

**FICTIONS OF FATHERHOOD:
FATHERHOOD IN LATE MEDIEVAL ENGLISH
GENTRY AND MERCANTILE LETTERS AND
ROMANCES**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis takes a firmly interdisciplinary approach to the subject of late medieval fatherhood. It investigates the ideology of fatherhood, as well as the relationships between fathers and their sons and daughters, both legitimate and illegitimate, and also their stepchildren. In doing this it not only illuminates a previously unexplored aspect of family life, but also demonstrates the importance of fatherhood in male identity formation, and so expands the current understanding of medieval masculinities. As its source material this thesis uses Middle English romances and fifteenth-century gentry and mercantile letters. Rather than attempting a survey of late medieval fatherhood, this thesis concentrates on ‘fictions’ of fatherhood – the constructed worlds of letters and romances. Whilst letters and romances may reflect reality, and in the case of letters in particular may provide details of even the most mundane realities, they are strongly and self-consciously generic. The narrative of the romance is very important, but the story is also the means by which ideas are transmitted. Likewise the forms of letters, whilst used to transmit practical details, are also a way of encapsulating ideological perspectives. This thesis is principally about ideas of fatherhood, and thus illuminates late medieval perceptions of fathers and their functions. The Introduction presents current scholarship and the source material. Chapter 1 argues that fatherhood was a defining aspect of establishing an adult male identity. Chapter 2 is concerned with fathers and sons, and engages closely with the specific vocabulary of fatherhood. Chapter 3 uses the father-daughter relationship to consider the nature of patriarchal authority. Chapter 4 looks at ‘outsiders’ – stepchildren and bastards – to consider how far stretched the bonds of fatherhood. The Conclusion raises areas for further research.

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ABBREVIATIONS

Letter Collections

Christine Carpenter, ed., <i>The Armburgh Papers: the Brokholes Inheritance in Warwickshire, Hertfordshire, and Essex, c.1417-c.1453</i> (Woodbridge, Suffolk: 1998).	AL
Alison Hanham, ed., <i>The Cely Letters: 1472-1488</i> , Early English Text Society, O.S. 273 (London: Oxford University Press, 1975)	CL
James Gairdner, ed., <i>The Paston Letters</i> (Gloucester: A. Sutton, 1983).	PL
<i>The Plumpton Letters and Papers</i>	PLP
Christine Carpenter, ed., <i>Kingsford's Stonor Letters and Papers 1290 – 1483</i> (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).	SL

INTRODUCTION

My ryght reverent and wurshypfull fadyr, I recomaund me unto your good fadyrhood in the most umbylle wyse that I kan or may, mekely besechyng your good fadyrhod of your dayly blessynge¹

In 1463, John Paston, member of a prominent Norfolk gentry family and future knight, quarrelled with his father. His mother Margaret wrote to him, advising that he ‘write to hym [his father] ageyn as lowly as ye can, besechyng hym to be your good fader’.² The difficult relationship between John Paston and his father has been well documented and some general assumptions extrapolated regarding the stern nature of medieval parenting, but the broader implications of this letter have been glossed over.³ Margaret writes ‘good fader’ as if this is a phrase with meaning that will be understood without need for further explanation – but what *is* a good father? What is expected of him and what is he owed? The relationship between John senior and John junior has been seen as evidence of the elder John Paston’s cold authoritarianism and of his son’s lackadaisical attitude, but the wider issues of what their relationship tells us about fatherhood, male power and expected family

¹ William Stonor to Thomas Stonor, 20 April 1473. Christine Carpenter, ed., *Kingsford’s Stonor Letters and Papers 1290 – 1483* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), no. 127, 219. Hereafter *SL*.

² James Gairdner, ed., *The Paston Letters* (Gloucester: A. Sutton, 1983, microprint of 1904 edition in 5 vols), no. 552, 4:85. 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. This letter, for instance, Davis dates to November 1473 rather than early 1474. Norman Davis, ed., *Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971-6, 2 vols), no. 175, 1:287-8.

³ 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 and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), *The Paston Family in the Fifteenth Century: Fastolf’s Will* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), *The Paston Family in the Fifteenth Century: Endings* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000). The classic depiction of the Pastons’ father-child relationship is found in H.S. Bennett’s *The Pastons and Their England*, especially Chapter VI, which offers the conclusion that ‘the common attitude of parents towards their children was astonishingly cold.’ H.S. Bennett, *The Pastons and Their England: Studies in an Age of Transition* (Cambridge and London: Cambridge University Press 1922), 78.

dynamics still need to be explored.⁴ I will argue that medieval correspondence is a self-conscious genre, a constructed world that reflects and shapes social norms regarding late medieval fatherhood. Alongside letters I will consider Middle English romance, another carefully conceptualised genre that mirrors, problematises and supports patriarchal ideology and familial norms. I will investigate the ideology of fatherhood, as well as the relationships between fathers and their sons and daughters, both legitimate and illegitimate, and also their stepchildren. In doing this I will not only illuminate a previously unexplored aspect of family life, but I will also demonstrate the importance of fatherhood in male identity formation, and so expand the current understanding of medieval masculinities. In this Introduction I will review current scholarship, introduce my source material and explain my methodological approach, as well as outlining the structure of the thesis as a whole.

The invisible man: the theoretical approach to gender, masculinities, and fatherhood

Although pioneering medievalists like Eileen Power had an interest in women's history from as early as the 1920s, it was in the late 1970s and the 1980s that medieval women became a dynamic area of interest in medieval studies.⁵ Recent years have seen an interest in medieval women broaden into an interest in medieval *gender*. Work on women has opened up questions about genders and sexualities,

⁴ Bennett, *The Pastons*, 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 and New York: Sutton, 1986), 74.

⁵ Eileen Power's *Medieval People* (London: Methuen, 1924) was a pioneering work of social history, as was her (posthumously published) collection of lectures, *Medieval Women*, ed. by M.M. Postan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975). Key works published in the 1970s and 1980s concerned with women's experience include: Derek Baker, ed., *Medieval Women. Studies in Church History*, Subsidia 1. Ecclesiastical History Society (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978). Shulamith Shahar, *The Fourth Estate: A History of Women in the Middle Ages*, trans. by Chaya Galai (London and New York: 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* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1987).

which has been consolidated by the adoption of queer theory into medieval studies.⁶ Whilst medieval sexualities have to date received more attention than medieval genders, a growing volume of work on medieval masculinities emphasises the significance of considering gender in the context of men's lives, not just women's.⁷ There has also been interesting work on the formation and operation of the late medieval household. Often these two areas have proved complementary, with work on, for instance, gendered differences in marriage formation, women's role in the household economy, and service as part of the female life cycle.⁸ Yet for all the critical interest in the family and an eagerness to investigate previously neglected groups, as seen with the burgeoning interest in the history of medieval childhood, there is a surprising absence – the figure of the father.⁹ The father is nearly always assumed to be an integral part of the 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

⁶ 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, 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 and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

⁷ Publications on medieval men 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 and London: Garland, 1999); Ruth Mazo Karras, *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002); Derek G. Neal, *The Masculine Self in Late Medieval England* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2008). More on this trend follows below.

⁸ Significant titles include: on the household, Barbara A. Hanawalt, *The Ties that Bound: Peasant Families in Medieval England* (New York and 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 Michael M. Sheehan, C.S.B.* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1998); on sexuality, male privilege and the household, Ruth Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing Unto Others* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005).

⁹ On childhood, see Shulamith Shahar, *Childhood in the Middle Ages*, trans. Chaya Galai (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), and Nicholas Orme, *Medieval Children* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001).

were mostly of interest to their parents only once they could be put to practical use.¹⁰ While work on parent-child relations has begun to develop beyond these assumptions, the father, if he is mentioned at all, appears as a stereotype – an emotionally distant authoritarian figure who has little interest in developing a relationship with his children, particularly his daughters.¹¹ Moreover, because of this tacit assumption that the medieval father's role is understood and does not really need to be interrogated, the full implications of what is meant when we call medieval society 'patriarchal' are not explored.

'Patriarchy' in dictionary terms may be simply defined, but it is a concept that in reality has proved to be so confusing that one gender theorist gives the first 130 pages of his book on patriarchy the subtitle 'What is this thing called patriarchy?'¹² Perhaps this confusion is in part because critics have tended to ignore the 'pater' part of 'patriarchy'; 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. The same is true of men in terms of their existence as gendered beings. As Michael Kimmel and Michael Messner note,

¹⁰ This text was translated into English in 1962 with the title *Centuries of Childhood*. Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood*, trans. by P.A. Wells (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 30, 125.

¹¹ 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. 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 work, the controversial *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500 – 1800* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977). Whilst work on the family has moved on, there is still a tendency to fall back on assumptions about gender roles when envisioning the medieval family. Hanawalt for example argues in *The Ties that Bind* that the household became a gendered space early on in the lives of children (157) and that fathers were less interested in their daughters and did not provide a nurturing role (184-5). See also Shahar, *Childhood in the Middle Ages*, 112-115; the work's dependence on didactic literature has meant Shahar has tended to follow the medieval authors' gender differentiation.

¹² 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 Allan G. Johnson, *The Gender Knot: Unraveling Our Patriarchal Legacy*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005).

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.¹³ Because patriarchal culture makes men and masculinities the touchstones for 'normal' behaviours and standards within society, maleness is taken for granted, creating the paradox of simultaneously privileging men and making them invisible.¹⁴ Until recently, medievalists had not fully engaged with this issue, and so both 'masculinity' and 'patriarchy' have been used as terms that are assumed to be understood, rather than terms that require exposition. This has, however, begun to change, and I will outline how the social sciences have had an impact on the work of historians and literary scholars, and how this is being registered within medieval studies.

Since the 1970s there has been vigorous work in the social sciences on making men visible in terms of their masculinities. The earliest work was part of the New Men movement, which sought to reimagine the role of men in the context of the rise of feminist theory.¹⁵ As the feminism of the 1980s grew increasingly interested in women differentiated by race, nationality, sex and class, so there developed an interest not in masculinity, but masculinities.¹⁶ Yet these different 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 was assumed to be understood. 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.¹⁷ Although 'studies in masculinities' is still not a typical part of the university

¹³ Michael S. Kimmel and Michael A. Messner, *Men's Lives* (Boston, New York, San Francisco: Macmillan, 1989), x.

¹⁴ Johnson, *The Gender Knot*, 155.

¹⁵ On the chronology of 'men's studies', see Kimmel and Messner, *Men's Lives*, xiii.

¹⁶ See 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, California: Sage Publications, 1987). 'Masculinities' is now the usual term, rather than 'masculinity', and I will follow this approach, except when discussing an individual's masculinity.

¹⁷ Kimmel and Messner, *Men's Lives*, xiv-xv.

curriculum, it is a growing field of interest that contains notable scholarship.¹⁸ Yet despite all this, little attention has been paid to the father. The typical figure of scholarship is the distant or absent father, the father indoctrinated by patriarchy to be uninterested in the routine aspects of his children's lives.¹⁹ There are few studies on fathers, and most of them are case studies based on contemporary fathers and do not offer broader conclusions.²⁰

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 work of historians and literary scholars. In a 1994 article John Tosh identified why there has been resistance to the idea of studying masculinities.²¹ He argues that the first major reason is a perception that a history of masculinities is an attempt to blunt the polemical edge of women's history; the second, and perhaps more pervasive reason, is a belief that it is a fashionable irrelevance that will obfuscate rather than bring light to our questions. In the years since this article was written, there has been much growth in studies in masculinities, although much of this work has been concerned with masculinities that are in one way or another queer.²² There has, however, been an increasing interest in the white heterosexual male – the 'default' of English society – particularly amongst scholars of the nineteenth and

¹⁸ 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, California: Sage Publications, 2005), 1-11.

¹⁹ Johnson, *The Gender Knot*, 197-9.

²⁰ Some examples I have found useful include: Louis Burghes, Lynda Clarke and Natalie Cronin, eds., *Fathers and Fatherhood in Britain* (London: Family Policies Study Centre, 1997); Nancy E. Dowd, *Redefining Fatherhood* (New York: New York University Press, 2000); Elaine Welsh, *'Involved' Fathering and Child Well-Being: Fathers' Involvement with Secondary School Age Children* (London: National Children's Bureau, 2004); and Jo Warin, Yvette Solomon, Charlie Lewis and Wendy Langford, eds., *Fathers, Work and Family Life* (London: Family Policy Studies Centre, 1999).

²¹ John Tosh, 'What Should Historians Do With Masculinity?: Reflections on Nineteenth-Century Britain', *HistoryWorkshop Journal*, vol. 38, 1994: 179-80.

²² For example, in social theory: Chrys Ingraham, ed., *Thinking Straight: The Power, the Promise and the Paradox of Heterosexuality* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005); 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).

twentieth centuries.²³ John Tosh has played a particularly prominent role in emphasising that scholars must understand masculinities. His work lays 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.²⁴

Medievalists have not yet caught up with their post-medieval colleagues. The late 1990s saw the publication of a handful of collections on medieval men, and there has been significant interest in queer masculinities. It has only been within the last eight years, however, that monographs have been written on medieval men.²⁵ Within late medieval studies, *gender* by and large still seems to mean *women*, because it is assumed that the societal default is male – perhaps because, as Rousseau said, ‘The male is only a male at times; the female is a female all her life and can never forget her sex’.²⁶ Given this, it is perhaps not surprising that there has not been any significant interest shown in fatherhood, apart from some writing on father-daughter incest, on patricide by sons, on the role of fatherly permission in marriage making, and on didactic literature that references father-son relationships.²⁷ Even these tend to make no broader conclusions about the role of fathers and fatherhood within society, or the wider context of father-child relationships. Yet late medieval English

²³ John Tosh, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999); Michael Roper and John Tosh, eds., *Manful Assertions: Masculinities in Britain Since 1800* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991); Claudia Nelson, *Invisible Men: Fatherhood in Victorian Periodicals, 1850-1910* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia, 1995); Lesley A. Hall, *Hidden Anxieties: Male Sexuality 1900-1950* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).

²⁴ John Tosh, ‘What Should Historians Do With Masculinity?’, 190-1.

²⁵ The essay collections are: Cohen and Wheeler, *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages*; Hadley, *Masculinity in Medieval Europe*; Murray, *Conflicted Identities and Multiple Masculinities*. Until 2007, Karras's *From Boys to Men* was the only monograph on medieval masculinities. Since then two books have been published: Isabel Davis, *Writing Masculinity in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) and Neal, *The Masculine Self in Late Medieval England*. 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).

²⁶ William Boyd, trans. and ed., *Emile for Today: the Emile of Jean Jacques Rousseau* (London: Heinemann, 1956), 132.

²⁷ For example: Elizabeth Archibald, *Incest and the Medieval Imagination* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001); María Bullón-Fernández, *Fathers and Daughters in Gower's Confessio Amantis* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000); Shannon McSheffrey, *Marriage, Sex, and Civic Culture in Late Medieval London* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2006); Helen Cooper, ‘Counter-Romance: Civil Strife and Father Killing in the Prose Romances’, in Helen Cooper and Sally Mapstone, eds., *The Long Fifteenth Century: Essays for Douglas Gray* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 141-62.

society is saturated with the image of the father: God the father, the king as father to his people, a priest as father to his congregation.²⁸ 'Father' is clearly a potent term with socio-political resonance in many contexts, so it seems an odd critical lacuna to have not yet considered in any detail the role and nature of medieval fatherhood.

Related worlds: the source material

Given the unexplored nature of my topic, it is perhaps fitting that the sources I will use to investigate it are critically underappreciated, and that like fatherhood – so ubiquitous as to be rendered invisible – these sources were an integral part of every day life for both the gentry and mercantile classes. My source material comes from gentry and mercantile letter collections of the fifteenth century and from popular romances that largely date from the fourteenth century but often circulated long after that.²⁹ The letter collections of the families at which I am looking – the Stonors, Pastons, Plumpton, Celys and to a lesser extent the Armburghs – are all substantial, but with the exception of the Pastons, these letters have been little studied, with the critical attention paid to them predominately coming only from their editors.³⁰ There are, of course, exceptions. Gentry letters have been used as source material particularly by historians writing about marriage formation, and there has been an interest in the language of letters. There have also been a small number of monographs based on the letter evidence.³¹ Nonetheless, given the large body of

²⁸ For the king as father, see Cary J. Nederman, ed., *John of Salisbury: Policraticus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 33. For the priest as spiritual father, see Archibald, *Incest*, 31. Further examples are given in Chapter 4 of this thesis.

²⁹ More on my source material follows below.

³⁰ The editions of the letter collections are: *PL*, as note 2; 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 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*.

³¹ 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*. She also uses the Cely letters as a source. 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 a useful volume on the language of the Paston letters, *Social Networks and Historical Sociolinguistics: Studies in Morphosyntactic Variation in the*

material provided by the letters, they have not been extensively used. Even the Paston letters have suffered from having only a very small selection of their content given close scrutiny, 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.³² 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.³³ By looking at a broader cross-section of letters than has been typical of anyone aside from the collections' editors, I am able to follow interpersonal relationships much more closely. Moreover, I will show that the formulaic nature of letters does not mean that they are casually composed or impersonal; rather, the form as well as the content of letters point to specific markers of genre, and of the construction of models of social interaction within the constraints of that genre.

Romances have been perceived as even more formulaic than letters, since they use the same plot motifs and vocabulary again and again, but as with letters, the formulaic is a marker of world construction, of demarcating what is truly

Paston Letters (1421-1503) (Berlin and New York: 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, Pennsylvania: Penn State 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. The Pastons in general have received much more critical attention than the other families I use here. However, there are still very few monographs generally that use the letters as a central source material. Nearly all of these 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). Colin Richmond, as noted earlier, has written extensively on the Pastons, but he also had a hand in editing the last volume of Norman Davis's edition of the *Paston Letters*. This year (2009) a monograph on the Stonors, particularly focused on their social networks, has been published. Elizabeth Noble, *The World of the Stonors: A Gentry Society* (Woodbridge and Rochester, New York: Boydell Press, 2009).

³² *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. by A.S.G. Edwards (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer), 294.

³³ Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader* (London: Hogarth Press, 1925), 37.

important.³⁴ If letters are underexplored, critical interest in ‘popular’ – that is, non-elite – Middle English romances has in the last thirty years grown beyond considering them curios, or of interest largely within dialect and manuscript studies. Within the last decade there has emerged a substantial body of work on these texts.³⁵ However, these texts still struggle under the burden of being compared unfavourably to other examples of Middle English literature, and 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.³⁶ 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.³⁷ Letters and romances, then, are both substantial sources that seem to have been neglected because they are perceived as providing more form than content – and convention has it that the form is not very appealing – and their position as ‘niche’ sources has kept their full potential 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

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 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 and New York: 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.

³⁶ Joanne A. Charbonneau, ‘From Devil to Saint: Transformation in *Sir Gowther*’, in Phillipa Hardman, ed., *The Matter of Identity in Medieval Romance* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, and Rochester, New York: D.S. Brewer, 2002), 27.

³⁷ 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 and London: 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* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: D.S. Brewer, 1994). A good example of how romances can be considered with other texts is provided by Noël J. Menuge’s *Medieval Wardship in Romance and Law* (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2001), and to a slightly more limited extent by Neal’s *The Masculine Self*, but this sort of interdisciplinary approach has not been typical.

groups of people, and their existence underscores the significance of the written word in the lives of people at 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.³⁸ 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.³⁹ 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.⁴⁰ If letters are self-conscious, meanwhile, 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.⁴¹ 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 a familiarity with the plot through the reading of other romances.⁴² Moreover, these romances are read by audiences that are very aware of their social positions, and are also self-consciously fashioning their identities at a time when gentry and mercantile society was expanding and developing, as I will explain further below.⁴³ 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.

³⁸ See Sarah Rhiannon Williams, ‘English Vernacular Letters c. 1400 - c. 1600 : Language, Literacy and Culture’ (PhD diss., University of York, 2002), particularly 243-50.

³⁹ Susan M. Fitzmaurice, *The Familiar Letter in Early Modern English: a Pragmatic Approach* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia, 2002), p 35-6.

⁴⁰ Williams, ‘English Vernacular Letters’, 243-8.

⁴¹ Fewster, *Traditionality and Genre*, 25.

⁴² *Sir Gowther*, in Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury, eds., *The Middle English Breton Lays* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995); *Octavian*, in Harriet Hudson, ed., *Four Middle English Romances*, 2nd ed. (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 2006).

⁴³ Janet Coleman, *English Literature in History 1350 – 1400: Medieval Readers and Writers* (London: Hutchinson, 1981).

The secondary literature has not often considered the gentry and the upper mercantile classes side by side, instead treating them as distinct groups. However, by the later fifteenth century these groups began to share cultural, economic and political connections. Whilst those who moved from the mercantile classes to the aristocracy were always a minority, it has been argued that England had a more fluid social system than most other European countries.⁴⁴ Because the structure of power was still based on land, the ownership of country estates was the goal of most careerists, even if they had made their fortunes in service or trade.⁴⁵ This meant that gentry families might well in the countryside have lived side by side with merchants. From the late fourteenth century the term 'gentleman' came into use, which broadened the concept of the gentry as a social group and increasingly blurred the boundary between gentleman and merchants.⁴⁶ Who was a gentleman and who was not was difficult to define, as contemporaries seemed to have no fixed definition of the gentry.⁴⁷ Chris Given-Wilson goes so far as to include merchants who had invested in land amongst the 'parish' gentry; while I would be wary of so easily eliding the social gap between even the lesser gentry and the merchant class, the parish gentry and merchant landowners were often neighbours and economic equals.⁴⁸ Richard Cely, head of a London mercantile family, invested much of his profit in establishing an estate in the country. This estate was purchased from his wife's brother, Richard Andrew, who had himself climbed high in the world through a career in the church; he served as secretary to Henry VI from 1442 to 1455, and in 1452 became Dean of York.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Michael Bennett, 'Careerism in Late Medieval England', in *People, Politics and Community in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. Joel Rosenthal and Colin Richmond (Gloucester, Sutton and New York: St Martin's Press, 1987), 33.

⁴⁵ Bennett, 'Careerism', 34.

⁴⁶ Chris Given-Wilson, *The English Nobility in the Late Middle Ages: The Fourteenth-Century Political Community* (London and New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987), 71-2.

⁴⁷ Susan M. Wright, *The Derbyshire Gentry in the Fifteenth Century* (Chesterfield: Derbyshire Record Society, 1988), 1.

⁴⁸ Given-Wilson, *The English Nobility*, 72.

⁴⁹ Hanham, *The Celys and their World*, 8.

Although there is not much evidence of extensive contact between the Celys and this elevated relative, Richard Cely's son, Richard junior, may have spent part of his youth in Andrew's household. Based on the bookish nature of Richard junior's hand as compared to his brothers' and to other contemporary merchants' hands, and because his vocabulary contains northern linguistic traits, Alison Hanham suggests that he may have spent part of his youth in his uncle's household.⁵⁰ This probably tied into life cycle service, where adolescents spent time in other households of equal – or for the ambitious, higher – ranking families to serve and to be educated.⁵¹ Adolescents from mercantile backgrounds surely spent time in service within gentry households, thus forging connections between families. Perhaps years spent in a household with courtly connections would have given Richard junior the refinement that made him an appealing retainer to Sir John Weston, whose estates were near the Cely's country residence. Judging by the number of references to Sir John in the letters, he became a patron to the whole family. Sir John was Prior of the Knights of St John of Jerusalem in England, and as such was a powerful and high-ranking man – yet he refers to Richard's brother George as 'coyssyn' in a holograph letter of 1481, and Richard spends the Easters of 1479 and 1480 with Sir John, who passes on his warm wishes to the family.⁵² Such ties of service were probably more common than the sources would have us believe, as it can be difficult to know the rank of servants within households.

Such acquaintances were not solely the product of a merchant's 'gentrification' and we should be careful not to assume that merchants would by the later fifteenth century necessarily aspire to a rural gentry lifestyle. Often gentry and merchant families had similar business interests, which became more common as a true urban gentry began to develop in this period.⁵³ The Celys, for instance, seem to have been acquaintances of the gentry Plumpton family and may have had business

⁵⁰ Hanham, *The Celys and their World*, 9.

⁵¹ Michael J. Bennett, 'Education and Advancement', in *Fifteenth-Century Attitudes: Perceptions of Society in Late Medieval England*, ed. by Rosemary Horrox (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 92-3.

⁵² *CL*, no. 129, 116, no. 55, p 501, no. 83, 73.

⁵³ D.M. Palliser, 'Urban Society', in *Fifteenth Century Attitudes*, ed. Horrox, 140.

connections with them at the Staple.⁵⁴ Similarly, Sir William Stonor's business in the Calais wool trade made him a direct contemporary, and perhaps acquaintance of the Cely family, and his mercantile connections extended into his marital life: his first wife, Elizabeth Ryche, was the widow of a wealthy mercer.⁵⁵ He also had the wardship of the Fenns, children of a fishmonger who was apparently a relative of his wife.⁵⁶ William's marriage to a woman of a lower rank did not stop him later making an advantageous match with Anne Neville, daughter of John, Marquis of Montagu. The gentry of the later middle ages were characterised, as Peter Coss notes, by their ability to absorb the upwardly mobile into its ranks. Certainly the expansion of the gentry into the professions – John Paston I was a lawyer, for instance – means that earlier ways of distinguishing between social groups became blurred.⁵⁷ As gentry culture crystallised from the fourteenth century onward, their success was based less upon their ability to wield a sword than their skill with a pen, and the gentry were characterised increasingly by increased occupational mobility and adaptability.⁵⁸ William Worcester lamented that those of 'gentill bloode' had to 'lerne the practique of law or of custom of lande, or of civil matier And who can ... put hym forthe in suche matiers' was more highly prized than a man of the same rank who had served on the battlefield.⁵⁹ Colin Richmond argues that in the late fifteenth century through to the sixteenth century England was transformed from 'a country of knights... [to] a nation of shopkeepers.'⁶⁰

Richmond's claim is, at least for the late fifteenth century, an exaggeration. John Paston I may have been a lawyer, but his sons were knights who fought on the battlefield, and Plumpton interests in the wool trade did not prevent Sir William

⁵⁴ A postscript in a letter from Richard junior to his brother George reads: 'Plomtton p[r]ays you to delyuer thys byll to hys brother Nowell'. *CL* no. 99, 87.

⁵⁵ Introduction to the *SL*, 55. The Celys may have at any rate known Elizabeth and her first husband Thomas Ryche, a mercer. Hanham, *The Celys and their World*, 196-7.

⁵⁶ Introduction to the *SL*, 57.

⁵⁷ Peter Coss, *The Origins of the English Gentry* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 246-51.

⁵⁸ Maurice Keen, 'Chivalry', in *Gentry Culture in Late Medieval England*, ed. by Raluca Radulescu and Alison Truelove (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 44; D.A.L. Morgan, 'The Individual Style of the English Gentleman', in *Gentry and Lesser Nobility*, ed. Jones, 25.

⁵⁹ J.G. Nichols, ed., *The Boke of Noblesse* (London: J.B. Nichols and Sons, 1860), 57.

⁶⁰ Richmond, *Endings*, 254.

Plumpton's heir dying at the Battle of Towton. The barriers between socio-economic groups may have been more permeable than they had hitherto been, but movement upward from the bourgeoisie to the gentry was still difficult. As a contemporary adage had it, service was not a substitute for heritage.⁶¹ Barbara Harris notes that a number of aristocratic wills stipulate that daughters must marry men of the right rank to receive their dowries.⁶² This is true of John Paston I's father William, who left his daughter Elizabeth £200 for her dowry – if she married a man of appropriate rank.⁶³ As the bloodline passed through the male, it was acceptable for a gentleman to marry a richer woman of lower status, but it seems a gentlewoman would be risking her status to marry a lower ranking man. Furthermore, there was social stratification within the gentry class itself.⁶⁴ The 'county' or greater gentry were typically wealthier than the 'parish' gentry, and had more geographically dispersed landed interests. The greater gentry, outnumbered by the lesser gentry by probably three to one, dominated local offices and tended to marry amongst themselves.⁶⁵ Nonetheless, it is evident that all these socio-economic groups could and did mix, and on a more than superficial level. Merchants were not necessarily relegated to mixing with the lesser end of the gentry scale, either; while the Paston family, ambitious and sensitive about its status, may have avoided marital connections with lower ranks, the perhaps more pragmatic Stonors clearly did not have such scruples.⁶⁶ The Stonors did not have the political aspirations of the Pastons, but they were not a lesser gentry family, either; Thomas Stonor was on the commission of the peace continuously from 1466 until his death in 1474 and his son William was knighted in 1478.⁶⁷ William's marriage in 1475 to the lower ranking but wealthy

⁶¹ Bennett, 'Careerism', 34.

⁶² Barbara J. Harris, *English Aristocratic Women 1450-1550: Marriage and Family, Property and Careers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 53-5.

⁶³ Colin Richmond, *The First Phase*, 178.

⁶⁴ C. Moreton, 'A Social Gulf? The Upper and Lesser Gentry of Later Medieval England', *Journal of Medieval History* 17: 3 (1991): 255-62. Janet Coleman remarks on the disunity of the 'middle class' at this time and considers antagonisms within it to influence contemporary literature. Coleman, *English Literature in History*, 276.

⁶⁵ Given-Wilson, *The English Nobility*, 71-4.

⁶⁶ In addition to the stipulation in William Paston's will cited above, the Pastons were furious when Margery Paston secretly married Richard Calle, the family's steward, and felt it demeaned the family. See *PL*, no. 710, 5:21, and Chapter 3 of this thesis.

⁶⁷ Introduction to the *SL*, 51, 58.

Elizabeth Ryche did not hinder his career, and reflected an increasingly common social practice.⁶⁸

Members of gentry and mercantile families were often peripatetic, travelling the country and overseas for their business pursuits or in service of patrons, and this movement made letters an integral part of communication. The Paston sons spent much time following their lords around the country, while George Cely made regular trips back and forth across the English Channel to and from the Staple at Calais. The reasons for travel were not uniform across these two classes – the two examples I have just given suggest very different lifestyles for George Cely and the Pastons – but they nonetheless provided the need for the regular transmission of information. The written word was evidently key in communication, as letters between different family members gave orders, made requests, and bore news. Letter writing thus became a key feature of fifteenth century life amongst these social groups, and was probably taught at a very elementary level.⁶⁹ Literacy, both in reading and writing, was rising, as household management and commercial transactions began to rely increasingly on written documentation.⁷⁰ These literate and aspirational classes could afford to commission books, or at least purchase texts, whilst in the last quarter of the fifteenth century the emergence of printed books in England allowed texts to reach a wider audience.⁷¹ Critical consensus of recent years seems to be that the readers of popular romances were of the gentry and bourgeois classes, and so both types of source that I am using emerge from the same social milieu.⁷²

⁶⁸ Peter Fleming, *Family and Household in Medieval England* (Houndmills, Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 34.

⁶⁹ Sarah Rhiannon Williams, 'English Vernacular Letters c. 1400 – 1600: Language, Literacy and Culture' (PhD diss., University of York: York, 2001), 44-5.

⁷⁰ Amanda Truelove, 'Literacy', in *Gentry Culture in Late Medieval England*, ed. Radulescu and Truelove, 85.

⁷¹ Margaret Lane, 'Private ownership of printed books', in *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain. Volume III 1400 – 1557*, ed. Lotte Hellinga and J.B. Trapp (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 205-13.

⁷² For example, see Harriet Hudson, 'Middle English Popular Romances: The Manuscript Evidence', *Manuscripta* 28 (1984): 69-78; Lane, 'Private ownership of printed books'; Coleman, *English Literature in History*; Carol M. Meale, "'Gode men / Wives maydnes and alle men": Romance and its

I will come to the evidence for this ownership shortly, but first I should address the question of how these sources were being read and, in the case of letters, written. The question of who physically penned letters is different from the question of who composed them, as medieval letters were often in higher status families not written by the sender, and women in particular very rarely penned their own letters.⁷³ The distinction between who writes down a letter and who composes it is a useful reminder that in this period there is a difference between having the ability to read and being able to write, and moreover, reading literacy was supplemented by what Joyce Coleman usefully calls ‘aural’ culture.⁷⁴ Reading and writing were two distinct technologies, and elite women, who often had access to scribes, had little need to develop the skill of writing.⁷⁵ The degree to which men penned their own letters also varied. John Paston I rarely penned his own letters, while all but seven letters by his son John III were in his own hand. The Cely men wrote all their own letters, which may point to socio-economic difference between the gentry and mercantile groups. For instance, gentry families would have their own chaplains who often doubled as secretaries.⁷⁶ James Gloys, the Paston family’s chaplain, often acted as their scribe.⁷⁷ Furthermore, if a clerk were not available, scribal duties were probably a conventional part of the ‘service-cum-friendship’ between the lord or lady and his or her high status servants.⁷⁸ If using a scribe was conventional for gentry families, why did Johns Paston II and III choose to write for themselves when their father did not? This may be partly because the Paston sons had grown up writing letters – on a number of occasions they acted as scribes for their mother –

Audiences’ in Carol M. Meale, ed., *Readings in Medieval English Romance* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, and Rochester, New York: D.S. Brewer, 1994), 209-25.

⁷³ Rosenthal, *Telling Tales*, 106-14.

⁷⁴ Joyce Coleman, ‘Aurality’, in *Oxford Twenty-First Century Approaches to Literature: Middle English*, ed. by Paul Strohm, 68-85 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁷⁵ Sharon D. Michalove, ‘The Education of Aristocratic Women in Fifteenth-Century England’, in *Estrangement, Enterprise and Education in Fifteenth-Century England*, ed. Sharon D. Michalove and A. Compton Reeves (Stroud: Sutton, 1998), 119-20.

⁷⁶ Given-Wilson, *The English Nobility*, 90-3.

⁷⁷ Rosenthal, *Telling Tales*, 106-8.

⁷⁸ Rosenthal, *Telling Tales*, 110.

and so found it easy to pen their own missives.⁷⁹ It also seems likely that by the later fifteenth century conventions of letter writing were changing, and more men were penning their own letters.⁸⁰ Wealthy mercantile families, meanwhile, would have had several servants, and the numerous letters from Cely servants indicate that many of them were literate.⁸¹ Merchants would probably not, however, have had experienced scribes within their households, since it was unlikely they would have their own chaplains, and so it might be just as efficient for them to write their own letters as to dictate them.

The presence of a scribal hand does not necessarily affect content as much as one might expect. Alexander Bergs' work on the morphosyntactic variation within the Paston letters indicates that scribes did not influence content. James Gloys, the Paston chaplain, wrote nineteen letters for Margaret Paston and four for her husband John I. According to Bergs' analysis, the morphosyntactic makeup of these letters varies, with differences in vocabulary between the two sets of letters. Evidence from other scribes that the family used provides similar results. If the words were the scribe's choice, there would not be these vocabulary differences.⁸² It seems likely that letters are verbatim transcripts of dictation.⁸³ The extent to which scribes were used, however, does give us insight into the way written communication was transmitted. Letters were not private in the sense that they were written by one person and then read by one recipient. Letters were dictated, sometimes to a professional scribe, sometimes to family members – as we have just seen, Margaret Paston made use of her sons – and sometimes to a trusted retainer. Some letters were written in more than one hand, the evidence suggesting the letter was not sealed for as long as possible, providing the opportunity for a postscript.⁸⁴

⁷⁹ Rosenthal, *Telling Tales*, 108.

⁸⁰ Williams, 'English Vernacular Letters', 227-30.

⁸¹ Over three dozen letters survive from William Cely and other letters penned by servants include one by Robert Good (*CL*, no. 94, 83-4) and Robert Eyryk wrote two (*CL*, nos. 152 and 154, 139-40, 141. On servants in mercantile households, see Jennifer Kermode, *Medieval Merchants: York, Beverley and Hull in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 103-5.

⁸² Bergs, *Social Networks and Historical Sociolinguistics*, 79-80.

⁸³ Rosenthal, *Telling Tales*, 110.

⁸⁴ Rosenthal, *Telling Tales*, 110.

Information, then, circulated quite freely within the circle of the household as it became incorporated into the letters, which then transmitted that information beyond the household. It will be seen below that romances, too, circulated within and outside of the household as dynamic and interactive, rather than static, objects, and were borrowed, shared, and probably discussed by different members of the household.

There has been much written on literacy in the Middle Ages, though the answers to how romances were consumed – read privately, read aloud to a group, memorised – are mostly speculative.⁸⁵ A more useful point for the purposes of this discussion is that from the late fourteenth century, books in English made up a substantial part of the private collections of gentry and mercantile families.⁸⁶ People wanted to read literature in English – hence the success of Caxton’s translations of Latin and French works – and, significantly, the language of literature and the language of politics and business began increasingly to be English. Latin was still very important, but in the business letters and also in the books of the gentry and mercantile classes we see a heavy use of Middle English, so we can assume that *if* someone could read a letter, they could probably also read a romance. Even lacking the ability to read English does not necessarily preclude someone from consuming literature; if someone could write a letter without actually setting pen to paper, they might also have been able to own and use books without being what would now be termed ‘literate’.⁸⁷ Medieval reading culture was aural, which meant it often involved the shared hearing of written texts. This was not a process where one person or a group of people

⁸⁵ There are a great many critical works on medieval literacy; some references I have found useful include: on orality and literacy, Walter J. Ong, ‘Orality, Literacy, and Medieval Textualisation’, in *New Literacy History*, vol. 16, no. 1 (1984): 1-12; on aurality, Joyce Coleman, *Public Reading and the Reading Public in Late Medieval England and France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); on the literacy of women, Julia Boffey, ‘Women authors and women’s literacy in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England’, in Carol M. Meale, ed., *Women and Literature in Britain, 1150-1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), and Phillips, *Medieval Maidens*, 61-72; on learning and its relation to literacy, Sarah Rees Jones, ed., *Learning and literacy in Medieval England and abroad* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003); on gentry literacy, Amanda Truelove, ‘Literacy’, in *Gentry Culture in Late Medieval England*, ed. Radulescu and Truelove, 84-99; on merchant literacy, Thrupp, *The Merchant Class*, 155-61.

⁸⁶ Lane, ‘Private ownership of printed books’, 213.

⁸⁷ Kim Phillips gives a useful outline of different kinds of reading literacy. Phillips, *Medieval Maidens*, 63.

passively listened to another reading. As she sits with her ladies, Criseyde in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* explains to Pandarus that ““This romance is of Thebes that *we* rede””, even though the person reading aloud is ‘a mayden’, not Criseyde herself.⁸⁸ Criseyde is here as much a reader as the maiden who is holding the book.

As for the question of who owned romances, evidence within the manuscripts and from wills supports the theory that book ownership in the gentry and mercantile classes went beyond the typical primers and mass books. The signatures within Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Hatton 73, a copy of Lydgate's *Life of Our Lady*, show the book passing from an abbess to the wife of a Knight of the Bath and to another gentry wife, suggesting that books might be circulated between friends and family.⁸⁹ Peter Fleming, meanwhile, has written an interesting sketch of the cultural ties between the Hautes, a gentry family from Kent and Sussex, and their circle.⁹⁰ However, although wills are a very useful source, they can be frustratingly silent in places. This has led authors to assume that a lack of mentions of a kind of book means that they were not kept, such as Sylvia Thrupp's belief that London merchants preferred religious and practical works to romances, as the latter appear rarely in their wills.⁹¹ Perhaps romances did not have a ‘serious’ enough content to be left in wills; it might have been considered appropriate to bequeath religious literature, but not secular works. Or it may simply be that romances were not usually valuable enough to be included in wills, particularly as romances circulated in booklet form, whilst religious books may have been mentioned because they were more expensive. For instance, Sir Richard Roos owned the French romance *Queste del saint Graal*, and bequeathed it to his niece Eleanor Haute on his death in 1482: ‘I

⁸⁸ *Troilus and Criseyde*, ll. 100, 83, my emphasis. In Larry D. Benson, ed. *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987). See also Coleman, ‘Aurality’, 68-73.

⁸⁹ Carol M. Meale and Julia Boffey, ‘Gentlewomen's reading’, 526-40, in *The Cambridge History of the Book*, ed. Hellinga and Trapp, 527-31.

⁹⁰ W. Fleming, ‘The Hautes and their “Circle”: Culture and the English Gentry’, in Daniel Williams, ed., *England in the Fifteenth Century: Proceedings of the 1986 Harlaxton Symposium* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1987), 85-102.

⁹¹ Sylvia Thrupp, *The Merchant Class of Medieval London 1300 – 1500* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1948), 161.

biqueth to Alianore Haute ... my grete booke called saint Grall bounde in boordes and covered with rede leder'.⁹² A *Grail* text's religious content might have meant this manuscript was considered to be quasi-devotional and so appropriate to bequeath. Probably most significant for testamentary purposes, however, was that this particular romance – London, British Library, MS Royal 14.E.III (s.14) – was an expensive fourteenth-century illuminated manuscript, and it would have been important to properly dispose of it. There is some slight testamentary evidence for the ownership of less religious romances, however; Elizabeth Darcy, for instance, in 1411 left to her husband six books, including a 'Lanselake'.⁹³

Even with a lack of testamentary evidence, the number of extant Middle English romance manuscripts suggests an increasing audience for these texts. There are seventy surviving romance manuscripts from the fifteenth century, compared to only nineteen from the preceding two centuries. Even taking into account the accidents of survival, this is a significant difference.⁹⁴ As more people became interested in reading texts in English, so demand for such texts increased. Certainly Caxton saw both the gentry and merchant classes as a potential customer base, for instance writing in the introduction to *Of Olde Age* that the book was intended for 'noble, wysse & grete lordes gentilmen & marchauntes'.⁹⁵ In Caxton's 1485 edition of *Le Morte Darthur*, meanwhile, he addressed 'alle noble prynces, lordes and ladyes, gentylmen or gentylwymmen'. Caxton did have high ranking patrons, but this dedication cleverly links a potential gentry audience with the nobility, which may have made it attractive for ambitious families like the Pastons.⁹⁶ Caxton anticipated that his publications would appeal to a wide range of readers.

⁹² Busby, *Codex and Context: Reading Old French Verse Narrative in Manuscript* (Amsterdam: Rodopi), 676.

⁹³ Carol M. Meale, "'...alle the bokes that I have of latyn, englysh and frensch': Laywomen and Their Books in Late Medieval England', in Meale, *Women and Literature in Britain*, 139.

⁹⁴ Meale, 'Romance and Its Audiences', 217.

⁹⁵ Lane, 'Private ownership of printed books', 213.

⁹⁶ Karen Cherewatuk, *Marriage, Adultery and Inheritance in Malory's Morte Darthur* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2006), xviii.

The composition of household miscellanies provides some interesting further evidence regarding the types of people who read romance. Sir Robert Thornton compiled Lincoln Cathedral Library, MS 91 and London, British Library, MS Additional 31042, containing between them eleven romances. Lincoln Cathedral Library, MS 91, a miscellany containing eight Middle English romances as well as devotional poems and medical charms, appears to have been composed for his own or his household's use, whilst the other manuscript was possibly composed for Thornton's patron.⁹⁷ Slightly lower down the social spectrum, John Colyns, a mercer, is known to have compiled London, British Library, MS Harley 2252 in the early sixteenth century. This miscellany contains texts that Colyns presumably found useful in his professional life, such as the *Annals of London*. It also contains two popular romances, *Lyf of Ipomydon* and the stanzaic *Morte Arthur*, which were copied c.1460-80, and so – unlike other texts in the book – were not transcribed by Colyns.⁹⁸ This gives us an indication of how most romances circulated: not as expensive bound books, but as booklets which could be readily purchased by householders like Colyns. Undoubtedly many such booklets, inherently more fragile than a bound codex, have not survived. The Colyns and Thornton manuscripts are quite different in content apart from the romances, but both seem designed to be of both practical use and for leisure. Colyns' miscellany in particular has the appearance of providing a complete library for its owner. Edinburgh, The National Library of Scotland, MS Advocates 19.3.1 may have also been intended to provide a complete library – in this instance for the provincial gentry family the Sherbrookes. This manuscript contains the romances *Sir Gowther*, *Sir Isumbras* and *Sir Amadas*, as well as devotional literature, burlesque and comic verse, and didactic literature such as *The Little Children's Book*.⁹⁹ This gives the impression that popular romances were considered part of a fairly standard body of literature useful for the

⁹⁷ See John J. Thompson, 'The Compiler in Action: Robert Thornton and the "Thornton Romances" in Lincoln Cathedral MS 91', in Derek Pearsall, ed., *Manuscripts and Readers in Fifteenth-Century England: the Literary Implications of Manuscript Studies* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1983), 113-24, and John J. Thompson, *Robert Thornton and the London Thornton manuscript: British Library MS Additional 31042* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1987).

⁹⁸ Meale, 'The compiler at work', in Pearsall, *Manuscripts and Readers*, 82-103.

⁹⁹ Thorlac Turville-Petre, 'Some Medieval English Manuscripts in the North-East Midlands', in Pearsall, *Manuscripts and Readers in Fifteenth-Century England*, 136-9.

household's reading needs or desires. There are a number of other such examples obtained through manuscript and will evidence.¹⁰⁰ These sources, however, provide little insight into how and by whom romances were actually read. More interesting, perhaps, is to look at the Paston family, who provide an enlightening case study for the reception of texts within a gentry social circle, as well as neatly showing the intersection of letters and romances.

The Pastons as readers: consumption of romance

What makes the Paston letter collection particularly exciting regarding the ownership of manuscripts is that there is a real sense of books in use, rather than static objects being bequeathed in wills or mentioned in inventories. The Paston letters show readers of different ages and of both sexes owning and exchanging books and enjoying the popular writers of their time. The family seem to have owned and read romances, and mention them in a similar way to texts by authors now viewed more favourably by critics. For instance, the family's appreciation of Lydgate serves as a good indication of how texts circulated in their social circle. In 1472, Sir John Paston wrote to his younger brother, John Paston III, that the Earl of Arran 'hath a book of my syster Annys of the Sege of Thebes; when he hathe doon with it, he promysyd to delyver it yow.'¹⁰¹ Here we have a brief insight into how manuscripts might reach a wider readership beyond their nominal owners – and it shows men and women enjoying some of the same literature. Anne was seventeen and had evidently loaned the book to her older brother, who had passed the text on to a man who was married to the King of Scotland's sister. Despite their differences in age, gender and rank, they could evidently find some common interest in this moralising verse history. To his brother Walter, John Paston III sent 'the book of vij.

¹⁰⁰ For instance, John de Ireland held Hale Manor in the years 1435-62. He may have owned MS. Bodmer, which contains *The Awentyrs Off Arthure At The Terne Wathelyne*, *Sir Amadace* and *The Avowing of Arthur*. See Gisela Guddat-Figge, *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Middle English Romances* (Munich: W. Fink, 1976), 131. A century earlier, Henry Graspayns, a fishmonger and prominent London citizen, left his son 'bokes of romanse' in 1348. Busby, *Codex and Context*, 733.

¹⁰¹ *PL*, no. 804, 5:144.

Sagys', which is probably the metrical romance *The Seven Sages of Rome*.¹⁰² Later John II listed this in his 'Inventory off Englysshe Boks', so it may be that it then passed to him from Walter, or perhaps that it was his in the first place.¹⁰³ In the same inventory, Sir John noted that he has 'a Boke of Troylus whyche William Bra [...] hath hadde neer X yer, and lent it to Dame [...] Wyngfelde' which could be Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, and later in the inventory records that he has a 'Boke lent Midelton'. Evidently the Pastons had friends who also enjoyed reading. All this evidence points to a society of people willing to share texts and eager to read new stories or re-read familiar ones.

