had announced that he wished to postpone marriage for two years so that he could pursue his studies at Padua.

²¹ *Ibid.*, no. 721 (c. 10 Sept. 1469).

²² *Ibid.*, no. 704 (3 April 1469).

²³ M.A. Welch, ed., 'Willoughby Letters of the First Half of the Sixteenth Century', in *Nottinghamshire Miscellany*, Thoroton Society, Record Series 24 (1967).

²⁴ PRO, Early Chancery Proceedings, C1/61/584. Lemster: C. Rawcliffe, 'Consultants, careerists and conspirators: royal doctors in the time of Richard III', *The Ricardian*, vol. 8 (1988–90), pp. 250–58. Apparently this was not the only case Dr Lemster brought into chancery: *ibid.*, n. 28, p. 258, cites PRO, C1/60/73, 75.

On his return he would reimburse Lemster for boarding Lucy and a maid. In the event he remained abroad for ten years, 'to the full great hurt and heaviness' of both Lucy and her step-father. When he did return he refused to pay anything towards Lucy's keep or, it seems, go ahead with the marriage, to 'the great peril and jeopardy' of his soul.²⁵ To the petition asking for Narborough to be summoned before the court of chancery in June 1481 Lemster carefully annexed a schedule of the costs he had incurred, starting with 3s. 4d. per week for the bed and board of the two women, a total of £20 given to Lucy to buy gowns, kirtles, smocks, etc and ten marks for clothing for her maid, and £13 13s. 4d. in expenditure upon Lucy 'in time of her sore and great sickness caused through his unkindness and changeableness, full hard to escape with life, as all the country knoweth and as it appeareth on her, for ever sith she hath been sickly through sorrow and pensiveness which she took for his newfangles.' With Lemster's own expenses, for instance in paying people to search for the absent fiancé at Louvain, Bruges, Ghent and Padua, in travel between Cambridge and London and most recently taking Lucy to London for three weeks when Narborough asked to talk to her and the case came before the mayor and sheriffs, Lemster claimed total costs of £182 4s. 10d. as well as personal damages to an amount that he left to the chancellor's discretion. Nothing, need one add, was said about a monetary compensation for poor Lucy herself. How old was she at her betrothal – or alleged betrothal – in 1469? Did she, although worn with sorrow, eventually get her man?

²⁵ Petitioners to the court of chancery did not necessarily tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Richard Narborough's version of the story might have been very different, but his response is not annexed, nor is the decision, if any. The chancellor, who was sole judge in such cases, often had to base his judgement on an estimate of the relative credibility of the parties and their witnesses.