John Paston II was the bibliophile of the family. In late 1474 he was very eager to claim books from the estate of their house chaplain James Gloys:

as for the bookes that weer Sir James, iff it lyke yow that I maye have them, I am not able to by them; but somewhat wolde I gyffe, and the remenaunt with a good devowte herte, by my trowthe, I wyll preye for hys sowle. Werffor iff it lyke yow by the next messenger or karyer to sende hem in a daye, I shall have them dressyd heer; and iff any of them be claymyd here aftre, in feythe I wyll restoor it.¹⁰⁴

One wonders how sincerely John would pray for Gloys' soul, as previously he had described the chaplain as 'the prowde, pevysh, and evyll disposyd prest to us all'.¹⁰⁵ Evidently opinions could be modified when there were books at stake. Shortly after sending the letter to his mother, he wrote to his brother, anxiously hoping that 'yow remembr so that I may have the bokys'.¹⁰⁶ Three weeks later he sent another letter to John III, noting rather peevishly: 'I her no worde off my vessell, ner off my boks; I mervayll'.¹⁰⁷ Unfortunately, there were evidently other bibliophiles – or at least those with an eye for valuable objects – who took an interest in Gloys' estate: Margaret wrote in January 1475 that 'the best of alle' the books have gone.¹⁰⁸ John

¹⁰² *PL*, no. 805, 5:146.

¹⁰³ *PL*, no. 987, 5:65-6.

¹⁰⁴ *PL*, no. 856, 5:212.

¹⁰⁵ *PL*, no. 805, 5:146.

¹⁰⁶ *PL*, no. 858, 5:216.

¹⁰⁷ *PL*, no. 860, 5:218.

¹⁰⁸ *PL*, no. 863, 5:223.

II, perhaps disappointed by this loss, replied loftily that his 'mynde is now nott most uppon bokes.'¹⁰⁹

At least Sir John Paston had a number of other books to comfort him. An inventory shows that as well as religious, philosophical, and heraldic texts, and Caxton's printed book on chess, he owned works by Chaucer and family favourite Lydgate, and the romances of *Guy of Warwick* and *Richard Coeur de Lion*, as well as probable romances *The Dethe off Arthur begynyng at Cassabelaun*, *The Grene Knight* and *Palatyse and Scitacus*.¹¹⁰ The presence of Guy, Richard and Arthur suggests an interest in the English heroes of romance, which is supported by a letter he writes to John III in 1473, where he complained piteously about how his servants treated him with 'onkynd nesse', especially a certain 'W. Woode' who John has 'kepyd ... thys iij yer to pleye Seynt Jorge and Robyn Hod and the Shryff off Notyngnam, and now when I wolde have good horse he is goon into Bernysdale, and I withowt a keeper.'¹¹¹ What exactly is going on here is unclear; did John II keep servants to perform plays or read literature to him, or was Wood requested to make use of his particular talents – or is this not a reference to any real kind of performance but instead a private allusion for which we do not have a context?¹¹² From the early fifteenth century, there is evidence that Robin Hood stories were dramatised, and several Robin Hood texts of this period have strong associations with a gentry readership.¹¹³ It has even been suggested that Sir John wrote the play *Robyn Hod and the Shryff off Notyngnam*, a dramatic fragment of only 21 lines.¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁹ PL, no. 865, 5:225.

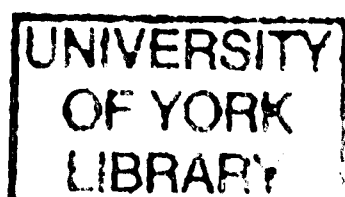
¹¹⁰ PL, no. 987, 6:65-7. As far as I can ascertain there are no records elsewhere of these texts, unless *The Grene Knight* is *Gawain and the Green Knight*. The titles are suggestive of romance, and *The Dethe off Arthur* is listed as in the volume that contained *Guy* and *Richard*. Even if these were not 'romances' in the sense considered today, it seems medieval readers had a broader interpretation of that category than modern critics. Yin Liu, 'Middle English Romance as Prototype Genre', *The Chaucer Review* 40.4 (2006): 335-353.

¹¹¹ PL, no. 832, 5:185.

¹¹² Richmond, *Endings*, 66.

¹¹³ A.J. Pollard, *Imagining Robin Hood: The Late-Medieval Stories in Historical Context* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 8-11.

¹¹⁴ *Robyn Hod and the Shryff off Notyngnam*, in Stephen Knight and Thomas H. Ohlgren, eds., *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997). On the proposed Paston authorship of the play, see Thomas H. Ohlgren and Lister M. Matheson, *Robin*



The evidence for authorship seems to me perhaps more a product of wishful thinking than anything more concrete, but certainly the play itself may have been amongst the Paston papers. For the purposes of this discussion, it may be John II's reference of Wood going 'into Bernysdale' that is most interesting. Barnsdale was part of the Robin Hood legend, appearing in both *A Gest of Robyn Hode* and *Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne*.¹¹⁵ John's comment that Wood has gone to Barnsdale seems to be a joking reference to his sudden abandonment of his post rather than actually locating where Wood has gone. Whatever is happening here, it suggests not only a familiarity on John II's part with folk literature, but also that he expected his brother to understand his meaning too, implying a shared base of cultural and literary knowledge.

Perhaps the best indication of John's interest in romances, however, comes not from him but in a letter from his friend Thomas Daverse, where he promised to send him *De Arte Amandi* as John requested. He then made the sly remark:

me thenketh Ouide *de Remedio* were more mete for yow, but yef [unless] ye purposid to falle hastely in my lady Anne P. lappe, as white as whales bon, &c. Ye be the best cheser of a gentellwoman that I know, &c.¹¹⁶

'White as whales bone' is a traditional romance descriptor for a beautiful lady, for instance used to describe the heroine in *The Erle of Toulous* – 'Hyr hondys whyte as whallys bonne' (355) – and the heroine's mother in *Emaré*, who is 'Whyte as whales bone' (34). In this context, it seems that Daverse was using it to tease his friend, who perhaps has already read enough about love and could do with a lesson or two in how to be rid of it. The '&c' seems like a casual reference to similar language that could be used to describe the lady, and as such this offhand ability to draw upon a literary tradition indicates a good knowledge of romance conventions. This ability to make jokes drawing upon the language of romance and courtly literature would suggest an intimate familiarity with such texts, just as Chaucer's ability to pastiche

Hood: The Early Poems, 1465-1560: Texts, Contexts, and Ideology (Newark, Delaware: University of Delaware Press, 2007), 92-5.

¹¹⁵ *A Gest of Robyn Hode*, in Knight and Ohlgren, *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales*, l. 536. See also Ohlgren and Matheson, *Robin Hood: the early poems*, 93-4.

¹¹⁶ *PL*, no. 660, 4:268.

romance in *Sir Thopas* would indicate a good knowledge of the source material. Moreover, Daverse's juxtaposition of a reference to Ovid alongside an allusion to popular romance shows a reading culture that could appreciate 'elite' and 'popular' texts. This distinction is in any case probably artificial; Ovid's *Ars amatoria*, for instance, was used as a pedagogical text from the twelfth century, as its elegiac couplets were seen as accessible to the beginner in Latin, which suggests a readership that was *learning*, rather than necessarily already learned.¹¹⁷ Chrétien de Troyes, meanwhile, both wrote romance and translated Ovid into French, and laid claim to both with apparently equal pride.¹¹⁸ These different texts can engage with each other despite generic differences. Daverse, who here appeared to be taking part in a friendly dialogue with Sir John Paston about love and literature, reflects an ability of medieval readers – at least of their sex and class – to read texts not in isolation, but as a part of a wider discourse, in this instance on sexuality and romantic love.

These letters show a dynamic relationship between the people who write the letters and the texts they read. The romances they own, if the treatment of literature here is any indication of normal behaviour, are not static and isolated; they are read, borrowed, loaned, sought out and discussed. Moreover, we learn this through words that these people have written; we learn about the written word of one genre through the written word of another. It is this intersection that interests me, and that makes these sources work together – not because they are immediately obviously comparable, but because they come out of and flourish in the same milieu. Although their difference in genre means that they have different priorities and points of emphasis, their shared social world means that key anxieties, preoccupations and interests are shared by both, and sometimes demonstrated in strikingly similar ways – as well as sometimes being intriguingly different. It is not necessary to know if the families I am studying read particular romances, or even if they read romances at all, although of course it is interesting when there is evidence of this, as with the

¹¹⁷ Marilyn Desmond, *Ovid's Art and the Wife of Bath: the Ethics of Erotic Violence* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2006), 52.

¹¹⁸ Desmond, *Ovid's Art*, 53.

Pastons. We do not know if the Stonors or Plumptons or Celys owned books of romance, never mind whether they actually read them. What we do know is that romances were circulating in the world in which these families lived, and that the themes and ideas within them were part of the literary universe to which these families had at least indirect access.

This also lends further credibility to my use of literary sources that were composed earlier – sometimes by a century or more – than the historical sources. Many of these romances proved to be enormously popular *centuries* after their original composition. As I have said, most of the manuscript copies of Middle English romance date to the fifteenth century, even if the romances they contain were composed earlier. For instance, *Lybeaus Desconus* is written in a fourteenth-century dialect, but it survives in five fifteenth-century manuscripts.¹¹⁹ At least eight Middle English romances – including *Sir Degaré* and *Guy of Warwick*, which I use in this thesis – were put into print by early Tudor publishers, and the perennially popular *Bevis of Hampton* was reprinted until the eighteenth century.¹²⁰ These texts were not just artefacts from the past; their transmission by scribes through to the fifteenth century, and in print sometimes far beyond this, suggests that these romances were appropriated by a new generation who found that they reflected their own interests and concerns. The typical romance's evocation of an aristocratic milieu may have appealed to an ambitious and socially mobile bourgeois and gentry class, whilst the values espoused by the romances may have been more broadly popular. A key feature of romances is, to use Helen Cooper's term, the 'meme': a motif or concept that appeals to the popular imagination and is able to replicate, but can also adapt and mutate, ensuring its survival in different forms and at different times.¹²¹ These motifs, already familiar to the reader of one romance, make romances as a whole accessible and appealing, and also ensure that romances continue to resonate with readers beyond the time of their composition. A romance may be composed in English at a particular date, but it is linked back and forward in time also – perhaps

¹¹⁹ See Appendix II for manuscript provenance of romances.

¹²⁰ Cooper, *The English Romance in Time*, 30-1.

¹²¹ Cooper, *The English Romance in Time*, 3.

back to a French source in an earlier century, and forward to a new manuscript version a century later, and even further on to a print edition. A romance appeals beyond its composition *not* because it remains the same, but because its central ideas – its memes – can be appropriated by a new generation of readers and interpreted and adapted for its own interests. These texts are dynamic in the broadest possible sense.

Given the broad span of time across which romances are popular, it makes even more sense to study them in an interdisciplinary context if one wishes to understand what desires, fears, and preoccupations they articulate. Without other sources, a romance's parameters are artificially narrowed. Thomas Daverse's letter shows how romances interact with other texts, and gives some insight into how they were part of a cultural language that was understood at least by men of this class. Using letters to compare or contrast with romances, meanwhile, allows me to locate ideas in a particular time and place. I do not argue that letters necessarily reflect 'reality'; as I said before, the letter is a genre which has its own formulae and expectations. But these are narratives created by specific, known individuals for other specific, known individuals, and as such have a historical context that in the case of romances can often only be glimpsed. Together, these sources provide an excellent opportunity to understand ideas of fatherhood, family and masculinity in the late fifteenth century.

The families of the sources

As I have demonstrated, by the fifteenth century the gentry and merchants were closely allied in terms of social and economic interests. We have seen that many gentry families were involved in trade, and marriages between these two social groups were not uncommon. Their worlds often intersected, and their letters indicate a similar value system and set of priorities, though I will also be interested in how their interests and habits diverged. At this point it is useful to provide an introduction to those families that I am using. Since I am dealing with several families, with the additional problem that many families repeat the same Christian

names across – and sometimes *within* – generations, I have provided genealogies in an appendix.¹²² Here I will provide a brief sketch of the families in order to place them spatially and temporally.

The **Armburgh** letters are preserved in a roll containing copies of letters written between 1417 and the early 1450s. Robert Armburgh, a younger son with no apparent property of his own, married the twice-widowed Joan Sumpter in 1420. Joan had two children by her first husband, Philip Kedington, who had died in 1406. These children were Robert and Margaret. Robert and Joan do not appear to have had children of their own.¹²³ This collection is far smaller than the other letter collections I am using, and contains only a few documents relevant to this study, and so these letters are used as a supplement to other letters rather than as a main source.

The **Cely** family were wool merchants who were based in London and Calais, and their letters cover the period 1472 - 1488. The first certain record of the family is not until 1449, when a Richard Cely appears in a list of London staplers named as having loaned Henry VI two thousand marks. This Richard Cely married Agnes Andrew, whose brother Richard Andrew had served as chancellor to Archbishop Chichele, and worked his way up to becoming Dean of York in 1452. Through this distinguished relative, Richard Cely obtained his country estate, Bretts Place, in Aveley, Essex. Richard and Agnes had three children, Robert, Richard and George.¹²⁴ All lived to adulthood and married, and both Richard junior and George had children – both in and out of marriage. Robert seems to have been impecunious and rash, and so, despite being the eldest son, was not treated as such in his father's will. Richard and George were employed in the family business, with George playing the particularly significant role of running the business in Calais, where the Staple was based. Other important figures in the letters include: Sir John Weston, prior of the Order of St John of Jerusalem and patron to the family, particularly

¹²² See Appendix I.

¹²³ Christine Carpenter, introduction to *The Armburgh Papers: the Brokholes Inheritance in Warwickshire, Hertfordshire, and Essex, c.1417-c.1453* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: 1998), 3-10.

¹²⁴ The sons' ages are not known. George appears to become involved in the business in 1473, which might mean he was in his mid teens. It seems likely all three were born in the 1450s.

Richard junior; William Maryon, fellow merchant of the Staple. Richard junior's godfather (and later godfather to his daughter), and close friend of the family; John Dalton, George's fellow at the Staple and close friend; and William Cely, a dependent of the family whose precise relationship to them is uncertain.¹²⁵ Richard Cely senior died in 1482; Robert Cely followed in 1485, George in 1489, and Richard junior in 1493.

The **Paston** correspondence covers a more extended period of time, but I am interested in the generations that make up the majority of the correspondence – John Paston and his children. The Pastons were a Norfolk family, and John Paston (b. 1421) came into his inheritance in 1444. He was already married to Margaret Mautby, and together they had at least six children, his two elder sons (both called John, born in 1442 and 1444, and hereafter referred to as Johns II and III) and daughter Margery being most prominent in the letters, the former two because they wrote and received much of the correspondence, and the latter because of the scandal of her marriage to the family steward, Richard Calle. John Paston senior's work as a lawyer meant he spent most of his time in London, and it was this work that led him to forming the acquaintance of his patron Sir John Fastolf. Like many men of his time, he paid the fee to decline knighthood (1457), perhaps not wanting the expense the position would entail. His sons, maybe ambitious in a more courtly way than their father, were both knighted – John II in 1468, and John III much later, in 1487. John Paston I died in 1466. His heir, John II, never married, and died – probably of plague – in 1479. John III then became head of the family. He had married Margery Brews in 1477, and their first son was born a year later.¹²⁶

The **Plumpton** family were a northern family who were patronised by the Percies, to whom they were perhaps for the times uncharacteristically loyal. William Plumpton was born in 1404 and married Elizabeth Stapleton. He was knighted sometime between 1427 and 1430, and had several children, including sons Robert and

¹²⁵ Hanham, *The Celys and their World*, 4-13.

¹²⁶ Introduction to the *PL*, 25-329.

William who predeceased their father. Sir William had two illegitimate sons by an unknown woman, one also called Robert (known as 'Robinet') and one named William, and a third bastard – yet another Robert – by his mistress Joan Wintringham. In 1468, called before the church court at York to account for the irregularities in his private life, Sir William 'revealed' he had been married to Joan for ten years – thus legitimising his son Robert. Since this act disinherited Sir William's granddaughters, the Plumpton estate was embroiled in legal disputes for years afterward. Like his father, Robert remained closely allied to the Percies, and was knighted when in their service on campaign against the Scots in 1481.¹²⁷

The **Stonor** correspondence covers the period 1290-1483, but I am concerned with the richest part of the correspondence, which is composed of the letters of Thomas Stonor (b. 1424) and his son Sir William. The family were based in Oxfordshire, and unlike the Pastons do not appear to have involved themselves heavily in politics. Thomas Stonor's presence on the commission of the peace continuously from 1466 to his death in 1474 may suggest that he was never decidedly committed to either the Yorkist or Lancastrian factions. He was married to Jane de la Pole, and had six children – three sons and three daughters – though the eldest son William has the greatest presence in the letters. William married Elizabeth Ryche in 1475. She was a widow with three daughters and a son. Her daughter Katherine married Thomas Betson, a friend and business associate of William's, in the same year that William was knighted. Following Elizabeth's death, William married Agnes Wydeslade (d.1481), and then took as his third wife Anne Neville. William had a son with Anne, but John died not long after his father, and eventually William's estate passed to his brother Thomas's son Walter. Other key figures in the correspondence include Thomas Mull, Thomas Stonor's brother-in-law and retainer, and the Fenns, wards of William Stonor's.¹²⁸

¹²⁷ Introduction to the *PLP*, 3-13.

¹²⁸ Introduction to the *SL*, 50-63.

Romance sources

I have endeavoured to use a wide range of popular romances. The range of texts here is certainly not exhaustive – representing perhaps fifteen percent of the literature classified as popular romance – but it does provide a good cross section, ranging across time, from the thirteenth century *Havelok the Dane* to *The Squire of Low Degree* which is considered one of the last ‘medieval’ romances and was published by Wynkyn de Worde in c.1520. Since plot summaries for the dozen romances used here amount to a few thousand words, I will not include them in this introduction. They are, however, given in an appendix, along with the details of the manuscript provenance of each romance.¹²⁹ The romances I will feature are as follow: *Bevis of Hampton*, *Le Bone Florence of Rome*, *Chevelere Assigne*, *Emaré*, *Guy of Warwick*, *Havelok the Dane*, *Lybeaus Desconus*, *Octavian*, *Sir Eglamour of Artois*, *Sir Gowther*, *The Squire of Low Degree*, and *Torrent of Portyngale*.¹³⁰ In addition to these texts I will also be using the ‘romance’ of Apollonius from Gower’s *Confessio Amantis* and Malory’s great prose romance *Le Morte Darthur* for comparative purposes.

Of the twelve romances, ten are found in fifteenth century manuscripts. The exceptions are *Havelok the Dane*, which is preserved in only one manuscript that dates to around 1325, and *The Squire of Low Degree* which does not survive in manuscript form at all and is instead preserved in early printed editions. The

¹²⁹ See Appendix II.

¹³⁰ *Bevis of Hampton*, in Ronald B. Herzman, Graham Drake, and Eve Salisbury, eds., *Four Romances of England* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1999), Carol Flavo Heffernan, ed., *Le Bone Florence of Rome* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1976), *Chevelere Assigne*, in Walter Hoyt French and Charles Brockway Hale, eds., *Middle English Metrical Romances*, 2 vols. (New York: Russell and Russell, 1964), *Emaré*, *Sir Degaré* and *Sir Gowther*, in Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury, eds., *The Middle English Breton Lays* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995), Erich Adam, ed., *Torrent of Portyngale*, Early English Text Society, E.S. 51 (London: Trübner, 1887), M. Mills, ed., *Lybeaus Desconus*, Early English Text Society, O.S. 261 (London, 1969), *The Squire of Low Degree*, in Erik Kooper, ed., *Sentimental and Humorous Romances* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 2006), *Octavian* and *Sir Eglamour of Artois*, in Harriet Hudson, ed., *Four Middle English Romances*, 2nd ed. (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 2006), J. Zupitza, ed., *The Romance of Guy of Warwick: The Second or 15th Century Version* (Early English Text Society, O.S. 25-6, 1966).

manuscript containing *Havelok* does however have material in it by a fifteenth-century hand, which does not guarantee that it was read but certainly means it had the *potential* to be read a century after it was written down.¹³¹ In addition, *Le Bone Florence*, *Sir Gowther* and possibly *Torrent of Portyngale* were all likely composed in the fifteenth century, while *The Squire of Low Degree* was composed either at the end of the fifteenth or the start of the sixteenth century.¹³² These romances were purchased and read by people who were contemporaries or near-contemporaries of the families who wrote the letters I am using. As I noted earlier, many more Middle English romance manuscripts survive from the fifteenth century than the preceding two centuries; this, coupled with the fact that romances were still being composed in the fifteenth century and even into the sixteenth century, strongly indicates a continuing interest in the genre.

All the romances included herein were probably read in the fifteenth century, which means that they may have been known by the gentry and mercantile families I examine. My selection of romances is, however, based on their content rather than their date. Nor is this thesis a catalogue of fathers in romance. Just as there is a knight in almost every romance, there is also a father in almost all popular romances; he has just not been thought about. I here use a selection of romances chosen because they deal most particularly with fathers and fatherhood, and have limited my sample to verse romances for the purposes of more consistent cross-comparison. Something that becomes clear in my analyses of these texts is that they contain recurrent memes, replicated across centuries. The exact date of composition or reception of a particular romance matters less than the ways these texts interact as a genre. Romances are often studied in isolation, with one romance serving as the topic for an article or part of a chapter. This sort of close reading is useful, but by looking at romances in the context of their genre more broadly, as well as alongside the related but distinct genre of letters, I am able to get a better understanding of what generic conventions romance creates and maintains about fatherhood.

¹³¹ See the introduction to *Havelok*, 79-80.

¹³² For specific details of manuscripts, see Appendix II.

The use of the sources: an interdisciplinary approach

The sources with which I am working have shaped my approach to the structuring of the thesis, as well as the content. Rather than attempting a survey of late medieval fatherhood, I have chosen to concentrate on ‘fictions’ of fatherhood – the constructed worlds of letters and romances. Whilst letters and romances may reflect reality, and in the case of letters in particular may provide details of even the most mundane realities, they are strongly and self-consciously generic. The narrative of the romance is very important, but the story is also the means by which ideas are transmitted. Likewise the forms of letters, whilst used to transmit practical details, are also a way of encapsulating ideological perspectives. As I began to look at popular romances and gentry and mercantile letters, it became clear that both these genres have closely related particular and embedded ideas about fatherhood. The content of the letters, meanwhile, provides examples of how these ideologies might be – or might not be – implemented. This thesis does not claim to explain what late medieval fatherhood was in ‘reality’; what it does is illuminate what fatherhood was perceived to be – and how it was considered it should be perceived. Furthermore, using these two genres together allows me to blur this rather artificial distinction between ‘fiction’ and ‘reality’. As Derek Neal has pointed out, there is a critical tendency to equate a ‘historical’ source with ‘non-fiction’, when in fact it is often necessary to ‘create the historical subject through an act of imaginative belief’.¹³³ Fictions, I will argue, are as useful as anything that ‘really’ happened in understanding fatherhood, especially since I am especially concerned with the conceptualising of fatherhood. This thesis, then, is principally about *ideas* of fatherhood, although my sources also give some tantalising glimpses about fatherhood in an everyday ‘real world’ context, and I hope that the conceptual grounding provided here will provide an opening into further research.

¹³³ Neal, *The Masculine Self*, 189.

This thesis is firmly interdisciplinary in approach. What this does not mean is that in each chapter I always use romances and letters side by side. In some instances, direct comparisons between these sources are useful and illuminating, but romances and letters have different agenda, which means that sometimes one source is silent in an area where the other source has a great deal to say. My response has been to approach this thesis thematically, which allows for greater flexibility in how I use the sources; where they intersect, I can compare them, but where they do not, I can look at them separately. Rather than limiting my analysis, this varied approach allows me to approach questions in different ways, playing to the strengths of the particular sources, as well as noting interesting lacunae within them. It becomes clear throughout my thesis that silence within sources is often significant, and the question of why certain issues appear in romances but not in letters – or vice versa – reveals a great deal about the function of those sources in late medieval England.

My first chapter, *Becoming a Father*, will have at its heart the argument that fatherhood was a defining aspect of establishing an adult male identity, and will discuss the role of fatherhood in the male life cycle as he moves from adolescence to adulthood. Having ascertained how a man becomes a father, I will then look at his relationship with and attitude towards his adult offspring. Children are difficult to glimpse in medieval sources, and certainly make almost no appearance in late medieval letters or romances. To try to include fathers' relationships with juvenile children in this study would necessitate research far beyond the scope of this thesis. I will start my investigation of father-offspring relations by considering the relationship fathers had with their legitimate sons in the chapter *Fathers and Sons*. This will engage very closely with the vocabulary of fatherhood and the way fatherhood is constructed within language. It will also consider questions such as the form and limit of paternal authority, whether or not we have evidence for paternal affection, and what was expected of fathers by their offspring and vice versa. These questions will also be considered in the next chapter, *Fathers and Daughters*, which shall examine differences between the father-daughter and father-son relationship, and through examining examples of abusive fathers I will be able to make assessments

about the patriarchal nature of the family and of late medieval society. My final chapter, *Beyond Fatherhood?*, shall ask whether there are limits to the fatherly role by looking at children who are related by marriage but not by blood – stepchildren – and children who are related by blood but who are not legitimised by marriage: that is, bastards. I will look at how these ‘outsiders’ fit into the concept of the family and the man’s perception of himself as father, as well as considering to what extent society would have viewed a man as father to such children. My *Conclusion* will draw together these different elements, whilst also considering the next step for further research.

CHAPTER 1

Becoming a Father, Becoming a Man

But all in langour he laye for lofe of here one
That he hadde no chylde to cheuene his londis,
But to be lordeles of his whenne he þe lyf lafte...¹

Syr, hyt ys so that a chawns ys fallyn that lyes ap[on] myne oneste Hyt is so
that Em ys wyth schyllde²

After several years of a loving but barren marriage, King Oreyns of the romance *Chevelere Assigne* bemoans his lack of an heir, as seen in the first quotation above. In the second quotation, Richard Cely junior anxiously reports to his brother that he has got a woman called Em pregnant. In addition to the obvious fact that one is a real person and one is fictional, these men are not very alike. One is a mature king, the other is a merchant in his early twenties; one is married, one is not; one longs for children and one fears the child he has sired will damage his reputation.³ Through these two examples, however, come some of the central questions of this chapter, and of this thesis. What does fatherhood contribute to male identity, and does this depend on whether offspring are legitimate or illegitimate? Does fatherhood play a role in establishing adulthood? Are fatherless males able to be men? It will become clear that being a father does not necessarily make one a man, but that it is very difficult becoming a man *without* being a father, and that the process of fatherhood plays a central role in the transition out of adolescence.

A central question in this thesis as a whole is the role of fatherhood in male identity formation, of how men become men. Sex identity is biological; gender identity is an intersection of the biological, social, sexual and political, and these vary according

¹ *Chevelere Assigne*, ll. 13-16.

² Richard Cely junior to his brother George, 1482. *CL*, no. 169, 156.

³ Richard's concern about his reputation is indicated by his use of the word 'honeste'. I will be examining this later in the chapter.

to time and location.⁴ Masculine identity manifests not just through its physical existence – the male sexed body – but the spheres that male body inhabits. Specific functions make the male masculine. As Michael Uebel eloquently puts it, ‘the spaces it [the male body] inhabits are less the territories in which it resides than the fields through which it moves.’⁵ Male identity formation in late medieval England was something done to and by men; it was an active process rather than a passive and discrete event. Moreover, there was a difference between being *male* and being a *man*, and I argue here that fatherhood is a way of accessing adulthood – particularly through the threshold of marriage. Marriage is an important gateway to manhood, but it is legitimate fatherhood that brings an adolescent through that door into a realised adult state.

Like gender, fatherhood will also be seen to be a process of becoming. Fatherhood, I argue, is one of the specific functions of the male body, and as such is one of the most significant methods of establishing both masculinity and manhood. It will become clear that there is a difference between demonstrating *masculinity* and showing one is a *man*. Adolescent and adult masculinities are related but distinct, and the ways in which males sire children can be a result of hypermasculine but still adolescent sexuality, or as a consequence of adult, manly choices. Fathering legitimate children allows the male to pass decisively from adolescence to manhood, and is distinct from the extramarital sexual behaviour of adolescent males that results in the siring of illegitimate offspring. Getting bastards does, however, play a significant role in male identity formation as older adolescents move toward maturity. Fatherhood is also a reaffirmation of masculinity and manhood in the identity of the already-adult male. So fatherhood is thus a process in a male’s life, with different stages and applications based on his age and marital situation.

⁴ A useful survey of the critical discussion surrounding this topic is provided by Margaret Mooney Marini, ‘Sex and Gender: What Do We Know?’, *Sociological Forum*, 5.1 (March 1990), 95-120. Simone de Beauvoir was one of the first to voice the idea of gender as a process in her groundbreaking 1949 work *The Second Sex*: ‘One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman’. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H M Parshley (London: Penguin, 1972), 267.

⁵ Michael Uebel, ‘On Becoming-Male’, in Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler, eds., *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages* (New York and London, 1997), 367.

As fatherhood is related to life cycle, the first part of this chapter seeks to define male adolescence before examining closely the threshold between late adolescence and manhood, a time of exploration and adventure that sometimes results in illicit fatherhood. I consider how youths in this threshold period react to news of both illegitimate and legitimate fatherhood, and why some might find themselves reluctant to be brought by fatherhood into manhood. Finally, I look at men who have not been able to father children, and argue that they are presented as victims of their own making, because they have extended their adolescent behaviour well into maturity.

Becoming a man: defining the adolescent

With the critical interest in women's lives in the middle ages, the concept of a 'life cycle' has been used to discuss the movement between different female life stages, particularly in terms of the move from adolescence to adulthood and the role of servanthood in this process.⁶ Whilst, as I noted in the Introduction, there is an increasing interest in looking at medieval masculinities, the specifically male aspects of the growing up process have been neglected. Furthermore, despite growing interest in medieval childhood and adolescence, it is only recently that there has been critical attention paid to the question of what medieval people meant by adolescence, what purpose it served in medieval thought, and how the adolescent experience is gendered in a way beyond the obviously biological.⁷ As this thesis is on fatherhood, this chapter does not aim to provide a detailed analysis of medieval male adolescence, but by taking some time to consider the function of adolescence

⁶ See for instance 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), and Kim M. Phillips, *Medieval Maidens*.

⁷ On childhood, see Orme, *Medieval Children*, and Shahar, *Childhood*. Barbara Hanawalt's *Growing Up in Medieval London: The Experience of Childhood in History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) has probably the most comprehensive coverage of adolescence thus far. She considers the definition of medieval adolescence (9-13), youth culture and adolescent experience (109-28), and age of exit (201-5). Ruth Mazo Karras argues that medieval people considered adolescence as sharply distinguished from childhood, and instead thought of it as a subset of adulthood. Karras, *From Boys to Men*, 13-4. The collection by Konrad Eisenbilcher, ed., *The Premodern Teenager: Youth in Society, 1150-1650* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002) is useful particularly for considering Italian youth, but it does not provide an overall definition of adolescence.

within the male life cycle, it will be seen how fatherhood acts as a transformative function between adolescent and adult life in a way more definitive than other significant life processes such as marriage and reaching legal majority.

Adolescence is a key life cycle stage for males, rather than merely a transitional period between childhood and adulthood. But what is adolescence, and what is the difference between a man and an adolescent? Avicenna wrote in a work that was translated into Latin and widely disseminated in the twelfth century and beyond: 'There is the age of growing up, which is called the age of adolescence and commonly lasts until the age of thirty.'⁸ Whilst our modern conception of adolescence often equates it with puberty, for medieval people these terms were not necessarily synonymous. For many medieval medical writers, puberty was not a phase but a moment in time, marked by an entrance into sexual maturity demonstrated through the onset of menses or the emission of seed.⁹ This was related to but not the same as the life phase of youth. As Arnold van Gennep argued in 1909, there is a difference between social and physical terms of adolescence:

It is appropriate to distinguish between *physical puberty* and *social puberty*, just as we distinguish between *physical kinship* (consanguinity) and *social kinship*, between *physical maturity* and *social maturity* (majority).¹⁰

What I am here concerned with is social adolescence, which unlike the biological process of puberty is determined by culture. I argue that in late medieval England, adolescence extends well beyond puberty into what we would now call 'young adulthood', or the early to mid-twenties, and what characterises medieval concepts of 'adolescence' has more to do with situational instability and mobility than physical (im)maturity.¹¹

⁸ Quoted in Burrow, *The Ages of Man*, 23.

⁹ Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 145.

¹⁰ Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. by Monika B. Vizedon and Gabrielle L. Caffee (London and New York: Routledge, 1977), 68. (Author's emphases.)

¹¹ Hanawalt distinguishes between social and physical adolescence for males, though she argues that the physical and social puberties described by van Gennep merge for female adolescents, which points to a gendering of adolescence. Hanawalt, *Growing Up in Medieval London*, 10.

Adolescent instability features in medieval writing on the stages that made up men's lives. 'The Ages of Man' was a schematic framework used by many medieval thinkers to explain the stages of man's life. There could be as few as three and as many as nine stages, but the most common number was seven.¹² Like Avicenna, these writers typically imagined a late end to adolescence; Dante wrote that *adolescenza* ended at 25, while earlier Isidore of Seville said that *adolescencia* finished at 28.¹³ There is no specific event that occurs at the age of 25, 28 or 30 that marks the transition from adolescence to adulthood. The particular ages of transition in these schemes reflect a convenient point of division in an artificial construct of a life neatly organised into seven phases rather than 'reality', but while 'Ages of Man' schemes may not have had a practical application, they may have influenced how people thought.¹⁴ The similar ways the different schemes describe adolescence and its end point also seem to reflect a widespread understanding of what constituted typical adolescent behaviours and the transition into adulthood. Aristotle described man's life as having three basic stages – growth, stasis, and decline – and the end of adolescence was a movement into a more stable frame of life.¹⁵ Adolescents' lack of stability was seen in their lustfulness and wild behaviour; they were not without good qualities, however, as youths were good looking and vigorous.¹⁶ The next life stage, meanwhile, was characterised by temperance, reason, and a 'readiness to found a family.'¹⁷ The move toward stability, then, is also a move toward taking on the adult responsibilities of marriage and children, from being part of a family to being head of one. Part of that process was also learning *how* to be responsible; as Lydgate's *Fall of Princes* says, 'in ther adolescence' boys should be well educated to ensure that when they mature they 'do non outrage'.¹⁸

¹² An excellent and detailed analysis of this topic is provided by J.A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

¹³ Burrow, *Ages of Man*, 28-33. See also Karras, *From Boys to Men*, 12-14.

¹⁴ P.J.P. Goldberg, 'Life and Death: The Ages of Man', in *A Social History of England*, ed. by Rosemary Horrox and W.M. Ormrod (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 413.

¹⁵ Burrow, *Ages of Man*, p 5-9.

¹⁶ Burrow, *Ages of Man*, p 33, 49, 67-77.

¹⁷ Censorinus, quoted in Burrow, *Ages of Man*, 73.

¹⁸ Henry Bergen, ed., *Lydgate's Fall of Princes* (Washington: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1923), ll. 1765-71.

Although the Ages of Man was a framework used by a number of medieval writers, it was still a philosophical concept found primarily in elite texts. How did this theoretical imagining of adolescence find translation into practice? In legal terms such a relaxed attitude regarding the onset of adulthood is not possible; fixed ages are required for legal purposes such as the age of consent and the age of inheritance. In terms of canon law, boys were considered rational enough to give marital consent after the age of fourteen, but legal majority for the purposes of inheritance was usually reached at the age of twenty-one, although this varied according to social rank.¹⁹ This demonstrates that medieval people recognised the differing kinds of adult responsibility here. The key point is that if one could theoretically be adult enough to marry but not adult enough to inherit property, the concept of male adulthood must have had a certain degree of flexibility, and attaining it was not necessarily caused by a discrete event – for instance reaching the age of 21 – but by a series of processes working in tandem. Legal thresholds are established to provide a minimum age at which someone is likely to be capable of taking on a particular responsibility, rather than an ideal age, which is what the writing on the Ages of Man reflects.

Social practice seems to have fallen somewhere in between. Hanawalt points to evidence that lawgivers used their own discretion regarding inheritance; whilst London law put the age of majority at twenty-one, exceptions might be made based on the character of the heir.²⁰ The thirteenth century treatise *On the Law and Customs of England* explains majority in terms of reaching critical competency, and this depended on the kind of inheritance. For instance, if ‘he is a son of a burgess, he is taken to be of full age when he knows how to properly count money, measure cloth and perform other similar paternal business. Thus it is not defined in terms of time but by sense and maturity.’²¹ Meanwhile, whilst the age of marriage would have varied by social group, amongst the gentry and mercantile classes I consider

¹⁹ Menuge, *Medieval English Wardship*, 2; Samuel E. Thorne, trans., *On the Laws and Customs of England*, vol. 2 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press, 1968), 250-1.

²⁰ Hanawalt, *Growing Up*, p 202-3.

²¹ Thorne, *On the Laws and Customs of England*, 250.

here males typically marry in their early to mid-twenties.²² Nearly all the gentry and mercantile sons I examine were married for the first time in their twenties.²³ Where males married in early adolescence, it was usually because they were wards and their guardians have sold their marriages or married them to their own children.²⁴ For instance, Thomas Stonor purchased the wardship of John Cottesmore in 1470 and later that year seems to have married Cottesmore to his daughter Joan Stonor.²⁵ Even in these circumstances, there is plentiful evidence that there was a popular sense that early marriages should not be consummated until later, and so even if young adolescents are married off, they often do not live as husband and wife until later. In 1453 Sir Thomas Clifford married his daughter Elizabeth to Sir William Plumpton's eighteen or nineteen year old son William; 'the said Sir William promised the said Lord Clyfford that they should not lygg togedder till she came to the age of xvj yeres.'²⁶ Clifford's stipulation was probably largely related to the awareness that if girls conceived at any early age, they were at a higher risk of complications in pregnancy and death in labour, but there also seems to have been a sense, amongst those arranging marriages at any rate, that sexual activity was not appropriate for young teenagers, even if they were married.²⁷ Sir William Plumpton himself had

²² Peter Fleming puts the age at first marriage for landed and urban elites at 17 – 24 for daughters and 21 – 26 for sons, with heirs typically marrying earlier. Fleming, *Family and Household*, 22. T.H. Hollingsworth's analysis of ducal marriages, whilst concerning a higher social rank, shows similar results. T.H. Hollingsworth, 'A Demographic Study of the British Ducal Families', *Population Studies*, 11, no. 1 (1957): 14. See also Thrupp, *The Merchant Class in Medieval London*, 192-3, David Herlihy, *Medieval Households* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1985), 107-9, Karras, *From Boys to Men*, 16. On English gentry marriage patterns more generally, see Dockray, 'Why Did Fifteenth-Century English Gentry Marry?', and Payling, 'The Politics of Family'.

²³ William Stonor was about 26 when he married Elizabeth Ryche; Robert Plumpton was 25; Richard and George Cely married in their mid-twenties (their exact date of birth is unknown), although their brother Robert may have married in his late teens or early twenties; John Paston III did not marry until he was 33, and his brother John II never married.

²⁴ Kim Phillips discusses female wards' marriages being sold, but the principle was likely to have been the same – the earlier the marriage, the quicker the profit for the guardian. Phillips, *Medieval Maidens*, 37-8.

²⁵ *SL*, nos. 109-10, 200-2.

²⁶ *PLP*, Appendix 1, no. 2, 230.

²⁷ Medieval naturalists noted that, whilst adolescence might mark the actualisation of generative ability, it was *not* the perfect age to reproduce. Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference*, 245. Barbara Harris notes that contracts for dowries often stipulated that the dowry should be returned if bride or groom died before the age of sixteen, suggesting that before this the marriage would have gone unconsummated. Harris, *English Aristocratic Women*, 45. Kim Phillips cites a number of examples of the consummation of young women's marriages being delayed on account of their 'tender age'. Phillips, *Medieval Maidens*, 38-41.

been betrothed in 1416 to Elizabeth Stapleton when they were both twelve, but the first of their nine children was born in around 1422, perhaps indicating the couple had also not lived as husband and wife until their late teens. Susan Wright's work on the Derbyshire gentry shows that in the case of child marriages the couple generally returned to the custody of their respective families until they were old enough to cohabit.²⁸ Meanwhile, at a slightly lower social level, apprentices were not allowed to marry without their masters' consent; given that apprenticeships lasted at least seven years, and in the fifteenth century the age of entry into apprenticeship in some elite guilds had risen to sixteen or eighteen, some young men would not be in a position to marry until they were in their early to mid-twenties.²⁹ Marriage was not really meant for adolescents.

What then were adolescents expected to be doing? On the one hand, there belief that adolescence was a time of playfulness and adventure, and there was more tolerance of 'wildness' in youths than in mature adults. A popular fifteenth century saying, 'an angelic young man becomes a devil in old age', shows a certain expectation that youths needed to get wild behaviour out of their systems before they settled down.³⁰ Apprenticeship indentures try to limit adolescent excess through regulations against whoring and gambling, which suggests that these were common enough vices in young men.³¹ Jeremy Goldberg concludes that male servants were given tacit permission to engage in sexual activity as long as it was outside their master's household.³² Thomas Daverse, as I mentioned in the Introduction, teasingly called his friend Sir John Paston 'the best cheser of a gentellwoman þat I know,'³³ while John Dalton, in a warm letter, bemoaned the absence of his friend George Cely because he was such excellent company – and was a good partner in merrymaking:

²⁸ Wright, *The Derbyshire Gentry*, 51.

²⁹ Hanawalt, *Growing Up*, 203.

³⁰ 'Angelicus iuvenis senibus satanizat in annis.' J.A. Burrow, "'Young Saint, Old Devil': Reflections on a Medieval Proverb', *The Review of English Studies*, New Series 30, no. 120 (November 1979): 385.

³¹ Karras, *From Boys to Men*, 128.

³² P.J.P. Goldberg, 'Masters and Men in Later Medieval England', in Hadley, *Masculinity in Medieval Europe*, 63-7.

³³ *PL*, no. 745, 2:379.

God knowys we haue a gret myesse of you. I had leyuer then þe best gowne that I haue that you myght abydyn styell her wyth husse. 3e schall onderstond mor at *your* comyng – yt ys of meyrth the cavsse I wold haue you for.³⁴

These young men had fun socialising together and pursuing women. They took part in sports, too; Cely and Dalton were invited, as single men of the Staple, to an archery match against their married colleagues – demonstrating simultaneously both that married and single men were not so separate that they could not socialise, but also that they were distinct enough that their marital grouping provided an easy and obvious way of creating teams.³⁵ The Cely brothers also visited taverns, and this, along with sports like archery rather than children's games, may have marked a shift toward adulthood.³⁶ Without the pressures of running a household or heading a family, it seems to have been expected that youths would enjoy the freedom to pursue pleasure.

On the other hand, however, adolescence was a time in which teenage boys and young men were meant to be learning about adult responsibilities, which included things far more concrete than the virtues they were meant to possess in manhood. This was when they were meant to start building their careers. Younger adolescents would often be in formal education, but the adolescents I look at here are all old enough to have passed out of school and university.³⁷ For adolescents of the mercantile class, training could mean an indentured apprenticeship in a trade, or for the merchants that I look at, being trained by their father in the family business. The gentry families I use here, as I explained in my Introduction, also frequently had some mercantile connections, but their sons were simultaneously learning about operating in courtly society, and would seek to advance themselves and their family through patronage. Adolescents were then in an interesting position. They were meant to be developing their adult identities, but they were also still under the

³⁴ *CL* no. 44, 41.

³⁵ The challenge is addressed 'To...all other Bacheleyns being Fremen of the Staple' and is from 'Weddyd men'. *CL* no. 29, p 26-7.

³⁶ Hanawalt, *Growing Up*, 114.

³⁷ Students typically entered university at the age of around fourteen or fifteen. Robert S. Rait, *Life in the Medieval University* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1931), 68.

authority of fathers and masters; whilst their playful and adventurous tendencies were tolerated and sometimes even admired, they were expected to be diligent and obedient.³⁸ The difficulties of balancing these different aspects will be something I return to in Chapter 2, when I look at how youths tried to be both obedient sons and independent men, and how fathers reacted to their sons' increasing independence. For now, what is important is that for youths, late adolescence seems to have been characterised by contradictory traits, and these contradictions were part of the struggle to move toward finding a more stable adult state.

Thresholds of adulthood (1): late adolescent sexual behaviour and its consequences

The youths who feature in the romances and letters used here are all in late adolescence, if we characterise adolescence in late medieval terms. Some of them may have entered puberty as much as a decade earlier; although they are considered generally too young to be married, they are known to have sexual desires and reproductive capabilities.³⁹ Given the long space of time between when males would enter puberty and when they married, it is unsurprising that many engaged in premarital sexual acts. At the same time, because the youths at whom I am looking are approaching the end of adolescence, they are beginning to look toward and plan for their marital lives. Both aspects of growing up – illicit sexual exploration and the seeking out of possible brides – have within them the potential for fatherhood, but as we will see, the role of fatherhood in establishing adult masculinity is quite different depending on whether or not the potential fatherhood is legitimate.

When the Cely letter collection begins, George and Richard junior were beginning to look for wives. A number of the letters record their interest in particular women: for instance, in May 1482 Richard reported extensively on meeting the daughter of Thomas Limerick, saying that as well as being worth £40 a year, she is also 'zewnge,

³⁸ On the importance of obedience, and the difficulty of balancing it against adolescent vices: Hanawalt, *Growing Up*, 85, 109-10.

³⁹ On adolescent sexual desire: Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference*, 146-8.

lytyll, and whery whellfauyrd and whytty'.⁴⁰ On another occasion he also let his brother know about a young woman George might want to consider for himself.⁴¹ George and Richard were both at the point in their lives where they were seriously beginning to seek out marital prospects, and by 1484 both of them would be married. It would be easy to assume that marriage is the stage that for most youths marks the transition between adolescence and adulthood. Romances that have as their heroes young knights errant generally end with the marriage of the knight to a lady, and a transition from adventurous adolescent life to the settled life of a married lord or king. However, marriage is not usually an end in itself in these stories; rather, it is a means by which fatherhood can be achieved. Take, for instance, the romance *Havelok the Dane*, which concludes with the marriage of Havelok and Goldeboru, and the following details:

He [Havelok] loved hir [Goldeboru] and she him so
 That neyther owe mithe be
 Fro other...
 ...
 He geten chidren hem bitwene
 Sones and doughtres rith fivetene,
 Hwar-of the sones were kinges alle,
 So wolde God it sholde bifalle,
 And the douhtres alle quenes:
 Him stondes wel that god child strenes! (2969-83)

The physical 'proof' of the extraordinarily close relationship had by Havelok and Goldeboru is the exceptional fecundity of their marriage. The last line quoted above is at the crux of the matter: it is well with him who sires a good child, and Havelok has managed this fifteen times over. The purpose of the couple's great love for each other is the creation of this dynasty – all their children become kings and queens, leaving an impression of a dazzling empire of rulers, all connected by blood. Ruth Mazo Karras argues that men did not need to be fathers to be seen as men, but they did need to have the *potential* to be fathers, and so marriage was vital to demonstrate that a man would be able to take his place in his genealogical chain.⁴² As we will see

⁴⁰ CL, no. 161, 151-2.

⁴¹ CL, no. 117, 106-7.

⁴² Karras, *From Boys to Men*, p 16-7.

later, men who were married but had not had children did in fact face threats to their masculine status, but it is certainly true that in romances there generally seems to be a tacit assumption that children will result from marriage, even when offspring are not mentioned in the concluding lines. The expected consequence of marriage is reproduction.

What is important in the case of Havelok is not his generative ability per se; rather it is that he is not only founding a family, but also a new link in the chain of his lineage. Fatherhood, however, did not always wait for marriage; whilst my final chapter will deal extensively with fathers and their bastards, here I will demonstrate that the fathering of illegitimate children played a significant role in the lives of older adolescents as they moved toward adulthood. Fatherhood of illegitimate offspring could play a role in masculine identity formation, but it is particularly the male thinking of the future of his line who moves from adolescence to manhood. The *intent* to sire children seems to make a difference to a male's adult status, as a comparison between the fairy knight of *Sir Degaré* and the young Cely men will demonstrate.

Although the Church frowned upon premarital sexual acts, amorousness was considered one of the traits of adolescence. In addition, medical opinion of the time was that sexual intercourse was useful in maintaining physical health; abstinence, meanwhile, could cause physiological and temperamental imbalances.⁴³ Whilst medical writers did not go so far as to endorse premarital sex, which was sinful, it might perhaps have been preferable to masturbation, which was not only sinful but also potentially emasculating.⁴⁴ For youths who were sexually mature but who were culturally encouraged not to marry until later, it was unsurprising that extramarital relationships were formed and that children resulted from these relationships.

⁴³ Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference*, 273-4.

⁴⁴ Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference*, 220.

The kind of relationship that unmarried men may have had with women varied from casual encounters to long-established arrangements. In romance we find several examples of long term relationships between knights and their (often fairy) mistresses. For instance, the titular hero of the romance *Sir Launfal* has a secret relationship with Tryamour for seven years, a relationship that is sexual as well as amatory.⁴⁵ In *Lybeaus Desconus*, Lybeaus spends a year living with Dame Amour as ‘hir lorde’ (1471). In the French source of *Lybeaus*, *Le bel inconnu*, the fairy enchantress refuses to let Guinglain kiss her, and both her chastity and the hero’s is preserved.⁴⁶ This change in the English story may suggest that it is important in his move toward manhood that Lybeaus have sexual experiences. Lybeaus is castigated by Elaine for abandoning his search for the ‘lady of Synadowne / May longe lye in preson’ (1506-7), but not for having a sexual relationship.

Mistresses were not just for knights in romance. George Cely’s relationship with a French or Flemish woman known only as Clare was an example of what was perhaps the most socially acceptable kind of extramarital relationship. This relationship was framed using the language of love, as a surviving letter from Clare in 1479 demonstrates: ‘Tout le coer de Clare est a vous, Jorge Sely – tous jour en mon coer.’⁴⁷ The direction is in Flemish, and so Clare may have been based in Bruges at this point, which was a place George frequently went on business.⁴⁸ However, he must have decided he would like her closer to him, because he seems to have installed her in a house in Calais.⁴⁹ In two memoranda of 1480 he makes references to wool he has stored ‘ower my Lady Clare’, which firstly shows he was happy to leave his business stock in her keeping, and secondly that their relationship lasted at least a year and a half.⁵⁰ George and Clare had a relationship that seems to

⁴⁵ ‘They wente to bedde, and that anoon, / Launfal and sche yn fere. / For play, lytyll they selepte that nyght, / Tyll on morn hyt was daylyght.’ *Sir Launfal*, in Laskaya and Salisbury, ed., *The Middle English Breton Lays*, ll. 347-50.

⁴⁶ Sarah Sturm, ‘The “Bel Inconnu’s” Enchantress and the Intent of Renault de Beaujeu,’ *The French Review* 44, no. 5 (1971): 865.

⁴⁷ *CL*, no. 54, 50.

⁴⁸ Dorse: ‘deseen brief zy ghegeuen tot Jorge Cely.’ *CL*, no. 54, 50.

⁴⁹ Hanham, *The Celys and Their World*, 49-51.

⁵⁰ *CL*, no. 105, 93.

have been on a semi-official footing, from the courteous way George referred to her as ‘my Lady Clare’ in both memoranda, the fact of his provision of her housing and, one assumes, her board, and his entrusting of his property to her. Moreover, her appearance in family records, and the likelihood that it was well known who owned her house, means that their relationship was reasonably public and, presumably, tolerated by his family. This was a long term and well established relationship that seems based on at least some degree of mutual affection and respect. Whilst we do not know that if this relationship resulted in illegitimate children, given its long term nature if Clare had got pregnant it probably would not have surprised George.

In contrast with George’s long term affair, the only extramarital experience we know his brother Richard had was the encounter with which I opened this chapter. Here Richard discovered to his cost that even a solitary occasion of illicit sex could result in offspring. As he reported to George in 1482:

Syr, hyt ys so that a chawns ys fallyn that lyes ap[on] myne oneste, byt I cannat kepe no cwnsell frome yow, for be polesy ze and I may fynd the meyn to sawhe awl thyng cler[e] at yowr comyng. Hyt is so that Em ys wyth schyllde Hyt whos gettyn on Schrofe zeuyn⁵¹

Alison Hanham surmises, from the use of Em’s familiar name with no surname given, that she may have been a servant, as the only women routinely mentioned by first name alone in the Cely correspondence are household servants.⁵² With service forming part of the adolescent stage of the life cycle of many people, and with servants living in close proximity to the family they served, this sort of encounter may not have been uncommon. Certainly, though, Richard does not seem to have particularly wanted or expected the consequences of this sexual relationship; he described it as threatening his ‘oneste’ – his reputation – and he seeks his brother’s advice, as he is clearly alarmed by what has happened.⁵³ Richard’s ability to so

⁵¹ CL no. 169, 156.

⁵² Hanham, *The Celys and Their World*, 268-9.

⁵³ ‘Honeste’ had a range of meanings in Middle English; whilst it could mean moral purity, in this context, with Richard’s anxiety about what to do next and needing his brother’s advice, it seems more likely to have a slightly more worldly concern of his reputation or honour. There would of course have been slippage between these meanings. ‘Honestē (n.) Also oneste, honesti(e), onesti. 1. (a) Honorable position; worthy or respectable status; eminence or the personification of it; also, wealth;

precisely date the conception indicates that it was a one off sexual encounter. The date may suggest the encounter took place during Shrovetide celebrations, which were often characterised by excessive consumption and disorderly behaviour.⁵⁴ Perhaps Richard intended to use Carnival excess as an excuse for his conduct. Richard senior had died earlier in 1482, so Richard junior's panic was not because he would get in trouble with his father, who as head of the household would have been expected to be responsible for protecting the virtue of his female servants.⁵⁵ Even without his father's disapprobation, Richard may have been embarrassed to have so obviously breached a standard of good conduct. George's relationship with Clare, outside the family home, may have been more respectable than Richard's relationship with someone in his employ. In the case of casual sex, it seems, fatherhood is a risk of sexual intercourse, not a desired result.

This serves as a contrast with another young man who sires a child in a one-off encounter – the fairy knight in *Sir Degaré*. This text allows the reader the rare opportunity to witness the siring of the romance's hero. In this narrative, Degaré's mother-to-be is raped by a fairy knight in the woods as she wanders lost after becoming separated from her father's retinue. Although the fairy knight's sudden appearance and supernatural background make him in some senses a mysterious figure, the text describes him in terms typical of young knights errant:

Toward hire comen a knight,
Gentil, yong and jolif man;
A robe of scarlet he hadde upon:
His visage was feir, his bodi ech weies... (90-3)

The text is careful to note that the knight is 'yong', perhaps to avoid the conclusion that this a mature knight; it may be that the knight's subsequent actions are excused by him exhibiting typical adolescent traits. He then announces that he has long loved

(b) good name; reputation; (c) honorableness of character, conduct, or action; honor, dignity; (d) respect towards (sb. or sth.); reverence, honor. 4. (a) Moral purity, uprightness, virtue, justness; (b) purity, virginity; chastity.' *The Middle English Dictionary*.

⁵⁴ David Nichols, 'In the Pit of the Burgundian Theater State: Urban Traditions and Princely Traditions in Ghent, 1360 – 1420', in *City and Spectacle in Medieval Europe*, ed. Barbara Hanawalt and Kathryn Reyerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 282; Lillian M. Bisson, *Chaucer and the Late Medieval World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 250.

⁵⁵ Hanawalt, *Growing Up*, 186.

the princess, and “Thou best mi lemman ar thou go, / Wether the liketh wel or wo.”
(107-8) Following this declaration, the knight then assaults the princess:

And he anon gan hire at holde,
And dide his wille, what he wolde.
He binam hire here maidenhod,
And seththen up toforen hire stod. (111-4)

The act completed, the knight promptly gets up, gives the princess his sword to bestow on the son he says she will bear, and leaves:

‘Lemman,’ he seide, ‘gent and fre,
Mid schilde I wot that thou schalt be;
Siker ich wot hit worht a knave;
Forthi mi swerd thou sschalt have,
And whenne that he is of elde
That he mai himself biwelde,
Tak him the swerd, and bidde him fonde
To sechen his fader in eche londe...’. (115-23)

It is at this point that the fairy knight’s behaviour becomes particularly distinct from Richard Cely junior’s. We do not know if the sexual intercourse Richard had with Em was consensual, but we do know that he had no intention of siring a child on her. The knight of *Degaré* may have raped the princess because he desires her, but more importantly he seems to have done it because he wants her to bear his child, and his fairy nature seems to allow him to know that the rape will definitely result in conception.⁵⁶ The child Richard had sired on Em was an accident, whilst the fairy knight has very carefully chosen the princess as the mother of his child. There is also a difference of status here in the women who bear the illegitimate children; Richard Cely impregnated someone who was possibly his servant and probably of a lower status, but the knight gets a child on a royal woman. The fairy knight is engaging in sex with the kind of woman a knight in a more conventional narrative would seek to marry. The knight’s use of the term ‘lemman’ to describe the princess neatly splices together both his long term and his immediate desires, as the word can be used to

⁵⁶ The question of whether conception is possible through nonconsensual sex was an area of heated discussion in the middle ages. I address this issue in Chapter 4.

mean both a paramour and a betrothed lover or wife.⁵⁷ He wants the princess because she can give him a suitable, nobly born heir.

Why has the fairy knight taken such an unconventional approach in securing an heir? Perhaps it is because the princess's overprotective father has a habit of killing her suitors:

Yif ani man were of armes so bold
 That with the King justi wold,
 He sscholde have in mariage
 His dowter and his heritage,
 ...
 Ac ech man, that him justeth with, tit
 Hath of him a foul despit:
 Some he breketh the nekke anon,
 And of some the rig-bon.... (439-53)

Whilst the fairy knight's behaviour is violent, it is also an innovative solution to the problem of gaining access to her without having to fight her father. This is behaviour calculated to result in a son, since as a supernatural being the fairy knight is apparently able to know if he will impregnate the princess, specifically with a boy who will be able to carry his sword – which serves well enough as a metaphor for his inheritance.⁵⁸ He also predicts that this son will seek out his father, and will thus reunite the family. The fairy knight has made an adult decision – albeit framed in an unusual context – to found a family. George and Richard Cely have already begun to seek out this future for themselves. It will not be long before both of them are married with children, but for the time being their sexual relationships are not about continuing the family name or making a socially or economically advantageous match. Despite being successful businessmen in their early twenties, they have not quite made the transition into manhood.

⁵⁷ 'lemman (n.): 1. A loved one of the opposite sex: (a) a paramour, lover; **haven (taken) to (unto) ~**, to accept (sb.) as a paramour, lover; (b) a concubine; (c) a betrothed lover; (d) a wife; **haven to ~**, to have (sb.) as wife.' *Middle English Dictionary*.

⁵⁸ The symbolism of the fairy knight's sword is considered in detail in Chapter 2.

Thresholds of adulthood (2): reluctant fathers and adolescent behaviour

Richard and George were, however, more adult in their behaviour than their elder brother Robert. Richard and George sought suitable wives based on factors such as the woman's reputation and fortune, and seem to find outlets for their sexual or romantic impulses elsewhere. Robert Cely, however, nearly married a completely unsuitable woman and had to be rescued by his father and brothers, which is just one in a long list of bad situations from which he needed help extricating himself. Despite having been married, perhaps unusually young for a male of his class, Robert does not seem to have grown up. His wife died in 1479, and in the spring of 1480 Richard senior wrote to George to report that:

I fele Robard Cely ys at Bregys for fere of gytynge at Caleys into Beschepys corte for the lvde mater of Jonne [Joan] Harthe, the weche ys meche adoe for at London. The frendes of here hath spoke wyt me for the mater, but all they wyll not grant a grote for [to] zeve them, werefor I haue sayd to them I wyll not zeve them a peny of my good⁵⁹

Richard's anxiety here was palpable. His reference to the 'bishop's court' would suggest that Joan Hart was trying to enforce a contract of marriage within the consistory court, as the bishops court did not deal with fornication. Evidently Joan's family were not in support of the match, as they had refused to put up any money for the marriage, and now Richard senior needed to extricate Robert from the situation. A few days later, Richard junior wrote to George, informing him of how the matter had been dealt with:

hyt is so be grehyt labor that the whoman that howr brother Robard whos tangyllyd wyth, sche has made hyme a qwyetans, and sche has ... aull the good that howr brother leudy wyth her, saue a gyrdyll of goulde ... and a lyttyll golde ryng wyth a lyttyll dyamond⁶⁰

⁵⁹ CL, no. 85, 75. Note that 'lvde' ('lewd') was more likely to mean misguided or foolish rather than unchaste. 'leued (adj.): 2. (a) Of persons: lacking in judgment or sense; stupid, foolish, misguided ... (b) of assertions, beliefs, behavior, etc.: resulting from, or characterized by, stupidity or ignorance; foolish, senseless; (c) lacking in refinement, untutored, uncouth; of disposition or conduct: ill-bred, boorish, unmannerly; of form or appearance: rough, crude, ugly; of talk, stories, etc.: coarse, ill-mannered, rude; of literary works or style: unsophisticated, unpolished; (d) useless, worthless; idle; (e) evil, wicked; dishonest; unchaste, lascivious.' *The Middle English Dictionary*.

⁶⁰ CL, no. 86, 76.

With some effort, it seems, Joan had been paid off by being allowed to keep the courtship gifts that Robert had given her; she was probably asked to return the ring as it may have been evidence for a marriage proposal.⁶¹ Courtship seems to have been an expensive business in general – Richard’s widow Anne, in her court case against George, accused him of spending substantial sums on jewels and rich gifts for Margery Rygon and her friends.⁶² The difference between his and Robert’s case, of course, is that George successfully married Margery, who as a wealthy widow was a good catch. Richard senior must have felt that Robert, as well as getting caught up in a love affair that was embarrassing to his family, was throwing good money away. He had not found a suitable woman to bear the Cely name – or to bear Cely children. There was no option but to get rid of Joan Hart, the loss of the gifts Robert gave her the price for keeping her out of the family.

It is interesting that Robert, who had previously been married and had his own household, has fallen back into being under his father’s authority, but Robert seems to have played the role of the perpetual adolescent in the Cely family – and his family clearly treated him as one. In 1478, an exasperated Richard junior reported that Robert has lost on dice 30s. given to him for his board, and two years later Robert wrote a plaintive letter to George asking him to cover debts of £14 15s.⁶³ After the Joan Hart affair he barely appears in the letters, and seemed to play no part in the family business. Once again, age is not the best indicator of when a youth becomes a man; the way he chooses to conduct himself in his amorous affairs and marital negotiations may prove a better indication of adulthood.

Whilst other men would probably not have envied Robert’s gambling debts or reliance on his younger brothers, some could have perhaps empathised with his apparent desire to continue living as an adolescent male, rather than embracing the full responsibilities of adulthood. *Guy of Warwick* and *Torrent of Portyngale* both

⁶¹ McSheffrey, *Sex, Marriage and Civic Culture*, 65-6. Many different types of gift could be given in the courtship process, from handkerchiefs to fish, but McSheffrey notes several examples of rings used in evidence of a marriage contract.

⁶² Hanham, *The Celys and their World*, 311.

⁶³ *CL*, nos. 32, 29, and 102, 89.

feature heroes who continue living as knights errant longer than one might expect, because in both cases their adventures continue *after* they have married and sired children. Both romances start with heroes who are spurred into action by their love for noble ladies, as is typical of the genre. Guy is initially not very keen to go adventuring, and it is only because Felice sets him the task of becoming the ‘boldyst knyght’ (810) that he goes out to seek renown. Guy then ends up having a very lengthy series of adventures, nearly seven thousand lines in length, before returning to marry his lady. Torrent, meanwhile, also has to undertake Herculean effort to win his lady, as he is commanded by Desonell’s father he must kill a whole series of giants before they can wed.

After so many trials, one might expect that Guy and Torrent would embrace settled domesticity. Torrent, however, is peculiarly willing to let the marriage be delayed. When he returns from yet another giant slaying, the King of Portugal asks that Torrent wait ‘halfe yere and a day’ (1354) before he is wed. Torrent agrees at once, although he then takes advantage of his proximity to the princess to visit her in her chamber (1360). He stays in Portugal for three months, until he receives a letter from the King of Norway begging him to slay a troublesome giant. Despite not needing the king’s gold – ‘I-nough to lyve uppon I haue’ (1380) – Torrent agrees and sets sail for Norway. After killing the giant, Torrent does not rush home, but instead stays ‘Twelfe monythis and mare’ (1860) at the Norwegian court. This is not the behaviour of a man eager to be married.

I argue that Torrent’s behaviour may be provoked by the realisation that he has sired a child. The text notes that following his night with Desonell, he remains in Portugal for ‘Twelffe wekys and mare’ (1370). At about this sort of time, a pregnancy could be identified by a midwife.⁶⁴ When Torrent takes leave of Desonell, he gives her two gold rings with the instruction that she should “‘Kepe *them* well... / Yf god a child vs send!’” (1397-8) He seems aware that he may have got the princess pregnant, but

⁶⁴ Margaret Schaus, ed., *Women and Gender in Medieval Europe: An Encyclopedia* (New York and London: CRC Press, 2006), 668.

he goes on his voyage anyway. A few months later, Desonell's pregnancy is discovered (1780-5), and her father rejects her and 'that Bastard with-in the' (1793). Torrent's actions expose Desonell to public shame and exile. On his return more than a year later, Torrent swoons at the news of what has happened to Desonell (2092-3): perhaps this is not just from sorrow, but also guilt.

Guy, meanwhile, starts to feel uneasy about his life at the same time as Felice finds herself pregnant. The text records that Guy sires a child on Felice on their wedding night, and then that he stays with her for fifty days. At this point he has a spiritual crisis: 'Gye beganne to syke sore. / In hys herte he thoght more: / He thoght for to chaunge his lyfe' (7145-7). He decides he must leave at once, an impulse so sudden his wife suspects he has 'a lemman in odor stede' (7188). Fifty days would not be long enough to *confirm* a pregnancy, but one might be suspected; could the news of potential fatherhood be part of the reason behind Guy's new desire to change his life?

Following Guy's decision, he cuts a more sober figure than before, refusing gifts of rich clothes and land (7884-8, 8380-4) and wandering the world in disguise. However, many of his adventures seem more like his adolescent quests than religious crusades. He spends a lot of time helping friends in need, and whilst he does kill a Saracen giant (7964-8312), he remains on good terms with the heathen king (8325-32). Torrent similarly goes to the Holy Land after he defeats the King of Portugal, but he phrases his decision interestingly: "'For Sevyn yere, parmaffay, / Par aventure som dele mare!'" (2177-8) While Guy and Torrent do appear to be sincere in their religious conviction, it is not unrealistic to suppose that the ability to recover something of the adolescent wandering life is appealing to them both.

Why, then, do the heroes get married and have children at all? In *Torrent* the heroine is important, since her story makes up an important sub-plot; Desonell's story follows the pattern of 'the calumniated queen', and at the end of the narrative she is

reunited with her husband.⁶⁵ In *Guy*, however, Felice is barely mentioned after her husband leaves her. Felice's purpose seems mostly to provide the initial impetus for Guy's action, and then to provide him with an heir. After further adventures, Guy eventually dies in the manner of a saint, sweet scents rising from his body (10685-94), but he has also left a successor to his earthly fortunes. Guy can take on the mantle of saintly life that appeals to him so much, but only after he has provided a new link in the patrilineage. In contrast Torrent is eventually reunited with his wife and the twin sons she has borne, but he is happy to leave his sons to their foster fathers (2631-48), and ends his life in performing good deeds without any mention being made of his family. Clearly the texts find it difficult to reconcile a religious hero with a hero who has a family – but it seems important that he has had children, even though he never acts as a father to them. P.H. Cullum has noted that fornication and fighting were the misdemeanours for which the lesser clergy in York were most commonly chastised by the archdeacon's court, and suggests that this may have been partly caused by priests trying to demonstrate their male identity.⁶⁶ Similarly, perhaps, Torrent and Guy need to demonstrate proofs of secular masculinity before they can retreat into a life of contemplation or good works, and they do this through their feats of arms and through their ability to get children – specifically male heirs – on their wives. It is evidently less important for the hero in these examples to be a householder and paterfamilias, because these particular narratives privilege religious duty above family responsibilities – but this makes it doubly interesting that it is nevertheless so important for him to have children. He may live as a saint in later life, but first he must prove himself enough of a man to sire an heir. It is both an obligation to the country he has inherited that he provide future rulers for it, and a necessary part in demonstrating to readers that he is a real man.

⁶⁵ Of course, Desonell differs from calumniated queens in the sense that she is not falsely accused – she did commit the act that is the cause of her exile (in this case, premarital sex). However, her story shares many traits with 'real' calumniated queens, and the text treats her father's punishment of her as cruel and unjust.

⁶⁶ P.H. Cullum, 'Clergy, Masculinity and Transgression in Late Medieval England' in Hadley, *Masculinity in Medieval Europe*, 184.

Thresholds of adulthood (3): the non-father and extended adolescence

Part of being a man, it is clear from the stories of both Torrent and of Guy, is having children – not because acting as a father is important, but because heirs are vital. I argue that Richard Cely did not become a man when he impregnated Em, because that child would not be able to continue the Cely line. Legitimate children provide continuity, and a male is not a man if he cannot provide a future for his family. As we will see, this taps into contemporary concerns about family lines, and an expectation that adult masculinity brought with it certain responsibilities, including the ability to lead the family now and provide for its future. I will make clear that in romance men who are apparently sterile are still adolescents – but that rather than adolescence being the result of infertility, sterility is the result of adolescence. If a male refuses to act like a man, the narrative denies him an heir; he must earn legitimate offspring not through sexual potency, but through an embracing of his adult responsibilities.

In a society that promoted primogeniture, producing a male heir was vital to keep a family's estates intact, and to preserve the family name. S.J. Payling cites the example of a Norwich church window paid for in 1419 by the childless Sir Thomas Erpingham, dedicated to those Norfolk and Suffolk gentry who had died without issue.⁶⁷ The evidence regarding replacement rates demonstrates that this was not an idle concern. Evidence from Inquisitions post mortem shows that in the period 1391 to 1496 male landowners left a direct male heir in some two-thirds of cases.⁶⁸ This meant that a significant proportion of estates might pass to female heirs who would not bear the family name, or out of the family altogether. To merchant families, too, continuity was important; men clearly had a vested interest in ensuring that the businesses they had spent so much time building would pass intact to the next generation and beyond. Yet they too suffered from the same problem that the gentry

⁶⁷ S.J. Payling, 'Social Mobility, Demographic Change, and Landed Society in Late Medieval England', *The Economic History Review*, New Series, 45 (1992): 58.

⁶⁸ Payling, 'Social Mobility', 55.

did – approximately a third of merchants died without surviving male issue, and few families survived more than two generations in the male line.⁶⁹

Whilst there is no direct evidence of anxieties regarding infertility in the letters, the men of the letters did all spend a great deal of time trying to find successful marriages. George and Richard Cely frequently wrote to each other about likely prospects; William Stonor wasted no time after the death of his first wife to find a second, and after her death a third; and Sir John Paston was often frustrated in his attempts to find a suitable bride.⁷⁰ These marriages would not be sought *just* to ensure family continuity; William Stonor, for instance, makes astute matches for himself, first marrying into wealth and then managing, with the greater bargaining power than wealth has brought him, to marry into status. Yet it seems unlikely that producing children was not a concern. William Stonor's alacrity in remarrying may have been at least partly because neither his first nor second wife gave him an heir.⁷¹ Perhaps with Anne Neville, as well as having the satisfaction of marrying a woman of high status, he could relax, knowing they had a son to carry on his name. Nothing regarding heirs could be certain in this time, however, as William Stonor's son John died only six years after his father; had William's brother not had a son, the future Sir Walter, the family name would have died out. Sir William Plumpton, meanwhile, was so frustrated by his lack of a male heir that he pulled off a sleight of hand to legitimise his bastard son Robert by announcing that he had covertly married Robert's mother, Joan Wintringham, several years prior.⁷²

The kings of romance may have dynastic concerns that these merchants and knights did not have to worry about; but clearly the issues of familial continuity and lineage were real and important to the readers of romance. In *Chevelere Assigne* and

⁶⁹ Sylvia Thrupp, *The Merchant Class of Medieval London*, 199-202, and Jenny Kermode, 'Sentiment and Survival: Family and Friends in Late Medieval English Towns', *Journal of Family History* 24 (1999): 7.

⁷⁰ William Stonor's marriage negotiations: *SL*, nos. 121, 122, 212-213; Cely discussions of women: *CL* 117, 106-7.

⁷¹ We do not know about any pregnancies Elizabeth Ryche or Agnes Wydesdale may have had, but certainly William Stonor did not have a living male heir when he married Anne Neville.

⁷² See Chapter 4.

Octavian, the rulers are faced with an anxiety that their readers would have understood – who will follow them? Without an heir, they offer their patrimony an uncertain future. Oreyns, the king of *Chevelere Assigne*, and the Emperor Octavian in *Octavian* face the predicament of having their stories begin where other romances end. They have achieved what should have guaranteed them a happy ending. They are sovereigns and husbands to beautiful women. However, the children we would expect from such men have not resulted from these marriages, and it will be seen that their failure to sire children has an effect on their perception of themselves as men and their confidence as rulers. As Emperor Octavian laments to his wife:

‘Now hafe we seven yere sammen bene
And hafe no chylde us bytwene,
For fay we sall hythen fownde,
And I ne wote how this land sall fare
Bot lyfe in werre and in kare
When we are broghte to grownde’ (64-9)

Life is fleeting, and if on his death he leaves behind no one to take his place, he puts the empire at risk of either civil war, or of conquest from an outside power.

Sterility does not threaten only the nation. It also damages the male’s sense of self – and of himself as a man. In 1432, at the church court of York, Alice Skathelok brought a case against her husband John in an attempt to have their marriage dissolved on the basis of his alleged impotence. One of the witnesses, Joan Semer, reported that she asked John to ‘prove himself a man’, by which she meant that he should achieve an erection.⁷³ John Skathelok could show that his physiology works as a man’s should, and as such his masculinity was under threat. Oreyns and Octavian are not physically impotent, but the term ‘impotence’ was used in the Middle Ages in a broad sense to mean powerlessness, referring to physical incapacity, sexual dysfunction, and socio-economic disadvantage. In the sense of powerlessness the long years of infertility that characterise Oreyns and Octavian’s

⁷³ Case translated in P.J.P. Goldberg, *Women in England c. 1275 – 1525: Documentary Sources* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1995), 220.

marriages certainly leave them feeling impotent.⁷⁴ Octavian has obviously been deeply troubled by the continuing barrenness of his marriage, confessing that “‘I slepe bot littill stownde”” (72) because he and his wife have failed to get a child in seven years of marriage. When he is brought the news that the empress has had twins, he gifts the messengers with three towns each (91-6), an extremely generous gesture pointing to his great relief. However, the ease with which his mother convinces him that his joy is unfounded demonstrates that even his moment of great joy is undercut by latent insecurity. His mother comes to him, saying sadly that ““Rome sall wrange ayerde bee / And in uncouth hande”” (107-8). When Octavian asks how this may be, as he now has not one but two heirs, his mother says that ““thay are noghte thyn”” (113), and adds the cruel remark that ““For thou myghte no childir have, / Scho hase takyn thy kokes knave”” (115-6). She has identified his weakest spot, and at once a ‘sorowe there to his herte gan goo’ (118). By suggesting that the infertility of the marriage led to the wife committing adultery, the queen mother is tacitly suggesting that the infertile party was Octavian. His mother then prepares a tableau by placing a ‘kokes knave’ in her daughter-in-law’s bed; as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen notes, the serving boy is so overawed that he cowers as far from the empress as he can, which may not make for a very convincing scene:

Bot ever he droghe hym ferre awaye
For the rechese that scho in laye,
Full sore than was he drade. (145-7)

Octavian does not give his wife the benefit of the doubt, however, because he is already convinced by his mother’s lie.⁷⁵

It is interesting that Octavian is so ready to assume that it is *his* fault, not his wife’s. *Sir Gowther* begins with a couple who have similarly failed to conceive, but the duke assumes it is his wife’s fault:

‘Y tro thu be sum baryn,
Hit is gud that we twyn;

⁷⁴ ‘impotence’ (n.): (a) physical weakness, feebleness; (b) powerlessness, helplessness; (c) poverty; (d) sexual impotence. *Middle English Dictionary* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001).

⁷⁵ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 64-5.

Y do bot wast my tyme on the,
 Eireles mon owre londys bee';
 For gretynge he con not blyn. (56-60)

The duke is in line with popular thinking here. Although according to most works of medicine and natural philosophy men and women could be equally at fault for barrenness, the emphasis in treating sterility and in explaining underlying disorders was usually on the female's failings.⁷⁶ This is despite the fact that medieval concepts of human generation usually made the active party the male; even those who did not believe that the womb was merely a receptacle for male seed generally attributed the larger role in generation to the man. Galen described women's role in generation thus: 'the female must have smaller, less perfect testes [ovaries], and the semen generated in them must be scantier, colder, and wetter... Certainly such semen would be incapable of generating an animal.'⁷⁷ The implication here is that woman, weaker, colder, more imperfect than man, has only a secondary part in generation. Furthermore, Albertus Magnus described possible causes of male sterility as including 'a defect of the generative members – a long or short penis or [one that] cannot become erect, or cold testicles'.⁷⁸ What then could be extrapolated about a man who failed to sire children? Was he weaker, colder, more flawed than the average man? His weakened, less capable state makes him an incomplete – or perhaps *immature* – male. The duchess in *Sir Gowther* conceives by the demon that visits her, and so it seems that the blame actually does lie with her husband.⁷⁹ It was not, then, impossible for Octavian to consider himself infertile, but the readiness with which he accepts the idea suggests a lack of belief in his manhood.

This lack of confidence is underscored by the status of the male with whom Octavian's wife is supposed to have committed adultery. Octavian's mother pays a 'kokes knave' to lie in her daughter-in-law's bed. A 'knave' has both the association

⁷⁶ Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference*, p 249-51.

⁷⁷ Galen, *On the Usefulness of the Parts of the Body*, excerpted in Alcuin Blamires, *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 42.

⁷⁸ Albertus Magnus, *Quaestiones de animalibus*, quoted in Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference*, 250.

⁷⁹ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, 'Gowther Among the Dogs: Becoming Inhuman c. 1400', in *Becoming Male*, ed. Cohen and Wheeler, 220-1.

of youth and of menial labour; Octavian finds it easy to assume that his wife has committed adultery with a lower status adolescent, however, because the knave is apparently fertile whilst Octavian is not.⁸⁰ In *Chevelere Assigne*, meanwhile, Oreyns' wicked mother convinces him that not only has his wife committed adultery, she has done it with 'Bothe howndes and men' (79). Instead of doubting his mother's outrageous claim, Oreyns at once 'gynnth to morne' (66). What does it say about Oreyns' sense of self that he believes his wife would lie with dogs – and that hounds are more fertile than he is? If Octavian and Oreyns can believe themselves so easily betrayed, this suggests both a lack of self-belief and indicates a breakdown in their marriages. Why have they not had the success in marriage and generation that the romance genre leads us to expect from men like this?

Octavian and Oreyns are good rulers in many respects, both 'of grete favoure / ... / And doghety was of dede' (*Octavian* 16-8), but they have an unhealthy dependence on their mothers. It is this, I argue, that keeps them trapped in an artificially prolonged adolescence, and which contributes to their marital problems and temporary inability to father offspring. The ease with which they are manipulated shows that Octavian and Oreyns are still too dependent on their mothers to become proper fathers, or true men. Whilst the reader knows that Octavian and Oreyns *are* capable of siring children, it is not enough to be a father in fact; one must also be in deed. Until they can shake off their mothers' influence, neither Oreyns nor Octavian will be able to be fully successful fathers, husbands, or rulers.

When Octavian tells his mother about his marital plans, she remarks that "'I am full blythe / That the Emperes schall haf hyr lyfe / And lyffe wyth us in londe..." (103-5). It is almost as if she is graciously granting her son permission to have his wife live with *them* – note that she says 'us', not 'you'. She is used to being first in her son's life, and so cannot accept being relegated into a position of secondary

⁸⁰ 'knāve (n.(1)) 1. a) A male infant; male offspring, son; (b) a boy, lad; (c) a young man, man, male; -- also as a familiar term of address 2. (a) A servant, attendant, page; messenger; also *fig.*; (b) a stableboy, groom [sometimes difficult to distinguish from (a)]; (c) a kitchen boy, cook's servant, scullion; **cokes** ~, **kichene** ~.' *Middle English Dictionary*.

importance. Thus her drastic action when the queen manages to have twins, because it is at this point that her position is really threatened. Octavian's mother is not ready to be displaced from her central role in her son's life, and if he has managed to have children, he will be first and foremost a father, rather than a son. Thus she lies not only about his wife, but also about his children.

Another text with a similarly vindictive and selfish mother-in-law in *Emaré*. In this story, the princess manages to escape the incestuous desires of her father, only to be persecuted by her new mother-in-law. The queen sees Emaré and notes: 'I sawe never wommon / Halvendell so gay!' (443-4) Immediately afterwards she says to her son, the King of Galys:

... 'Sone, thys is a fende,
In thys wordy wede!
As thou lovest my blessyng,
Make thou nevur thys weddyng...' (446-9).

The queen is evidently jealous of Emaré's beauty, and also of her son's sudden infatuation with this younger woman. Her jealousy has cause, because her son rejects her advice and marries Emaré, proving where his new loyalties lie. However, her feelings are inappropriate; the text makes clear that her importance in her son's life is meant to be eclipsed by the new queen. Moreover, as her son is head both of his household and of the nation, she should not be able to dominate him; he is not a child subject to her authority. The reason for the queen mother's behaviour becomes clearer when compared with that of Emaré's father. There is a great deal of repetition within *Emaré*; almost twenty per cent of the text is verbatim repetition, and there are many other similarities within the story.⁸¹ The second half of the tale clearly mirrors the first, which is in part to emphasise the heroine's sufferings, but also works to provide a point of comparison between the two families. Emaré is the victim of the queen, but so is her husband. The queen cannot punish him directly for marrying, but she can hurt him by ridding herself of her rival. She also attempts to

⁸¹ Ad Putter, 'The Narrative Logic of *Emaré*', in Ad Putter and Jane Gilbert, eds., *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance* (London: Longman, 2000), 157–180.

secure her own place at the expense of the other woman.⁸² The emperor's incestuous lust and the queen mother's jealous possessiveness are intended to reflect each other within the narrative. In the first part of the romance, the Emperor Artyus' desire for Emaré is clearly wrong, as the princess says: "God of heven hyt forbede" (251). Artyus' response is violent, swearing that she must die if she will not assent (265-7). In the second half, Emaré is once again persecuted, this time for coming between the King of Galys and his mother, frustrating the mother's desire to control her son. I consider the emperor's motivations in depth in Chapter 3, but even without lengthy analysis it is clear that Artyus' desire for his daughter, followed by his expulsion of her from home, thus losing his only heir, and the queen mother's wish for her son not to marry, followed by her setting Emaré and her own grandson adrift, are characters and events with strong parallels. This does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that the queen mother's feelings are, like Artyus', incestuous; rather it implies that the father's and mother's underlying impulses are similar in their selfishness and myopia. Both Artyus and the queen mother are so focused on their own desire, their wish to keep control of their offspring, that they fail to take into account that they are risking the future of their families and nations by cutting off the line of descent.

The behaviour of the queen mothers is self-obsessed and inappropriate. They view the new queens as interlopers, when it is they who are forcing themselves into the wrong position. *Emaré's* use of the phrase 'olde qwene' is both a reflection of physical truth and a marker of the queen mothers' position relative to their daughters-in-law. The queen mothers' blatant disregard of this overthrows the natural social order. However, the wicked mothers are not solely to blame. Although they tell the lies, their sons believe them, being easily overruled, a sign of latent insecurity regarding their abilities. Oreyns, having accepted his mother's falsehood about his wife, plans to have the queen locked up. However, one simple remark from his mother is enough to have him planning his wife's execution. She says: 'thy

⁸² Margaret Robson, 'Cloaking desire: re-reading Emaré', in Jennifer Fellows, Rosamund Field and Judith Weiss, eds., *Romance Reading on the Book: Essays on Medieval Narrative presented to Maldwyn Mills* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1996), 67.

Qwene is vnbrete so meruelows longe / That hath serued the deth if thou here dome wyst', and Oreyns grants her request 'with a grymme herte' (185-6, 189). Oreyns is weak willed, and allows his mother's arguments to supersede his own, when he should be a strong enough ruler to trust his own judgement. Instead throughout the romance he relies on the opinions of others, and is seemingly unable to actively drive the narrative; instead his storyline is directed by the behaviour of others.⁸³

Octavian, meanwhile, perpetrates a cruel jest by tricking his father-in-law into pronouncing judgement on his own daughter. The King of Calabria, the empress's father, appears to be part of Octavian's court. Octavian outlines a hypothetical scenario and asks the king how he would punish 'swylk a treson'. The king replies that the correct punishment was that the traitor should 'to the dede be bryntte'. The emperor responds that he will 'holde to thyn assent', and reveals the truth to the horrified king (214-42). Octavian thus manages to abdicate responsibility for what happens to his wife. There is something notable in asking the empress' father to make the judgement. Whilst asking his council as a whole to decide could be seen as his attempt to be impartial and just, by manoeuvring his father-in-law into making the decision, he passes responsibility for the empress back to her father. However, the empress has passed out of the King of Calabria's authority through her marriage; giving her back up to her father echoes Octavian's giving up of his judgement to his mother. Octavian is not man enough to pass judgement on his wife, and so he returns her to the last man who had authority over her, in an adolescent expectation that the king can better carry the burden of responsibility. This is not the act of a responsible ruler nor husband, and it is certainly not the act of a mature man.⁸⁴

Both Octavian and Oreyns seem uncertain of how to act and depend heavily on their mothers, who take advantage of this by manipulating their sons. Since their fathers are dead and they have assumed their roles, Oreyns and Octavian should be men

⁸³ Diane Speed, 'The pattern of Providence in *Chevelere Assigne*', in *Romance Reading on the Book*, ed. Fellows, 145.

⁸⁴ There is a similarity here to the way Walter sends Griselda back to her father in *The Clerk's Tale* under the pretext that he wishes to take another wife. *The Clerk's Tale*, ll. 800-12, in *The Riverside Chaucer*.

enough to act like husbands and fathers. However, their unhealthy relationships with their mothers means that they remain in a perpetual adolescence, which seems to contribute to them being initially unable to have children. They need to be first and foremost fathers, not sons, and until they accomplish this, they will effectively be adolescents. After all, how can a man found and lead a family if he is still behaving as if he were a junior member of his natal unit?

The hero of *Lybeaus Desconus* is an interesting contrast to these two men. At the start of the romance, the boy who will eventually become Lybeaus Desconus has a mother who is controlling in the sense that she deliberately prevents him from accessing the knightly life that is his birthright. However, when Lybeaus comes across a dead knight in the woods, he at once realises that he must leave his mother behind and seek out an adult life for himself:

He fond a knyght ...
 ...
 He toke of that knyghtis wede;
 Hym-sylffe þerin well fayre [c]an shrede,
 All in that bryght armour.
 What he had do that in dede,
 To Glastynbury þe childe him yede,
 Ther lay Kyng Arthure. (34-42)

Lybeaus has never before seen a knight, but he seems to understand the trappings of knighthood as desirable, and so leaves the emasculating household of his mother. Lybeaus' removal from his mother is a necessary part of growing up, of moving from adolescence toward manhood. Despite their experience as knights and rulers, Oreyns and Octavian have not managed what the much younger Lybeaus does with ease.

This would be less problematic if Oreyns and Octavian had only themselves to think about. However, they are responsible for nations, and for carrying on their lineages. Not only does their adolescent behaviour possibly contribute to their initial failure to sire children, it certainly causes them to discard the children that the reader knows

are legitimate, largely because they have too little faith in their own judgement and too much faith in their mothers.

Just as both men are quickly swayed into making pronouncements against their wives, they are also quick to forgive, suggesting they have regretted their decisions. In both cases they are confronted by their sons, who have grown up and returned to seek justice. Oreyns is confronted by Enyas, who confidently offers to fight for his mother's sake. Enyas has been raised in the woods, and is barely more than a child, but despite his naïveté and inexperience, he at once recognises that his father's judgement is wrong, and confidently tells Oreyns that 'Matabryne... / ...is fowle, fell, and fals.../And I woll putte my body to better and to worse / To fyte for the Qwene with whome that wronge seyth' (238-45).⁸⁵ The king grants the youth's request with 'ioye' (246), and speaks coldly to his mother when she questions him (250-3). He is eager to be shown that his mother lied even before the fight begins. Octavian's namesake son, meanwhile, does not even have to fight to prove his mother's innocence, although he seems to make the offer: "'Lorde, for a lesesyng that was stronge, / Scho was flemede owt of londe. / I prove that it was lese.'" (1777-9) The emperor swoons for joy (1780-1) and receives his family. Fathers here are educated by their sons, as the sons, shaped by trials and adventures, are more mature than their childish fathers. In another context this might be an inappropriate family dynamic, but here is necessary to underscore the inappropriateness of what has gone before. The king is, in a way, treated as a child who must be taught, because he has behaved like a child, accepting his mother's word without question and not accepting his adult responsibility towards his wife.

In *Emaré*, the King of Galys is also pointed toward the truth by his son, but this episode proves to be quite different from the confrontations in *Octavian* or *Chevalere Assigne*. Instead of being confronted by a confident youth, the king meets

⁸⁵ Tom Davenport, 'Abbreviation and the Education of the Hero in *Chevalere Assigne*', in *The Matter of Identity*, ed. Hardman, 12.

a young boy, who offers no challenges, but simply leads his newfound father to his mother:

He [Segramour] toke hys [the king's] hond at the grete ende,
 And fayre he helpe hym yn;
 And sayde, 'Syr, yf your wyll be,
 Take me your honde and go wyth me,
 For y am of yowr kynne!
 Ye shull come speke wyth Emaré ...' (917-22).

The King of Galys has been less culpable for his wife's misfortunes than his counterparts in *Octavian* and *Chevelere Assigne*. When his mother sends him news of his wife supposedly giving birth to a monster, he is grieved, but importantly he does not assume it was either his fault or Emaré's: 'When he sawe hyt myght no bettur be, / ... / He commanded yn all thyng / To kepe well that lady yyng' (565-9). The queen mother is forced to forge a letter ordering Emaré's exile. Despite his lack of direct involvement in this, the king still feels the need to seek penance. This is of course a plot device, used to ensure he will find Emaré in Rome, but it seems that the King of Galys accepts a certain degree of culpability for his wife's 'death', partly because he is the reason for his mother's jealousy, and perhaps also because the relationship he had with his mother led to her malicious acts. The king needs less direction from his son than do Oreyns or Octavian, because he is already aware of his mistakes.

The King of Galys' self awareness is also the reason why he is more merciful to his mother when he discovers her crime than Oreyns and Octavian are in the same situation. *Emaré's* king says that his first instinct is to have his mother burned (796), but instead he consults with his council and they decide to banish her (799-804). Despite his anger, the King of Galys acts temperately, perhaps because he is aware of his own culpability, and because he is more confident as a ruler. In *Chevelere* and *Octavian* no such mercy is shown. In *Chevelere* the mother is burned on the pyre intended for the queen (344), and Octavian's mother escapes being boiled to death in a brass vessel only by slitting her own throat (1771-9). The execution of the mother is a bold move. Although she is a would-be murderess, matricide is no small matter.

However, she is guilty of not just attempted murder, but also treachery. Her insistence that the king remain her son rather than another woman's husband means that for several years he is denied the solace of children and the comfort of knowing that his kingdom will be passed onto another. As the *Emaré* poet poignantly writes of the king: 'when he sawe chylderen play / He wepte and sayde, "Wellawey. / For my sone so dere!"' (811-13) The mother threatens the continuity of the male line and the security of the throne in order to fulfil her desire to remain the most important woman in her son's life. By denying her son of his right to be a husband, she also denies him the right to fatherhood, and that cannot be forgiven. She has kept her son from becoming fully a man, because as long as the mother remains the central woman in the male's life, he cannot quite achieve adult masculinity.⁸⁶ The king in these romances reasserts his masculinity dramatically by removing his mother altogether, ending his childish dependence irrevocably. It is perhaps because their dependence has been greater that Oreyns and Octavian must make a more dramatic break with the past than the King of Galys is required to do. In any case, regardless of how the queen mother leaves the story – through execution, suicide or exile – by killing their mothers, these men literally unmake themselves sons and reinvent themselves as fathers. Having been punished for their foolish belief in their mothers by the loss of their families, these kings are allowed to make amends and become fathers not just in fact, but in deed.

Conclusion

The physical process of becoming a father might for some men be relatively easy, but the mental and social processes are a lot more complicated. The adolescent male's identity is in many regards fluid; in order to fix himself as a man, he needs proof that he has left childhood behind him. Marriage is not enough, because it is possible to be married and yet still be an inadequate man. Fathering children,

⁸⁶ Despite a critical interest in mothering in the Middle Ages, there has been very little consideration of the role of the mother in her adult offspring's lives. Nikki Stiller addresses mothers and adult daughters in her monograph *Eve's Orphans: Mothers and Daughters in Medieval English Literature* (Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 1980), but there is little on mothers and adult sons.

however, is a way of demonstrating that a man has left childhood behind him. The way these children are sired must be particular, though. It is not sufficient for a man to have bastards. Whilst siring illegitimate offspring is an expected part of the young male life cycle, it is still an aspect of his growing up, not of his having grown up. What makes a male a man is not exactly the act of fathering; it is contributing to a *line* of fathers. Whether a man is a king or a knight or a merchant, he has a lineage, and by becoming a father he takes his place in a line of fathers that stretches into the past and into the future, rather than ending with him. Marriage, then, is a threshold of adulthood, but it is not sufficient to make a man. Instead it provides him with the appropriate context in which to *become* a man. Marriage lets him establish a household to head. It also allows him to father legitimate offspring who will continue the family beyond the present generation. Without heirs, a man is not a man; he is still a son rather than a father, and so is still in a subordinate position. When a man cannot – or will not – move himself out of the position of being a son, his manhood is compromised. No matter what else he accomplishes, through feats of arms or economic success or religious fervour, the failure to sire children will overshadow all his successes, because what are victories without heirs to enjoy their fruits? Without an heir, a man has only a past, not a future. In the end it is continuity that is heroic.

CHAPTER 2

Fathers and Sons

[T]he father is seen as an organising focus for identification. The actual presence of the father is not essential...¹

‘Leve moder,’ seide Sire Degarre,
 ‘Telle me the sothe, par charité:
 Into what londe I mai terne
 To seke mi fader, swithe and yerne?’²

In Chapter 1 we saw some of the ways in which men became fathers and how the process of fatherhood has a definitive effect on masculine identity. With the father-son relationship, we see the convergence of many kinds of masculinities. This brings to the fore many of the central features of adult masculine life, and helps explicate several important questions regarding issues of mutuality, duty, and familial power dynamics. The father-son relationship, it becomes clear, is an uneasy yet vital relationship in terms of family and social structuring. Fathers, I showed in the previous chapter, need heirs – specifically male heirs – in order to establish and reinforce their masculine identity. But as sons grow up, they begin to threaten the hierarchy of the family by encroaching on the fathers’ territory. Sons, meanwhile, gain their masculine identity from their fathers and are raised in their likeness, but the more they grow to resemble their fathers, the more they chafe under the yoke of paternal *authoritas*, finding themselves wanting to exert their own nascent authority.

The problematic negotiation of the father-son relationship may be why it has been considered in a mostly negative light, where it has been considered at all. The critical perception of John Paston I as a coldly authoritarian father makes a good example. The argument between him and his son John II is one of the most commonly cited episodes in the Pastons’ history, and the historiography here

¹ Mary Target and Peter Fonagy, ‘The role of the father’, in Judith Trowell and Alicia Etchegoyen eds., *The Importance of Fathers: A Psychoanalytic Re-Evaluation* (Hove: Brunner-Routledge, 2001), 57.

² *Sir Degaré*, ll. 697-700.

demonstrates some of the limitations of the analysis both of this relationship and of the analysis of father-son relationships more generally. The dispute between Paston father and son arose when John II absented himself from the family home without permission, and John I's furious response also allowed him to share some choice words on his son's supposed idleness.³ H.S. Bennett describes John I as 'hard and almost implacable' with regards to his children, whilst even Colin Richmond, who suggests that John I 'softened' toward his sons in his last years, calls him 'a difficult father'.⁴ While it is hard to read the Paston correspondence without gaining the impression that John I was, in fact, a difficult man, there has been little effort paid to understanding the broader dynamics of the relationship he had with his son. That obedience is expected of sons to their fathers is a given in what writing there is on father-child relationships. It is usually described as resulting from the Christian obligation to honour one's parents, and sometimes is connected to the maintenance of social order, but the deeper issues here are not examined.⁵ For instance, how is obedience utilised in the father-son relationship, and what can the son expect in return? It will become clear that making easy assumptions about the Pastons' relationship reduces it to two-dimensional terms, and that John Paston I's insistence on John II's obedience is not the oppressive discipline of an authoritarian, but a window into understanding how the hierarchical gap between fathers and sons was negotiated. What I will be doing more broadly, as I have indicated with this example, is trying to understand the late medieval father-son relationship on its *own* terms, both moving away from the Ariès-influenced perspective of the uncaring parent, and avoiding the revisionist approach to parent-child relationships that, as a response to Ariès, attributes modern values to medieval parenting.⁶

³ PL no. 575, 4:122.

⁴ Bennett, *The Pastons and their England*, 78; Richmond, *The Paston Family in the Fifteenth Century: Falstof's will*, 151-2.

⁵ Orme, *Medieval Children*, 82-3; Shahar, *Childhood*, 169.

⁶ Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood*, 30-7. James Schultz criticises Shulamith Shahar for what Schultz perceives as sentimentalising the parent-child relationship. James A. Schultz, *The Knowledge of Childhood in the German Middle Ages, 1100 – 1350* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1995), 6. See Shahar, *Childhood*.

In terms of organising this chapter, the structure is partly dictated by the nature of the sources themselves. Letters are intended to transmit information between people, and are framed in stock language that reflects social hierarchies, and so missives between fathers and sons give us examples both of ideological expectations about fatherhood as well as evidence for real interactions between these men. Romances, meanwhile, feature very few interactions between fathers and sons, largely because the narrative constraints of romances often require the father to die so that the son can easily take up his inheritance. Notwithstanding Lee Ramsey's remark that romances are stories of fathers, the narrative 'blank' of father-son relationships has resulted in a corresponding blank in the secondary criticism.⁷ However, the absent father is not always a narrative convenience – indeed, he is sometimes a narrative motif, and the search for the absent father is an important recurring story arc. The differences in the kind of evidence for this relationship means that it is not especially useful to consider romances and letters at the same time. Rather than constraining the chapter, however, this approach actually broadens its scope. Romances and letters have quite different, but complementary, things to say about fathers and sons, and where one type of text falls silent, I will show that the other often fills in the missing pieces. Moreover, by considering the sources separately, the disparate functions of these different texts become clearer.

I open the chapter proper by considering the language of fatherhood that is particular to letters. This helps establish some of the generic parameters of the father-son relationship particularly in relation to respective positions, which then opens into a wider discourse on the relative status and power of fathers and sons. With these dynamics understood, the evidence for affective ties between fathers and sons is more explicable. I end this section by considering how father-son bonds became strained, which then leads to the second part of the chapter, which turns to the romances. The frustrations and resentments of the father-son relationship, which are perhaps too dangerous to be fully articulated in the letters, are in the romances more

⁷ Lee C. Ramsey, *Chivalric Romances: Popular Literature in Medieval England* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 29.

safely explored through the motifs of the absent father, the son seeking a name, and the fight with the father.

‘Mi ryght wel-belouved fadyr’: the vocabulary of fatherhood

I begin by discussing the language that medieval people used to express concepts of fatherhood, in terms of the language that was used about and towards fathers. It will become clear that decoding this vocabulary is essential in understanding fathers, both in the sense of how they were perceived by society, and in terms of how they interacted with their offspring personally. The language of fatherhood, moreover, not only reflects reality; it also shapes it. The written word, by formalising expression, also makes it more concrete. I will thus pay some attention to how the medium of letters can be constructed to this end, before considering what kind of language was used about and towards fathers, as well as what vocabulary fathers and their offspring used to negotiate, maintain, and develop their relationships.

Medieval letters are all about connections; ties of kinship, friendship, patronage and mutual obligation often provide the driving force behind the composition, reception, and sometimes even the very means of delivery of letters. The way letters are written, meanwhile, creates connections between writer and recipient through the syntax as well as the content of the correspondence. In particular I am interested in salutations, the greetings that open letters. These are stock phrases, but they tell us a great deal about how social relationships were envisioned. Salutations locate writer and recipient in relation to one another. Most obviously, they may locate them spatially – for instance addressing a letter as having gone from one place and to another – but they may also locate them socially and empathetically. Social deixis, in linguistic terms, is language that emphasises social difference, whilst empathetic deixis creates and reflects an emotional tie between writer and recipient.⁸ For instance, when John Russe writes in 1465 to John Paston ‘my right honorabyll maister, I recomaund me to you in the most humble wise’, by addressing John as

⁸ Fitzmaurice, *The Familiar Letter in Early Modern English*, 35.

‘master’ and referring to himself as ‘humble’, he creates an impression of social distance, although calling him ‘*my maister*’ also creates a sense of connection.⁹ The empathetic connection is established at the same time as the hierarchical difference is maintained. This example of master and servant is apposite, as in the specific language of fatherhood, terms of affection and service become inextricably linked. By understanding the analogous relationship between the vocabulary of service and fatherhood, the language of the latter is placed more readily within its wider social context. I will therefore closely examine the lexical choices of sons and fathers, relating these choices to other aspects of their authors’ lives and thus illuminating the broader social constructs from within which a paternal vocabulary emerges.

The most consistent place to find language about fathers is in the opening phrases of letters. In the gentry and mercantile correspondence, salutations from adult sons to their fathers follow a well-established formula. On 20 April 1473 William Stonor wrote to his father in the following manner:

My ryght reverent and wurshypfull fadyr, I recomaund me unto your good fadyrhod in the most umbylle wyse that I kan or may, mekely besechyng your good fadyrhod of your dayly blessyng¹⁰

Two years previously, his letter to Thomas Stonor began in a similar, though more succinct, manner:

My ryght reverent and worshypfull fader, I recomaund me unto yowur good fadyrhod, mekely besechyng of yowur dayly blessyng¹¹

John Paston III was of the same generation as William Stonor, and his salutations to John Paston I follow in a similar vein:

Ryth reverent and worchepfull fadyr, I recomand me on to yow, besechyng yow lowly of your blyssyng, desyryng to here of yowyr wellfar and prosperyte¹²

His elder brother wrote with a slightly creative twist on the same theme:

⁹ *PL*, no. 580, 4:133.

¹⁰ *SL*, no. 127, 219.

¹¹ *SL*, no. 118, 209.

¹² *PL*, no. 560, 4:95.

Most reverent and worschepfull fadyr, I rekomawnd me hertyly, and submytt me lowle to your good faderhood, besechyng yow for cheryte of yowr dayly blyssyng.¹³

A generation later, William Plumpton was writing similar letters to his father Robert. At the turn of the sixteenth century one of his letters begins thus, varying only in that it mentions his mother:

Right worshipfull father & mother I recomend me unto you, praying you of your dayly blessing¹⁴

The remarkable similarity between all these salutations demonstrates that this address was the conventional way for sons to address fathers. The Stonors, Plumptons and Pastons were all gentry families, and as such did not always pen their own letters. The beginning of these letters could, then, be a conventional opening written by a scribe, quite possibly not even dictated by the son, who could expect his amanuensis to append the necessary introduction and conclusions to his letters. However, these salutations are also seen in letters we know to have been written by a son himself. George Cely was of a slightly lower social standing than these other men, and he penned his own letters. Nevertheless, the form of the salutation remains very similar:

Ryght rewerent and whorshippffull ffadyr, affter all dew recomandasyon pretending I recomeaund me [vn]to yow in the moste lowlyest whysse that I can or may.¹⁵

The only significant difference is that George does not request a 'daily blessing'. This may indicate that George's training in letter writing was flawed in this respect. Unfortunately no letters survive from Richard junior to Richard senior and so I cannot compare the brothers' salutations. In any case, all the examples listed are very similar, indicating that this form of address was not only used by those who had access to professional letter writers, but had become a wider convention. From the thirteenth century in England texts appeared on the *ars dictaminis*, the art of letter writing, but by the fifteenth century there is little evidence for the teaching of

¹³ *PL*, no 477, 3:301

¹⁴ *PLP*, no. 176, 162.

¹⁵ *CL*, no. 41, 38.

dictamen in English.¹⁶ Sarah Williams argues that the standardisation of English letter writing techniques in this period, however, implies the existence of taught precepts, and suggests that by the late fifteenth century letter writing had become such a basic accomplishment for more elite ranks that it would be taught at an elementary level.¹⁷ This would explain why no manuals from this period have been found; early year education is informal and thus difficult to reconstruct. However it was taught, the evidence of salutations alone indicates that learning conventional forms of letter composition would have been a feature of the education of the gentry and mercantile classes.¹⁸

The salutation used by sons to fathers is typical. As such, we cannot expect it to tell us much about how an individual son felt for his father. It does, however, tell us a great deal about societal expectations of the relationship between fathers and sons, and the position of the father in society, whilst the rote aspect of the greeting points to the entrenched nature of these social factors. As such, it is worth looking at the form of the salutation in detail.

‘I submytt me lowle’: ties of kinship and relative status expressed through salutations

As we have seen, the basic form of the son-to-father salutation, regardless of its individual variations, always begins by placing the writer and recipient in their familial places. Sometimes the ‘my’ is omitted, but the salutation still instantly locates the son by use of the word ‘fadyr’. This reflects a wider pattern of usage in letters written to either social superiors or equals. Richard Cely junior’s letters to George invariably begin with a version of ‘Riught interly welbelouyd brother’, while Margaret Paston always writes to John Paston I in a variation on ‘Ryth wyrchypful

¹⁶ English letter writing manuals started to reappear in the sixteenth century, although Latin manuals originate in the eleventh century: Linda Ehram Voigts, ‘A Letter from a Middle English Dictaminal Formulary in Harvard Law Library MS 43’, *Speculum*, 56 (1981): 577.

¹⁷ Williams, ‘English Vernacular Letters’, 35, 43-5.

¹⁸ Watt, ‘“No Writing for Writing’s Sake”’, 127.

hwsbond'.¹⁹ Servants begin letters with something like William Coting's address to John Paston I: 'Right reverent and my most worshipful maister', while friends like William Maryon always make a note of that friendship: 'Ryght reuerent syr and my specyall frende'.²⁰ Correspondents are not simply addressed by name; indeed, the name being provided on the dorse, it is frequently not used in the salutation. What is important is locating the recipient in relation to the writer in terms of social and kinship networks. Each of these relationships, it would seem, has a specific significance within medieval English society, which is being evoked – and invoked – by the writer of the letter.

This is at least the case when people are writing to their social superiors, or to their equals. Letters from men to their social inferiors seem to have less need to draw attention to the respective positions of the correspondents. Lords writing to their gentry retainers typically opened with something akin to the Duke of Norfolk's letter to John Paston II: 'Right welbeloved frynde, I comaunde me to you.'²¹ Fathers were even more concise in their addresses. Thomas Stonor began a letter of 1468-9 with a brief 'Willm. Stonore, I sende yow Goddes blessyng and myne.'²² This is longer, however, than Richard Cely's greeting, which was typically only 'I gret you wyll'.²³ These briefer openings, which apparently rely less on formulaic expressions of hierarchy, actually provide as much information about status as letters to social superiors. The difference between salutations *from* a man and *to* him say as much about relative status as the individual salutations.

In the salutations from sons to their fathers, it is very important that the sons appear as supplicants. Sons wrote 'mekely besechyng' their fathers, 'submytt[ing]' themselves in the 'moste lowlyest whysse', which stressed their fathers' worship whilst drawing attention to their own inferiority, thus emphasising a hierarchical difference. At the same time, the repetition of the word 'fadyr' and 'faderhode' and

¹⁹ *CL*, no. 55, 50; *PL*, no. 75, 2:84.

²⁰ *PL*, no. 89, 2:102; *CL*, no. 58, 54.

²¹ *PL*, no. 994, 2:73.

²² *SL*, no. 97, 190.

²³ *CL*, no. 87, 76, and no. 122, 110.

the request for a 'blessyng' draws upon familial vocabulary to give an empathetic connection between writer and recipient. Fathers, meanwhile, with briskly friendly salutations to their sons, addressed their children similarly to how they would address their servants. This informality when contrasted with the sons' carefully formal language reinforces a sense of hierarchical difference – fathers are not required to be as careful in their language, as they are of a higher rank within the household.

The connection between sons and servants is not tenuous. Today, 'service' has connotations of menial work, and as such does not sit comfortably with our notions of familial relationships. However, service was in late medieval England not so much defined by the tasks performed as the relationship between master and servant, and in the hierarchical society that was fifteenth-century England, it was natural that service – the practice and ethic that made this hierarchy work in a practical way – should also feature in family life. Moreover, not only can we expect to see the service ethic reflected in the language of the family, but quasi-familial language was also used in the dialogue of service. The family and the household were coterminous, and the ties between servants and their lords were taken as seriously as ties between blood kin.²⁴ I am here particularly discussing honourable, rather than menial, service; as Rosemary Horrox notes, this 'is not a distinction based on function..., but on the status of the servant.'²⁵ The service offered to a lord by his gentry retainer was honorable because the rank of the servant demanded that the service he gave should add to his worship, not reduce it. Here the difference in status between the two men did not have the effect of demeaning the inferior; rather the opposite. To serve a great lord added to one's own status. For instance, John Tiptoft, the earl of Worcester, is depicted as wearing royal livery in his funerary effigy.²⁶ The language of servants to their masters in letters, then, is a written equivalent of wearing a livery collar; whilst simultaneously reminding the lord of the servant's

²⁴ Michael Hicks, *English Political Culture in the Fifteenth Century* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 151.

²⁵ Rosemary Horrox, 'Service', in *Fifteenth Century Attitudes: Perceptions of Society in Late Medieval England*, ed. by Rosemary Horrox (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 63.

²⁶ Horrox, 'Service', 67.

service and flattering his sense of worship by emphasising his greater status, it also draws attention to the servant's privileged position. For example, John Paston II wrote to Lord Hastings:

My most doughtyd and singuler good lord, aftyr most humble and dew recomendacyon²⁷

At a slightly lower social level, George Cely wrote to Sir John Weston:

Ryght whorshypffull syr and myn essaynglar good Lord, affter all dew recomendacyon pretending Y recomeavnd me vnto yowr good Lordshyp yn the most lowlyest whysse that I con.²⁸

As my earlier examples demonstrate, the greetings from sons to fathers are very similar to the salutation from retainer to his lord; they are highly structured and deeply conscious of respective positions. In contrast, fathers and lords can write back more casually, even using terms such as 'welbeloved'. It is appropriate for the higher ranking to use this seemingly affectionate term, but it is apparently too familiar for an inferior to use. Just as these vocabulary choices emphasise the difference between lords and servants, so sons' and fathers' respective positions within the family hierarchy are strongly reinforced by such usage. The vocabulary of fatherhood is not one of equality, and nor does it merely reflect a seniority that is a product of a difference in age. It is as highly structured and as self-conscious as courtly language, because the father's significance in his son's life is similar to a lord's in his servant's.

This might seem to characterise father-son relationships, at least in the world of letters, as they have been imagined by other critics: dutiful rather than affectionate on the part of the son, and cold and autocratic on the part of the father, who demands his son's unquestioning loyalty. However, this would be misunderstand the service relationship. There is a strongly reciprocal element to these greetings. Men submit to their lords, offering 'humble and dew recomendacyon', but they also seek their masters' 'good lordshyp'. Likewise, sons may approach their fathers in 'the moste

²⁷ *PL*, no. 886, 5:253.

²⁸ *CL*, no. 178, 164.

lowlyest whysse', but they also appeal to their fathers' 'gode fadyrhod'. This is not a merely courteous turn of phrase, but a term that has as much weight as 'good lordship', and demanding as much from the father as the lord. Even within the conventional framing of a letter there is a strong sense of this mutual dependence. Familial service must be rewarded with favour just as much other kinds of service need to be. Some of these rewards are practical, such as assistance with career advancement or marriage negotiations, but others are less tangible, such as the request for the father's 'dayly blessing'. This expresses a conventional piety, although it seems to represent an actual physical custom, perhaps like Isaac's blessing of Jacob.²⁹ Sons need to be shown their fathers' favour to make their service to them feel valuable, and we will see later how a lack of favour may have contributed to the strained relationship between Johns Paston I and II.

Salutations, then, indicate that the father-son relationship is not simply explained by filial subservience and paternal authority. Instead it is a relationship with a strong element of mutuality, duty and affection. In the next section it will be seen how affective ties between fathers and sons are expressed in the letters, and how a tradition of dutiful reciprocity makes up a significant element of the father-son relationship.

'A fadirlye affeccion':³⁰ affective ties and reciprocity between fathers and sons

The strongly hierarchical and formalised nature of the written relationship between father and son may give an impression of a relationship characterised more by ritual than feeling. However, this is to forget how important hierarchy was for *all* social relationships in late medieval England, and is based on the assumption that formality of etiquette results in a comparable rigidity of emotion. The form letters take not

²⁹ Nicholas Orme, *Medieval Children* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), 84. Isaac's blessing is found in Genesis 27: 21-31. For pictorial representation, see for instance Bodleian Lib., MS Lat. liturg. d. 42, fol. 4r. In this image, Jacob kneels at the bedside of his sick father, who raises his hand above his son's head in blessing. MS Lat. liturg. d. 42. http://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/dept/scwmss/wmss/medieval_mss/lat/liturg_d/042.htm, accessed 27 February 2009.

³⁰ *Gesta Romanorum*, Early English Text Society, O.S. 33 (London: Trübner, 1878, reprinted 1962).

only demonstrate societal expectations of duty, but also of feeling. The salutation expresses, in a formulaic and brief way, something of the complex relationship of mutual dependence and obligation between father and son, which, far from being devoid of emotional significance, was in fact *based* on an expectation of familial feeling. To discover more specific, rather than general, evidence for affective ties, I must now look beyond the salutations to the bodies of the letters. As I noted earlier in the Introduction, medieval letters were intended more to inform than entertain, to deliver news rather than love. Sons' letters to their fathers are often the epitome of this, delivering information in formal language. However, evidence for affective ties can be teased out even from business letters. I will begin by considering evidence of paternal and filial affection, before considering how father-son relationships are complicated, but also defined by, duty and mutual responsibility – and how the breakdown of familial duty creates strain in those relationships.

When looking for evidence in the gentry and mercantile correspondence, certain caveats must be kept in mind. Firstly, more letters *to* than *from* fathers survive, because it is usually the father's correspondence collection that is kept. Secondly that these are first and foremost business letters. This is not necessarily a drawback; as will be seen, the mixture of business and personal matters gives a particular flavour to father-son relations, but it does mean that it can be difficult to tell what recipients or writers of letters were doing outside of these affairs.

This is why the Cely collection is particularly valuable, and an analysis of their letters will make up a large part of this section. The nature of the Cely business necessitated a high volume of letter traffic, and fortunately George kept a great many of the letters that were sent to him. Furthermore, much of the correspondence is by his brother Richard and his father, and so evidence of family dynamics accrues through the collection. Richard junior and George clearly had an affectionate relationship, and so their letters, whilst primarily concerned with business, relate a great deal of personal information. Richard senior, meanwhile, wrote to George frequently. His letters are usually hurried and strictly related to the wool trade, and

do not take the time to remark on personal news, though he will on occasion note if his sons have done their work well, such as in this example: ‘the poyse, argent *and* dayys I undersand wyll, for the weche I am wyll plesyd.’³¹ Nonetheless, enough information can be gleaned from the letters to gain a good idea of family dynamics.

The Cely letters are particularly valuable for the insights they give into everyday domestic life; at times Richard junior and George give details of how they have been spending their time, and this includes that spent with their father. For instance, Richard junior wrote to George that he and his father had discussed George’s marital prospects, and also touched on the matter of the death of George’s bastard infant:

I towlde hym aull as hyt whos, and he whos ryught sory for the dethe of the sch[y]lde, and I toulde hym of the good whyll that the Whegystons and Dawltons hows to yow, and how I lykyd the zenge gentyllwhoman, and he commaunded me to whryte to yow and he whowlde gladly that hyt whor brohut abohut and that ze labyrde hyt betymys³²

Richard Cely senior seemed strongly interested in his son’s life, in terms of both its licit and illicit elements. We get an impression from this letter of men in full and frank confidence with each other, both through the medium of words and in person. We are even given a visual image of father and son talking about George. As Richard junior reported, he and his father ‘comende togydyr in the new orchard on Fryday laste’, where Richard senior ‘askyd me many qwestyonys of gyu’.³³ They may perhaps have simply gone to inspect a new property, but it could also be that taking a walk was a conventional way for people – or perhaps men in particular – to share confidences. At the very least, a walk outdoors would probably guarantee more privacy than a busy mercantile household.³⁴ There is a parallel in a letter from the Stonor collection, where Thomas Mull wrote to his master Thomas Stonor regarding Stonor’s son William:

³¹ Hanham describes Richard’s writing as ‘careless and inelegant’ (introduction to *CL*, xiii), which seems a little unfair; but certainly his letters have the air of being speedily written and promptly dispatched. Richard Cely’s letter: *CL*, no. 31, 28.

³² *CL*, no. 117, 107.

³³ *CL*, no. 117, 107.

³⁴ Jeremy Goldberg notes that conversations within the home could easily be overheard by servants and other household members. P.J.P. Goldberg, *Communal Discord, Child Abduction, and Rape in the Later Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 106.

callyth hym forth with you when he is at home with you, and let him walke with you, and gevyth wordes of good comforte, and beth goode ffader unto hym, as I certainly knowe ye be³⁵

Here, as in Richard Cely junior's letter, the father-son walk is an opportunity for male bonding. William was at this point embroiled in difficult marriage negotiations, and he and seems to have had his feelings hurt. Mull's suggestion was that father and son have a man-to-man chat, much as Richard Cely senior and junior seem to have done. Thomas Stonor was expected to comfort his son and be a 'goode ffader', which in this context seems to mean that he should be sympathetic. Mull's letter can also be read as a tacit criticism of Thomas' behaviour toward William, as otherwise he would not need reminding of how to behave. This leaves the impression that fathers were meant to take an active interest in their sons' lives outside of the role they played within family socio-economic matters, and that direct demonstrations of affection were not just possible, but desirable and expected.

The strength of paternal affection can become particularly clear in a crisis. In the winter of 1479 George Cely was struck down by a serious illness, and Richard senior's concern for his son is evident. Richard senior seems to have been the kind of man who fretted, and the mercantile trade had inherent dangers. For instance, he wrote to Richard junior anxiously telling him not to cross the Channel if the weather is bad, and relayed the same information to George a week later. But his love and concern for George are never more palpable than in letters both from himself and by other family members in November and December 1479.³⁶

Late 1479 saw deaths from illness in the Stonor and Paston families; of course, we do not know if these people all died of the same disease, but research suggests that this year featured a particularly high number of deaths from infectious disease.³⁷ An epidemic was afoot, which naturally enough spread from England to the mercantile colonies of Calais, Bruges and Antwerp. Richard senior's location in London must

³⁵ *SL*, no. 124, 215-6.

³⁶ *CL*, no. 37, 33; no. 38, 34; no. 67, 60; no. 70, 62.

³⁷ An epidemic of presumed plague began in England in the summer of 1479 and spread to London in 1479. Hanham, *The Celys and Their World*, 58.

have meant he was well aware of the spread of the disease, and so when news of George's illness first reached the family it is understandable that he was deeply concerned:

I understande be John Rose 3e were sore seke at Bregys, werefore youre moder *and* bothe youre breon *and* Wyll Maryon *and* I were sory and hevvy for you.³⁸

Will Maryon, writing to George a couple of days later, corroborated this, saying:

My master yowre fader and my maysterys yowre modere hat ben ryght heuy for yow. After tym that they hard that ye war seke ther covde nothy[n]g make them mery, nat tyell yt warre Alhalowhyn Heuen that my master hat wrytyng from yow..³⁹

Less than a week after sending his first letter, Richard senior sent an anxious second missive:

Be as mery as ye can and spare for no coste of syche tyngke as may be good for you in good mete [and] dryke; and youre fessychons, doe be there consell and plese them at my coste... I wyll not that ye labor to the marte: kepe youreselve wyll in onny wyse. I haue lever my money be note resayuyd tyll anoder tyme radar nor ye schall labor yourseleve and not holle⁴⁰

Richard senior, who was normally very concerned and somewhat overbearing when it comes to business, tossed aside questions of profit when it came to the health of his son.⁴¹ The same day, Richard junior also wrote to his brother, and informed him that 'owry father and mother ... goys a pillgrymage dayly for you', and reinforced Richard senior's request: 'Owr father and mother desyer yow not to labor nowher tyll 3e be hoy[l]'.⁴² George wrote them a reply the next day, but his messenger died en route, probably of the same sickness, and so his letter was much delayed. In the meantime the family was very anxious: 'whe marwell grehytly that whe haue no wrytng from yow'.⁴³ Not until 11 December could Richard Cely senior finally write to George: 'I haue resayuyd a letter from you wryt ... the xxj day of Novembor ...

³⁸ *CL*, no. 67, 60.

³⁹ *CL*, no. 70, 62.

⁴⁰ *CL*, no. 73, 64-5.

⁴¹ For example, his fretting over Richard junior's abilities: 'I pray you doe as wyll as ye can in makynge hover of money, for I fere me Rychard Cely wyll scharege me wyt fell in Ctottyswolde and he lyke the passell wyll'. *CL*, no. 87, 77.

⁴² *CL*, no. 74, 66.

⁴³ *CL*, no. 78, 69.

the weche was to youre moder and me *and* bothe youre brethon *and* Wyll Maryon a gret comford.⁴⁴ Both Richard senior and junior were careful to express not only their own affection, but also to stress that the whole family is thinking of George; it was all they could do with George on the other side of the Channel, but it was hopefully a comfort to him, and is perhaps some of the strongest evidence of affective ties in the corpus of medieval correspondence.

This concern is not one-sided, either. When Richard senior was sick in 1480, Richard junior anxiously wrote to George that ‘howr father has ben dysesynd sor. I tryste hyt be byt an axys [fit of ague], byt I wolde fayre that ye who her tyll he be better mendyt.’ A week later his relief was evident when he wrote: ‘howr father ys aull hool and ryught merry, thankyd be God’.⁴⁵ He even cut the length of his salutation in half and put this information in the first sentence, overriding etiquette in his eagerness to provide news. Richard was usually careful to tell his brother about the health of their household, which usually meant their parents and his godfather who interestingly seems to spend much time living with the Celys, as evidently their wellbeing was of import to both Richard as sender and George as recipient of the letters.

Richard Cely’s health, perhaps not fully recovered from his illness the previous year, failed in the January of 1481. I presume that the illness came on quite quickly, because letters from John and William Dalton, both of whom had regular contact with the family, made no reference to his health in the conventional good wishes of their letters of December and early January.⁴⁶ Then in late January John Dalton, George’s close friend, wrote consolingly:

I understond of your grett hevenes of your faider, on whose sole God have mercy ... in the reverens of God take it pacyenly and hurte nott yoursell I pray yow that I may be recomaunddyd vnto your broder Rychard Cely, and ych of yow cheere oder in þe reuerens of ovr Layde, who preserue yow.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ *CL*, no. 80, 70.

⁴⁵ *CL*, no. 95, 85, no. 96, 85.

⁴⁶ *CL*, nos. 138-9, 126-7.

⁴⁷ *CL*, no. 141, 128-9.

This demonstrates that both George and Richard were grieving for their father, and reinforces the already strong sense in the letters that the two brothers are a support for one another. Moreover, it suggests that George's grief was severe, because his friend feared it could harm him. Perhaps he means that it might make George ill again; George's long sickness in 1479 may have made him susceptible to future illness, and he was very unwell again in May 1482 and September 1483.⁴⁸

At the time of Richard senior's death, George was perhaps twenty-three; but it was not just young, unmarried men who grieved when they lost their fathers. Thomas Stonor was a mature man with an adult son when he wrote the following letter to his wife in 1468:

Like yow to wyt that my ffadyr is gone to God ... and my modyr on Saterdag by the morne, & my ffadyr on Munday And goode swete Lemman, be ye myry and of goode comfort for to cumfort me when I cum.⁴⁹

The only real difference here is that rather than turning to a friend, as suited an unmarried man like George Cely, Thomas Stonor wanted to be comforted by his wife. The sense of sentiment is the same. It is worth noting here that Thomas' 'ffadyr' was actually his stepfather. Whilst it would have been conventional for Thomas to refer to a stepfather as 'father', Thomas Stonor senior had died when his son was only six or seven, and so Richard Drayton may well have been the man Thomas viewed as his father.⁵⁰

For gentry men like the Stonors, disease was not the only likely cause of death. Death by violence was no small risk to men of this class at this time. William Plumpton lost two sons to the battlefield, and the siege of the Paston estate of Caister Castle by the Duke of Norfolk could have easily resulted in family death, and did end with the death of two trusted retainers.⁵¹ In August 1461 John Paston I had a narrow escape from death, as a letter from the nineteen year old John Paston II makes clear:

⁴⁸ Hanham, *Celys and their World*, 61.

⁴⁹ *SL*, no. 91, 185.

⁵⁰ I will be discussing stepfathers further in Chapter 4.

⁵¹ Introduction to the *PL*, 1:250-4.

It is talked here how ... on of Howards men schuld a' strekyn yow twyess with a dagere, and soo ye schuld a ben hurt but for a good dobelet that ye had on at that tyme. Blyssyd be God that ye hade it on.⁵²

John Paston II may not have always had an easy relationship with his father, but the knowledge that only the good chance of thick fabric stood between his father's life and death seems to have been sobering.

From these examples, it is clear that fathers and sons could, and did, love each other; but the father-son relationship, as the salutations of their letters make clear, mingles affection with a particular sense of duty. The following letter, interesting in itself because it is from George Cely whose side of the correspondence is largely lost, offers some insight into the complex range of ties within the father-son relationship:

Brothyr, our ffathyr ys now at Calles, and ys whorshyppfull, and so takyn, and ffor our honesteys latt us se that all thyng anbowt hym be honest and clenly [more likely in this context to mean 'appropriately dignified' than 'morally pure']. He ys nott now at Allay [Aveley, Kent], and the more whorshyppffull as he ys at Calles, the better belowyd shall whe be, and the mor sett by thys actys the world. Brothyr, Y vndyrstone he hathe no mo to whaytt vppon hym but yow. Do yowr dewte, and at my comyng to Calles I shall do myne.⁵³

Hanham describes this as showing a 'mixture of kindliness and calculation'.⁵⁴ I would rather say that it is a perfect example of the blending of duty and affection that characterises father-son relations. The letter put the family in unusual geographical positions. George was at Antwerp, and both Richards were in Calais. The sense of the letter is a little hard to follow, but George seemed to be saying that his father's situation must be appropriately dignified. Could George's comment that their father is not now at Aveley, the family's country home, be implying that he needed to behave differently in the society of Calais? Was George perhaps anxious that their father should appear in a good light in the town that was for most of the year George's home? Whether or not George was potentially embarrassed by his father, he believed that the better their father's reputation was at Calais, they would

⁵² *PL*, no. 477, 3:303.

⁵³ *CL*, no. 4, 5.

⁵⁴ Introduction to the *CL*, xiii.

be better loved, although it is unclear whether they mean by their father or the 'world'. George said Richard senior had no one but Richard junior to attend to him, which seems a little unlikely, but in any case he felt that both of them have a duty to wait on their father in some way.

Richard and George were concerned for their father; they had a 'dewte' to maintain his reputation, not just for his sake, but for their own. Moreover, the very act of upholding added to their worship. To be a diligent son reflected well on the family, and on the individual. Assisting their father benefited Richard senior twofold: in the first place because of the assistance itself, and in the second because having dutiful sons showed his position as *paterfamilias*. It also benefited his sons as individuals, as it added to their personal honour. As my analysis of the salutations indicated, the father-son relationship is coded in terms of responsibility and obligation on both sides, for their mutual benefit.⁵⁵

The 'dewte' that Richard and George owed their father was complex and varied. What fathers expected from their sons can often be found in letters where they reprimand sons for *not* fulfilling their duties. Richard Cely senior expected his sons to keep him fully apprised of their business dealings, and wrote a reproaching letter to George in August 1478 when George failed to communicate with him:

I marvele meche wat ys the cavse that ye send me no lett[er] from Caleys, neder thy broder nor thyselfe, for the weche I thyng ryght strange, insomeche as I am so schargyd for thys good late schepyt it were grete comford for me to here howe ye doe, and in wat case my good ys in at Caleys There ys non askvse but ye may wryt at all tymys as hoder men doe to there maysters *and* frendys.⁵⁶

Richard senior's language here is very interesting. He 'marvele[s]' that he has not heard from George, saying it is very 'strange' to have no word, adding the emotionally charged note that it would be 'grete comford' to have a letter from him.

⁵⁵ Although Ilana Ben-Amos's work concerns the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, she offers a useful discussion of reciprocal support: Ilana Krausman Ben-Amos, 'Gifts and Favors: Informal Support in Early Modern England', in *The Journal of Modern History*, 72 (2000): 295-338, especially 304-5.

⁵⁶ CL, no. 30, 27.

He couched his terms in the context of 'hoder men', implying that his concern was altogether reasonable. His use of the word 'maysters', meanwhile, evokes the language of service and reminded George that not only did he have an obligation as a son to a father, he also had an obligation as a servant to his master. Given that most sons would be employed in their father's service, familial, social and economic duties must have easily blurred together.

In practical terms, fathers relied on their sons to provide them with up to date economic and political news, but there is also the sense that regular communication was a sign of respect from a son to the father. John Paston I was also displeased when he did not hear regularly from his sons. Unfortunately little correspondence from John I survives, but John III's eagerness to apologise to him in a letter of 1463 may suggest he had received criticism from his father before on such matters: 'beseyching yow to have me excusyd that ye had no wrytyng fro me ... I kowd get no messenger tyll now'.⁵⁷ Normally John III seemed to be on better terms with his father than John II was, but his haste to explain himself indicates that he knew John I was likely to be angered by a lack of communication. An extended period of tension between John Paston I and his eldest son seems to have begun when John II did not do him the courtesy of telling either his father or mother where he was going. In November 1463 John II's mother wrote to him that:

I conseyyve thar ye thynke ye ded not well that ye departy hens without my knowlage. Wherfor I late yow wett I was ryght evyll payed with yow. Your fader thowght, and thynkyth yet, that I was asentyd to you departyng, and that hathe causyd me to have gret heviness. I hope he woll be your god fader hereafter, yf ye demene [govern] you welle, and do as ye owe to do to hym; and I charge you upon my blyssyng that in any thung towchyng your fader that schuld be hys worchep, profyte, or avayle, that ye do your devoyr and dylygent labor to the fortherans therin, as ye wulle have my good wille, and that shall cause your fader to be better fader to you.⁵⁸

John II's behaviour had not only angered his father, but it had also caused domestic discord more generally. Clearly Margaret did not have the authority to allow her son

⁵⁷ *PL*, no. 560, 4:95.

⁵⁸ *PL*, no. 552, 4:84-5. 'Demene' probably from 'dēmeinen: 4. (a) To keep (sth.) within bounds, govern (one's manners), control (one's strength, power, thoughts, expenditures), moderate, restrain; mitigate (penance).' *Middle English Dictionary*.

to leave without his father's consent, which reinforces the sense of the strict hierarchy within the gentry household. Margaret's letter also gives an insight into what was expected of a good son. John's demeanour must be appropriate, and he must also carry out the duty he owes his father. He must work diligently to further his father's worship and also his profit, which in Margaret's phrasing of 'profyte, or avayle' probably means working for both John I's general prosperity and his specifically financial advantage.

How well John II responded to the letter from his mother we do not know; but evidently relations between him and his father did not improve. For John Paston I, the incident in November 1463 seemed to be a symptom of a wider problem with John II's behaviour. In 1465 he complained that John II was apparently 'presumptuouse and ondiscrete' and a bad example to the servants. The real problem, however, was that he was lazy:

that greveth nat me so evill as doth that I nevir coud fele nor undirstand hym poletyk ne diligent in helpyng hym self, but as a drane amongis bees which labour for gaderyng hony ... and the drane doth nought but takyth his part of it.⁵⁹

John II, according to his father, took the fruit of the household's labour, but did not contribute to it. He was now Sir John Paston, and 'in the kynges hows he coud put hym self foorth', but he 'hath leved in idelnes' instead. It is difficult to know if John I's criticisms were fair. Certainly, John Paston II had a reputation within his family for dilettantism and being lackadaisical in his duties, his mother for instance blaming him for the loss of Caister Castle in 1469. On the other hand, she defended him to her husband, her frustration with John I's stubbornness evident in her letter of April 1465, when four months after his original letter the elder Paston had still not relented: 'For Gods sake, sir, a pety on hym ... he hathe obeyed hym to yow'⁶⁰ What is clear is that John I was frustrated because his son was wasting opportunities to advance himself, which not only disadvantaged him but also disadvantaged his family. His decision was to tell John II he could not return to the family home until

⁵⁹ *PL*, no. 575, 4:122.

⁶⁰ *PL*, no. 578, 4:131.

he made better use of his time. John Paston senior is often read as a stern disciplinarian, but what comes across here is a father exasperated because his son is not playing his expected part within the family, and his refusal to have John II in his house seems to be less to punish him and more to force him into action.

John Paston I and Richard Cely senior moved in quite different spheres. The socially conscious Pastons would have probably not liked to be associated with merchants or their equivalents – John III made the acid comment about the bailiff Richard Calle and Margery Paston's marriage that such a match would reduce his sister to selling 'kandyll and mustard' – but both fathers seem to have had some similar notions regarding appropriate behaviour from sons.⁶¹ Whilst the wool packing and selling that the Cely boys undertook might be more tangible than John Paston II's service at court, there is from both fathers the very strong sense that this work is done for the family's benefit and that the father is meant to oversee and direct it. It is clear that fathers are supposed to be treated with appropriate dignity, be deferred to and consulted, and that their sons are meant to serve them and their family. Failures in this regard could incur a father's wrath, as well as his punishment. However, although sons had a weight of obligation on them, this relationship was reciprocal, and fathers had duties to sons just as sons did to fathers. The invocation of 'gode faderhode' is not an empty act; sons could actually rightfully expect a great deal from their fathers.

Fathers had a range of responsibilities toward their adult sons. If they expected their sons to help the family profit, they in turn were expected to help their sons establish their careers. Sometimes this could be in very practical ways, usually related to money. The Paston sons seem in particular need of cash. John Paston II wrote on one occasion that he had:

grete expens ... dayly travelying with the Kyng ... remembr that I may have
suche thynges as I may do my mayster servys ... trusting in God it schall be
to your wyrshyp and to myn In especiall I besyche you, that I may be sur

⁶¹ *PL.*, no. 710, 5:21.

where to have mony somewhat be fore Estern, other of you, or by myn uncle Clement, when nede ys.⁶²

John II's attempts to advance himself at court proved to be a costly business, but although his requests were couched in polite terms, there was an expectation that they would be met. This is presumably because the advancement – or to put it another way, the 'worcheþ, profyte, or avayle' – John was seeking was not just beneficial for him, but for the family as a whole. His younger brother John also had occasion to write requesting funds, as he needed to remain with his lord, the Duke of Norfolk, who had not had a profitable time recently:

the felawchep have not so myche mony as we wend to have had be ryth myche; for my Lord hath had gret costs syn he came hedyr. Wherefore I besech yow, that I may have this mony at Estern, for I have borowyd mony
....⁶³

Whilst lords could be expected to provide for their retainers, living up to a courtly lifestyle was still expensive.⁶⁴

Less tangible but even more important was the ability of a father to extend his influence, making use of his connections to aid his son. William Stonor requested this in 1474 when he joined the commission of the peace:

I beseche your good fadyrhod that yt wyll plese yov to speke with the Abbot of Dorchester that I may have suche fe as Marmyun [his predecessor] had with hym ... And I beseche your fadyrhod to wryte for me to the pryor of Wychyswyde for such fe as he had there ... he wyll do the pleasyre of your fadyrhod what he can do: for he seyth he knovyth your fadyrhod, but he knovyth not me.⁶⁵

William Stonor was an unknown quantity to the abbot and prior, but Thomas Stonor could influence them. William Stonor's method of obtaining help from his father seems to be reinforcing the difference in position between himself and his father; his humility, real or assumed, underlines the need he had of his father, and emphasises

⁶² *PL*, no. 511, 4:34.

⁶³ *PL*, no. 560, 4:97. Only a few years later the Duke of Norfolk laid siege to Caister Castle, as I mentioned above, and so it may seem surprising that John Paston III was in his service before; but relations with a number of important people were soured by the controversy over the Fastolf estate.

⁶⁴ Horrox, 'Service', 63-4.

⁶⁵ *SL*, no. 136, 228-9.

the father's need to help his son. Such assistance would profit both son and father by contributing to the family's advancement much in the same way as a lord helping his retainer achieve lands or office benefited both the rewarded servant and the lord whose influence had been extended.⁶⁶

What family advancement meant exactly would, of course, vary by family, and also *within* families. Richard Cely senior, for instance, was always very anxious about the profitability of his business and as we have seen would chastise his sons if they were not keeping him fully informed, or if they are not working to his standards. However, he made no complaint about Richard junior's frequent absences from home in the service of the family's patron, Sir John Weston. Richard junior seems to have been a particular favourite of Weston's, as a letter by William Maryon makes clear:

my Lord hemselffe cam to my masterys plasse in Hesext for to deseyr of yowre fader and of yowre moder that yowre brodere Rechard myt reyd wyt hem into that conterey.⁶⁷

It is interesting that Weston felt he should ask Richard junior's parents for permission to have his company. Even if this were merely a formality rather than necessary, it shows the importance of fatherly authority, even when the father was outranked. Richard senior could not have been blind to the benefits such favouritism from a man like Weston might procure. Whether or not there were direct rewards, keeping company with Weston would give Richard junior – and through him the Cely family – that intangible yet priceless quality, worship. Evidently this seemed worth the sacrifice of Richard junior's time working for his father.

Assessing what best served the family as well as the son himself could be complicated. Marital negotiations at this level of society, for instance, involved weighing up the relative values of dowries and jointures and trying to ensure the best financial settlement – while also ensuring that candidates for wives of sons were socially acceptable. Fathers played an important role in running negotiations. From

⁶⁶ Horrox, 'Service', 64.

⁶⁷ *CL*, no. 58, 54.

the evidence of marriage contracts, it would seem that fathers were often responsible for having the contracts drawn up. In 1466, for instance, Thomas Stonor and Thomas Rokes drew up a rough draft of a marriage contract between Stonor's daughter and Rokes' son.⁶⁸ These, however, do not give a great sense of what was actually happening in a day-to-day context. The case of William Stonor and Margery Blount demonstrates that whilst sons may be wooing women, they rely on their fathers for advice and permission – and that a father has the ability to stop negotiations.

In 1472, William started paying suit to a wealthy widow named Margery. It seems he got a family friend and retainer, Thomas Mull, to break news of the potential match to his father. Mull carefully outlined the lady's qualities in a way that seemed designed to make her appealing to her potential father-in-law:

for the certente what my cosen shall have with her, yf God provide for them that they shall go throwe in mariage, ... she hath in possession C. marks of lande, and after the deth of her ffader shee shall have over that the half of al the residue of al the lande of her ffader And for certeine shee is well named, and of worshipfull disposicion.

Mull was also very particular about ensuring that Thomas Stonor's sense of authority was satisfied:

I know verely my Cosen woll in no wise in this cas doo *but as your good ffaderhode woll* he do. Wherfor in the name of God beth in this cas and in al other good ffader to my Cosen in counceylng, helping, and preferring *after your hertes plesyr*⁶⁹ (My emphasis.)

Shortly afterwards, William sent his father a letter, including the remark that 'I truste weryly to alle myty Jhesu and to youre good fadyhod that I shalle spede well of my mater, for I have comfortabul demenure of my mastresse'.⁷⁰ The juxtaposition of divine and fatherly authority is very telling; it gives the impression that Thomas' word is law, his will something that can be appealed to but certainly not challenged. That this was not simply rhetoric intended to flatter Thomas is shown by another letter from Thomas Mull to William:

⁶⁸ *SL*, no. 87, 181.

⁶⁹ *SL*, no. 121, 212.

⁷⁰ *SL*, no. 122, 213.

I conceyve the [her] wordes wer þees: ‘Syr, I may have CCC. marcs in joyntur, and I to take þe lesse when I may have þe more, my ffrendes wold þenke me not wyse &c.: and howe be yt, your ffader wol not geve me. yet lette hym do well to you.’ ... I wot well ye remembre what your ffader by his last letter assureþe you in joyntur: and syr, þat ys feyr⁷¹

Fathers were expected to settle the jointures for their sons’ wives, and this could be an area of stiff negotiation; the typical amount according to Barbara Harris’ research was around ten per cent of the dowry, although women who were particularly desirable due to their wealth or status could demand a higher proportion.⁷² Margery Blount’s demand for three hundred marks does seem surprisingly high for a gentry, rather than greater aristocratic, marriage, and so perhaps Thomas Stonor was right to turn down such terms. In any case, the discussions clearly broke down, and William was left feeling dispirited, as the letter from Mull I quoted earlier in the chapter demonstrates:

for God is sake callyth hym forth with you when he is at home with you, and let him walke with you, and gevyth wordes of good comforte, and beth goode ffader unto hym, as I certenly knowe ye be For, syr, he is disposid to be a musyr and studyer⁷³

Thomas Mull suggested to Thomas Stonor that William’s naturally introspective nature had made him take this loss hard. Whether Thomas Stonor did comfort William or not, it did not make him relax his stance on the jointure. William’s current feelings may have been of less import to his father than the long term value of the match; marriage negotiations required fine financial calculations, and in trying to balance the lady’s cash value against the cost of her jointure, the result in Thomas’ eyes must have been debit rather than credit. William seems to have accepted his father’s decision, even if he did not like it, for no more was said of Margery Blount.

Of course, fathers did not necessarily care about their sons’ marriages solely on the basis of their cash or social value. Thomas Stonor’s turning down of steep terms for a jointure might well have been seen as the behaviour of a prudent father. Richard

⁷¹ *SL*, no. 123, 214-5.

⁷² Harris, *English Aristocratic Women*, 49-51.

⁷³ *SL*, no. 124, 216.

Cely senior, meanwhile, was very interested in a potential match between George and John Dalton's sister for its own sake. John Dalton was a very close friend of George, and the Daltons seemed to have made good colleagues in the wool trade as well as good friends to the Celys. Richard junior wrote to George that after telling Richard senior about it, the latter 'commaunded me to whryte to yow and he whowlde gladly that hyt whor brohut abohut and that 3e labyrde hyt betymys'⁷⁴ Evidently Richard senior was impressed enough by the idea to write to George on the same day, saying 'Rychard ... hade grete schere for youre sake, for the weche mater in aspeschall I wyll be wyll plesyd to here more of'.⁷⁵ Richard senior's interest in the match seems enthusiastic but not overbearing. He gave his approval, but left it to George to ensure that the match came about. The marriage did not actually result, but this was not necessarily surprising in what could be a competitive marriage market; George and Richard junior spent a lot of time talking about potential partners, but did not actually marry until after their father's death, seemingly not through want of effort.⁷⁶

Not all sons were probably as diligent as George and Richard Cely and William Stonor in keeping their father involved about their marriage prospects. Robert Cely is a prime example. In Chapter 1 I discussed his entanglement with Joan Hart:

The frendes of here hath spoke wyt me for the mater, but all they wyll not grant a grote for [to] 3eve them, werefor I haue sayd to them I wyll not 3eve them a peny of my good But prevely kepe thys maters preve and lette me understand ys entent, and after that I schall wre[te] more to you.⁷⁷

Robert's father and brothers had to rescue him from an inadvisable match, including paying off the woman and covering Robert's bills in Calais so he could be brought home.⁷⁸ It would be interesting to know how Robert was punished, if at all, for this 'lvde mater'; Richard senior, we have seen, was not slow to chastise his other sons when they failed to live up to his expectations in smaller matters than this, but sadly

⁷⁴ *CL*, no. 117, 107

⁷⁵ *CL*, no. 116, 106

⁷⁶ *CL*, no. 117, 106-7, no. 165, 151, no. 215, 211.

⁷⁷ Richard senior to Richard junior, *CL*, no. 85, 75.

⁷⁸ *CL*, no. 86, 76.

there are no letters that deal with the aftermath of the Joan Hart affair. Perhaps at this point Richard senior had given up on his eldest son; Robert appears to have had little sense of self-preservation, given his propensity to fall into debt and, on one occasion, affray.⁷⁹ Only a couple of months after the scandal with Joan Hart, Richard junior wrote sourly to George that ‘hour father wndyrstondys of owr brothe Robardys chyl dysche dellyng.’⁸⁰ What those childish dealings were is not said; but a few weeks later Robert wrote to George asking that he ‘wyll do so moche for me to see that Wylliam Borwell, mercer, of London, be contentte of ys byll of xiiij li. xv s.’⁸¹ All this may indicate that there were limits to what paternal authority could achieve; nothing seems to be able to make Robert reform. After this he is scarcely mentioned in the letters, and he died in 1485. Family affection may have remained despite Robert’s difficulties, if the monument to a Richard and Robert Cely in the parish church of St Olave, Hart Street, London was indeed erected in memory of Richard senior and his erstwhile son.⁸²

Richard Cely senior and John Paston senior seem to have responded quite differently to the difficulties of having a son who flouted their authority and did not behave as they would like. Both men seem to have been very frustrated by it. John’s response was to firmly rebuke his son and refuse to have him in the family home until he reformed, whilst Richard took his son in after his scandal in order to keep him under family control. This demonstrates something of the variation in the father-son relationship, and may be as much due to differences in personality as to any particular cultural norm. What both the Richard/Robert and John I/John II interactions demonstrate is that affective ties between fathers and sons are rich and complex relationships where duty, affection, family loyalty and personal pride and ambition interplay.

⁷⁹ *CL*, no. 25, 32.

⁸⁰ *CL*, no. 96, 85.

⁸¹ *CL*, no. 102, 89.

⁸² *The Celys and Their World*, 7.

‘With dintes that thai smiten there’: the absent father and the trauma of reconciliation

Letters, by their very nature, show fatherhood happening at a remove; even though the letters report on real events, they are written because one party or the other is absent. John Paston senior was very often in London, and his sons frequently travelled in the service of patrons. George Cely spent most of his time in Calais whilst Richard junior spent more time at home with their father, meaning there are more letters from Richard senior to George than to Richard junior. The reason the correspondence generally becomes much thinner after 1482 is because George became permanently based in London too.⁸³ William Stonor regularly went on business to London. These sons spent a great deal of time at a physical distance from their fathers. This reality is reflected, and exaggerated, in romance, where fathers and sons almost never occupy the same space, and indeed fathers of sons are often completely absent from the narrative. Partly this is for narrative purposes – fathers are rarely part of the knight errant story motif – but this absence also brings to light certain tensions within the father-son relationship that may not be able to be expressed in the formal medium of letters, which of course have their own narrative expectations.

Romances with an absent father demonstrate firstly how young men need fathers to help them form (a particularly masculine) self-identity and secondly how as sons enter adulthood the relationship with the father becomes strained. Precisely when young men need fathers, the relationship becomes most difficult. This is the paradox of the father-son dynamic.

The narrative of *King Horn* begins with the promise that ‘A sang ich schal you singe / Of Murry the Kinge.’ (3-4)⁸⁴ However, Murry dies by line 62, and the romance instead concerns his son Horn. As Lee Ramsey has discussed, this *is* a song about

⁸³ *The Celys and Their World*, 273-7.

⁸⁴ *King Horn*, in Ronald B. Herzman, Graham Drake, and Eve Salisbury, eds., *Four Romances of England* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1999).

the father, firstly because Horn is so very clearly a copy of his successful father-king, and secondly because it is Murry's death that precipitates the action of the narrative.⁸⁵ So far this is conventional; but to press the meaning of these lines a little further, this is a song of the father in which there *is no father*. The storyline – the very fate of the hero – is shaped by a character's *absence*. This is even more explicitly seen in *Lybeaus Desconus* and *Sir Degaré*, which are both 'Fair Unknown' romances.⁸⁶ In *Sir Degaré*, a princess is raped in the wood by a fairy knight, who leaves her with a gift of a pair of gloves and a broken sword. She abandons the son she bears, along with the gifts, which he uses to find first his mother and then his father, the former by placing the gloves on her hands, the latter by fitting his sword to the broken off segment that his father carries. *Lybeaus Desconus*, meanwhile, features Gingalain, bastard son of Gawain, so ignorant of life that he does not even know his own name. He goes to Arthur's court, where the king gives him the name Lybeaus Desconus, or 'Fair Unknown', and knights him. Lybeaus' many subsequent adventures culminate with his encountering of a terrible worm that transforms into a beautiful woman on kissing him, simply because he is of Gawain's blood.

Both narratives begin with a boy, almost but not yet a man, who is somehow on the margins of ordinary society. The effort of each narrative is to restore him to his rightful place within that society. Many romances feature a coming-of-age motif, as knights, through adventure, make themselves into suitable lords and kings, but what is particularly striking in these narratives is how little these heroes know about themselves, and how driven they are to find self-knowledge. Moreover, it is the desire for the father that propels the hero out of the sheltered environment of his childhood and makes him cross into the unknown – both the physical wilderness of romance, and the uncertain psychological space between adolescence and manhood.

⁸⁵ Ramsey, *Chivalric Romances*, 29.

⁸⁶ On the 'fair unknown' motif, see Cooper, *The English Romance in Time*, 331-2.

Lybeaus and Degaré's narratives begin by placing the heroes in the wilderness beyond ordinary society, the marginality of their location mirroring the liminal space between childhood and adulthood. Degaré is as a baby abandoned in the forest. Although he spends the first ten years of his life living in a town with a merchant's family (260-75), he returns to the woods to spend the next decade living with the hermit who found him (284-8). Lybeaus lives an even more isolated and wild life. Got on his mother by Gawain 'vnder a forest syde' (9), he has dwelled there ever since, his mother ensuring 'that he shulde se no knyght' (17). As the two approach manhood, the world beyond the woods gives them an unexpected jolt of awareness, the society to which they belong by birth penetrating the wilderness. Degaré has the more conventional experience of revelation; the hermit judges that he is old enough to take responsibility for himself (294), and so presents the young man with his mother's letter and the gloves which he is told should be tried on by any woman he wishes to marry (301, 311-6). Lybeaus' experience is more peculiar; while out hunting, he comes across a dead knight (34-6), and at once is seized by a profound curiosity. After being presented with the possibility of knightly life, both Lybeaus and Degaré act with great decision. Lybeaus strips off the knight's armour and dons it himself, and makes his way to Arthur's court at Glastonbury (37-42). Degaré, meanwhile, is so keen to find his family that he ignores the hermit's suggestion to wait until he has armour:

'...To seche thi ken mightou nowt dure
 Withouten hors and god armure.'
 'Nai,' quod he, 'bi Hevene Kyng,
 Ich wil have first another thing!' (321-4)

With this decision made, Degaré rips up a sapling to use in lieu of a sword and sets off. We are left with an interesting image of our heroes. Instead of the usual situation of a knight leaving a castle on horseback, these boys walk out of the woods, one bearing a small tree and a pair of women's gloves, the other clanking through the forest in stolen armour.

I have drawn out this oddness because Lybeaus and Degaré are usual enough heroes in many respects, but the peculiarity of their births leaves them outside ordinary

society, and is a marker of the difficulties faced by lacking conventional paternity. Throughout the narratives, this oddness persists; the heroes are constantly reminded of their own strangeness. Even their names are a marker of their unknown status. As Jane Bliss rightly notes, neither Lybeaus nor Degaré are 'nameless'; within the texts their names are not pseudonyms but proper titles.⁸⁷ Lybeaus' name begins his story bearing only a description given to him by his mother: 'Bewfi3'. When the boy confesses to Arthur that he is nameless, the king remarks that this is very strange:

This is a wonder thinge,
 ...
 [Whan] þat [he] wold be made a knyght
 And wote not whate his name h[e]ght
 And hathe so fayre a vice. (68-72)

Arthur gives him the name Lybeaus Desconus, or 'Fair Unknown', but as the romance proceeds, this marker of his namelessness becomes a real name, and unlike in the French analogue text *Le Bel Inconnu*, Lybeaus does not shed his 'Fair Unknown' title in exchange for a 'real' name.⁸⁸ In contrast, Degaré is properly baptised with his name. However, we are told that the hermit choses it because 'Degarre nowt elles ne is / But thing that not never what hit is' (255-6). 'Degaré' and 'Lybeaus Desconus' serve as paradoxes – names that represent namelessness.

Lybeaus does not express a conscious interest in discovering his father in the way Degaré does, but he has a preoccupation with people's names that demonstrates an interest not only in names but also in origins. For instance, he says to the maiden Violet: "'Tell me whate is thi name / And where ye were y-bore.'" (683-4) By asking where she is from as well as her name, Lybeaus is getting a sense of her place. Violet replies by telling him firstly who her father is and establishes that he is of 'riche fame' (686); her name is almost an afterthought (691). Violet clearly identifies herself through her father, and the reader is reminded of what Lybeaus lacks. Unlike many romances, *Lybeaus* names nearly all its characters, and often characters introduce themselves and each other, underlining the significance of the

⁸⁷ Jane Bliss, *Naming and Namelessness in Medieval Romance* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2008), 107-8, 166.

⁸⁸ Bliss, *Naming and Namelessness*, 108.

power that being able to give one's name bestows.⁸⁹ Through his deeds, the hero becomes well known, but this is always juxtaposed with a reminder of his lack of identity by the mention of his name: 'in courte ffast roose / Syr Lybeaus Dysconeus noble loose / And all his gentill fame.' (715-7) Thus, whilst Lybeaus may be 'making a name for himself', he is constantly reminded that, unlike the people he encounters, he does not know his origins. There is a hole at the centre of his identity. Despite their great deeds, Degaré and Lybeaus, with this gap in their lives, cannot attain full manhood.

It may seem strange to assert that these heroes are not sufficiently masculine, given that Degaré and Lybeaus are not lacking in the traditionally male areas of courage or prowess. Both have an innate gift, presumably born of their noble blood, for knightly pursuits. However, they are both held in the position of knight errant because of their lack of a name; they are forced to keep in motion, unable to take on the adult male position of settled householder and lord. Both shy away from marriage, Lybeaus by having a relationship with an evidently unsuitable enchantress whom he abandons only when shamed by Elaine into a reminder of his duties:

With false lies and fayre
Th[u]s she [Dame Amoure] blered his eye
...
[Elaine said] 'Knyght, thou arte false in thi laye
...'
Hym thought his hert gan breke
For sorowe and for shame. (1494-1511)

Degaré meanwhile says he has adventures to seek before he can wed. Degaré's inability to settle is particularly well outlined. In the first part of the romance, Degaré cannot find a wife without recourse to the mysterious gloves, which have forbidden his marriage until he finds their owner. The gloves keep Degaré in motion, preventing him settling in one place:

'...
Yif mine gloven beth to hem mete
For to done upon here honde,

⁸⁹ Bliss, *Naming and Namelessness*, 108-9.

Thanne ich wil take thi londe;
 And yif thai ben nowt so,
 Iich wille take me leve and go.' (SD 398-402)

The gloves are a signifier of Degaré's lack of family knowledge; without understanding his origins, he cannot be ready to take on the position of husband and lord. Even after he has found his mother, Degaré is still not ready to marry. After leaving his grandfather's court, Degaré saves a lady from the depredations of a knight. Whilst he is able to take up the role of her protector easily enough, slaying the knight who threatens her, Degaré seems uncomfortable playing the lover. When he sees the lady on arriving at the castle, he at once 'Hire to love was ibrowt' (830), and after the feast he is taken to her chamber. The lady has created a seductive scene – Degaré is brought spiced wine, and a harpist plays – but these serve only to send the hero to sleep. In the morning, the lady chastises him:

'Thou art worth to suffri schame,
 That al night as a best sleptest,
 And non of mine maidenenes ne keptest.' (853-5)

Although the lady is partly criticising him for failing in his knightly duty to keep watch, she seems also to be mocking him for failing to taking advantage of the potentially romantic situation presented to him. An abashed Degaré apologises, and rectifies his fault by getting rid of her unwanted suitor. The lady very boldly offers herself to him in exchange for this, but Degaré delays marriage and consummation because he needs "more of haventours for to fonde" (981).

It is important that Degaré leaves with a promise to return – "agein ich wil com the to" (983) - because his impotence in this situation is not the product of his unsuitability, but his immaturity. He knows he is not yet ready to be a husband; but he is also aware that it will not be long before he matures. It may also be that he is seeking to distinguish himself from his father, even as he seeks him out.⁹⁰ Degaré has by this point been told by his mother how he was conceived, and Degaré makes up for the irregularity of his birth by ensuring that both he and his father are married

⁹⁰ Amanda Hopkins, 'Female Vulnerability as Catalyst in the Middle English Breton Lays', in *The Matter of Identity*, ed. Hardman, 49.

to their respective partners. Degaré avoids illicit sexuality, because only licit behaviour will restore his identity.

Lybeaus' behaviour is quite different, as he embraces sexual contact rather than avoiding it. As I demonstrated in Chapter 1, illicit sex may be part of the process of male adolescence, but it does not make a youth into a man. Having stayed with Dame Amour for a whole year, Lybeaus has delayed the process of seeking out adult identity, which contrasts with Degaré's relentless desire to find answers – a difference explained perhaps because Lybeaus, unlike Degaré, does not know he is seeking his father, though like Degaré the discovery of fatherly identity proves to be his ultimate destination.

Lybeaus seems, after his initial departure from the woods, to have a less conscious need to know his origins than does Degaré. Lybeaus also never meets his father as his father; one might expect, after the Lady of Synadowne's miraculous transformation and revelation of Lybeaus' kinship to Gawain, that the hero might be reunited with his father, but this never happens. This may be because the reader knows from the beginning that Gawain is Lybeaus' father and so there is less place for a revelatory scene, but it is strange that Gawain and Lybeaus meet in the text yet are never reunited as father and son. Gawain arms Lybeaus near the beginning of the romance, and is referred to by the text as Lybeaus' 'owe syre' (252), which might seem like an ideal occasion to be mirrored later in a reunion scene, but instead Gawain and Lybeaus remain simply fellow members of the court. This does not mean that Lybeaus' father is unimportant; what Lybeaus needs here, however, is more abstract than a father figure.

The key to this puzzle seems to lie in Lybeaus' peculiar encounter with the worm. Throughout the romance, Lybeaus has been called upon to perform great feats of prowess, which he does with apparent ease. The monstrous worm, whilst the most daunting of the challenges Lybeaus has thus far faced, should not prove too much

for a man of his talents. However, when Lybeaus is faced with the worm, he does not even try to fight it; he is literally paralysed with fear.

There he sate in his sete,
As alle had ben in fyre;
So sore he was agaste
Hym thought his herte to-braste
As she neyhid hym nere. (2077-82)

The worm then forces its way through the window into the chamber and kisses him:

Oute at a stone walle
A wyndowe fayre vnfelde;
...
A worme ther ganne oute-pas
With a womanes face:
...
Hir tayle was mekyll vnnethe,
...
The worme with mouth him kyste
And clypped aboute the swyre. (2060-84)

There is something oddly phallic about the way the long-tailed worm penetrates the hall through the opening of a window, and Lybeaus' uncharacteristically passive state places him in a more feminine role. A petrified Lybeaus has his personal space aggressively invaded by the monstrous creature, which then kisses him about the face and neck. Men's necks are rarely mentioned in romance, unless they are wounded, but women's necks are often noted in the context of remarking upon their beauty.⁹¹ The worm's attack reduces Lybeaus to a helpless victim.

This scene seems to be a reflection of Lybeaus' essential impotence when it comes to finding a proper station in society. Having demonstrated this, the worm then shows him the transformative power of having blood and a name. The proof of his heritage is enough to win him a bride and demesnes:

She seyde, '...
...
To a worme they had me went

⁹¹ Amanda Hopkins, "'wordy vnder wede": Clothing, Nakedness and the Erotic in Some Romances of Medieval Britain', in *The Erotic in the Literature of Medieval Britain*, ed. by Amanda Hopkins and Cory Rushton (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2007), 56.

Wo to leven and lende,
 Tyll [J] had kyssed Gaweyne,
 That is doughti knyght, certayne,
 Or some of his kynde.
 Syr, for thou savyst my lyfe,
 Castellys fyfty and fyve
 Take Y will the till,
 And my-sylfe to be thy wyf' (2094-113)

Being a nameless knight working on the basis of his own merit has taken Lybeaus a long way; but it can only take him so far. Knowledge of the father is what allows him to take the next step into full and responsible adulthood.

What is important here, then, is less the father in terms of being an active parent, and more the *existence* of the father. His name, it seems, is more important than his presence. Knowing where he has come from is significant to Lybeaus, because it gives him a heritage that makes him worthy to marry the Lady of Synadowne, and because it explains his extraordinary prowess. Lybeaus does not, however, seem to need to be reunited with his father in order to provide a happy ending; it is enough that he knows where he came from, not that he has a relationship with his father.

Does this mean that fathers were not significant in a family context within romance? It might suggest that the father was more significant theoretically because of his role as bestower of patrimony, rather than because of any nurturing role, although the letter evidence has already shown the significance of affective ties. In a narrative where the father as a person is almost expunged, his value as bestower of legacy is extraordinarily high. However, the lack of a reconciliation scene between Gawain and his son in *Lybeaus* indicates that there is something more complex going on here than a simple need for the son to find his father in order to inherit the patrimony. The Lady of Synadowne tells Lybeaus of his parentage in a scene where no one else is present, and Lybeaus does not receive any public acknowledgment of his relationship to Gawain. What seems vital here is that Lybeaus understand who his father is, because it lets him know who *he* is. The most important part of the hero's identification in *Lybeaus Desconus* is not the discovery of a father-son relationship –

it is the discovery of bloodline. The text elides Gawain with his 'kynde': their blood is what makes them capable of breaking the enchantment. Lineage is more important than family in a domestic context, and knowing his blood lets Lybeaus know himself. What Gawain has given Lybeaus by siring him is more important than his role in his own right in this text.

Lybeaus needs to discover his father in order to move into the next phase of his life, but he does not seem particularly interested in discovering who his father is as an individual. Degaré knows that what he wants is to find his father, but his search is also characterised more by a desire for what the father can impart than who the father is. The sword Degaré is given by his mother is telling in this regard. The gloves left by his mother are a marker within the text of the limitations of an identity that comes solely from the female line. Typically, the gloves have been read as an incest motif, which is not surprising given Degaré's mother's strange request that Degaré should 'ne lovie no womman' (215) except she whose hands the gloves fit, and because in late medieval England gloves were often a courtship gift.⁹² However, I believe the gloves' other function is to serve as an intermediate phase in Degaré's development before he receives his father's sword. After he tries the gloves on his mother and they realise each other's identity, he asks her "'Into what londe I mai terne / To seke mi fader, swithe and yerne?'" (699-700). She tells him what she knows, and then 'the swerd sche fet forht anon right' (707). The sword may be broken, but it is still 'Brod and long and hevi' (709). "'Whoso hit aught, he was a man!'" (712), remarks Degaré admiringly, and he says that "'Night ne dai nel ich slepe'" (714) until he finds its owner. The sword feeds Degaré's restless impulse to seek out his father, because he recognises something attractive in the sword – and something that is incomplete in his own life.⁹³ Whilst it might be simplistic to equate the sword with the penis, it is interesting that Degaré's father gives him a magnificent weapon that is apparently usable, as Degaré fights with it, but is

⁹² Jennifer Fellows, 'Mothers in Middle English Romance', in *Women and literature in Britain, 1150-1500*, ed. by Carol M. Meale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 51; McSheffrey, *Sex, Marriage and Civic Culture*, 65-6.

⁹³ Archibald, *Incest and the Medieval Imagination*, 130.

ultimately incomplete. The sword represents Degaré as he is without his father – impressive, but lacking an element of potency. Degaré’s father holds the broken piece of the sword, and he also holds access to adult masculinity for his son, because by learning of what heritage he is a part and through that finding his fortune, Degaré will be capable of taking up the position of householder and husband. The broken sword is not just a way for the fairy knight to recognise Degaré; it is a physical symbol of what Degaré has achieved, and what he still needs to discover. Having managed to uncover part of the puzzle of his past, he is rewarded with a glimpse of what manhood means for him, and he desires it greatly; but he cannot take possession of it without knowing his father. The fairy knight, meanwhile, moves his son in the direction he wishes his life to take; his instructions may be more oblique than those of a Paston or Stonor or Cely father, but like them he manages to influence his son even when physically removed from him.

John Paston II, chafing under the yoke of his father’s disapproval, perhaps might have preferred a cryptic message in the form of a sword rather than a letter outlining explicitly why he was a disappointment. This might seem a flippant point, but the fantasy element of the fatherless space is worth considering; it is entirely possible that someone like John Paston II, who we know to have owned romances, when embroiled in his own difficulties with his father might have found such Fair Unknown stories to have had a certain appeal. The conclusion of *Sir Degaré*, which features a startling fight between father and son, likewise may have provided a way of exploring aggressive feelings within families in a way that would not have been socially acceptable outside of fiction.

In *Sir Degaré*, the hero’s adventures have made him cross a great deal of space, both literally and psychologically. From being a foundling in the woods, Degaré is propelled by the shocking news of his mysterious birth into adulthood, becoming a knight errant of spectacular skill and courage. He has found his mother; he has jousting with his grandfather; he has fallen in love with a lady. But he cannot rest until he finds his father. Regardless of the great strides he makes by himself, Degaré

cannot be himself without his father. Understandably, then, his eventual meeting with his father is imbued with great psychological significance. What follows is a very striking episode. Degaré comes across a knight, who aggressively accuses him of trespass. Degaré protests that he has done no wrong, but the knight insists that they fight. The fight is brutal, intense, and bloody:

Togider thai riden with gret raundoun,
And aither bar other adoun.
With dintes that thai smiten there,
Here stede rigges toborsten were. (1041-5)

Given that this is the most significant episode in the romance, it is fitting that it is very dramatic; anything less would be anticlimactic. However, the physical intensity of the battle is notable. Degaré and his father fight in complete earnest, using their whole strength. The men are too evenly matched, and so are unable to defeat each other; but they do push themselves to the brink of exhaustion. Thus, when Degaré draws the broken sword and is recognised by his father, both men swoon, presumably from the intensity of the realisation coupled with the great physical strain they have just borne (1045-66). This scene has a far greater emotional and physical intensity than Degaré's romantic scenes. I do not mean that this meeting is in any way erotic, but it does signal that this is the climactic moment of the romance, one that allows for an outpouring of all Degaré's hopes and resentments – and for the same outpouring from his shadow-father, the fairy knight.

Degaré's resentments may be easily enough imagined. He has spent all of his adult life thus far dogging the steps of a man he has never met, unable to establish himself until he has the solution to the puzzle of who he is. No matter what Degaré does, he cannot really know himself until he knows his father, and in the process, Degaré seeks to *become* his father, even going so far as to nearly marry his mother. The abortive wedding scene is titillating with its glimpse of incest narrowly avoided, but it not merely shocking entertainment. Degaré's fight with his father and his almost-marriage to his mother both point to Degaré's subconscious desire to become like – and then best – his father. A more sinister parallel to Degaré is Malory's Mordred. This villain tries to marry Guinevere, not so much because of an illicit desire for his

stepmother, but because marrying his father's wife will make him more like Arthur, and thus consolidate his claim to power: 'he seyde playnly that he wolde wedde her (which was...hys fadirs wyff).'⁹⁴ Degaré is a hero, and so cannot actually wed his mother, just as being a hero precludes him killing his father. These scenes do, however, demonstrate his struggle to become a man when he lacks a father, whilst simultaneously being in his father's shadow. His fight with his father allows him to express this resentment, and because no great harm comes to either party, there is no guilt attached to Degaré.

What of his mysterious father's motivations, however? It is definitely the fairy knight who is the aggressor in this battle. He is belligerent in the face of Degaré's courteous denial that he is poaching deer, and he insists that if Degaré has come to fight, "'Here thou hast thi per ifounde'" (1012). He is very emphatic in stressing his lordly rights, saying Degaré has come to "'*mi* forest to chase *mi* dere'" (1003; my emphasis). This sensitivity to encroachment of his property, as well as his claim that Degaré is seeking conflict, may suggest some kind of subconscious knowledge that Degaré is his son. The knight fears that Degaré is encroaching, not only on his estate, but on his position and livelihood. His son is a competitor to be feared. However, he is also a successor to be embraced, and this is the problem at the heart of the father-son relationship.

In a patriarchal society, the *paterfamilias* is not only lord over women, but also other men. For such a society to continue functioning, the father must have a son, as we have seen in Chapter 1. However, what happens when the son is ready to replace the father? Some romances sidestep this problem by producing a *deus ex machina* in the form of the fortuitous death of the father, such as in *Floris and Blancheflour*. The hero marries his lady, and 'Nas hit nowt longe after than / That Florice tidingge to cam / That his fader the king was ded.'⁹⁵ Degaré reveals the problem with this conclusion: fathers cannot be relied upon to die conveniently as soon as their sons

⁹⁴ Thomas Malory, *Malory: Works*, ed. Eugene Vinaver, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1971), 707.

⁹⁵ *Floris and Blancheflour*, in Erik Kooper, ed., *Sentimental and Humorous Romances* (Kalamazoo Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 2006), II. 1198-1200.

have proved themselves to be men, and it is then difficult for these men to co-exist. The son, after all, has been designed as his father's successor; his destiny is to replace his father. This cannot have been comfortable knowledge for fathers, and may have been a source of some inner guilt for sons. So *Sir Degaré*, with its near-patricide, followed by tearful reunion, allows for the exploration of these impulses, while also providing the happy ending that the genre expects.

This motif of sidestepping near-catastrophe might also explain why there are very few father-son conflicts in Middle English romance, but there are many disputes between sons and fathers-in-law. I deal with the particular resentments fathers have regarding prospective sons-in-law in my next chapter, but it seems that having conflict between knights and fathers-in-law is potentially less contentious than knights fighting their own fathers. To cast a son's father in the villain's part would be dangerous, because it is made clear in romance that sons are very much a direct product of their fathers. Havelok's similarity to his father in *Havelok the Dane*, for instance, is frequently stressed. He "is so fayr / Als Birkabeyn" (2156-7), and he is recognised by Ubbe because "hw he is fayr / Sikerlike he is hise [Birkabeyn's] eyr" (2300-1).⁹⁶ A father-in-law offers a less controversial opponent, although as the next chapter will show, less controversial does not mean less problematic.

Of course, a large part of the reason that sons and fathers do not share the same space in romance is because these stories, with their rite of passage elements, are intended to show the progression of the son's career; having a vigorous and capable father would hamper the story. However, it is clear that there is some unease in these narratives when trying to accommodate both sons and fathers. Once sons become men, they are meant to be ready to be successors to their fathers. However, they need their fathers in order to reach this stage, and so fathers are meant to help make their own replacements. This is an uncomfortable conclusion to reach, and romances can only solve them by either killing off fathers, or giving the son through his

⁹⁶ *Havelok the Dane*, in Ronald B. Herzman, Graham Drake, and Eve Salisbury, eds., *Four Romances of England* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1999).

marriage a kingdom far enough away from his native land that he will be kept occupied until, presumably, his father dies. Real life was unlikely to be so accommodating, and one wonders if it is a coincidence that the Cely and Paston sons who had the most difficult relationships with their fathers were also the eldest sons. In the romances, there is only ever one son, in order to create a neater narrative, so in these stories 'son' means 'heir'. Robert Cely and John Paston II would have grown up with a weight of expectation on them; did they disappoint their fathers so sorely because they could not live up to these expectations, or were their characters simply naturally unfit for the position of heir? Or is the complex emotional mixture of disappointment, anger and concern on the side of the father, and resentment and an anxious desire to please on the part of the son, a natural result of the pressures of the father/heir relationship? With a limited sample like this, it is difficult to know; but when reading John Paston II's letter to his unyielding father, it is impossible not to read into them a mixture of resentment and an unhappy wish for approval:

remember and concydre the peyn and hevynesse that it hathe ben to me syn
youre departyne...here abydyng tyl the tyme it please yow to schewe me
grace.⁹⁷

Conclusion

When fathers' relationships with their adult offspring have been thought about at all, it has tended to be about daughters, and focusing on the abusive end of the spectrum. Fathers and sons have not been thought to be very interesting, presumably because in a patriarchal society like England in the later middle ages, the relationship ought to be simple, with sons being brought up in the image of their fathers, ready to take on the role of ruling the family. But as this examination has showed, the process of making sons into men ready to be fathers is fraught with difficulties, as it is very difficult for a household based on the supremacy of one male – the father – to accommodate more than one man who can legitimately occupy this position. The resentments that are hinted at in letters may find an outlet in the literature, where sons can fight fathers without repercussions, and fathers can demonstrate that they

⁹⁷ *PL*, 3:375, 137.

are still as powerful as their maturing sons. However, this reading of the antagonistic elements of the father-son relationship does not preclude affectional ties. Indeed, fathers *need* to make sons who are able to challenge them – if a son is not strong enough to pose a threat to his father, he will not be strong enough to be his successor, but there is an uncomfortably fine line between sons who are *able* to challenge their fathers, and those who actually challenge them.

Despite this awkwardness, there is plentiful evidence of deep emotional attachment between fathers and their sons. Perhaps part of the reason that this has not been more taken note of by critics is because these expressions of regard are so closely bound up in a strong sense of hierarchy, with sons expected to provide obedient service and fathers ruling without being questioned. Thinking that this were evidence of lack of feeling would, however, be to do a disservice to these men, and to misunderstand the basis of the father-son relationship. Sons and fathers do not care for one another *despite* their obligations to one another, or need to obey familial etiquette; the duties are part of the way the relationship is established and maintained, and the formal language and gesture built into father-son communication is a means of expressing and building this cooperative and respectful relationship. Sometimes it seemed that these relationships broke down, which may be partly due to the inherent problems built into *all* relationships based within a patriarchal social model – but even these relationships are certainly not coldly devoid of feeling, or based more on ritual than empathy. Some sons and fathers seem to have loved each other; some probably did not, but what is clear is that sons and fathers needed each other, and this need is so profound that it makes the father-son relationship one of the most important – and most difficult – of family relationships.

CHAPTER 3

Fathers and Daughters

‘Alas, father, why dyd ye so?
Ye might have warned me of my fo;
And ye had tolde me who it had be,
My love had never be dead for me.’¹

They are mostly girls, who, to the delight of their parents, retain their full infantile love [for their fathers] far beyond puberty This shows that the apparently non-sexual love for the parents and the sexual love [for a man] are nourished from the same source²

For all the excellent work that has been done in recent years illuminating the lives of young medieval women, scholarship has been remarkably silent on the relationship between fathers and daughters.³ Partly this is simply because of the already outlined paucity of work on fathers in general.⁴ However, it may also be because of trends in scholarship in the way women have been envisioned. Much work on daughters, for instance, is by scholars in women’s studies, so there has been a greater interest in the relationship between women – particularly mothers and daughters – than between fathers and daughters, particularly when critical opinion has largely been of the consensus that fathers were withdrawn from their children in general and from daughters in particular. Barbara Hanawalt, for example, argues of peasant society that fathers had a keener interest in the upbringing of their sons than their daughters.⁵ What work there has been on father-daughter relationships has, by and large, focused on sexual dysfunction, which I will address shortly. I argue that this

¹ *The Squire of Low Degree*, ll. 1043-6.

² Sigmund Freud, *Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex*, trans. by A.A. Brill (Nervous and Mental Disease Publishing Company: New York and Washington, 1920), 84.

³ There are some exceptions: Shannon McSheffrey considers fathers’ consent in female marriage making in *Marriage, Sex and Civic Culture*, 74-150; María Bullón-Fernández writes on Gower’s dysfunctional fathers in her *Fathers and Daughters*; Elizabeth Archibald has written extensively on father-daughter incest in her *Incest and the Medieval Imagination*; and Nikki Stiller’s *Eve’s Orphans* is interested in paternal tyranny, especially in the context of female saints’ lives (15-27).

⁴ See Introduction.

⁵ Barbara Hanawalt, *The Ties That Bound*, 14. Meanwhile, Kim M. Phillips’ otherwise very useful monograph on young medieval women, *Medieval Maidens*, barely considers the role of fathers in their daughters’ lives.

preoccupation with incest has led to a missed opportunity in understanding both family dynamics and the operation of patriarchy.

Joel Rosenthal has argued that the importance of patrilineage and patriarchy were such that they shaped the function and self-identity of the individuals within them.⁶ The *fashioning* aspect of paternal authority – not just on offspring, but also on parent – may have been sketched by Rosenthal, but it has not been fleshed out. Looking at fathers and daughters provides the ideal opportunity to put meat on those bones, because the father-daughter relationship is the most extreme of the medieval family, representing absolute opposites in terms of gender, age and power. The latter is particularly important; the father-daughter relationship is the familial relationship with the greatest difference in its weighting of power to its respective parties.⁷ The father-daughter relationship in romance is often extreme. I argue that this may be because this relationship, with its particularly striking power dynamic, allows for some of the greatest freedom in exploring the nature of paternal authority.

In this chapter my methodological approach will be a little different from that of other chapters, as its focus will be almost entirely on the literary sources. The evidence within the letter collections for direct father-daughter interaction is quite slight, and I felt that scattering this evidence throughout the chapter would diminish its significance – primarily because, as will become clear later in the chapter, the *lack* of evidence for fathers and daughters within letters reinforces conclusions I will come to about romances. By looking in depth at a handful of romances, however, and then at the end of the chapter applying some of the questions raised by these to the gentry letters, I shall be able to show more clearly the interaction between the literary and historical. By considering the father-daughter conventions of romance first, it will be seen that considerations of genre in relation to the letters are highly

⁶ Rosenthal, *Patriarchy and Families*, 57.

⁷ 'The relationship between father and daughter, adult male and female child, is one of the most unequal relationships imaginable.' Judith Lewis Herman, *Father-Daughter Incest* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1981), 4. See also Nikki Stiller, *Eve's Orphans*, 6: 'if fathers fought to control their sons... their control over their daughters seems to have been as close to absolute as possible'.

significant. I will also make use of modern psychoanalytic scholarship on the father-daughter relationship, particularly sexually dysfunctional variations on it, to help articulate my conclusions.

‘For schame couthe unethes speke’: incest, near-incest, and the structure of paternal authority⁸

The problem of incest, in academic terms, is that it is both under- and over-exposed. In terms of psychoanalytical literature, it has been widely discussed, whilst simultaneously dismissed as female fantasy, or used to demonstrate female culpability in father-daughter sex crimes.⁹ Yet there is very little written about ‘typical’ father-daughter relationships with which this work can be contrasted. So, too, is the case in medieval studies. Work on fathers and daughters in literature is rare as it is, but even so, the relationship has largely been approached through the *topos* of incest.¹⁰ This is not, perhaps, surprising, since incest is a significant theme in medieval literature; but the problem with viewing fathers and daughters through the lens of incest is that it creates a kind of myopia. It becomes easy to extrapolate from the incestuous relationship and apply outwards into the broader society, rather than considering how incest may simply be one manifestation – albeit a particularly arresting one – of issues that share root causes.

Reading the work of María Bullón-Fernández and Elizabeth Archibald, it is easy to come to the conclusion that incest was the defining aspect of literary fatherhood. It is

⁸ Gower, *Confessio Amantis* VIII:324.

⁹ The classic view, of course, originates with Freud: ‘Almost all of my women patients told me that they had been seduced by their father. I was driven to recognize in the end that these reports were untrue... I was able to recognize in this phantasy of being seduced by the father the expression of the typical Oedipus complex in women.’ Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures of Psychoanalysis*, trans. and ed. by James Strachey (London: Penguin 1991), 120. The attitude has lingered, however: ‘From some of the details which she related of her relationship with her father, it was obvious that she was not all that innocent. But she was unable emotionally to accept her own sexual involvement with him.’ A male therapist, cited in Robert Stein, *Incest and Human Love: The Betrayal of the Soul in Psychotherapy* (New York: Third Press, 1973), 46.

¹⁰ The only monographs that significantly deal with the father-daughter relationship seem to be Bullón-Fernández’s *Fathers and Daughters* and Archibald’s *Incest and the Medieval Imagination*, and both works focus on the incestuous elements of this relationship.

certainly true that there are a number of stories that involve father-daughter incest; but they are not so very common. In terms of Middle English literature, the *only* consummated father-daughter incest occurs in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*.¹¹ Attempted incest happens in *Emaré*, and is central to the story of St Dymphna, but even attempted father-daughter incest is relatively rare in Middle English narrative. There are, however, several stories that are described as having 'near-incest' themes: where the father behaves in a similar way to the incestuous father, but no illicit acts are actually attempted. The assumption is usually that these stories are also about incest.¹² There is certainly a strong sexual element to these narratives, and I will be discussing this later in the chapter, but it is too simplistic to conflate these stories into an overarching incest theme. If we instead move away from thinking that incest is a defining theme of literary fatherhood, something else beneath the incest motif begins to come into focus. Incest appears at the heart of these narratives because it is an excellent signifier for what is actually a source of anxiety: the nature of paternal authority.

Bullón-Fernández and Archibald have both discussed the role of incest as a motif to illuminate the abuse of authority. Both draw strong parallels between father-daughter incest and the rule of a tyrant, for instance, and of the fear of daughters' nascent sexuality.¹³ These are factors, but I will argue that the real reason that incest is important is because it threatens paternal authority, and that this is particularly disturbing because the threat comes not from outside, that is from the daughter, but from the father himself. Incest is like tyranny not so much because it is an abuse of others, but because it is an act of a man against the source of his own power; and as we will see, for a father to undermine patriarchy is the worst sort of crime.

¹¹ Book VIII of the *Confessio Amantis* tells the story of Apollonius of Tyre, which was extremely popular across Europe in the middle ages – but it nonetheless remains only one *story* (albeit in several forms) of consummated incest. John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, ed. by Russell A. Peck (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), Book VIII.

¹² Elizabeth Archibald draws this conclusion. Archibald, *Incest and the Medieval Imagination*, 145-7.

¹³ Archibald, *Incest and the Medieval Imagination*, 145.

Modern psychologists, in their analysis of father-daughter incest, often speak of it in terms of it being a 'silent crime'.¹⁴ Daughters have been too frightened to speak out, and if they do their experiences have often been denied, both by their families and, until recently, by the medical establishment. In feminist analyses of incest, one of the gravest effects of incest is that it denies women a voice.¹⁵ However, within medieval narratives, silence is a female virtue, and a father's authority seems absolute. In these texts, the moments at which women speak – or choose not to speak – can be particularly important in understanding the power relationship between fathers and daughters. At the moment when it might seem that a woman gains her own voice, her function is to reassert the essential rightness of patriarchy against a father who is losing his own paternal identity because of his selfish lust.

In late medieval society, not only were women meant to be submissive to men, but children were meant to submit to their parents. As Gratian put it: 'It is the order of nature among human beings that women obey man and sons obey their parents, because it is justice in these matters that the lesser obey the greater.'¹⁶ Thus it could be considered that the father-daughter dynamic is the familial relationship with the greatest difference in power. The father's role is to govern, whilst the daughter's is to obey. Moreover, the daughter should obey in silence, or at least with little speech, as 'idle talk' is something for which medieval women were often chastised.¹⁷ Women were meant to be meek and guided by the head of their household, be it father, husband or master. The narrator of the fifteenth-century poem *How the Wise Man Taught His Son* recommends that the son seek a 'meeke and good' wife who will serve him 'weel and plesauntly', while in the previous century the poem *How the Goodwife Taught Her Daughter* advises that the reader should with 'sybbe ne

¹⁴ 'Any serious investigation of the emotional and sexual lives of women leads eventually to the discovery of the incest secret. But until recently, each investigator who has made this discovery has ended by suppressing it. The information was simply too threatening' Herman, *Father-Daughter Incest*, 7.

¹⁵ See 'Chapter One: The Incest Secret', in Herman, *Father-Daughter Incest*, 7-66. For a brief outline of the feminist approach, see the introduction to the same volume, 1-4.

¹⁶ Gratian, from *Decretum*, excerpted in Blamires, *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended*, 84.

¹⁷ On the dangers of gossip, see Karma Lochrie, *Covert Operations: The Medieval Uses of Secrecy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 56-92.

fremde make no jangelyng'.¹⁸ Women talking with other women was particularly dangerous, because as Karma Lochrie puts it, it shows a 'troubling disregard for authority, institutions, and masculine reputations.'¹⁹ Preventing women talking to other women is a means for men to control not only female speech, but female *dialogue*. Here, then, are two rules for being a good woman – to be obedient and to be silent – that would make it difficult for a daughter to voice a complaint against her father in case of incest.

Moreover, it was typical in this period for a woman to be blamed for extramarital sexual activity, regardless of whether or not she initiated, or, indeed, even consented. The fifteenth century poem *Why I Can't Be a Nun* blames Dinah for her rape because 'for sche bode not styлле, / But went owte to see thynges in veyne'.²⁰ In effect, to use a more modern term, Dinah was 'asking for it'.²¹ The implication that harm, both physical and spiritual, will come to women who leave their proper sphere is found in Caxton's *The Knight of the Tower*, a 1483 translation of the fourteenth-century *Livre pour l'enseignement de ses filles du Chevalier de La Tour Landry*. In one of the knight's stories, a woman goes out at night to see her lover, and 'she felle in to a pyte whiche was twenty fadom depe'. She is miraculously saved after praying and repenting.²² She seems to be guilty of both sexual misconduct – having a lover – and social misconduct, that is leaving her home at night. It is easy to blur the line between these so that the act of leaving the appropriate feminine space of the house for the physically dangerous outside world becomes associated with falling into a 'pyte' of sexual misbehaviour. If a woman goes 'as it were a gase / Fro house to

¹⁸ *How the Wise Man Taught His Son*, in F.J. Furnivall, ed., *The Babees Book: The Bokes of Nurture of Hugh Rhodes and John Russel* (New York: Greenwood, 1969), ll. 81-2; *How the Goodwife Taught Her Daughter*, in George Shuffelton, ed., *Codex Ashmole 61: A Compilation of Popular Middle English Verse* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 2008), l. 21.

¹⁹ Lochrie, *Covert Operations*, 75.

²⁰ *Why I Can't Be a Nun*, in James Dean, ed., *Six Ecclesiastical Satires* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Western Michigan University, 1991), ll.348-9.

²¹ The attitude that Dinah 'deserved' to be raped because she was out of her home has not disappeared; a recent survey of the British student population found that 26 per cent of those surveyed said women who walked alone in a dangerous area were partially responsible if they were sexually assaulted. Kat Lay, 'Asking For It', *London Student*, 16 February, 2009.

²² Geoffroy de la Tour Landry, *The Book of the Knight of the Tower*, trans. by William Caxton. Early English Books Online, <http://eebo.chadwyck.com>. Accessed 1 July 2009.

house to seke the mase [diversion]', she will reap the consequences.²³ Furthermore, women are to blame for men's passions simply because they inflame it through their physical appearance, as the thirteenth century *Ancrene Wisse* argues:

Heo is bitacned bi theo thet unwrith the put - the put is hire feire neb, hire hwite swire... Best is the beastlich mon thet ne thenchet naut on God, ne ne noteth naut his wit as mon ach to donne, ach secheth for to fallen in this put thet ich spec of, yef he hit open fint... [H]a is witi of his death biforen ure Laverd ant schal for his saule onds weren an Domes-dei...²⁴

A woman's beauty here is a pit, a place that traps men. Although the woman has not actively done anything to encourage a man's desire, by letting her beauty be seen, according to this text she is complicit in his fall into sin.

This 'hapless collusiveness', as it might be called, has not disappeared with the Middle Ages; until the 1980s, a common view expressed by therapists was that girls have contributed to or even initiated incest:²⁵

These children undoubtedly do not deserve completely the cloak of innocence ... [There was] at least some cooperation of the child in the activity, and in some cases the child assumed an active role in initiating the relationship... Finally, a most striking feature was that these children were distinguished as unusually charming and attractive²⁶

²³ *How the Goodwife*, ll. 61-2.

²⁴ 'She is symbolised by the one who uncovers the pit – the pit is her fair face, her white neck... The beast is the beastly man that does not think of God, nor use his wit as man ought to do, but falls into this pit that I spoke of, if he finds it open... (S)he is guilty of his death before our Lord and shall answer for his soul on Doomsday.' (My trans.) Robert Hasenfratz, ed., *Ancrene Wisse* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000), Part 2, ll. 101-12.

²⁵ Karin Meiselman summarises research prior to 1979 in Karin C. Meiselman, *Incest: A Psychological Study of Causes and Effects with Treatment Recommendations* (San Francisco, Washington, London: Jossey-Bass publishers, 1979), 1-55. 'Seductiveness' is discussed in the same volume, 161-5. Herman, from a feminist perspective, summarises the 'pro-incest lobby' in Herman, *Father-Daughter Incest*, 22-5, and discusses the 'Seductive Daughter' theory in the same volume, 36-42.

²⁶ Laretta Bender and Abram Blau, 'The Reaction of Children to Sexual Relations with Adults,' *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 7 (1937): 514. This is an older article, but the quotation given perfectly encapsulates a perspective seen more recently – for instance James Henderson in 1975 writing that 'daughters collude in the incestuous liaison' (quoted in Herman, *Father-Daughter Incest*, 40), whilst the Seductive Daughter appears frequently in modern literature, the most famous being Nabokov's *Lolita*. Rachel Devlin draws attention to the psychoanalytic tendency to privilege 'the power of the adolescent girl's Oedipal desire over and above the actions of the father, no matter how coercive or transgressive.' Rachel Devlin, '"Acting out the Oedipal wish": father-daughter incest and the sexuality of adolescent girls in the United States, 1941-1965', *Journal of Social History*, 38 (2005): 17.

This belief may trace its roots back to Roman mythology, where the topos of the ‘Seductive Daughter’ was well-established. The most famous classical case of father-daughter incest is probably that of Myrrha, who tricked her father into having intercourse with her, and was used by Ovid as an example of female concupiscence. Ovid’s poetry was relatively well known amongst higher status groups and indeed was used as pedagogical material in Latin instruction.²⁷ Reading in the classroom may have left some with a taste for Ovid; as we saw in my Introduction, Sir John Paston read *Remedia Amoris*, and men of his social background may well have been familiar with *The Metamorphoses* within which the Myrrha story appears.²⁸ If daughters are at least partly responsible for the occurrence of incest, questions about paternal culpability can to an extent be bypassed and the focus shifted to the familiar trope of the sinful woman.

In Middle English literature, the mere presence of the daughter, coupled with her beauty, is often enough to bring her father to sin. The typical situation is that the mother dies, and the father is left with only one child, a daughter. He notices her exceptional beauty, which may be explicitly described as like her mother’s, or may be simply mirrored in the language of the text, and he desires her:

The mayden that was of sembelant swete,
Byfore her owene fadur sete,
The fayrest wommon on lyfe;
That all hys hert and all hys thowghth
Her to love was yn browght... (*Emaré*, 220-24)

There is also a sense in which the daughter is a convenient lust object, as she is close by:

And that this maide tendre and softe,
Which in hire fadres chambres duelte,
Withinne a time wiste and felte.
For likinge and concupiscence
Withoute insihte of conscience
The fader so with lustes blente,
That he caste al his hole entente
His oghne doghter for to spille. (*Confessio Amantis*, VIII. 91-7.)

²⁷ Desmond, *Ovid's Art*, 52-3.

²⁸ Archibald, *Incest*, 71, 78-88.

Based on typical medieval antifeminist discourse, it could be argued that these daughters are to blame, as they incite lust in their fathers through their looks, and because their fathers are lacking wives. However, although an antifeminist reading of the texts may allow these interpretations, blaming of daughters is not something that is ever explicit; as Archibald puts it, 'though Myrrha was well known in the Middle Ages, she seems to have had no literary descendants.'²⁹ In Middle English literature, daughters are never the initiators of father-daughter incest. The passion is entirely one-sided, and is startling in its intensity and suddenness. The fathers cast their 'hole entente' and 'all [their] thowghth' into achieving their desire, whilst the daughters are completely unaware of their danger. However, the same misogynistic attitudes that allow Dinah to be read as deserving of rape make it easy for daughters to slip from the status of blameless victim to a tainted accomplice.

Antiochus, the villain of the Apollonius story, is probably the most rapacious father in Middle English literature. The Apollonius legend was extremely popular throughout the middle ages, appearing in Latin (*Historia Apollonii regis Tyri*), Old French (*Apollin roy de Thire*) and numerous Italian prose versions. A fragment of a Middle English romance survives, and the story's popularity continued into print with Robert Copland's *Kynge Appolyn of Thyre*, so it seems likely that some variation on the story would be familiar to the social groups I discuss here.³⁰ Since the romance is fragmentary, and Gower's work was circulating in the kind of households discussed here, I have used his version of the story.³¹ Many Middle English stories feature the *threat* of father-daughter incest, as will be seen in the section below, but it is not often consummated. Antiochus, however, takes what he wants at once, with force. Unlike Emaré's father, he does not try to make the union seem more valid by seeking a marriage (*Emaré*, 231-4). Antiochus is unconcerned about the legitimacy of the match; 'For likinge and concupiscence / Withoute insihte of conscience' (VIII. 293-4) he seeks to rape his daughter. It is certainly a calculated

²⁹ Archibald, *Incest*, 145.

³⁰ J. Frik, *The Romance of Apollonius of Tyre, Mnemosyne*, 4th series 1, no. 3 (1948): 222.

³¹ Deborah Young, 'Cultural Networks', in *Gentry Culture*, ed. by Radulescu and Truelove, 128-9.

attack; he ‘hath leisir at his wille / With strengthe, and whanne he time sih. / This yonge maiden he forlih’ (VIII. 298-300). ‘The wylde fader thus devoureth / His oghne fleissh, which non socoureth’ (VIII. 309-10); that which should be protected – the daughter, and her body, or rather ‘hir Maidenhede’ (VIII. 302) – is instead taken by the father. The use of the word ‘devoureth’ suggests a ravenous and destructive hunger, and that destruction is of the self; the princess is Antiochus’ ‘owne fleissh’ in a sense deeper than that they share the same blood. As his unmarried daughter, she belongs to Antiochus completely, and as an only child, she is also his heir. Antiochus’ taking of the princess’ virginity, and his subsequent refusal to find her a husband, is denying the nation a future monarch, and also threatens the continuance of his line. Antiochus’ desire for his daughter, then, is the antithesis of what it should mean to be a king. A monarch should always be thinking of the future by providing an heir, who will ensure the country remains stable, whilst Antiochus can think only of the present, his lust both self-indulgent and self-destructive.

If Antiochus is unusual in the extent of his depravity, the daughter is given a remarkably full description of her experience and emotions. The physical difference between Antiochus and the princess is made clear; he is strong and lustful, while she is ‘tendre and full of drede’ (VIII. 302), and it ‘helpeth noght althogh sche wepe’ (VIII. 305), as her father can simply ignore her tears. Gower is also careful to stress that there is no one nearby to help her (VIII. 306-7). The main purpose of this is to emphasise the princess’ helplessness and isolation, but is also possibly a reference to Old Testament laws regarding rape, where a woman was held to be accountable if she did not cry out for help.³² The princess struggles and cries, which is what she is expected to do, but she is completely alone. The difference in power between her and her father could not be more clearly expressed. When the king leaves, the princess lies still and ‘such sorghe made’ (VIII. 315). Her nurse finds her, and asks her why she is so distressed. At first the princess with ‘schame couthe unethes speke’ (VIII. 324), but at last she gives up the secret, and ‘evere wissheth after deth’ (VIII. 333), her shame and sorrow is so great. The princess seems utterly blameless.

³² Deuteronomy 22: 23-29.

This is not necessarily how the medieval reader would have perceived the incident, however. Although the princess is presented sympathetically, she shares in her father's punishment:

That for vengance, as god it wolde,
Antiochus, as men mai wite,
With thondre and lythnynge is forsmite;
His doghter hath the same chaunce,
So be thei bothe in o balance. (VIII. 998-1002)

The gravity of Antiochus' sins makes it appropriate that his punishment comes through a *deus ex machina*, but why does his daughter suffer the same 'chaunce'? 'Chaunce' is an interesting word; it could mean an unexpected occurrence, or something haphazard, but it could also be an event attributed to divine providence.³³ 'Balance', meanwhile, was used in this period to mean both 'danger' and 'the scales of Justice'.³⁴ Is the princess suffering a mischance because she has been swept up in her father's wake? Or is she being rightfully punished for sharing in her father's sin? The language seems ambiguous, though presumably God does not make mistakes. Thus we might assume that, despite her sympathetic portrayal earlier in the poem, by the time of her death the princess is as deserving of punishment as her father.

However sympathetic Gower's early portrayal of the princess, the taint of her rape, along with her silent acceptance of her father's subsequent overtures, seem to consign her to sharing Antiochus' fate later in the poem. When she weepingly tells her nurse what happened, her servant has this pragmatic advice to offer:

To lette hire fadres fol desir
Sche wiste no recoverir:
Whan thing is do, ther is no bote,
So suffren thei that suffre mote;
Ther was non other which it wiste. (VIII. 337-41)

³³ 'chaunce: 1. (a) Something that happens or takes place; an occurrence or event, esp. one that is unexpected, unforeseen, beyond human control, or attributed to providence or destiny.' *The Middle English Dictionary*.

³⁴ 'balance: 3a. The scales of Justice. 5. Risk, jeopardy, danger.' *The Middle English Dictionary*.

The nurse's assertion that there is nothing to be done, so the daughter should bear it, finds a parallel in modern psychotherapy samples of some mothers' reactions to revelations of incest.³⁵ The preceding description of the rape would seem to bear out the nurse's opinion; the king is strong, both in terms of his physical strength and his power, and there is no way the daughter can withstand him. However, it seems that there is an implicit condemnation of the daughter's submission to her father:

Thus hath this king al that him liste
 ...
 And such delit he tok therinne,
 Him thoghte that it was no Sinne;
 And sche dorste him nothing withseie. (VIII. 342-7)

The daughter, having stopped opposing her father, lets him believe that there is 'no Sinne' in his actions. After this the daughter all but disappears from the text; there is no suggestion that Apollonius ever meets her, for instance. The daughter's silence makes her complicit in her father's sins, and so she shares his fate. There is a sense, however, that no matter what the princess does, after her rape her future is destroyed. Even if she had continued to resist her father's sexual assaults, the rape of the daughter makes her – in romance narrative, at least – unmarriageable, and it also taints her with her father's sin. As Robin Bott argues, the raped female body is diseased tissue in a patriarchal society; it must be excised, or else the corruption may spread.³⁶

It is interesting to compare the nameless princess with Apollonius' spirited daughter, Thaise. Reunited without knowing each other's identity, their storyline features the implicit threat of incest, particularly since they are in the romantic situation of the princess nursing the king.³⁷ Apollonius, in the mad anger of his grief at losing his

³⁵ Herman, *Father-Daughter Incest*, 174-5.

³⁶ Robin L. Bott, "'O, Keep Me From Their Worse Than Killing Lust': Ideologies of Rape and Mutilation in Chaucer's *Physician's Tale* and Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*", in *Representing Rape in Medieval and Early Modern Literature*, ed. by Elizabeth Robertson and Christine M. Rose (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 190.

³⁷ Believing his daughter has died in his absence, Apollonius falls into a depression, and Thaise is sent to 'glade with this woful king' (VIII. 1655). Knights often fall in love with ladies who nurse them. For instance, Tristan is nursed by Iseult, and Degaré is looked after by his unnamed fairy lady.

family, strikes out at her. Unlike Antiochus' daughter, Thaise does not weep helplessly. Instead, she remarks acerbically that:

‘Avoi, mi lord, I am a Maide;
And if ye wiste what I am,
And out of what lignage I cam,
Ye wolde noght be so salvage.’ (VIII. 1696-9)

Thaise asserts her right to be treated with respect. This piques Apollonius' interest, and he feels a curious love for her (VIII. 1707). Luckily, Apollonius is no Antiochus, and so does not immediately act on his desire. Instead he asks the girl her history, and so discovers she is his daughter. In effect, Thaise, by speaking up, has both found her past and secured her future.

Like Thaise, Emaré is quick to speak out when her father acts dishonourably. As soon as he makes his marriage proposal, she says: “‘Nay syr, God of heven hyt forbede, / That ever do so we shulde!’” (251-2) She then goes on to make the longest speech in this short romance – fourteen lines – expressing her repugnance towards Artyus' idea, and pointing out that both God and society will shame them if they marry. Although Artyus is both a doughty knight and a powerful emperor, Emaré does not hesitate to make her opinion known, and having the power to express her view seems to render her immune from her father's depredations, even if it does not protect her from his anger.

However, *Emaré*, even with its female protagonist and celebration of her bravery, is hardly a proto-feminist text. When her father decides to murder her, she is silent. The text, whilst devoting a sizeable number of lines to her horrified rejection of her father, says nothing of her response to Artyus' decree that she should be put out to sea in a rudderless boat. The effect of this is the sense that what is important is that she resisted rape, not that she objected to death. Emaré's story is most similar to the life of St Dymphna, but her tale does share features with that of another embattled virgin.³⁸ St Agnes, although not menaced by her father, does have her virginity

³⁸ The story of St Dymphna is broadly thus: Dymphna, daughter of a pagan Irish king, secretly converted to Christianity. After the death of her mother, Dymphna's father desired to marry his

threatened. According to *The Golden Legend*'s account of her life, she makes a long speech to her would-be lover, informing him of her great passion for Christ. Later, when she is stripped naked, her hair miraculously grows long enough to hide her entire body from view. God intervenes, reinforcing the rightness of her decision to defend boldly her virginity. She, however, has no fear of losing her life, because that offers the gift of martyrdom; she only fears to disobey Christ's commandment that 'he hath set in my visage a sign that I receive none other espouse but him'.³⁹ Emaré and Agnes, facing death by water and fire respectively, could go to that death with the comfort of knowing that their most precious 'flour' was still intact.

The difference between these women and the princess of *Confessio Amantis*, then, is not that they speak out – but *when* they speak. Gower's princess cannot be given a happy ending, whatever our sympathy for her, because she no longer has a place within the story. Her father's actions rob her not only of her virginity, but of her function. Without her virginity, she is worthless in story terms; unlike Emaré, she cannot become a wife, because the most precious part of her dowry is gone. Agnes, when talking of her relationship with Christ, presents it in the manner of a betrothal contract:

He hath clad me with precious stones and with jewels of gold, he ... hath showed me over-great treasures which he must give me if I abide with him. I will have none other spouse but him, I will seek none other, in no manner may I leave him⁴⁰

Agnes here exchanges her body and soul for the jewels that Christ offers. These, of course, are spiritual rewards, but her description evokes medieval marriage negotiations. As part of these, a daughter's obligation is to preserve her virginity for the man who is purchasing her marriage.

daughter, but she fled with the priest Gerebernus. Discovered by messengers, the king travelled to his daughter's hiding place and renewed his offer of marriage. When this was rejected, he had his servants slay the priest, and himself beheaded his daughter.

³⁹ F.S. Ellis, ed., *The Golden Legend or Lives of the Saints as Englished by William Caxton*, vol. 2 (London: J.M. Dent, 1900), 256.

⁴⁰ Ellis, *The Golden Legend*, 256.

Of course, part of her father's duty is to help her do this, because women could not be relied on to defend their own honour. In *Sir Degaré*, for instance, as soon as the princess is separated from her father, she loses herself in the woods and is raped.⁴¹ Unlike Dinah, she did not choose to go out by herself, but nonetheless the woman alone is always at risk of sexual violence. This particular helplessness of women is not simply because she is physically weaker, but because the bestowal of her body is meant to be decided by a man. This becomes clearer if one considers that elite marriage negotiation is often not between a man and a woman, but between two men. The daughter, as object, passes from father to husband; whilst this does not mean the father was indifferent to his daughter's happiness in the match, her obedience is expected regardless.⁴² If a woman cannot choose how her body will be given in a licit – that is, marital – context, she cannot be expected to protect it from illicit contact. The daughter's virginity is a marker that the father has done his duty to the man who marries her; he has kept intact her most valuable attribute. When Thaise is hit by Apollonius, she reprimands him by pointing out her lineage. She wants him to realise that, although she is without a father, she is not fatherless; whilst her father may be temporarily lost to her, she still belongs to him, and in her position as his child, deserves respect:

if ye wiste *what I am*,
And out of *what lignage* I cam,
Ye wolde noght be so salvage. (VIII. 1697-9; my emphasis.)

In this context, it can be seen that in these examples, virginity and its preservation is less important for its own sake, and more because of its role in reinforcing patriarchal norms.⁴³ The converse of this is that the effect of not preserving a daughter's chastity is that a man's paternal identity is undermined. The following biblical passage illustrates this point well:

⁴¹ *Sir Degaré*, ll. 47-114, contains the section of the story where the princess becomes separated from her father's entourage, encounters the fairy knight in the woods, and 'Tho nothing ne coude do she', he rapes her.

⁴² Harris, *English Aristocratic Women*, 55-6.

⁴³ Of course, virginity is valued as a state by religious writing of this period; it is interesting to compare the language used regarding virginity in *Emaré* and the Life of St Agnes. The latter has a very strong focus on the importance that Agnes' purity is preserved; *Emaré* is concerned only that the heroine does not let her father bismirch it.

Keep a sure watch over a shameless daughter: lest at any time she make thee become a laughing-stock to thy enemies, and a by-word in the city, and a reproach among the people, and she make thee ashamed before all the multitude.⁴⁴

The focus is less on the daughter's own shame, but the shame she will bring her father. The daughter's shame undermines the father's authority; by not enforcing his control over her sexuality, he is emasculated. When Emaré learns of her father's foul desire, her main argument against it is that:

'The worde shulde sprynge fer and wyde;
In all the worlde on every syde
The worde shulde be borne.' (256-8)

Emaré points out what should be obvious to Artyus – that if he weds her, the world will be aware of his failure. It is perhaps the shame of being reminded of this by his own daughter that causes Artyus' 'wrothe' (265); rather than forcing her to marry him, he re-exerts his paternal authority by demonstrating his ability to choose something as fundamental as whether she has the right to live. That Emaré allows him to do this is a reinforcement of the essential rightness of fatherly authority, even if in this case it is unjust; only when a father's actions would undermine his own authority is a daughter allowed to criticise him. Emaré does not speak because her body is her own to bestow; she speaks because her father is about to give up his privilege to bestow it. The paradox here is that if the father rapes his daughter, apparently an act of enforced authority, he in fact is sacrificing his seigniority. This is what happens in the *Confessio Amantis*; Antiochus, by raping his daughter, not only undermines his own authority, but also eliminates the future of his dynasty. His daughter has no future, and he has brought about the end of his own line.

It could then be argued that women are only meant to speak when their words have value to men. The princess – once again unnamed – in *Sir Gowther* provides an interesting comparison with the texts examined here. Although there is no incest threat in this story, the theme of silence is very important. This beautiful lady 'wold have spokyn and myght nought' (376), and she finds kinship with the equally dumb

⁴⁴ Ecclesiasticus 42:11.

Gowther, although his silence is through choice while hers has been enforced by nature. The princess is the only one who knows that the knight who saves her kingdom is Gowther; her silence seems to have gifted her with a rare sense of perception (437-8), and her gentle nature is briefly but strikingly outlined in her charity towards him (445-50). Despite her silence, she is one of the text's most appealing characters. Later in the story, Gowther needs a sign from God that he is forgiven, and the princess can provide it, through the miracle of having her voice restored: "My lord of heyvon gretys the well, / ... / Thu schallt be won of his." (661-6) Her voice in a sense does not belong to her, but is God's and her husband's, in order to signpost God's true presence and Gowther's true status. After this she is described only through other characters, for instance when her father assents to her marriage (676-7), and there is no account made of her in the rest of the story of Gowther's life. Her ability to speak seems to have diminished her as a character, whilst making her important as a symbol; given a specific function for a man, she no longer seems to exist in her own right.

Writing on incest in medieval literature shows the reader the consequences of the abuse of paternal authority. What it does not do, though, is question that authority; indeed, these stories reinforce the essential value of it. Incest's principle horror is not that it violates a woman, but that it subverts the meaning of fatherhood, and what it means to be a ruler. If a man lusts after his daughter, he does not truly control her; he becomes a slave to his passions, and so the natural order of governance is upset. No wonder incest was used as a familiar trope to describe bad rulership.⁴⁵ In these stories, daughters are heavily restricted, their function that they belong to either father or husband. Their obedience is not only expected but demanded. They have the right to speak only when what they are asked to do threatens their fathers as well as themselves. Whilst these stories feature heroines who appeal to our sympathies, their mistreatment at the hand of their fathers is not intended to undermine patriarchal modes, but instead to signify the importance of the proper implementation of these models. The paradox is that this is done through the actions

⁴⁵ Archibald, *Incest and the Medieval Imagination*, 145.

of men who undermine patriarchal ideals, but that seems fitting for stories of incest, whose particular contradictions are presented as a riddle that only the hero can untie:

With felonie I am upbore,
 I ete and have it noght forbore
 Mi modres fleissh, whos housebonde
 Mi fader forto seche I fonde,
 Which is the Sone ek of my wif.
 Hierof I am inquisitif;
 And who that can mi tale save,
 Al quyt he schal my doghter have;
 Of his ansuere and if he faile,
 He schal be ded withoute faile. (*Confessio Amantis*, VIII. 405-14.)

The daughter, of course, is presented as the riddle, and cannot translate herself. That is a task best left to a man.

‘For al his joie is in me’: the causes and consequences of over-controlling fatherhood, and moving beyond the incest motif⁴⁶

Incest, we have seen, is significant because it means that men undermine their own authority, and thus threaten the very structure of their society. However, critical interest in incest has led to it being perceived as the *cause* of this threat, and so it has not been observed that factors leading to incest also lead to more covert forms of abuse, and in the end result in similar threats to the kingdom as do the depredations of an incestuous father. Incest then is a symptom – albeit a particularly shocking one – of underlying problems that can manifest themselves in a number of ways.

In stories with an overt incest threat, such as *Emaré*, the daughter is always motherless. She and her father are alone, and she is just entering adulthood. As discussed above, the combination of these factors – her father’s single status and her youthful pulchritude – are given in the texts as key contributing factors in provoking the father’s incestuous desire. Modern research on father-daughter incest would suggest this is at least partly a realistic understanding of the situations in which incest occurs; most of the girls affected are only or eldest daughters, and many have

⁴⁶ *Sir Degaré*, l. 175.

mothers who are dead or incapacitated.⁴⁷ However, it is not only in romances where fathers make incestuous overtures that daughters are left motherless, even though the death of the mother would not seem necessary for the plot. For instance, in *Sir Eglamour of Artois* and *Sir Degaré* the daughters are without mothers. *Degaré* explains the conventional circumstances:

This maiden he [the king] loved als his lif,
Of hire was ded the Quene his wif:
In travailing here lif she les. (*Degaré*, 23-5)

Torrent of Portyngale provides a slightly different scenario – the queen is still alive. However, she plays such a minor part in the action that she does not appear until line 775, even though many scenes have taken place at the court, and when the king orders Desonell put out to sea, the queen's plea for mercy is ignored (1799-1806). Likewise, in *The Squire of Low Degree* there is a queen, but we know this only because of a brief, almost offhand, reference:

‘And take thy leve of kinge and quene,
And so to all the courte bydene...’ (271-2)

The queen is never mentioned again, leaving all the domestic drama to take place between her daughter and her husband. The author seems to forget – whether deliberately or not – that there is a queen, apparently because the storyline only works if there is no mother. These romances are all stories where the hero and heroine's love is thwarted by the actions of the father, and it seems as though the absence of a wife/mother figure is highly significant in understanding the motivations within the text. Furthermore, the way the father feels for the daughter is described in similar terms within these texts as within those containing more overt incest motifs; *Degaré*'s princess notes that “‘al his joie” is in her (174), and the text notes that he loves her ‘als [i.e., as] his lif’ (23), much as Emaré's father loves her with ‘all hys hert’ (223).

⁴⁷ Herman, *Father-Daughter Incest*, 69, 75, 78-86. Meiselman notes that in the past the absent or ‘weak’ mother has been blamed for ‘allowing’ incest to happen. Her argument is that in the absence of the mother it is easier for the father to commit incest, but it certainly is not the mother's ‘fault’. Karin C. Meiselman, *Resolving the Trauma of Incest: Reintegration Therapy with Survivors* (San Francisco and Oxford: Jossey-Bass, 1990), 23-4.

There are parallels, then, with the way incestuous fathers react to their daughters' nascent sexuality to how these other fathers react. However, the fathers in these other stories are either less conscious of their responses, or are more scrupulous, and so the conflict between father and daughter emerges later in the text, and without the explicit threat of sexual violence. Nonetheless, it is clear that the eventual estrangement between father and daughter in a number of these texts happens for the same reasons that provoke men into incest. The kings in these stories may not try to rape their daughters, but they are also determined that no other men may have them, for instance setting a never-ending number of trials that must be passed (*Torrent of Portyngale*) or even challenging suitors themselves (*Sir Degaré*). Of course, a good father would be expected to test his daughter's suitors to ensure they were suitable; he has a responsibility to ensure that she is married well. The ordeals suitors face in romance are perhaps a fantastical reflection of more prosaic conditions in the historical evidence, such as the will of a London merchant that made his daughters' marriage portions only to be awarded if they married men deemed suitable by their family.⁴⁸ But the difficulty of the trials set for the suitors in these romances indicates that these kings would be happy if their daughters never married at all. In *Sir Degaré*, the king is challenged by many suitors; 'many assayed and myght not gayne' (36), and indeed the king remains undefeated for twenty years.⁴⁹ Partly this is a plot device, so that Degaré will be old enough to challenge his grandfather, but it also presents a peculiar image – a princess, unmarried well past her prime, defended by her ageing but still very protective father. Partly this can be explained by the ageless quality characters in romance seem to have, but the text does draw attention to the passage of time by pointing out how long it was since the princess lost her virginity:

'Thou wenest that ich a maiden were,
Ac certes, nay, sire, ich am non:
Twenti winter nou hit is gon
That mi maidenhed I les...' (682-5)

⁴⁸ Example cited in McSheffrey, *Marriage, Sex and Civic Culture*, 88-9.

⁴⁹ Degaré's age is given as twenty (l. 289), so his mother must be at least 32 years old, and is probably older.

Of course, the irony of *Degaré* is that the king is trying to defend what has already been lost, and the implicit criticism in the text is that he is leaving it far too long to find an heir for his kingdom:

He sscholde have in mariage
His dowter and his heritage,
That is kingdom god and fair,
For he had non other hair. (441-4)

This is true of all these fathers; none of them have an heir besides one daughter, and an obstinate refusal to marry those daughters places their kingdoms in jeopardy. They seem willing to risk the future of their patrilineage in order to have complete control over their daughters' marital destiny.

What, then, are their motivations for this behaviour, which is surely counter-productive to their aims as monarchs? There does seem to be a possessive quality to their relationships. The princess in *Degaré* notes the claustrophobic nature of her relationship with her father; she has never had the opportunity to get to know men, and that she bears sole responsibility for her father's happiness (163-75). The earl in *Eglamour* allows his daughter a little more freedom, even letting her speak to Eglamour in private, but finds it hard to conceive that anyone could be worthy of her hand: 'I knowe non that hyr schall have, / Sche ys so bryght of ble!' (209-10) Are these reactions covertly sexual? It is difficult to say, but Gower's *Confessio Amantis* may, if not explain these feelings, provide an understanding of their complexity. In Book VIII, Apollonius is reunited with his daughter Thaise, having not seen her in fourteen years. Before he discovers who she is, he looks on her and has the following reaction:

His herte upon this maide caste,
That he hire loveth kindely,
And yit he wiste nevere why. (VIII. 1706-8)

'Kindely' is an interesting word that could offer a number of readings. It could suggest 'affectionately' in a general sense, or it could mean more specifically 'with familial feeling', or even that the feeling arose 'naturally'. It could also be a play on

the use of 'kinde' to mean 'sexual activities'.⁵⁰ There is a slippage here between potential types of feeling, just as Apollonius seems ready to slip inadvertently into an inappropriate emotional response to his daughter. Apollonius responds to Thaise, the text implies, because she is his daughter; kind knows kind, just as in other romances people instinctively recognise the gentle status of a knight even if he is dressed as a beggar. Because Apollonius does not expect to find his daughter, however, his feelings could easily be mutated into another kind of love. The narrator seems to present this as an understandable response, although it is evidently a good thing that Apollonius thinks to ask Thaise her name, and so discovers her true identity. The fathers of *Eglamour*, *Degaré* and *Squire* also seem to occupy this dangerous ground between fatherly affection and sexual passion, but unlike Apollonius, who is there for only a few moments, they are in this position for years, which may explain the depths of their hostility towards the idea of their daughters belonging to anyone else.⁵¹ Judith Herman, in her study of later twentieth century incidents of father-daughter incest, discusses the phenomenon of 'the seductive father', whom she defines as a man demonstrating sexually motivated behaviours towards his daughter, whilst stopping short of actual sexual contact.⁵² While it would be inappropriate to apply her findings directly to literature written centuries before, there are some interesting parallels between her work and the romances studied here.

[The] daughters of seductive fathers experienced their relationships with their fathers as privileged and special Within their families the daughters were often known as 'Daddy's princess' [W]hen their fathers were angry or upset, they turned to their daughters for solace or comfort. Although the daughters generally enjoyed their special status, they felt ambivalent about it The daughters sensed that their fathers' special interest in them did not develop in response to their own need for parental nurturance but rather expressed the fathers' needs.⁵³

⁵⁰ 'kind(e), as adjective – 1. (a) In accordance with the ordinary course of nature, natural. 4. (a) Having normal affections or disposition, well-disposed towards one's kin. 'kinde' as noun – 14. (b) sexual function; *werkes of* ~, sexual activities; *don* ~, to engage in sexual intercourse.' *Middle English Dictionary*.

⁵¹ The father in *Squire* is a more complicated example than those in *Eglamour* and *Degaré*, as he is not openly hostile to the suitor – but his actions are obstructive to the marriage, and his underlying behaviour seems to have much in common with these other fathers. I will be looking closely at this particular father anon.

⁵² Herman, *Father-Daughter Incest*, 109.

⁵³ Herman, *Father-Daughter Incest*, 114-5.

On the one hand, a 'seductive' father is controlling, and may show aggressive tendencies, such as *Degaré's* king violently striking down suitors for his daughter's hand (450-6). On the other, he privileges his daughter by making her the most important person in his life, as *Degaré's* king also does. He may also show great material generosity at the same time as controlling his daughter's relationship choices. *The Squire of Low Degree* contains a particularly interesting example of this control combined with largesse. The King of Hungary is responsible for his daughter's great grief, as he has contrived to make her believe that her lover the squire is dead. When the king comes across her mourning, the princess says he cannot understand her unhappiness. 'Her father knewe it every deale, / But he kept it in counsele' (737-8), and aims to comfort her with offers of gifts instead of with the truth. He promises a hunting trip, fine wines, and beautiful clothes in a speech (739-852) remarkable for its length – particularly in a romance of only 1132 lines - and beguiling language. The king presents his daughter with a beautiful world, but one that he has created and will control. His interest in her happiness seems to be intended more as a demonstration of his largesse than providing the princess with what would actually benefit her. When the squire returns, perhaps forcing the king into action, the king tells the princess that the corpse she has cherished as the body of her lover is in fact that of his steward. The king replies to his daughter's impassioned "'Alas! Father, why dyd ye so?'" (987) only by summarising the plot thus far (998-1035). The princess does not think this is a satisfactory answer, and so asks the question again (1043), but the king does not reply. Perhaps there is nothing he can say to justify what he has done; he can only distract her by bringing out the squire (1063-4).

It seems that the king enjoys playing the role of the kind and beneficent father rather than actually being one, as indicated by his apparently solicitous attempt to console the princess at the beginning of her period of mourning for her supposedly dead lover:

And nowe ye were clothes of blacke,
 Tell me, doughter, for whose sake?
 If he be so poore of fame

That ye may not be wedded for shame,
 Brynge him to me anone ryght,
 I shall hym make squyer and knight... (723-8)

Given that the king has created the circumstances that make the princess believe her lover is dead, which thrusts her into the position of widowhood without any of the obvious benefits of having been married, this seems like a remarkably cruel offer on his part. Why does the king delay his daughter's marriage? He does not appear to have any concerns about the squire's lowly status; as he says, "many a page / Have become men by mariage" (373-4), and he readily addresses the squire as 'sonne' (666). He sends the squire away to seek his fortune for seven years (865-80), which is a conventional period of time for such an adventure, and is indeed the length of time that the princess previously told the squire he should spend in pursuit of glory (165). The king, however, orders the squire that his 'counsayl he should never discure' (868), and he lets his daughter continue to think that the squire is dead. Perhaps he hopes that the squire will never return, but since he has already said that the squire is an eligible suitor, he cannot simply get rid of him; he instead has to delay the marriage for as long as possible.

It is only after seven years, when the princess is still consumed by despair and decides to "become an ancesse" (956) that her father decides to end the charade, but this may be less out of concern for his daughter and more an expedient response to the fact of the squire's successful return (900-14). Whatever his reasons, it seems important to the king that he keep orchestrating the action so that he is responsible for even the choreography of the lovers' reunion, and in a final act of control instead of waiting for his death to pass on the crown, he 'made him [the squire] kyng among them al' (1120). This decision to abdicate is what allows the story to have a completely happy ending, but the question of whether the king would have ever let his daughter know the truth had the squire not come back is, like the princess' plaintive 'why?', left unanswered.

The *Squire*'s king eventually seems to decide on a pragmatic course of action – if his daughter must marry, then at least he can control how and when she does. In *Eglamour*, however, the father never seems to accept the need for his daughter to marry, and takes against the suitor, even when that knight was previously a valued member of the court whom he has praised to Christabelle:

The Erle to his dowghtyr spake,
 '...
 He [Eglamour] hath served us many a day,
 Full trewly in hys entent;
 In justyng and in turnament
 He seyde us nevyr nay...' (*Eglamour*, 121-9)

Moreover, when the topic of the princess' marriage is first broached, Prynsamour seems amenable, and says that Christabelle can be won through deeds of arms. However, there is a peculiar use of language preceding this conversation. In *Eglamour*, the earl and Eglamour go out hunting, and the narrator notes:

Tyll a *wrathe* fyll betwen hem two,
 Ore hyt nyghed the nyght thoo,
 Yyf ye wyll lysten and lere. (193-5; my emphasis.)

No argument arises at this point, although the narrator clearly states that if the reader follows the account of what happens that night, they will learn of one. Is it meant to be taken that the negotiations for Christabelle's hand, which appear to be conducted amicably, are actually fuelled by bad feeling? Or is the implication that the negotiations are necessarily fraught – that by his nature the earl cannot but take against a suitor for his daughter's hand? Furthermore, when Eglamour returns after his second successful quest, the earl is 'full woo' and remarks crossly that:

'...Thow art abowte, I undirstande,
 To wyne all Artas of my honde
 And my dowghtyr schene!' (646-8)

Although Eglamour has done exactly what the earl has asked, the earl is angry. He sees now that Eglamour is not just a rival for his daughter, but for his patrimony, and this clearly disturbs him. Eglamour, young, courageous and efficient, poses a real threat to the confident rule of the father. It is best to send the knight as far away as possible; he and the ruler cannot comfortably occupy the same space.

Prynsamour's anger, then, seems to be born out of not just a jealousy for losing his daughter, but jealousy because of what the younger man represents. This may be why the King of Hungary sends the squire away, even though he knows that the squire is a suitable suitor, just as Prynsamour knows that Eglamour is capable because of the tasks he successfully completes. Both fathers employ tactics to delay the wedding, and feel that their role is threatened by the younger men. A similar motivation is seen in *Emaré*, where it is arguable that the emperor forms a passion for the heroine because he has just received the splendid cloth covered with images of famous lovers (85-180). When he then sees his daughter, who looks very like her mother, he tries to cast himself in the role of her young lover, instead of finding a more appropriate candidate for her hand. It may be that the glamour of the robe, and the exciting lifestyles it evokes, reflects a large part of what attracts the emperor to his daughter. Like Prynsamour, he does not like to be reminded that he is growing older and that he will eventually pass on his patrimony to another.

Like *Eglamour*, *Torrent* recounts a dispute arising because of a proposed marriage between two men who have previously had an amicable relationship. In *Torrent* it is the king who suggests that the hero might be able to win the princess, since he has realised Torrent loves her, but after Torrent's promise to fight for her, there follows this line:

Ther-of the kyng for tene wax wode (73).

This apparently simple sentence is actually packed with possible meanings. 'Wode' was most commonly used to mean 'angry', but it could also mean 'driven to distraction, distressed, or insane'.⁵⁴ What has given the king such an extreme feeling? 'Tene' was used to mean an injury or physical suffering, but in this context it seems more likely to mean 'loss'.⁵⁵ This would present an interesting picture of

⁵⁴ 'wode': 3. (a) Of a person or other sentient being: emotionally distressed or agitated, driven to distraction. (e) wrongheaded, perverse, foolish to the point of madness or wickedness; also, witless. *Middle English Dictionary*.

⁵⁵ 'tene': 1. (a) Injury, harm, wrong; also, an injury. 2. Physical suffering, pain. 3. (a) Suffering, adversity; a misfortune, hardship; also, loss, losing. 5. (a) Pains taken, travail. *Middle English Dictionary*.

the effect of negotiating Desonell's marriage on the king. Is he then driven to distraction by the pain of losing – or merely the idea of losing – Desonell? It may be that both *Eglamour's* earl and *Torrent's* king are both initially open to the idea of their daughters' marriages, but when faced with it as a looming reality, recoil from the notion.

However, the king of *Torrent* seems more pragmatic than his counterpart in *Emaré* or *Eglamour*, and less likely to be acting purely on the basis of his emotions. Indeed, the king in *Torrent* provides an interesting contrast to other fathers who persecute their daughters, because when Torrent is absent, he arranges another marriage for her (1101-5). Torrent returns and challenges the Prince of Aragon, and having defeated him says indignantly: “‘Lokyth, lordys, you among, / Whether he [the king] do me ryght or wrong!’” (1209-10) The king seems to have made expert use of the young Torrent, and then taken advantage of his absence to find a better match for his daughter. The king's delaying of his daughter's marriage to Torrent might be less a sign of possessiveness than a sort of Machiavellian cunning. Here we have a king who is not necessarily opposed to marrying off his daughter *per se*, but is determined to ensure that he gains the best possible outcome from the marriage negotiations. It is appropriate behaviour for a father to try to find his daughter the best possible match, but he is breaking what amounts to a contract with Torrent in order to marry her to a prince.⁵⁶ It may be no coincidence, then, that in *Torrent* the queen has more of a presence in the text than in other stories of this type. She cannot alter her husband's actions – her pleas for him not to put Desonell out to sea are ignored (1800-6) – but she may influence his motivations. Certainly, whilst the king's judgment is cruel, it seems to be born out of a desire to make an example of Desonell – ‘Euery kyngis doughter ffer and nere / At the shall they lere’ (1919-20) – rather than as a result of rage, as in *Emaré*:

⁵⁶ In terms of canon law, it is difficult to know what would be made of the conditions set by the king on Torrent before a marriage could be made, as details regarding conditional marriage are about agreements made between the couple. See R.H. Helmholz, *Marriage Litigation in Medieval England* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 47-50. As for the kind of marriage contracts typical of the gentry, there is no written agreement between Torrent and the king. Nonetheless, it is clear from the narrative that the king has at least contravened the spirit of their agreement.

The Emperour was ryght wrothe,
 And swore many a gret othe,
 That deed shulde she be. (265-7)

Nonetheless, whether it is too much love or too much greed that drives the king, it is an extreme selfishness that means he puts his own desires above the happiness of his daughter and the oath he has made to Torrent. The king believes he is above the law, and acts accordingly.

All these fathers are, in one way or another, tyrants. Whilst the precise scenarios vary, what comes out of these stories is that their tyranny is born from selfishness. Just as I outlined incest earlier in this chapter as being more a reflection of the father's perception of himself than of his feelings for his daughter, in these cases the daughter is for him less an individual in her own right than a way of externalising his own ambitions and desires, which he projects on to her. The king cannot conceive of anything lying beyond his own desire, and so he tries to mould the world – and its people – around him. Thus a scenario arises in which a king can on the one hand offer his daughter as many gifts as she might desire, while simultaneously punishing her for daring to want anything he does not feel like granting.

In all these romances, it is the father's selfishness that precipitates the action. In *Torrent* and *Eglamour*, his blocking of the marriage ensures that the hero and heroine will seek to be together without his involvement. This was controversial, as disobeying one's father was no light thing, and to disobey a king could be seen as treasonous. The historical evidence makes it clear that daughters were expected to marry at their parents' behest. In terms of canon law, parental consent was one of the few conditions that could be attached to a promise of marriage, of either future or present consent.⁵⁷ Shannon McSheffrey's examination of London marriages in the later fifteenth century shows evidence for such conditional clauses being attached to agreements to marry, and argues that daughters were socialised to insist on parental,

⁵⁷ Helmholz, *Marriage Litigation*, 47. 'If the father consents' was the most frequently given by canonists example of an honest, possible type of condition (as contrasted with honest but impossible conditions and dishonest conditions).

particularly paternal, consent before agreeing to marry.⁵⁸ These bourgeois marriages, meanwhile, may have offered a greater degree of autonomy to the couple than the marriages of the social ranks I discuss here; there is no need for conditional clauses, because daughters would never be expected to be making their own matches. Social norms side with the father's right to make his daughter's match. However, the romances are careful to ensure that each hero has clearly carried out his part of the agreement with the father. Both Torrent and Eglamour agree to perform deeds of arms in exchange for the daughter's hand in marriage. Both men carry out these feats, and thus have fulfilled the obligations set by the fathers. However, if in a romance a parent has given their consent and a marriage is then contracted, it would doubtless seem to readers that subsequent attempts to thwart the match were inappropriate, and possibly also invalid. The consummation of Eglamour and Christabelle's relationship, moreover, is evidently the making of a marriage, as they plight their troth before going to bed:

... 'Wellcome, syr knyght!'
 'Damysell,' he seyde, 'so have I spedde,
 With the grace of God I shall you wedde.'
 Thereto here trowthes they plyght.
 So gracyus he con here tell
 A poynt of armes that hym befell
 And there he dwelled all nyght. (665-72)

Whilst the marriage would be clandestine, in terms of canon law it would still be valid.⁵⁹ The status of Torrent and Desonell's relationship is a little more uncertain, as they exchange no vows; it could be argued that by having sexual intercourse they consummated their engagement, which would constitute a valid marriage, but that depends on the reader assuming that Desonell has plighted her troth to Torrent 'offstage', as it were. If these are, in fact, valid marriages, the fathers' later behaviour is even more reprehensible. In contrast, the princess of *Degaré* does not have a pre-existing engagement, but like the other examples cited here, the irregularity of her first sexual encounter is partly a result of her father's behaviour. She is raped when she loses her party in the woods, and the knight is not a trusted

⁵⁸ McSheffrey, *Marriage, Sex and Civic Culture*, 89-96.

⁵⁹ Helmholz, *Marriage Litigation*, 27.

member of the court, like Torrent and Eglamour, but a stranger of Fairy. Her father's stubborn refusal to let her mix with men is a contributing factor in making her more vulnerable to the depredations of a stranger, as she seems to be unaware of her danger before it is too late.

Although the legitimacy of the sexual acts in these romances may vary, all of them show an element of dysfunction, in that they appear outside the norm of what would be expected of their social class. The making of marriage, for instance, was meant to be preceded by the publishing of banns and made in the presence of a priest, and not doing so was a sin requiring penance.⁶⁰ More significantly, the culture of marriage making at the aristocratic level was that marriages were formed through formal agreements between families, not through a private act between a couple. Business negotiations regarding dowry and jointure were settled in written contracts, the details of which often took months to finalise.⁶¹ Margery Paston's clandestine marriage to the family steward Richard Calle horrified her brothers and mother. Largely this was because Richard was viewed as an unsuitable candidate for marriage to Margery; John III told him coldly that 'he shold never have my good wyll for to make my syster to selle kandyll and mustard', which indicates that John felt that Margery's status would be degraded by such a match.⁶² However, her family were also angry that Margery contracted the marriage without their guidance, as a letter from her mother makes clear:

the Bysschop ... put her in rememberawns how she was born, wat kyn and frendds that sche had, and xuld have mo yf sche wer rulyd and gydyd aftyr hem; and ... wat rebuke, and schame ... yt xuld be to her, yf sche wer not gydyd be them⁶³

A young woman's marriage making must be controlled. This is particularly important if she is an heiress, as her marriage moves her patrimony into the hands of another man.⁶⁴ Her marriage can potentially threaten patriarchal authority, and so

⁶⁰ Helmholz, *Marriage Litigation*, 27.

⁶¹ Harris, *English Aristocratic Women*, 45-6.

⁶² *PL*, no. 710, 5:21.

⁶³ *PL*, no. 721, 5:38.

⁶⁴ Menuge, *Medieval English Wardship*, 83.

must be contained. It is thus clear that clandestine marriages subverted the idea of aristocratic marital norms, but in *Eglamour* and *Torrent* the narrative emphasises that it is the father who pushes the daughter and her betrothed into socially inappropriate behaviour. They have been forced to act in secretive ways because their fathers will not let them fulfil their expected role as aristocratic women – that is, to get married in a family-sanctioned ceremony. This is the first of many signs that the men lack certain qualities essential in leaders, because if their own daughters – the people they might most expect obedience from – have to act without their permission, what does that say about their ability to govern?⁶⁵ If the household is a microcosm of the estate or kingdom, then the father's failure to control the weakest member of the household is telling.

Unsurprisingly, the fathers react badly when they discover what has happened.⁶⁶ In both *Torrent* and *Eglamour* the father determines to put his daughter to death by setting her afloat in a boat without provisions. In other circumstances the father's anger would be justified, as a clandestine wedding undermines his authority, but the earl's and king's punishments are extreme and unreasonable. Both describe their daughters' offspring as 'bastards', and are clearly unable to recognise the validity of Desonell and Christabelle's relationships. When confronted with proof of these relationships, both fathers are furious, because it demonstrates that the women have acted outside the fathers' authority. It is not, however, that the daughters have become independent, but rather that they now belong to other men, that incenses the fathers. It is perfectly licit for a father to expect to be able to rule his daughter; what is inappropriate is that they stymie their daughters' marital and procreative futures to assert that governance. Being crossed in their desire for absolute control, the father shows another sign of his tyranny by putting his own feelings before justice.

⁶⁵ As Nikki Stiller argues, the greatest level of paternal authority can be seen in men's treatment of their daughters. Stiller, *Eve's Orphans*, 6.

⁶⁶ With the exception of *Degaré's* king, because this story does not follow the expected 'Constance' motif and so we do not see the king's reaction to what has happened – but given his possessive nature, it would seem likely that his response would be similar.

Beyond the injustice of his decision to cast out his daughter, however, there is a graver crime. By putting his daughter out to sea, the king is quite literally cutting off his only chances of direct succession. The king has already failed to some extent by only having a daughter, rather than a son, but he could mend this by ensuring his patrilineage went to his grandson. Instead, even though Christabelle has one boy, and Desonell has twin sons, the fathers cast them all out.

The daughter at sea is dislocated. Previously she is in a clearly delineated domestic space – the castle, and within that her own chamber. Her fixed presence is important, because whilst the hero has to earn his fortunes, the heroine *is* his fortune. She and the castle and the patrimony are inextricably linked in her position as heir. Or at least, they should be. By putting her to sea, her father is cutting her off from her inheritance. *Emaré*, which contains the fullest description of the maiden-at-sea, makes it clear what a dangerous and desolate place she inhabits:

She was dryven wyth wynde and rayn,
Wyth stronge stormes her agayn,
Of the watur so blo. (316-8)

Unlike the fixed boundaries of the kingdom or earldom, the sea is without boundaries and constantly shifting. The daughter's fortunes should be constant; her presence on the wild seas represents how disordered her father's government has become.

The major reason that it is wrong to cast the daughter out to sea, however, is not because it is immoral to kill, but because it is terrible to deny the lineage a future. One of the greatest responsibilities of a king is to ensure that his kingdom had a successor.⁶⁷ As Octavian notes to his wife:

‘Now hafe we seven yere sammen bene
And hafe no chylde us bytwene,
For fay we sall hythen fownde,
And I ne wote how this land sall fare
Bot lyfe in werre and in kare
When we are broghte to grownde...’ (64-9, *Octavian*).

⁶⁷ Concerns regarding lineage have been considered in Chapter 2.

The emperor has an appropriate concern for the future of his empire. These other rulers do not, from the King of Hungary's delaying of the marriage, to Prynsamour's casting out of his daughter and her son. *Eglamour's* earl and *Torrent's* King of Portugal show particular wickedness because their daughters do not just show *potential* for providing lineage but have already done so; yet because the fathers have not had authority over the creation of the next generation, they reject it. It is part of their myopic selfishness that prevents them looking beyond their own needs to what their nation requires.

In two of these romances – *Torrent* and *Eglamour* – the father is punished with death. In *Squire* and *Degaré* he is not. In part this is because of the extent of the father's sin. All of them have been guilty of keeping their daughters unmarried, but the latter two fathers have not tried to kill their daughters, nor broken any promises to particular suitors – *Degaré's* king never makes any vows, and *Squire's* king seem to treat the squire more fairly than he does his own daughter.⁶⁸ However, in the text I have been using for comparative purposes, *Emaré*, the emperor is not only allowed to live, but is redeemed. Given that he also tries to kill the heroine, and furthermore attempts to make her a victim of his lust, this seems surprising. Why is he reintegrated back into family life when the earl and the king are not?

Emaré provides a reason why some fathers are reintegrated when others are not. In this text, Artyus and Emaré's mother-in-law clearly parallel one another. However, the latter is cast out of her kingdom whilst the former is reunited with Emaré and is forgiven. Partly this could be seen as a misogynistic approach – forgive the man and punish the woman for the same sin – but I believe it has more to do with the *function* of each character. The wicked queen is, essentially, functionless. The mother-in-law is described as an 'olde qwene' (443) as she meets her successor. The widow of the previous king has no dynastic purpose, since her son is an adult and ruling in his own right. The text is able to dispense with her. The Emperor Artyus, however, is

⁶⁸ Although 'more fairly' is a relative term in the case of this king – he does keep the squire locked up for some time, but on the other hand gives him leave to seek his fortune!

required, because Emaré's son, Segramour, has become the heir to the empire, as well as to the kingdom of Galys that he will obtain through his father. The emperor must meet his daughter and realise she is still alive, and recognise her heir as legitimate. Doing so means that her son's future is assured:

Ther was a joyfull metynge
Of the Emperour and of the Kynge,
And also of Emaré;
And so ther was of Syr Segramour,
That after was emperour... (1021-5)

There is a similar situation in *Degaré*; the reason the hero needs to have the almost-marriage with his mother is so that he will be recognised by his grandfather. Degaré's situation is the most precarious of any of the children in the romances mentioned here, as he was not born under circumstances of any legitimacy, and he needs to be recognised to give himself any kind of identity.⁶⁹

What, though, of *Eglamour* and *Torrent*? Do the fathers not need to recognise their grandchildren? It seems not, because the contracts that they have made with the heroes are quite public. In *Torrent* in particular, the hero is very vocal about the rights he has. He is, unusually, the direct cause of the king's death; he forms a council and has the king sentenced to be set adrift in a boat full of holes to ensure he, unlike his daughter, will not drift ashore (2119-54). He then takes the kingdom with the nobles' consent, meaning that his children are now heirs to Portugal through him, rather than necessarily through Desonell. It must be noted, however, that *Torrent* still does not directly kill the king, although he is responsible for his death; as he himself points out 'he is a kyng, / Men may hym nether hede no hing.' (2125-6) This seems like a way for *Torrent* to get around the moral impossibility of killing an anointed king, while still managing to punish him for his crimes. In *Eglamour*, the death of the father is less controversial; in an act of God he falls down and breaks his neck (1285-90). In addition, the recognition scene between *Eglamour* and Christabelle takes place in front of kings and nobles, so their relationship is legitimised and does not need proof from the father.

⁶⁹ The question of Degaré's identity is dealt with extensively in Chapter 4.

The passionate, cruel Prynsamour of *Eglamour* and the playful, tricky King of Hungary in *Squire* may seem on first reading like very different types of rulers. Both however are motivated to act improperly because they are tyrants. Tyranny, in these romances, is not defined so much by *acts* as by *motivations*; the cruelties that the rulers impose are caused by a similar strain of selfishness that differs only in magnitude. Like incestuous fathers, these men do not wish their daughters to belong to anyone else. They have a relationship with them that is uncomfortably possessive, not because they necessarily desire their daughters, but because they do not know how to be fathers. To be a father requires them to think beyond themselves in a very particular and far-reaching way; that they fail to do this is not only a mark of their failure as fathers, but as rulers. The main preoccupation of a father, these narratives indicate, should be the future; he should always be working to preserve his line. To neglect this, as *Squire*'s king does, is foolhardy; to deliberately put that patrilineage in jeopardy, like *Torrent*'s king does, is sinful. If they threaten their line, the only way they can be reintegrated into the family is either to make amends, as *Squire*'s king does, or to be vital in reinforcing the legitimacy of the line, as *Emaré*'s king is. A king or father who cannot act his proper role can be struck down by God; as *Torrent* notes, 'Falshode wyll haue a foule end, / And wyll haue euermore.' Kings may often seem to be above the law, but there is one law they cannot break: that of blood, and the necessity of preserving it.

'Norysch þe chylde wyth honowre': the good father and the importance of dynastic preservation⁷⁰

This awareness of blood and the importance of continuity is a key difference between the bad father of romance and the good. The tyranny of the bad father, it has been seen, is in large part an overweening selfishness. This goes beyond him merely considering himself first; it is a myopic self-absorption that excludes an

⁷⁰ Carol Flavo Heffernan, ed., *Le Bone Florence of Rome* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1976), l. 55.

outward and forward-looking gaze. The tyrant is exclusively focused on the immediate gratification of his personal desires; he has a narrow world view that excludes anything but himself. He wishes to enjoy the power of kingship whilst forgetting that a king – and father – must look beyond himself. The good father, meanwhile, is constantly aware of time beyond the moment, of his place within history and of his responsibility to secure the future. As we saw earlier, the Emperor Octavian expresses this awareness of the pressure of time as he describes his grief at their childlessness to his wife:

‘Now hafe we seven yere sammen bene
 ...
 Therefore I hafe so mekyll thoghte
 That when I am to bedde broghte
 I slepe bot littill stownde.’ (*Octavian* 64-72)

The importance of establishing dynastic continuity is particularly pressing when a father has only a daughter, which is often the case in romance. He cannot rely on his son taking on the responsibility of continuing the family line, and so he must take an active part in establishing this. The good father, then, is one who finds his daughter a suitable husband.

The kings of *Le Bone Florence of Rome* and *Havelok the Dane* may be seen as excellent fathers in this respect, the former because he is determined to not give his daughter to the wrong man, even at great cost to himself, and the latter because he diligently attempts to secure his daughter’s marital future. Athelwold, father to *Havelok*’s Goldeboru, knows he is on his deathbed and so appoints a guardian for his infant daughter and specifies how she should be brought up until ‘she be wman of helde’ (174), at which point she should be wed to the ‘beste man that micthe live - / The beste, fayreste, the strangest ok’ (199-200). Athelwold’s deathbed speech seems like a dramatic variation on normal practice, if aristocratic wills are any indication; Barbara Harris has found that nearly all of her sample of aristocratic fathers with daughters provided for dowries, and some stipulate that these dowries

should be awarded only if their daughters married men of fit wealth or rank.⁷¹ In a few words Athelwold sums up the necessary qualities for his daughter's husband. The man should be 'beste', that is highest in rank; 'fayreste', which could mean handsome as well as courteous; and 'strangest', which could be used to mean not only physically strong, but also virile, mature, and mighty in a political sense.⁷² Athelwold expects a great deal from the man who will marry his daughter, which is right since his son-in-law will become king, and also the next father in Athelwold's dynastic chain.

In *Havelok*, it is the epithet 'strong' that particularly resonates. When Godrich wants to cheat Goldeboru of her rightful position as queen, he decides to take Athelwold's commandment literally by picking Havelok, who becomes well known due to his shot-putting prowess. The text refers to Havelok as 'strong' sixteen times, and it thus seems to be his defining characteristic. The attributes that the term covers are apparently what is most important in a king, and this is a reason why Otes, in *Le Bone Florence*, cannot wed his daughter to Garcy. He is simply not 'strong' enough.

In some senses, Garcy seems like an eminently suitable suitor. He is a great emperor, governing a large territory and heading a massive army. He certainly seems to embody the military and political aspects of 'strength'. The text's disapproval of Garcy, then, is all based on his age. The emperor is not just old; he is decrepit: 'Hys flesche trembylde for grete elde, / Hys blode colde hys body unwelde...' (94-5). Of course, the ill fit of a young wife with an old husband is a familiar enough motif, and

⁷¹ Sir Robert Radcliffe's 1496 will insisted that his daughters marry men with land worth 200 marks a year or more, and John Shirley's will of 1485 revoked his daughters' dowries if they married men of lesser rank. 257 wills out of the 268 surveyed provided dowries. Barbara J. Harris, *English Aristocratic Women*, 43-55.

⁷² 'Strong: Com **stronger**(e, etc. & **stranggere**; su **strongest**(e, etc. & **stranguste**, (error) **stroggest**. 1. (a) Of a person, bodily part or component, etc.: having physical strength; sturdy, strong; 2. (a) Of a person, the body, physical condition, etc.: healthy, fit, robust; virile; ~ **herted**, q.v.; (b) of a bodily function: robust, vigorous; of appetite: hearty; of the pulse: firm, strong; of sight: sharp, keen; of sleep: sound; of the voice: loud; (c) of **more** ~ **age**, more advanced in years, more mature; 5. (a) Of a person, the heart, soul, etc.: spiritually or inwardly strong; also, virtuous; well-endowed (in virtue, conscience, etc.); 6. (a) Of a knight, warrior, etc.: fierce in fighting, valiant, brave, hardy; of an army or enemy: formidable in war or battle; 7. (a) Of a ruler, lord, bishop, leader, etc.: wielding power, mighty; also, as an epithet for a ruler.' *Middle English Dictionary*.

is presented for its comic potential in, for instance, Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale*, where May surveys her wrinkled husband:

The slakke skyn aboute his nekke shaketh,
 Whil that he sang, so chaunteth he and craketh.
 But God woot what that may thoughte in hir herte,
 Whan she hym saugh up sittynge in his sherte,
 In his nyght-cappe, and with his nekke lene;
 She preyseth nat his pleyying worth a bene.⁷³

May's distaste for her husband's grotesque body is presented as a natural response to the incongruity between his desire and the reality of his physical state. There is a revulsion based on aesthetics here, but there is also a sense that marriage and sex are meant to take place between youthful people for whom sex has some purpose. Non-consummation caused by impotence was one of the few reasons for being able to sue for an annulment, not because a marriage without sex was not valid, but because impotence could deprive a marriage of the possibility of children. As the court case between John Skathelok and his wife Alice that I referenced in Chapter 2 indicates, Alice was able to seek an annulment because 'Alice is a young woman ... willing to be a mother and have children if the husband joined to her in marriage were sufficiently potent'⁷⁴ January is, of course, able to consummate his marriage, so there would have been no grounds for annulment, but his sexual desire is grotesque because it serves no function; it seems unlikely that his withered body can have much generative potential. *Le Bone Florence* goes further by indicating that Garcy may in fact be impotent. Garcy's envoy suggests that Florence's place in his bed would be only to keep his frail old body warm (208); whilst this may be the envoy's attempt to soothe Florence's concerns about being put to bed with an old man, it underscores the improper nature of the proposed marriage. With this in mind, Florence's distaste at the idea of marrying Garcy is not just about her personal desires. When she makes the rather startling claim that she would rather 'had leuyr þe warste bachylere, / In all my fadurs thede, / Then for to lye be hys bresyd boones' (245-7), she is demonstrating just how ridiculous it is for her to consider marrying Garcy. Even the worst bachelor in her father's kingdom would be preferable.

⁷³ *The Miller's Tale*, ll. 637-42, in *The Riverside Chaucer*.

⁷⁴ Goldberg, *Women in England*, 220-1.

because he would be what Garcy is not: young and potent. Garcy can offer no future for her father's empire; his marital bed could offer only 'oldely grones' (248), not children to continue the dynasty. This is particularly important when a daughter is her father's heir, because the future of the family line rests on the children she bears, and if she marries an old man, that future is threatened.

Florence's remark that rather than marrying a high ranking but old and potentially infertile man she would take an unsuitable and lower ranking suitor demonstrates the importance of virility. However, when a man is marrying an heiress, much more than potency is expected of him. Athelwold's list of qualities demands an exceptional man. Indeed, at that point in the text, it would seem that the only man able to fill that role would be himself, since the romance has opened with a long enumeration of his outstanding qualities (27-109); given that the situation in England is then very deliberately mirrored with that in Denmark, the assumption is that Birkabeyn is also a holder of these excellent attributes. Havelok is at this point in the narrative only a child, but he grows into a man who is very like both his father and his father-in-law. Athelwold is a just and noble king who upholds the law and protects the poor and needy. This long detailing of his virtues is not only so that a contrast can be provided with the traitor Godrich's corrupt rule, but also allows the story to come full circle when Havelok is restored to his rightful position and takes on both fathers' roles. Birkabeyn, Havelok's father, is 'the best knicth / That ever micte leden uth here' (345-6), and Havelok lives up to this noble example when he 'slawen sixti and on / Sergaunz, the beste that mihten gon' (1928-9). The men were thieves, from whom Athelwold protected the kingdom (39), as, presumably, did his Danish mirror. Athelwold loves all 'Richtwise men' (37), regardless of rank, and hates the wicked – 'For hem ne yede gold ne fee' (44). Similarly, Havelok punishes Godrich and Godard, even though they are noble, and remembers to reward his friends, right down to Bertram the cook (2898-2927). Goldeboru is thus married to a man who is as close to a copy of her father as possible.

In *Le Bone Florence*, too, the princess ultimately marries a man who is very like her father. Otes offers his daughter's hand to anyone who can defeat Garcy (609-21), and Florence urges Emere to take up the challenge by saying:

‘Thou be my fadurs belde,
And þou schalt haue all thy desyre,
Me and all þys ryche empyre,
Aftur my fadur to welde.’ (762-5)

By describing Emere as her father's ‘belde’, that is ‘courage’, she transforms her suitor into an aspect or extension of her father; her transmission to him through Otes will thus be natural. Moreover, once Emere and Florence marry, their first child is named Otes (2165), a conventional naming pattern that creates a sense of seamless family continuity.

This seamlessness is what the good father attempts to create for his daughter. For the daughter of romance, her place in the narrative is defined by her relation to the primary man in her life – firstly her father and then her husband. Unlike sons, who maintain relationships whilst moving through the narrative, daughters are more fixed spatially. A good father helps his daughter move from location A – as his daughter and at his court – to point B, where she becomes the wife of an aristocrat and is attached to his court, with as great ease as possible. Hence Athelwold's careful detailing of how Goldeboru's marriage should be handled. The daughter should, ideally, transition naturally between father and husband-who-is-like-father.

Of course, this rarely happens in romance, or at least not in romances where the story of the daughter plays a significant part, because if there were such easy transitions, there would be no story. Narrative happens when the space between A and B opens and the daughter, like Emaré at sea, is left adrift. This kind of story is easily created by the addition of a bad father who will push the heroine into flight, but the only way to create narrative when there is a good father is to remove the father from the narrative. In this way, the absence of the father precipitates the action of the story; but his absence also demonstrates the importance of the father by underlining the chaos that follows when he is gone. Thus the good father plays the

role of negative space within the romance; he is remembered because he is not there. Unlike Emaré and Antiochus' daughter, Goldeboru and Florence are not victims of their fathers; they are victims of their fathers' absence.

Moreover, this lack of a father is a defining characteristic of these princesses. Goldeboru cannot help being imprisoned, nor despite her protests can she stop herself being married to a man she believes does not meet her father's standards (1110-31); there is no sense at all in the narrative that she has any control over her own destiny. Meanwhile, once Florence loses her father and becomes a victim of her brother-in-law's treachery, her position as a persecuted victim overpowers all other aspects of her character. This can make sense of the discrepancy noted by Carol Flavo Heffernan – that the Florence of the second part of the narrative is rather different from that of the first. The Florence of the opening part of the romance is spirited and intelligent, but after she loses her father she becomes a victim of misfortune after misfortune, and her dialogue is mostly reduced to pleas to God.⁷⁵ This may be because her relationship with her father has been something that defines her. Unlike other daughters in romance, when her mother dies Florence is not sent away to be raised by a nurse, but instead is actively cared for by the emperor himself:

Syr Otes, þe nobull emperowre,
Gart norysch þe chylde wyth honowre,
And kept hur hole and sownde. (55-7)

Whilst Athelwold wants Goldeboru educated to the level one might expect for a noble lady (until 'she couthe of curteysye', l. 194), Otes goes further and has Florence taught 'Tyll sche cowde of þe boke telle, / And all thyng dyscrye' (59-60). When Garcy's offer of marriage is presented, Otes is happy to have Florence speak in front of his council, which she does boldly (240-52), and she even joins him on the ramparts as he surveys Garcy's troops arriving (479-86). Their relationship is remarkably close, and is one of the most fully fleshed out father-daughter relationships in romance. Although Florence may seem like a bold and independent

⁷⁵ Introduction to *Le Bone Florence*, 18.

character at the start of the romance, it becomes clear that it is her father who provides her with the impetus to action. She reacts to his offering her in marriage to anyone who can defeat Garcy with enthusiasm, because she wishes her defender to become her father's strength (762); her attention is all on his success. When he is killed, his body is brought from the battlefield 'wythowten belle or procescyon' (797) to protect his daughter from the shock of a funeral procession, but Florence at once knows what is wrong and is stricken by sorrow. From this point onwards her character seems to diminish; she never loses her fortitude, but she is less willing to speak out, and becomes driven by events, rather than driving them alongside her father. When she comes to the convent where she finds sanctuary, she is able to call on a religious, and female, authority, as her position as both nun and healer means she can boldly demand that the men who have wronged her confess their sins if they wish to be healed:

Sche seyde, 'Ye that wyll be hale,
And holly broght owt of yowre bale
Of that ye are ynne,
Ye muste schryue yow openlye,
And that wyth a full lowde crye,
To all þat be here boþe more and mynne.' (2032-7)

Florence confidently sets out the terms under which she will give aid, and the men meekly obey. However, the romance ends not in a convent, but with 'the emperowre and hys wyfe' (2170); it is Emere who succeeds Otes, not Florence, and after her brief interlude as a powerful woman in her own right, she returns to being dependent upon her lord.

The (near-)incestuous father and the good father, then, are in some ways not so very different; both in some fashion want their daughter to be married to them. Because the bad father is bad, however, this desire is literal; it is not so much the desire itself that makes him bad, but the impulses that drive it. He does not recognise his responsibilities to his patrilineage, and so instead of finding a substitute – and successor – he instead tries to fix himself at a point in time where he can keep his youth and power. The good father is more realistic; he is aware of his mortality, but

instead of reacting against it in fear, he ensures that his patrilineage will continue, and in this way ensures for himself a form of immortality.

That tyrannous fatherhood and good fatherhood are closely linked helps address the question that has surfaced again and again thus far: are there limits to paternal authority, and does paternal abuse of the power invested in that authority mean the nature of that authority is being questioned? Fiction allows an avenue of expression for that which cannot – must not – be consciously expressed. As Rosenthal writes, patriarchy's worth 'was exalted to the point where it largely governed the definition of the family'.⁷⁶ In such a society, paternal authority is so necessary, so fundamental to the working of that society, that the need to sustain it becomes paradoxically a source of anxiety that, because of its taboo nature, cannot be consciously expressed. The relation to the 'real' world can, because of this, be difficult to see; but if instead of looking for 'real life' examples of the tyrant or incestuous father we instead consider how literary motifs might be mirrored in historical material we can see how pervasive this notion of the centrality of fatherly authority was, and thus by reading against the material see how it was also a source of anxiety.

'Scho wold have spokyn and myght noght': absent daughters, conventions of genre, and the necessity of silence⁷⁷

In my Introduction, I established that by looking at letters as much as 'fictions of fatherhood' as historical documents, one can better appreciate the slippage between different types of text and conventions of genre. As discussed in Chapter 2, letters, like more obviously fictional genres, have particular generic conventions which reflect societal expectations not just of form, but also of function. As I indicated there, the stock beginnings of letters from sons to fathers point towards societal expectations of relations between fathers and sons, reinforcing the son's position as supplicant to his master. Sons and fathers, however, might be considered to be on a

⁷⁶ Rosenthal, *Patriarchies and Families*, 57.

⁷⁷ *Sir Gowther*, l. 376.

somewhat more even footing than daughters and fathers, so how do daughters relate to their fathers in letters?

The answer is that they do not. Daughters simply do not write to their fathers. Only Richard Cely has the excuse of having no daughters; all the other families I have mentioned had at least one. Robert Plumpton II had seven daughters, but a letter from only one of them survives.⁷⁸ Robert Armburgh received a letter from his stepdaughter.⁷⁹ From the Stonor or Paston daughters there is nothing. This certainly does not reflect a taboo against women in general writing; although some didactic authors viewed female writing as a subversion of social norms, there are a significant number of letters in the collections written by women – generally wives to their husbands – so why do daughters not write?⁸⁰ Rather than simply chalking this up to a failure of evidence to survive, or simply accepting at face value a notion that it was not ‘proper’ for women to write, instead I consider that the silence of daughters in this respect is as much a convention of genre as the salutations written by their brothers.

An illuminating insight into the communication of fathers and daughters is seen in letters between Robert Plumpton and his son-in-law German de la Pole. In these letters German always passed on his wife’s best wishes to her father, as for instance here: ‘my poor wyfe, your daughter, recomends hir vnto you & my sayd lady, and prayeth you of your daly blessing’.⁸¹ He also requested information on her behalf: ‘let my wyfe haue some word from you...how you doe in your sayd matters’.⁸² Did German mean that Robert should write back to his wife, or that he should include a reply in his next letter to German? Unfortunately we cannot know, but it seems that Anne de la Pole was happy enough for her husband to have control over her

⁷⁸ *PLP*, no. 201, 182-3.

⁷⁹ *AL*, 126-7.

⁸⁰ For more on female writing as subversive, see “‘How ladies...who live on their manors ought to manage their households and estates’”. Women as landholders and administrators in the later middle ages’, Rowena E. Archer, in *Women in Medieval English Society*, ed. by P.J.P. Goldberg (Stroud, Gloucestershire: Sutton, 1997), 151.

⁸¹ *PLP*, no. 212, 192.

⁸² *PLP*, no. 167, 155.

messages to her father. Yet we do not assume that when Anne saw her father she communicated with him through her husband. Nor do we assume that she could not compose letters, since women of her rank and within her own family regularly wrote letters to their husbands, and as I demonstrated in the Introduction, the standard use of an amanuensis by gentry families meant that even if a woman could not write, she could still compose letters.⁸³ What we are seeing here is not a reflection of actual social interaction, or of a practical approach to a problem of literacy, but rather an example of the conventions of what it is appropriate for whom to write. The question, then, is why?

It seems to me that there is a strong parallel here between the absence of daughters in letters and the limitations on daughters' speech in romance. As St John Crysostom opined: 'they [women] will show submission by their silence. For their sex is somewhat talkative by nature...'⁸⁴ The central word is *submission*; for a daughter to maintain silence is for her to show her position within the family hierarchy, particularly since for her to be silent is a way to act against her nature. If she submits willingly, she shows her readiness to subvert her nature to fit in the patriarchal construct of the family; if she is forced into silence, her father has demonstrated his complete control over her voice. As I discussed earlier, women are allowed to speak about their virtue because of its value both to their father and to their prospective husband; that is, to the current patriarch and the patriarch-to-be. In real life, the need for a daughter to insist that her father should not rape her would not have been the experience of most women, but there does seem to be a shared thread between the speech of the daughter in romance, whose words in a sense are a possession of her father and of her husband-to-be, and the words of Anne de la Pole, whose words are passed through her husband to her father, translated into the speech of men. The presence of the 'real' daughter is obfuscated, and she is instead re-imagined in male terms. If the daughter speaks, it is to achieve what is best for her father. This may perhaps allow for a different reading of Margery Brews' letters to John Paston III:

⁸³ Rosenthal, *Telling Tales*, 106-14.

⁸⁴ St. John Crysostom, *Homily IX On St Paul's Epistle to Timothy*. Quoted in Blamires, *Woman Defamed, Woman Defended*, 59.

typically seen as a rare insight into a young woman's emotional life, it is worth noting that, in fact, the letters aim to resolve in her father's favour the dispute over her dowry. By the time of the marriage negotiations in 1477 John Paston III was aged thirty-three and was keen to be married, but nonetheless he was not willing to settle at a disadvantage. John III felt that Sir Thomas Brews was providing an insufficient dowry; for his part, Thomas wrote that he were 'lothe to be stowe so meche uppon one doghter' when he still had to settle her sisters' dowries, and pressed for more favourable terms.⁸⁵ There is plenty of evidence that Margery and John III felt real affection for each other,⁸⁶ but her courtship letters to him were not necessarily spontaneous outpourings of love.⁸⁷ In the following letter to her 'welebelovyd Volentyne', Margery told John III that she wished the matter between her 'fadyr and yowe' were concluded to their mutual advantage, and added that:

I let yowe pleynty undyrstonde, that my fader wyll no more money parte wyth-all in that behalf Wherefore, yf þat 3e cowde be content wyth þat good and my por persone, I wold be þe meryest mayden on grounde.⁸⁸

The first point of interest is that the matter was between John Paston III and Sir Thomas Brews; Margery depicted herself as meekly waiting for its resolution. Of course, Margery may well have had a far more active role to play in the negotiations, but she presented herself as the dutiful daughter and future wife by distancing herself from the male-dominated business at hand. The second point is that she emphasised that her father would concede no further ground, whilst simultaneously subtly suggested that surely she was a sufficient prize, despite not having a large dowry. This is not to suggest that Margery was simply writing at her father's instruction, nor that this letter does not also reflect her own feelings; but given what the letter says, and the fact that it was unusual for young women to write letters, it might be naïve to assume that the content was uninfluenced by her father. Daughters, at least in theory, are meant to speak only for the good of their fathers.

⁸⁵ *PL*, 5:902, 273.

⁸⁶ Richmond, *Endings*, 54. See also Margery's postscript to a letter to John, three years into their marriage, that she hopes 'it wil plesse to sende for me, for I thynke longe sen I lay in yowr armes.' *PL*, 6:982, 58.

⁸⁷ Diane Watt, *Medieval Women's Writing: Works by and for Women in England, 1100-1500* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), 153.

⁸⁸ *PL*, 6:898, 268.

The princess of *Sir Gowther*, mute and miraculous, may seem far removed from this: but the perfection that is her silence and then the perfection that are the few words she is granted by God the Father to grace her own father and her husband-to-be find in Anne de la Pole and Margery Brews more prosaic, but still recognisable, sisters.

Conclusion

In its depictions of father-daughter relationships, late medieval literature presents two claims: firstly that paternal authority is inviolate and permanent, and secondly that paternal authority must be reinforced – through narrative, through generic conventions, and through the very structure of the text. It has been seen that these two aspects result in a certain degree of contradiction. If paternal authority is so firmly established, why does it need reinforcement? The space between these two statements results in anxiety, which in turn creates narrative through which ideas about the very nature of patriarchy can be examined. What has not been previously illuminated in discourse on fathers and daughters is how this relationship, because of the extremes it embodies due to differences in power, age, and gender, allows for some of the most fundamental aspects of patriarchy to be drawn out. Critics have used the father-daughter relationship to draw correlations with governance; what they have failed to do is note how important it is that this governance is the rule of a *father*. ‘Patriarchy’ is a word often used, but it is too often simply understood as ‘rule by men’ rather than ‘rule by the father’.

By looking across texts and genres, it has become clear that the most significant aspect of the father-daughter relationship – good or bad – is the father’s power over his daughter. Whilst texts where bad fathers appear might initially seem to question the validity of that power, on closer examination it proves that such bad fathers are merely a further argument for the necessity of good fatherhood. These fathers are bad not because the source of their power is in any way flawed, nor do these fathers have the ability to de-legitimise that authority. The power of ‘the father’ is too central to medieval concepts of society for the individual father to be able to tarnish

it; but the awareness of the slippage between the ideal father and the flawed individual father creates an area of ideological awkwardness. Romances, however, do not deal with this problem head on; instead, after raising the question, they avoid answering it by providing the narrative with a happy ending. Perhaps part of the appeal of the romances is that they appear to skirt tantalisingly close to critiquing established values, then provide the reassurance of re-asserting the established order.⁸⁹ Thus, although appearing in some ways radical, these texts sustain – and help mythologise – the status quo, which, if the letter evidence is any indication, is that the father's authority is inviolable. Whether daughters would have agreed we do not know; her words filtered through her husband or shaped by her father (or Father), she says what he needs to be said.

⁸⁹ Harriet Hudson, introduction to *Sir Eglamour of Artois, Four Middle English Romances*, 99-100.

CHAPTER 4

Beyond Fatherhood?

And to the castel thai wente isame
 With gret solas, gle and game,
 And [to ensure] that his stifader wer ded
 Ase tit he let felle a led
 Ful of pich and of bremston,
 And hot led let falle ther-on ...¹

Throughout the course of this thesis, it has become clear that the stereotype of the late medieval father as an autocrat who has an interest in his children only insofar as they are useful to him is narrow and flawed. Fathers have complex and multifaceted emotional relationships with their offspring that are not reliant solely on the children's function as heirs, business partners, or pawns in marriage brokerage. At the same time, however, children *are* significant for their role in the advancement of the family. All the relationships I have looked at thus far have been coloured by issues of lineage, duty and worship in the context of a patriarchal society. What, then, is the status of fatherly relationships that fall outside the norm of a legitimate blood relationship?

Whilst we have seen that the relationship between a father and his legitimate offspring is central to the conceptual framework of late medieval English society, 'father' is a word with significance beyond the nuclear family. In a patriarchal society, 'father' is the highest epithet that can be bestowed. It is a word used to reinforce the importance of an individual or institution's role, and the relative subservience of others to that person or group. 'Father' is a term frequently used to relate a king to his subjects; John of Salisbury suggests that a king should be both father and husband to his subjects, while in the previous chapter we saw how Gower's discourse regarding incest created a parallel between the household headed

¹ *Bevis of Hampton*, ll. 3449-54.

by a father and a nation ruled by a king.² Priests, meanwhile, were spiritual fathers to their parishioners, an analogy with scriptural precedent.³ The eleventh-century reformer Peter Damian equated sex between priests and their parishioners with incest and indeed thought sex with a spiritual daughter was even worse than intercourse with a daughter by blood.⁴ Given that the focus of this thesis is on the family, I will not be looking at these more abstract uses of the word ‘father’, which are not used to imply that these men are *actually* fathers. I mention them, however, to show that the father-child relationship is consistently used within a variety of medieval discourses. It is clearly intended to have emotional resonance beyond the nuclear family, and its continued use in a wide range of contexts would indicate that this resonance was felt. Concepts of fatherhood are thus utilised outside the simplest use of a father towards his legitimate offspring.

Rather than moving toward more metaphorical uses of the concept of fatherhood, here I am interested in how far away from the nuclear family the term ‘father’ has *literal* meaning. In this final chapter, I look at relationships that might be expected to embrace elements of the father-child relationship, but which are more problematic conceptually than the father-offspring relationships seen thus far. My focus is on two particular relationships: stepfathers-stepchildren and fathers-bastards. Looking at these relationships, which fall some way outside the nuclear family norms, allows me to press the definition of fatherhood, to test my hypotheses regarding affective ties and fatherly priorities, and to ask when a man starts being a father. I also establish the outer boundaries of fatherhood by examining relationships that might be expected to have quasi-fatherly aspects in order to establish how far fatherhood can go from its origins in the nuclear family before it is compromised as a recognisable state.

² Cary J. Nederman, ed., *John of Salisbury: Policraticus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 33.

³ For example, Thessalonians 2:11: ‘we exhorted and comforted and charged every one of you, as a father doth his children’. See Archibald, *Incest and the Medieval Imagination*, 31.

⁴ Megan McLoughlin, ‘Secular and Spiritual Fatherhood in the Eleventh Century’, in *Conflicted Identities and Multiple Masculinities*, ed. by Murray, 35.

In terms of the balance of evidence, bastards appear frequently in both romance and letters, and the variation in how bastards and their fathers are portrayed gives some insight into both the conceptualising of bastardy and the actual experience of father-son relationships. Stepfathers and stepchildren, however, are a different matter. The step-parental relationship barely appears in romance, even though step-parents were common in late medieval England. However, whilst step-relations are found in letters, they are not distinguished by a particular vocabulary. This suggests that the absence of stepfathers from romance may not be simply due to a lack of interest in step-relations. It becomes clear that there was not much conceptual space in either romances or letters for the 'stepfather' as distinct from the 'father'. Like the absence of daughters from letters, the blanks in the evidence surrounding stepfathers is telling; in this case, silence is as illuminating as the written word.

Boundaries of fatherhood: godparenthood and wardship

Before I consider the relationships of stepfatherhood and fatherhood to bastards, I will look at wardship and godparenting, both of which draw upon aspects of the paternal relationship but are clearly *not* fatherly relationships. Doing so helps establish the 'outer limits' of fatherhood and the boundaries of the family. Guardianship, intended to protect and provide for heirs, and godparenthood, meant to provide for children's spiritual needs, share certain values with fatherhood, but we will see that they substitute for fathers neither in the medieval imagination nor in practice.

We might expect that in wardship we would find that fatherly attitudes were applied to children who were not often related by blood to the guardian who nonetheless had legal responsibility for them. The need for wardship, after all, demonstrates a disruption to the patrilineage, but its installation is also an attempt to minimise that damage, the guardian as protector of the heir and his or her estate providing a replacement link in the chain that passes inheritance from father to offspring.⁵

⁵ Menuge, *Medieval English Wardship*, 26.

Although it is possible that some men became guardians due to a feeling of responsibility, wardships were taken on primarily because they offered profit. Guardians could profit from their wards' estates until they came of age, with the proviso that inheritances must be returned intact in proportion to the duration of the wardship and the size of the inheritance.⁶ Another area of profit was that of marriage, as guardians had the right to dispose of the marriages of heirs, or to sell the marriage on. Some guardians took on wards specifically to marry them to one of their own children, thus securing the ward's inheritance for the family, whilst other guardians sold on the right of marriage, making what could be a substantial profit. As an instance of the first case, Thomas Stonor used the wardship of John Cottesmore to secure a match with one of his daughters; he purchased the wardship around 1470, although only an undated draft of the agreement survives, and a letter from Sir Richard Harcourt in February 1470 recorded plans for the wedding.⁷ In 1473 the daughter, probably Joan, bore a son, as her brother noted: 'my Suster Cotymore ys delyveryd of a feyre sun, and both don welle, blessyd be Jhesu.'⁸ Unfortunately there are only a handful of references to Cottesmore in the letters, and although he probably lived in the Stonor household until he was of age, it is impossible to ascertain anything about his relationship to Thomas Stonor or to the rest of the family.

William Stonor, meanwhile, seems to have made something of a business of the buying and selling of wards. In 1475, he was engaged in a dispute with his mother Jane Stonor over various matters to do with his father's estate, including the wardship of John Gatton; the arbitration reads 'that also the said William shall suffre his said Moder to have þe ward and mariage of John Gatton above rehersed ... for terme of her liff.'⁹ Given that Jane was a widow, she may have thought it useful to keep control of such a valuable bargaining chip as a ward. However, Gatton seems

⁶ Menuge, *Medieval English Wardship*, 2; see also G.D.G. Hall, ed., *The Treatise on the Laws and Customs of England Commonly Called Glanvill* (London: Nelson, 1965), VII:9, 82-4.

⁷ *SL*, nos. 109-110, 200-2. As I said in Chapter 1, earlier than average marriages were typical in cases involving wards, since their marriages needed to be sold before they came of age.

⁸ *SL*, no. 128, 221.

⁹ *SL*, no. 157, 250.

to have been living in William's household in 1478-9, given his mention in a shoemaker's bill.¹⁰ Wardship distinguished between who had legal control of a ward and who looked after a ward – it did not have to be the same person – but it is unclear why in this case William has taken on the responsibility to look after the boy. The shoemaker's bill also mentions 'mayster Humpton sone' and 'M. Gylys Wellysborn', who were possibly also wards. Through his marriage to Elizabeth Ryche William gained the wardship of four children by her kinsman John Fenn. William seems to have placed the eldest boy, John, as an apprentice, although in what business is not stated.¹¹ The eldest two children gained their majority in Elizabeth's lifetime, but the youngest, Hugh and Margaret, were still underage when she died, and William seems to have lost interest in keeping them after this; he transferred their wardship to John Picton in April 1481.¹² Perhaps following his wife's death, William no longer felt obliged to have any responsibility for her kin. William used a man called Walter Elmes to negotiate for him in the sale of the Fenn wardships. At the same time as his efforts to sell on the Fenns, Walter reported that 'I shall ffynd yow suerte to pay yow att viij yeres end ... CCCCC. marcs for the ward of the seyde Agas [Lovell]'.¹³ This was a substantial sum of money, demonstrating how lucrative this business could be. It is worth noting that at this point William still did not have any legitimate children of his own, and so keeping wards may not have been particularly useful to him in terms of fixing marriages, whilst selling them on could be profitable.

The movement of children between households to the highest bidder may not seem indicative of particularly warm, never mind fatherly, interest on the part of William; on the other hand, records of marriage negotiations do not tell us much about the relationships between fathers and their children beyond the financial arrangements surrounding the offspring's marriages, and we do not assume that this was the sum total of the father-child relationship. The case of Robert Kedington may indicate that

¹⁰ *SL*, no. 234, 330.

¹¹ *SL*, no. 249, 342-3.

¹² Introduction to the *SL*, 58.

¹³ *SL*, no. 282, 373.

these children had the right to expect to at least be treated as members of the household. Robert Kedington was the son of Joan Armburgh by Philip Kedington; she later married Robert Armburgh. Robert Kedington wrote a bitter letter to his godfather Thomas Bendyssh in 1427-8. Robert's father had died when he was underage, and this letter reflects his feeling that he and his father were betrayed by Bendyssh, who had been a trusted friend.¹⁴

And fordermore after the deces of my fader ye stale me fro my frendys and delyuered me vp to the erl of Oxinford, vndyr whos gouernance I was so euyllly kept tat I schall fare the wese of my body all the dayes of my lyef... thorgh youre vntroghth the erle hyndud and vndede so my moder at that tyme that sche was neuer in power to helpe ne fordere me none of here childryn.¹⁵

The earl of Oxford was the Kedingtons' lord and so had a right to the heir's guardianship.¹⁶ Perhaps, then, it was not altogether fair for Robert to blame Thomas for his placement in a home where he was so unhappy; but feelings are not always 'fair', and this letter is a valuable and unusually emotional insight into the mindset of a young man, who was evidently traumatised by his removal into the home of someone who he believed treated him cruelly. It is impossible to know to what extent Kedington was mistreated, but the young man evidently felt that after the death of his father he should have been entrusted to a friend or relative – 'frendys' could mean either – and that his godfather put his own profit before the welfare of his godson, betraying their relationship and the trust Kedington senior had put in his friend. Nonetheless, there does not seem to be an expectation that Bendyssh should have acted as a father. Kedington seems to think that Bendyssh has failed because he has been dishonest and greedy, rather than because he was meant to play a quasi-parental role, an impression reinforced by the fact that this letter also takes issue with Bendyssh on the grounds of alleged fraud of the estate.¹⁷ Bendyssh has failed as a guardian, but that is only part of his larger failure.

¹⁴ Introduction to the *AL*, 10.

¹⁵ *AL*, 90-1.

¹⁶ Introduction to the *AL*, 10. For the legal context, see *Glanvill*, VII:82-4.

¹⁷ Kedington accuses Bendyssh of fraud perpetrated in his capacity as feoffee and executor of Kedington senior's estate. Introduction to the *AL*, 10; letter, 90-1.

Evidence for guardian-ward relationships within romance supports the idea that guardians may supply some of the responsibilities of fatherhood owed to wards, but that they do not act as substitutes to fathers. As Noël James Menuge points out, in romances where the father dies when the son is underage, an idealised father-heir bond is necessary for the narrative to progress. The heir must be left defenceless: anyone who protects him or her will necessarily not match up to the benevolent and dead father.¹⁸ In romance, the guardian is motivated by purely selfish instincts rather than by the best interests of the ward, which serves as a contrast to the loving behaviour of the father. Robert Kedington, if he read romance, might have felt he had an empathetic understanding of Havelok's situation in *Havelok the Dane*. King Birkabeyn, who loves his children 'so his lif' (349), realises he is dying, and chooses 'Godard, the kinges owne frende' (375) to be his offspring's guardian. Godard betrays this trust by murdering the princesses and plotting to have Havelok killed. This seems like a dramatic version of a real fear that guardians, unlike fathers, would not have heirs' best interests in mind, and indeed *Havelok* sets up the father and guardian as opposing, rather than as complementary roles.

Unlike wardship, the language of godparenting does make use of the word 'father', and godparenting did create ties of spiritual affinity that, at least in ecclesiastical terms, were as close as blood in determining matters of consanguinity.¹⁹ However, it is often difficult in the letters to determine who was godparent to whom, and when the relationship is known – such as Will Maryon's role as godfather to Richard Cely junior – it does not seem to be reflected in particularly fatherly language. In the Cely letters, Will Maryon is mentioned frequently, and seems at times to have even lived within the Cely household.²⁰ When passing on good wishes to George during his serious illness, Richard senior wrote: 'youre moder and bothe youre breon and Wyll

¹⁸ Menuge, *Medieval English Wardship*, 29-30.

¹⁹ The impediment to marriage through spiritual affinity theoretically worked along the same lines as the prohibition on the basis of consanguinity. However, circumstantial evidence suggests that in practice, the court was more lenient regarding spiritual affinity than consanguinity. Helmholz, *Marriage Litigation*, 71, 78.

²⁰ CL, no. 52.

Maryon and I were sory and hevvy for you.’²¹ This does not necessarily report on household members – Robert had his own household – but it does seem to report on *family*. However, in the letters at least there does not appear to be a particular relationship between Maryon and Richard junior beyond that of a family friend. Bendyssh, meanwhile, was Robert Kedington’s godfather, and Kedington addressed him as ‘godfadyr’.²² Richard Cely did not address Will Maryon in this way, and they had a much more friendly relationship than Bendyssh and Kedington. Kedington’s use of the title might be simply to underscore what he perceived as a wholesale betrayal of his family, particularly his father. A godfather might be meant to be a spiritual father to a child, but that does not seem to have translated in these examples into a fatherly relationship in a domestic context, and the lack of emphasis in the letters in general regarding godparents may indicate that this was true more broadly.

Here we see that the roles of godfather and guardian, whilst calling on some of the features of fatherhood, are not really much like fatherhood; they seem to lack essential elements of what made a relationship fatherly. Is it simply the lack of a blood tie? I will now look at stepfathers, and argue that matters are a little more complicated here than that.

‘My wyues sone’: fathers and stepchildren

Amongst the elite classes in late medieval England, there were many step-parents, caused by a tendency towards remarriage in the case of the death of one’s spouse. Barbara Harris’ analysis of elite fifteenth and sixteenth century wills shows that seventy per cent of her 751 sampled male testators left a surviving wife, and she calculates that an extremely high proportion – 85 per cent – of knight’s widows remarried at least once, and often these women would have children.²³ Widows of this class could often be in a powerful position; freed from coverture, they had greater independence and authority. Why did many then choose to remarry? The

²¹ *CL*, no. 67.

²² *AL*, 90.

²³ Harris, *English Aristocratic Women*, 127, 162.

literary trope of the lascivious widow shows that medieval society found the idea of the independent woman troubling, while remarriage meant that men were once more properly in authority.²⁴ So there was an ideological pressure to remarry, and since a number of widows had significantly more wealth than never married women, often they would have many suitors, and their increased wealth or greater social position meant that they could get favourable agreements. Finally, a new husband could help protect a widow's property and the rights of her children, and women may have been more likely to remarry if they had underage offspring.²⁵ Remarriage could thus prove beneficial both to the widow and to the man who sought her hand, which would often result in households containing a range of full, half, and step-siblings. Widows were an attractive prospect to gentry and mercantile men, as they were often wealthier than their single counterparts, as George Cely discovered as he vied for the hand of Margery Rygon, widow of a draper; he had to see off competition before marrying her only four months after her husband died.²⁶ William Stonor was not, then, at all unusual when at the age of twenty-six he married a woman who already had four children. Nor was it atypical that he had three wives in the space of a decade; perhaps the only statistical anomaly is that *all* his wives predeceased him, rather than him eventually leaving a widow. Other stepfathers in the letter collections include Richard Drayton, who was Thomas Stonor's stepfather, and Richard Armburgh, who was Robert Kedington's second stepfather, his mother Joan having remarried twice.

Despite the ubiquity of the step-parental relationship, there seems to be little conceptual space for the 'step' relationship in my sources. The step-parent is not a common figure in romance. For narrative purposes, the nuclear family of Middle English romance is usually presented at its most compact; there is not space for the

²⁴ Rebecca Hayward provides useful examples of tropes of widowhood. Rebecca Hayward, 'Between the Living and the Dead: Widows as Heroines of Medieval Romance', in *Constructions of Widowhood and Virginity in the Middle Ages*, ed. by Cindy L. Carlson and Angela Jane Weisl (New York: St Martin's Press, 1999), 222-43.

²⁵ Harris, *English Aristocratic Women*, 127 – 166.

²⁶ *CL*, no. 215, 211.

large, complex kin groups that actually characterised the families in the letters.²⁷ Nonetheless, it is interesting that we do not see, for instance, the figure of the ‘wicked stepmother’ that features so prominently in later fairy tales.²⁸ The only stepfather in romance that I have come across is in *Bevis of Hampton*. In this romance, Bevis’ mother is married to Sir Guy of Hampton, but she plots with the Emperor of Germany to have him murdered and subsequently marries the emperor. Bevis, still very young, attacks the emperor, and is subsequently exiled by his mother (433-500). Unsuccessful in this early attempt, many years later Bevis is in a situation where he can kill his stepfather. Engaged in combat, Bevis ‘hadde ment is [the emperor’s] heved [head] of smite’ (3408), but the emperor’s host rescues him (3409-14). A furious Bevis asks the giant Ascopard to strike down the emperor; no one’s armour can withstand Ascopard’s mighty stroke, and he kills the emperor and his horse with one blow (3425-30). Bevis wishes to ensure his stepfather is truly dead, and so:

... he [Bevis] let felle a led
 Ful of pich and of bremston,
 And hot led let falle ther-on ... (3451-7)

This is an interesting episode. Derek Neal’s psychoanalytic reading of this is that the murder of the stepfather allows the hero to fulfil the Oedipal wish of killing the father, but managing to avoid his guilt because the stepfather is not really his father.²⁹ There is probably an element of this here, in the same way that *Degare’* allows the hero to fight his father to fulfil a need to punish the father for his absence, without committing the crime of patricide. However, it also seems important that Bevis is not the person who kills the emperor. He gives the order, and he ensures that his stepfather is dead, but the actual killing blow comes from someone else. This seems to be related to the way Torrent puts to sea in a boat full of holes the King of

²⁷ Harris, *English Aristocratic Women*, 128.

²⁸ Bruno Bettelheim discusses the topos of the wicked stepmother, and how the division between the good, dead mother and the wicked stepmother divides the maternal role in a way that allows the hero/ine (and by proxy the child reader) a way of articulating frustrations with the mother whilst also remaining loyal to her. It may be that this function is fulfilled by the evil mother-in-law, whose role I have discussed in Chapter 2. Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), 66-72.

²⁹ Neal, *The Masculine Self*, 216-7.

Portugal. As I argued in Chapter 3, Torrent can only be the *indirect* cause of the king's death, because actually executing him is a dangerous area in moral terms. It would have been very easy in *Bevis* for the hero to kill his stepfather, but the narrative avoids this. Evidently the emperor, however wicked, is still enough of a father and a ruler to make killing him uncomfortably close to treason. It is better to pass on the responsibility to the pagan giant Ascopard, rather than potentially tainting the Christian hero.

Although Bevis hates his stepfather, his real anger is reserved for his mother. He is outraged by her betrayal of his father and tells her that she is a 'vile houre' and that she deserves to die (302-4). The stepfather who helps disinherit a rightful heir might seem like the worst nightmare of a patrilineal society, but the usurpers of Middle English romance are not, with this exception, stepfathers, and are instead more typically external invaders (as in *King Horn*) or nobles of the land (*Havelok the Dane*). Perhaps the functions of and problems with step-parents were considered close enough to those of blood parents that, for the purposes of romance narrative at least, step-parents could be subsumed within the broader category of 'parent'.

In this context, it is interesting that in the letters the term 'stepfather' is never used. *Bevis* uses the term 'stifader', and the term originated in Old English with 'stéopbearn' to describe an orphaned child.³⁰ So the terminology does exist, but it does not feature in the letters at all. Stepfathers are addressed much as fathers are. Thomas Stonor referred to his stepfather as 'fadyr' in a letter of 1468, and Robert Armburgh's stepdaughter called him 'fadre' in the 1420s, whilst he referred to her as his 'doughter'.³¹ If the step-relationships were not known through other sources, one would easily assume that these were relationships of blood. This lack of terminology

³⁰ 'step- OE. *stéop-* ... refixed to terms of relationship (as son, father, brother) to form designations for the degrees of affinity resulting from the remarriage of a widowed parent. The primitive sense of the word is indicated by the use of OE. *stéopbearn*, *-cild* (STEPBAIRN, STEPCHILD) for 'orphan', and by the cognates, OE. *ástíeped* bereaved, OHG. *stiufen* (also *ar-*, *bistiufen*) to bereave.' *The Oxford English Dictionary*.

³¹ *SL* no.91, 97, *AL*, 126-7.

could indicate that the male head of household, as *paterfamilias*, was never considered as anything other than father of the family.

This might have worked well enough in theory, but there were probably stepfathers and stepchildren who were not especially willing to consider themselves as closely related as the term 'fadyr' would suggest. Robert Armburgh had a difficult relationship with his stepson Robert Kedington. Given Kedington's feeling that he was betrayed and abused by his guardian Thomas Bendyssh before his mother married Armburgh, it is perhaps not surprising that his relationship with Armburgh was characterised by hostility and resentment, especially since Armburgh seems to have had a combative personality.³² In 1429, Armburgh wrote that:

Roberd my wyues sone and his wyf ben partid from vs in greet wrath and is in full purpos to hurle with vs for his fadirs enheritaunce withoute we yeve hym a gretter pension than yt lyth in oure pouer for to bere.³³

Armburgh obviously felt he had already been more generous than he could afford, while Kedington believed he was being denied what was rightfully his. Whatever the truth of the matter, it seems that Kedington died without peace having been made, if the tone of the letter regarding Kedington's death is anything to go by. In 1430, he wrote a letter to William Harpour and Richard Barbour regarding their non-payment of rent:

Dere frendys ... that I sent to you be my letre that ye paie Robert Kedynton my wyues sone the annuyte specified in his endentour, loke that ye paye yt no longer, for I haue werry word and ful knowleche that he ys ded and beried, but I pray you sendith me myssomer term bothe partes³⁴

It is easy to read too much into the casual way in which medieval writers report on bereavements; nonetheless, the way he wrote about Kedington's death does seem particularly cool, and he did not even offer a perfunctory committal of Kedington's soul to God. Most significantly, the note that he had 'werry word ... that he ys ded and beried' would indicate that he did not attend his stepson's funeral, which might

³² Many of the Armburgh letters feature Robert Armburgh's disagreements and his aggressive and mercenary tendencies are well documented. See introduction to the *AL*, 49-53.

³³ *AL*, 112.

³⁴ *AL*, 129-30.

indicate a complete break within the family. Moreover, Armburgh never referred to Kedington as his 'sone', but instead described him as 'my wyues sone' both here and in the previous letter discussed.³⁵ In the previous letter it makes more sense, as it might be confusing to be speaking of Kedington's inheritance from his father if Armburgh referred to Kedington as his son. However, calling him his 'wyues son' in the second letter seems another way of distancing himself from an unmourned relation. Furthermore, Armburgh may have not called Kedington 'sone' because not only were their relationships not cordial, but because Kedington was already of age when Armburgh married his mother, and the two men may have never lived under the same roof.

When it came to Margaret Kedington, Armburgh's stepdaughter, relations appear to have been a little warmer. Armburgh assisted her marriage prospects by going to court in 1421 to try to obtain money for her marriage owed to her by her father's estate, but apparently withheld by her brother's godfather Thomas Bendyssh.³⁶ Following her wedding, Armburgh needed a loan from his brother due to various costs including 'thorough my daughters mariage'.³⁷ Margaret was a few years younger than her brother, and so Armburgh may have more successfully acted as her father figure than he did towards her brother.

It may also be that stepdaughters proved less of a challenge to a stepfather's authority than a stepson, as stepsons – particularly stepsons like Robert Kedington, who were adults and very certain of exactly what they were owed – often had their own incomes, and their own prospects provided by their natural fathers' estates. Stepdaughters, even if they were left money and property by their fathers, still needed stepfathers to protect their interests, as we see in the case of Margaret Kedington. Even when a stepdaughter had an older brother, as Margaret did, it may have been more appropriate for the father figure to look after her interests regarding

³⁵ *AL* 112; 129-30.

³⁶ Introduction to the *AL*, 10. See also Robert's letter, 91: 'xl li. Of the golde comyng ther of be youe to the mariage of Mergrete my sistre, ye kept hyt still many yeres after...'.
³⁷ *AL*, 127.

matters such as marriage. This is certainly true of the Stonor family. Elizabeth Stonor had four children by her first husband, three of whom were daughters. In December 1476, she wrote to William, noting that she had been to dinner with her parents and the family of the ‘childe which was movid for oone of my dosters’, by which she presumably meant that the boy was proposed as a spouse for one of her daughters, but noted that although:

shee were my childe, ... I could not answere that mateer without yow nor noght wolde do. How be hit, I answeyrd in your byhalf: that I wyst ryght well þat 3e wolde be ryzt kynd and lovyng ffadir. yif God ffortunyde that ye and they shulde dele.’³⁸

Elizabeth was careful to make it clear that she had shown in public that William was the head of the household, even regarding children who were not his own. It may be simply that this was part of the negotiations around marriage – by stressing to the other party that William would be a ‘lovyng ffadir’ to her daughter, she was demonstrating that William would take an active interest in the marriage negotiations and would protect her daughter’s interest, and so it seems here that ‘good fatherhood’ applied in this case as much as it would to offspring by blood.

One wonders, though, if stepfathers ever had problems asserting their authority over adolescent stepdaughters. Elizabeth Stonor certainly seemed anxious to assure her husband that she had emphasised his paternal authority, perhaps suggesting that William had felt it was threatened. Her use of the phrase ‘lovyng ffadir’, meanwhile, might not have just been intended as a public statement about William’s behaviour as stepfather; given that it was reported to him, it could be a tacit reminder to him of the right way of behaving, just as Thomas Mull a few years before had encouraged William’s own father to be a good parent.³⁹ This reading gains credence in the context of another letter written two years later. In June 1478, a few months before his marriage to the fifteen or sixteen year old Katherine Ryche, Thomas Betson wrote to her mother the following:

³⁸ *SL*, no. 176, 275.

³⁹ *SL*, no. 124, 215-6. See my discussion of this interesting letter in Chapter 2.

Also, madam, as ye wryte me the curtesse delynge off my mayster with my cossen Katheryn &c, truly I am very glade þeroff, and I pray God hartely thanne hym þerffore: ffor he hath ever been loffyngly disposed [unto] hir, and so I beseche God ever contenew hym and also my Cossen Kateryn to [de]serve it unto hym by hir goodly demaynar and womanly disposicion⁴⁰

Thomas Betson is certainly one of the more effusive letter writers in the Stonor collection, but this letter still seems a little lavish in its praise. What did the ‘curtesse delynge’ of William toward Katherine involve? Had there perhaps been some discord between the two of them, and is the encouragement of Katherine to continue in good behaviour perhaps a veiled remark about her previous conduct? It is difficult to say, and very hard in general to ascertain anything about William’s feelings towards any of his stepdaughters – though he can at least be seen to be interested enough in their well-being to have been sent news of Anne’s recovery from a serious illness.⁴¹ Regardless of feelings, however, theoretically at least stepfathers, in their position as head of the family, seem to have had as much authority as actual fathers. Perhaps Katherine might have troubled her real father too, though the step relationship may have added an extra source of friction.

Whilst it is possible that Katherine Ryche might have chafed under William Stonor’s authority, it is likely that some daughters appreciated or at least made use of this relationship, perhaps even after they were married. As Armburgh’s stepdaughter Margaret Walkerne (née Kedington) wrote to him in the late 1420s:

My dere and welbeloued fadre... [I] am lyke withyn a short tyme with the grace of God to be delyuered of child. And for as moche as ladyes and gentilwemen... ar lyk to vysite me while I ly ynne childe bende [*sic*] and I am not purveyd of onest beddyng with oute the whiche myn hosbondys oneste and myn may not be sauid... wherfor I wold beseche you of youre goode faderhode that ye wol wouchesaf... to lene me ij marc or xx s.⁴²

Margaret knew how to use the language of fatherhood to elicit a favour from her stepfather, and was apparently not afraid to call upon him for even a relatively small matter. It is a telling contrast to the relationship Armburgh had with Margaret’s

⁴⁰ *SL*, no. 217, 311.

⁴¹ *SL*, no. 222, 317.

⁴² *AL*, p 126-7.

brother; Roberts Kedington and Armburgh had serious arguments about money, and seemed through Armburgh's choice of words to limit the familial context of their relationship, while Margaret received financial help from Armburgh, whom she seemed more than happy to call 'fadre'.

Is this an indication of affection on Margaret's part? It is difficult to tell. It is worth noting that the sum of money she is asking to borrow is rather small; that she needs to call on her stepfather for such a little amount of cash may indicate that her and her husband's finances were in poor shape, and this might make her more dependent on her stepfather than might otherwise be normal for a married woman. Margaret might have made use of the step-parental relationship quite cynically to get what she needed, or she might have been asking a beloved father for his help. The letter does not tell us much, except that Margaret felt it was appropriate to utilise the language of fatherhood, which at least gives a sense of the expected parameters of their relationship. As for other stepchildren, it is hard to ascertain anything about their feelings toward their stepfathers, since their voices are rarely heard in the letters. Robert Kedington is of course the notable – and bitter – exception. William Stonor's stepchildren sometimes send him greetings through the letters of others, but it is difficult to ascertain anything from these stock phrases.⁴³ The only real example of positive feeling is from Thomas Stonor, who wrote a letter to his wife following the death of his mother and his stepfather in quick succession:

Like yow to wyt that my ffadyr is gone to God also: and the there was a sone departing: and my modyr on Saterday by the morne, and my ffadyr on Munday by [d]ayrove And goode swete Lemman, be ye myry and of goode comfort for to cumfort me when I cum.⁴⁴

Thomas Stonor senior died when his son was seven. Soon afterwards his mother married Richard Drayton, an Oxfordshire squire.⁴⁵ Although no letters survive between Thomas and Richard, there do seem to be connections between them. Thomas stayed with his mother and Richard in 1462, and John Frende expected that

⁴³ *SL*, no. 180, 278, for instance.

⁴⁴ *SL*, no. 91, 185.

⁴⁵ Introduction to the *SL*, 50-1.

Thomas would want to inform Richard of certain matters regarding Thomas' argument with Richard Fortescue.⁴⁶ It seems that they also had mutual friends: Thomas Mull, who was one of Stonor's trusted retainers and friends, as well as possibly his brother-in-law, was Richard Drayton's executor.⁴⁷ These build the picture of a man who had a cordial relationship with his stepfather. His wish that Jane Stonor be of 'good comfort' to him is a rare expression of feeling in these letters, and says something about how Thomas feels following the death of his parents. After all, Richard Drayton had been Thomas' stepfather since Stonor was seven years old; it may well be that in this letter 'ffadyr' is a true description of the role Drayton played in his stepson's life. 'Fadyr' may have been a conventional term of address for stepfathers, but for some stepfathers it was probably also an accurate description of the role they played.

'To seche his fader': fathers and bastards

Stepchildren may have been able to call their stepfathers 'fadyr', but it may have been more difficult for bastards to give their fathers that title. Whether or not a man had any emotional investment in his stepchildren, by being legally head of the family, the stepfather became invested with authority, which lent itself to providing at least the appearance of a familial relationship. Social attitudes towards bastards seem to have been a little more complex. In my first chapter, I asked the question: does being a father make a male a man? For this chapter, the question might be rephrased: does fathering children make a man a *father*? The biological answer might be self-evident, but the social response, I will show, does not provide as easy an answer.

There is evidence for the existence of bastards in the Paston, Plumpton and Cely correspondence, involving four fathers and seven bastards. These fathers represent a cross-section of the letter population – two gentry sons, two merchant brothers, and

⁴⁶ *SL*, no. 64, 144-5.

⁴⁷ Introduction to the *SL*, 50.

a knight who was head of his family. That bastards are found in three of the five letter collections I use, and that the men who get them range from a teenaged John Paston III to a widower in his late thirties like Sir William Plumpton, may indicate how common illegitimate offspring were. Given the different kinds of men involved, however, one might also expect that the context for siring these children was different, and as a result of this, the attitudes by fathers towards their bastards may have varied.

In both the letters and romances, bastards are born as a result of brief liaisons, long term extramarital relationships, and from degrees in between. In the narratives of letters and romances, bastards range from unnamed babies to supplicants who know their place to (unexpected) heroes. The fathers who sire them, meanwhile, are central figures in the letters, but shadow-knights in the romances, though both ultimately seem to be driving the action. I begin by considering under what circumstances bastards were got and how this was viewed from a social perspective. I will then look at affective ties between fathers and bastards, as well as considering resentments and the social problems associated with the father-bastard relationship.

In terms of romance, the most common way of siring bastard offspring is the brief encounter, although this can later be complicated by a re-establishment of the relationship at the end of the narrative. In *Sir Degaré*, for instance, the hero's illegitimacy in itself does not appear to be problematic, as his father's reunion with his mother, and Degaré's assured place as his father's heir, seems to dismiss any problem with his bastard status. Nonetheless, he *is* illegitimate, and he is sired in a particularly sudden and violent way:

[The knight said] '...Thou best mi lemman ar thou go,
Wether the liketh wel or wo.'
Tho nothing ne coude do she
But wep and criede and wolde fle;
And he anon gan hire at holde,
And dide his wille, what he wolde.
He binam hire here maidenhod... (107-12)

A long-standing relationship might be a waste of narrative space, since the romance is concerned more with the results of this encounter than what preceded it; but it is nonetheless a very brief and forceful means of establishing a connection between the knight and the princess. Would the medieval reader have thought it was rape? Critics sometimes represent medieval medical theories to preclude conception without pleasure, and so, according to this argument, the princess would not have been perceived as a rape victim.⁴⁸ However, this is a simplistic reading of what was a complex issue. Firstly there is the question of whether a woman needs to emit seed in order for conception to take place, and secondly, if so, is pleasure required for that emittance? The compiler of the twelfth century text *On Human Generation* includes a debate between a master and his pupil on whether pleasure is necessary for conception, and argues that a woman's reason may resist rape, but her body may still enjoy it. Such an argument easily leads to misogynistic assumptions about female carnality, but it also ties in to an increasingly important issue in theology from around this time onward: consent.⁴⁹ As Jeremy Goldberg notes, consensual sex and rape are not two distinct categories, but points on a spectrum.⁵⁰ In addition, the very concept of rape was blurred in the late middle ages. Legal interpretations of 'raptus' ranged from abduction to forced coitus, but in literary terms was often associated with spiritual exaltation – and then with pleasure.⁵¹ The princess's rape in *Degaré* would have been open to a multiplicity of readings, but it is certainly a surprising, and perhaps even shocking, way for the hero to enter the world.

Perhaps the encounter is envisioned in this way to keep the princess closer to the ideal of the virginal romance heroine than a longer extramarital relationship would allow. As soon as the princess gives birth to her son, she reverts to living like a maiden, and is depicted later in the text still in the conventional romance terms for an unmarried princess, as for instance when *Degaré* is inadvertently married to her:

⁴⁸ See for instance Karras, *Sexuality*, 113, and Amanda Hopkins, 'Female Vulnerability as Catalyst in the Middle English Breton Lays', in *The Matter of Identity*, ed. by Hardman, 45.

⁴⁹ Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference*, 94-6.

⁵⁰ Goldberg, *Communal Discord*, 123.

⁵¹ Christine M. Rose, 'Reading Chaucer Reading Rape', in Robertson and Rose, *Representing Rape*, 28-9. For a good overview of medieval law concerning rape, see Corinne J. Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England* (Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2001), 33-75.

His 3onge bride þat gan here,
And al for thout chaunged hire chere... (659-60)

The princess must be at least in her mid-thirties, but she is still a '3onge bride'. She has been perfectly preserved just as she was before she had Degaré. The rape scene, which we might assume to be something that marks out Degaré's illegitimacy further, may in fact by its suddenness and brevity allow the characters of the fairy knight and princess to return to their lives as if nothing has happened. Degaré's upbringing in the woods, meanwhile, dislocated from both parents, may displace his illegitimacy as a signifying marker, making him a 'lost' child rather than a 'bastard'. Degaré's legitimacy is not irrecoverable; it is simply, like him, misplaced.⁵²

Degaré's illegitimacy may have seemed questionable in any case, because he is what is called a 'mantle child' – a person who is born out of wedlock but whose parents afterwards marry.⁵³ There was a conflict between common law and canon law in how such children were treated. Canon law recognised such children as legitimate, but common law did not give bastards the right to inherit, a position taken from the late twelfth century. However, just because bastards did not have the *right* to inherit did not mean that their fathers would not leave them anything, and by the fourteenth century the increased use of wills meant that property was being distributed in wills rather than solely in accordance with the laws of feudal inheritance.⁵⁴ John of Gaunt went to great lengths to ensure that his mantle children, the Beauforts, were legitimised on his marriage to Catherine Swynford, and ensured that they prospered.⁵⁵ Of course, the Beauforts' royal blood may well have made them an exceptional case; Sir William Paston had a mantle child, but evidently felt he needed to claim that the boy was born after the marriage in order to be able legally to make him his heir, of which I will write more shortly.⁵⁶ This was probably more of a

⁵² See also my comments in Chapter 2 on Degaré's 'lost' name, and Bliss, *Naming and Namelessness*, 166.

⁵³ Chris Given-Wilson and Alice Curteis, *The Royal Bastards of Medieval England* (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 44.

⁵⁴ Given-Wilson and Curteis, *The Royal Bastards*, 44-8.

⁵⁵ Anthony Goodman, *John of Gaunt: The Exercise of Princely Power in Fourteenth-Century Europe* (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1992), 361-5.

⁵⁶ *PLP*, Appendix II, no. 33, 263.

problem for those who had land to pass on; those of the urban classes, not necessarily dependent on a lord, may have found it easier to distribute their property. Robert de Howm, for instance, a merchant who died in 1396, left his bastard son the bulk of his estate as he had no legitimate heir.⁵⁷ This can be contrasted with John de Warenne, earl of Surrey, who begged Edward III to allow him to leave his estates to his bastard sons; Edward refused as he wished to grant the lands to the earl of Arundel.⁵⁸ Clearly attitudes toward inheritance varied across socio-economic groups. Nonetheless, these examples suggest there was some sympathy for the canon law perspective above that of common law, which means that in one kind of reading, by the end of the narrative Degaré is not a bastard at all.

It may also be that within the romance genre the issue of bastardy was just another plot device. Like Degaré, Lybeaus Desconus is sired by his father out in the woods – in his case ‘vnder a forest syde’ (9) – in a brief encounter, and like the fairy knight, Lybeaus’ father Gawain then leaves the lady behind. Unlike *Sir Degaré*, however, *Lybeaus Desconus*’ storyline does not feature the reunion of Sir Gawain and Lybeaus’ mother. As I discussed in Chapter 2, the most important thing about Lybeaus is that he is Gawain’s son; blood offers its own legitimacy.

The demands of narrative can, of course, mean issues can be ignored that would be more problematic in real life. *Lybeaus Desconus*, in which Gawain features only briefly and never explicitly as Lybeaus’ sire, is interested not in how the father feels, just in who he is. How would Gawain have felt about Lybeaus had they been reunited?⁵⁹ The siring of a bastard may have led to mixed feelings on the father’s part. In Malory’s *Morte Darthur*, Lancelot’s night with Elaine results in the child who will be the best knight in the world. Despite this, Lancelot’s feelings about his son are presented as a mixture of shame and pride. When Galahad comes to court, Lancelot ‘behylde his sonne and had grete joy of hym’, but despite this when the

⁵⁷ Robert Beilby Cooke, ed., *Some Early Civic Wills of York* (Lincoln: Lincolnshire Chronicle, 1906), 14-36.

⁵⁸ Given-Wilson and Curteis, *Royal Bastards*, 48.

⁵⁹ As I noted in Chapter 2, Gawain and Lybeaus do meet, but they never seem to explicitly recognise their relationship to one another.

‘noyse sprange’ at court about what had happened, Lancelot is ‘so ashamed’.⁶⁰ Although Lancelot takes personal joy in his son, he is embarrassed to have everyone know of his unchivalrous behaviour.⁶¹ If in romance even the father of the world’s purest knight could find siring a bastard problematic, then it is not surprising that in real life men could also have conflicted feelings.

The Cely letters provide two examples of the siring of illegitimate offspring that indicate that it could be a cause of some anxiety and a reason for social delicacy. Richard Cely junior has a sexual encounter with a woman only known as ‘Em’, which I discussed in the context of adolescent sexuality in Chapter 1. This encounter results in a pregnancy, and was apparently a one night stand based on Richard’s ability to date the conception precisely. Richard reported to George in May 1482:

Syr, hyt ys so that a chawns ys fallyn that lyes ap[on] myne oneste, byt I cannat kepe no cwnsell frome yow, for be polesy 3e and I may fynd the meyn to sawhe awl thyng cler[e] at yowr comyng. Hyt is so that Em ys wyth schyllde Hyt whos gettyn on Schrofe 3euyne⁶²

Richard referred to the incident as damaging his ‘oneste’, by which he is likely to mean his reputation, although he could also mean his moral purity.⁶³ The whole affair shamed and panicked him enough that he could not see clearly how to proceed, and so he hoped for his brother’s help. In closing the letter, he called George his ‘gostely brother’, which is clearly a play on the idea of a ‘ghostly father’, or confessor.⁶⁴ It is a joking term, but it underlines that Richard felt he has done something that requires absolution – if not morally, at least socially.

George was probably well placed to give his brother advice, as only four months previously he had received the news that he, too, was going to be a father. As we

⁶⁰ *Malory: Works*, 517, 485.

⁶¹ Karen Cherewatuk, *Marriage, Adultery and Inheritance in Malory's Morte Darthur* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2006), 96-7.

⁶² *CL.*, no. 169, 156. See also Hanham, *The Celys and Their World*, 268-9.

⁶³ ‘*honestē* (n.), 1. (a) Honorable position; worthy or respectable status; eminence or the personification of it; also, wealth; (b) good name; reputation; (c) honorableness of character, conduct, or action; honor, dignity; (d) respect towards (sb. or sth.); reverence, honor. 4. (a) Moral purity, uprightness, virtue, justness; (b) purity, virginity; chastity.’ *Middle English Dictionary*. See also my discussion of this in Chapter 1.

⁶⁴ Hanham, *The Celys and their World*, 268.

saw in Chapter 1, George was sexually experienced, having kept a mistress in Calais, but it was not ‘my lady Clare’ who bore him a child in 1482. Instead it was a servant in a Calais pudding house known as Margery who not only gave birth in the summer of 1482, but apparently had also had a child by George a year or two previously.

George was in London in January 1482, probably for his father’s funeral, and he received a letter from his good friend John Dalton. After expressing his condolences, Dalton reported on some news from Calais:

Alsoy syr, wher as we ette the good podyngys, the womon of the hosse that mayd them, as I onderstond sche ys wyth schylde wyth my broder that hayd the Irysch skeyne [dagger] of me.⁶⁵

This oddly phrased letter would not immediately imply that it was George who had sired the child, but soon afterwards George received a letter from Joyce Parmenter, his servant, which told him:

Also I lat yow wyt, þer ye go *and* ete puddyngys the woman is with child, as I ondirstond.⁶⁶

Two such similarly worded letters could only be intended to let George know that he was going to be a father. Further evidence comes a few months later from William Cely, who wrote to George – who was now spending more time in London following his father’s death – to say:

Margery commavndyþ her vnto yowr masterschupp, and sche tellyth me sche schulde hawe rayment – as a gowne and oder thyngys – agaynest her chyrchyng, as sche hadd the toder tyme⁶⁷

The August date of this letter makes it extremely likely that ‘Margery’ was the ‘womon of the hosse’ that Dalton wrote about. William’s note about the ‘toder tyme’ suggests that this was the second time Margery had borne a child to George, and it does not seem unreasonable to assume that hers was the child who died in 1481, the

⁶⁵ *CL*, no. 141, 129.

⁶⁶ *CL*, no. 142, 130.

⁶⁷ *CL*, no. 181, 167.

child about whom Richard Cely senior expressed his condolences when he talked with Richard junior in their orchard:

[Richard senior] askyd me many qwestyonys of gyu, and I towlde hym aull as hyt whos, and he whos ryught sory for the dethe of the schylde⁶⁸

There is no evidence one way or another as to whether George and Margery had an ongoing relationship; but certainly they must have been involved sexually at least occasionally from 1480 or even earlier, depending on the age of the 'schylde' that died. George does not appear to have maintained Margery the way he did Clare, but evidently the encounters were pleasing enough that after she bore their first child he kept the sexual connection between them, even if their relationship was not formalised to the extent that he provided her with a house as he did for Clare or that Margery gave up her work to be supported solely by him. Moreover, churching, a ritual purification following childbirth, would have been a fairly public event.⁶⁹ The request that George provide the clothing for this public ceremony may suggest that his relationship to Margery's new child would be known in the community, and possibly that George provided her with some level of material support.

As we saw in Chapter 1, there was a belief that lustfulness was a characteristic of youth, and further it was even considered a medical truth that men needed to expel their seed regularly to maintain good health.⁷⁰ There must then have been an acknowledgement that sexual activity would sometimes result in the conception of illegitimate children. However, just because there was a certain toleration of male youthful sexual behaviour does not mean that the issue of siring bastards was entirely socially acceptable. Bastards were the proof of incontinence, and there was a disconnect between what was socially acceptable and what was morally right regarding sexual behaviours. When Richard Cely junior got Em pregnant, he was worried about his 'oneste', a term that splices together both his public reputation and his personal virtue. I argue that the way John Dalton and Joyce Parmenter used the

⁶⁸ CL, no. 117, 107.

⁶⁹ Paula M. Reider, *On the Purification of Women: Churching in Northern France, 1100 – 1500* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

⁷⁰ Karras, *Sexuality*, 111.

term 'podyng' in a euphemistic manner, meanwhile, was a social delicacy made out of respect for George's reputation, as well as a kind of sexual slang.

John Dalton's letter to George mentioned 'wher as we ette the good podyngys'; Joyce Parmenter's letter, sent three days later, referenced 'þer ye go and ete puddyngys'. There is something very striking in the similarity of the language used by Joyce and John. Of course, in part this is simply descriptive; George and John dined at a pudding house where George met Margery. However, the similarity of phrasing, coupled with the circuitous language John used to identify George as the father – the reference to the Irish dagger – gives the distinct impression that 'puddings' is here being used to both cloak and disclose. I believe that this tells us something about the nature of this sexual relationship, and also about social attitudes toward such relationships and toward bastards.

It seems that by the late seventeenth century, 'pudding', which meant a 'sausage' rather than the definition more widely used today, had come to be a slang term for the penis.⁷¹ As Alison Hanham has noted, 'some of the gaps in [the *Oxford English Dictionary*]... would have been filled had all the Cely papers been available to the editors',⁷² but even if this is the case, there does not seem to be a direct link here to George's 'eating of the pudding', which would in such a definition become a far more taboo act! More usefully, the *Middle English Dictionary* defines 'pudding' as both a sausage and a type of cheap ale. The conflation of the food stuff and a drink may suggest the context in which such 'puddings' were sold. Margery may well have worked in a tavern or alehouse that served this kind of cheap meal in addition to ale. Women played a large part in the selling of ale. For example, in fifteenth-century Chester over half of those retailers brought before the court for breaking the assize of ale were female.⁷³ This might of course merely show that women were more likely to be prosecuted than men, but it still indicates a high proportion of

⁷¹ 'pudding, n. 9. a. *coarse slang*. The penis. Now only in *to pull one's pudding* and variants'. *The Oxford English Dictionary*.

⁷² Introduction to the *CL*, xxi.

⁷³ Jane Laughton, 'The Alewives of Later Medieval Chester', in *Crown, Government and People in the Fifteenth Century*, ed. by Rowena F. Archer (Stroud: Allan Sutton, 1995), 202.

women in the business. Unsurprisingly, the authorities were worried by businesses dominated by women and considered that antisocial activities, principally of a violent or sexual nature, flourished in alehouses.⁷⁴ Although part of this was probably the result of a misogynistic dislike of female enterprise – Ruth Mazo Karras notes that laundresses and spinsters were also suspected of prostitution – like these industries, it may well have also been rooted in fact.⁷⁵ Thus, just as foodstuffs and drinks become conflated, so too do alehouses and brothels, and customers become purchasers of distinct but associated ‘products’. Of course, this is not to say that the pudding house George frequented was actually a brothel. It was probably not, but we do get a sense that taverns were places where men could find sex and where women – whether ‘professional’ prostitutes or not – might solicit. This gives us a context for a way in which a young unmarried man might meet a woman and get her pregnant. It also seems that for George and John their appetite for more than one kind of pudding did not affect their reputations. All these observations support the idea that social perceptions of young male sexuality accepted and even expected a certain degree of promiscuity, which might well result in the production of offspring.

The matter is a little more complex than this, however. Bastards were, after all, incontrovertible proof of illicit sex, which may have been acceptable only when it was discreet. To quietly keep in her own house a mistress like George’s Clare might have been perceived quite differently than getting pregnant a household servant like Em or a low ranking servant like Margery. Both John Dalton and Joyce Parmenter avoided directly linking George to Margery’s pregnancy. Dalton’s awkward reference to his ‘broder that hayd the Irysch skeyne’ seems to be a reference to a private piece of knowledge that allowed George to identify himself whilst simultaneously let Dalton avoid naming his friend as father. Both Dalton and Parmenter then talked of ‘eating puddings’, on the surface an innocuous reference to

⁷⁴ Judith M. Bennett, *Ale, Beer, and Brewsters in England: Women's Work in a Changing World, 1300-1600* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 122.

⁷⁵ Ruth Mazo Karras, *Common Women: Prostitution and Sexuality in Medieval England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 54-5.

George's dining habits, but which in the context of the pregnancy seems to be a carefully veiled reference to George's sexual intimacy with Margery. Given that George's father knew about his previous child, this seems unlikely to be because the matter was meant to be a secret; rather it seems to be both a socially delicate phrasing and a way of providing a certain distance between George and the child. Under common law, a bastard was *nullius filius*, the child of no one.⁷⁶ 'No one' of course means 'no *man*', and it is interesting how William Cely referred to 'Margereys dowghter' when telling George of his child's death.⁷⁷ William here gave the infant only one parent, her mother, even though he clearly knew George was the baby's father. In the world of correspondence, when so much emphasis is placed on establishing relationships between parties – 'my worschypffull master', 'my whellbelouyd brother', 'my ryghtt whorshipffull ffadyr' – it is notable that George is never once called a father. He may do his duty as a father if his provision of clothing for Margery's churching is any indication of his general attitude, but he is not given the title of father. This may or may not have been a reflection of his real behaviour, but the circumlocutory approach of Parmenter and Dalton to the question of paternity suggests that at least a fiction of disassociation between fathers and bastards was maintained.

George Cely may have felt some embarrassment regarding his bastards, or perhaps it was those around him who felt the shame of the issue rather than he himself; since we do not see George's side of the correspondence, either is possible. Regardless, the careful reporting of the situation with Margery, taken in tandem with Richard junior's panicked response to making a woman pregnant, suggests their father-bastard relationships got off to a difficult start. Just because a man was not delighted by the news of a pregnancy, however, does not mean he could not subsequently act as a father to the child, nor does it eliminate the possibility of affection towards the child. Unfortunately, George's bastards died in infancy, and we do not know what happened to Richard's baby, so in their case affective ties are difficult to ascertain.

⁷⁶ Given-Wilson and Curteis, *Royal Bastards*, 43.

⁷⁷ *CL*, no. 188, 173.

Only Richard senior's comment that he was 'ryught sory for the dethe of the schylde' gives the hint of feelings within the family for George's bastard.⁷⁸

John Paston II never married, unlike Richard and George, but like Richard he kept a mistress, in his case Constance Reynforth. Not much is known about this relationship except that they had a child together, also called Constance, whom Margaret Paston left ten marks to in her will: 'I bequeth to Custance, bastard doughter of John Paston, Knyght, when she is xx yer of age, x marcs.'⁷⁹ Margaret openly recognised Constance's relationship to John, and whilst the bequest was not as large as those she gives her legitimate grandchildren, it was more than a token amount, and indicates that Margaret had an interest in Constance's welfare. Meanwhile, John Paston III also sired a bastard, and he called on his mother for assistance. In 1468 he wrote to Margaret asking 'that ye wolbe good mastras to my lytyll man, and to se that he go to scole.'⁸⁰ At this point John was only 24 years old, and so if he had a child old enough to go to school he must have sired him as a teenager. We do not know anything else about this child except that the letter refers to him later as 'Jak', but because John calls him 'my lytyll man', it seems more likely that the child is his son than, for instance, a ward. We can glean from this firstly that John felt he had a responsibility toward his son, and that he hopes his mother will treat him well. Secondly, it is notable that he asked his mother for help; evidently she knew of the child's existence, and must have been willing to be involved to some extent in his life, though John's request that she be a 'good mastras' might be read as a veiled criticism that she had not previously been this. Even if this is so, the implication is that John could expect his family to make sure his bastard is looked after – and in more than the basic sense of providing something for him to live on. John wished his son to be educated.

⁷⁸ *CL*, no. 117, 107.

⁷⁹ William Dawson, ed., 'The Will of Margaret Paston', in *Norfolk and Norwich Archaeological Society, Norfolk Archaeology* 3 (1852): 173-4.

⁸⁰ *PL*, no. 684, 4:299.

Perhaps John Paston III wanted this education to allow his son to have the kind of life had by Sir William Plumpton's bastard Robert 'Robinet' Plumpton. Robinet and his brother William were Sir William's bastards by an unknown mother. That they bore the Plumpton surname shows that they were acknowledged. Joan Kirby surmises they were brought up in the Plumpton household, though she does not say why she has come to that conclusion; but it is certainly a possibility.⁸¹ Robinet seems to have had a mutually beneficial relationship with first his father Sir William and then his father's heir and Robinet's own half-brother Robert. Robinet evidently had legal training, and served as common clerk of the city of York from 1490 until his death in 1507. He seems to have provided some legal services to the family as well as running less specialist errands.⁸² It seems likely that his father would have provided for his education, and perhaps assisted him in setting up his practice in York.

Only one letter survives between Robinet and his father, and Robinet did not address William as father, instead opening the letter with a conventional salutation from a servant to his master: 'After all lowly & dew recomendations, I lowly recommend me vnto your good mastershipp'. He signed the letter not with a 'yowre son' but a 'Your servant in all Robenett P.'⁸³ Even though Robinet was an acknowledged bastard, it might not have been appropriate for him to refer to William as his father. On the other hand, as I noted in Chapter 2, the language of service and the language of fatherhood is nearly interchangeable, and moreover the language of service is not *servile*. Calling his father 'master' does not mean that Robinet considered William first and foremost his patron rather than his father. He is also very open in referring to Robert as his brother, even though Robert was William's heir and Robinet was a bastard son of lower rank. In later letters to his brother he addressed his 'good mastership & good brotherhode', neatly tying together Robert's responsibilities as

⁸¹ *PLP*, Appendix III, 332.

⁸² See for instance *PLP* no. 173 (159-60), where Robinet investigates writs against Sir Robert, and no. 26, regarding the licence to course fox and hare in Knaresborough forest, as well as details of a purchase of fabric for a cope (48-9). See also Dockray, 'Why did the Fifteenth-Century English Gentry Marry', 67.

⁸³ *PLP*, no. 26, 48-9.

head of the family and as brother.⁸⁴ In his letter to Sir William, furthermore, he offered the following comment regarding Robert's proposed marriage:

And if I durst, Sir, the matter betweixt my brother Robart and Mr Gascoines sister me think is so long in makeing up, for in long tarrying comes mekell letting.⁸⁵

Robinet was comfortable with openly describing Robert as his brother, even though Robert was the heir and Robinet was a bastard. Despite his 'if I durst', he seems confident in expressing his opinion, and must have believed that William would at least take it into consideration. However, this is not necessarily reflective of a strong relationship based on their blood ties. This could as easily be an indicator of a comfortable relationship between a lord and his retainer, as for instance in the case of Thomas Mull's exhortation to his master Thomas Stonor that he should be kinder to his son.⁸⁶ Once again the line between 'service' and 'family' is blurred, and perhaps in the context of a late medieval gentry household where all members took part in various kinds of 'service' the distinction is not very important – particularly since legitimate sons, as I have already noted, were expected to be as deferential as any retainer.

Robinet might have been the perfect type of bastard son from a father's perspective: able and intelligent, he was able to serve the family's interests, seemed – from what little can be gleaned from the letters – to be content in a subordinate but not menial position, was on friendly enough terms with his father to be able to discuss family matters candidly, and remained heavily involved with the Plumptions long after Sir William's death in 1480. Robinet and his brother William were left quite substantial bequests in Sir William's will, and Robinet's own will demonstrates that he was a prosperous man.⁸⁷ Not all sons, however, may have taken to this second-tier position

⁸⁴ *PLP*, no. 150, 142.

⁸⁵ *PLP*, no. 26, 49.

⁸⁶ *SL*, no. 124, 216.

⁸⁷ James Raine, ed., *Testamenta Eboracensia: a selection of wills from the Registry at York*, 6 vols (Durham: Surtees Society, 1869), 4:258-60. This kind of generosity to bastards is not peculiar to the Plumption family; other examples of generous bequests include Roger Flore, who leaves his son Thomas, who appears to be a bastard, a great many goods, whilst the rather grander eighth Earl of Surrey leaves his bastard son lavish gifts. Frederick J. Furnivall, ed., *The Fifty Earliest English Wills*

so readily. There is some evidence that suggests that Robinet's brother William may have found his bastard status more frustrating than his sibling seemed to. Unfortunately, no letters to or from William survive; we learn about him only indirectly. There is no indication of how well he got on with his father, but there was certainly friction with his father's heir and his half-brother Robert, which might point to general family difficulties. In a letter of 1490, Edward Plumpton wrote to his cousin and patron Sir Robert about 'William Plompton, bastard', and seems to be defending himself against some accusation by William. He offered this caustic remark:

Yt is no marvell he þat is not naturall, þat cannot love & owe his service to you, though he loue not me. I trow he love all ill þat is faythfull & true to you.⁸⁸

The phrase 'not naturall' is peculiar; is it a reference to William's illegitimacy? If so, it is a strange way to refer to him – particularly since 'a natural child' was a term for a bastard. The way Edward seems to be using it is as a reason for William's supposedly unbrotherly behaviour, and his disparaging tone may point towards a prejudice regarding bastard offspring; the suggestion may be that irregular birth results in irregular conduct. Could such casual prejudice have fuelled further discord? This is purely speculative, but later that year matters had escalated, and there is an indenture in the Plumptonoucher book that states:

William Plompton ... had by his obligation dated 1 Oct. 1490 bound himself in the sum of £100 to abide by the award of Sir Robert Plompton ... on all manner of variances, quarrels, trespasses, debates ... between Sir Robert and William arising before the above date At the request of ... [various friends listed] Sir Robert agrees to grant William a life annuity of 3m payable at Martinmas and Whitsuntide...provided that he remains loyal and honest in his dealings⁸⁹

There certainly seems to have been a lack of brotherly goodwill between the two men. One wonders if William harboured any resentment towards Robert, who was of a similar age to him and had himself once been considered a bastard. As I will

in the Court of Probate, London., A.D. 1387-143: With a Priest's of 1454. Early English Text Society, O.S. 78 (London: Oxford University Press, 1882), 56-7; *Test. Ebor.*, 41-5.

⁸⁸ *PLP*, no. 86, 94.

⁸⁹ *PLP*, Appendix II, 277.

explain, Robert was legitimised in controversial circumstances, and thus became his father's heir; his change in status from an equal to William to his superior may have understandably compounded William's general feeling of frustration that he was on the fringes of his family simply because he was not born within wedlock.

That there may have been some prejudice against bastard sons who reached too high is supported by Malory's work. Mordred, born out of wedlock and as a result of an incestuous encounter between his father Arthur and Arthur's sister Morgause, is made regent of England whilst Arthur is on campaign. He forges letters that claim Arthur has died, and so he is crowned, and then he attempts to marry Guinevere, who 'was ys unclys wyff and hys fadirs wyff'.⁹⁰ As we saw in Chapter 2, knights in romance strive to become their fathers, but Mordred does not wait to succeed his father – he seizes what he wishes by force. Mordred is the ultimate upstart bastard. Lancelot's bastard Galahad would seem to discredit the idea of Mordred as a typical bastard; but Galahad, unlike Mordred, does not seek to follow his father. He has another destiny, one that happily leads him away from the patrilineage in the service of his heavenly father.⁹¹

Perhaps faced with prejudice regarding his birth, the bastard William Plumpton might have envied Degaré and Lybeaus Desconus, who seemed so easily able to shake off their illegitimacy. Knowledge of the father alone seems enough to legitimise; there are no thorny legal issues, no questions of heritage. Why, then, bother making these sons bastards at all? Other romances, such as *Octavian* and *Chevelere Assigne*, also dislocate their heroes from their families – but in these cases the sons are the legitimate offspring of a marriage between king and queen. If all the romance authors were interested in were having the hero be lost, then, there are other narrative patterns that they could have followed. Perhaps it is more satisfying to have the outsider *achieving* legitimacy, rather than *regaining* it.

⁹⁰ Malory, *Malory: Works*, 707.

⁹¹ Cherewatuk, *Marriage, Adultery and Inheritance*, 99.

Degaré and *Lybeaus* are not, however, stories of the underdog who triumphs; the heroes' illegitimacy falls within particular parameters that seem to make that illegitimacy acceptable and convertible into legitimacy at a later stage. I have already remarked in this chapter on the exceptional nature of their conception, and in Chapter 2 on the oddness surrounding their childhoods. This strangeness importantly marks both the heroes and their fathers as extraordinary in some way. *Lybeaus* has as his father the exceptional knight Gawain, which is enough to mark him out as special, and there seems to be a readiness within Arthurian legend to accommodate bastards in a way other romances may not.⁹² *Degaré's* father, meanwhile, is a more shadowy figure than Gawain – who although he appears only briefly in *Lybeaus* would probably be very familiar to the romance's readers from other stories – but he charges his conception of *Degaré* with supernatural significance, rendering it less illegitimate by indicating that it was somehow predestined:

‘...Lemman,’ he said, ‘gent and fre,
Mid schilde I wot þat þou schalt be.
Siker ich wot, hit worht a knave;
Forþi mi swerd þou sschalt have,
And, whenne þat he is of elde,
...
... bidde him fonde
To sechen his fader in eche londe....’ (115-122)

Degaré's father appears to have magical knowledge that he will sire a child on the princess, and his gift of the sword, with his instructions that his son receive it when he is old enough and take it to seek his father, means that *Degaré's* father orchestrates the quest that occupies his son's early adulthood. The gift of the sword at the beginning of the story provides the romance with its ending; all *Degaré* needs to do is follow the sword's narrative trajectory and fulfill the destiny his father seems to have designed for him. With *Degaré's* successful reconciliation with his parents assured by the gift of the sword, his illegitimacy becomes simply another aspect of the coming-of-age story, something that is overcome in his transition from adolescent knight to established man.

⁹² In Malory's work, for instance, there are a number of bastards integrated into the society of Camelot – Sir Pellinore's son Torre, Arthur's son Borre, and Lancelot's son Galahad are all accepted. Cherewatuk, *Marriage, Adultery and Inheritance*, 90-9.

These stories would seem to have little relation to real life situations were it not for the extraordinary case of Robert Plumpton, who lived his first fifteen years as an acknowledged bastard, until his father, Sir William Plumpton, ‘revealed’ in 1468 that he had been married to Robert’s mother for *sixteen* years. In so doing William defrauded his neighbours and caught the Plumpton family up in litigation that would last for years to come.

In 1463 or 1464, William Plumpton was sixty, and despite having three bastard sons he had no male heir, his last surviving legitimate son having died on the battlefield. His fortunes had also suffered a reversal following the Battle of Towton. So William sold the marriages of his granddaughters, now his heirs, to Brian Roccliffe and Henry Sotehill for 400 marks and 333 pounds respectively.⁹³ The surviving indenture between William and Sotehill establishes Elizabeth Plumpton as co-heir, and importantly also prevents any future son of William receiving anything other than a life annuity, which was a conventional sort of arrangement in circumstances like these.⁹⁴ Sotehill had prepared for any eventuality – apart from William producing a pre-existing legitimate son.

In 1468 William was called before the consistory court in York to account for the ‘grievous scandal’ of his private life.⁹⁵ He had apparently been living with a woman named Joan Wintringham for some time. William then ‘confessed’ that he was in fact married to Joan, and had been since around 1452, making his son Robert – born about 1453 – legitimate. The case was interrupted by political events, but in 1472 Dr William Poteman judged the marriage to be valid:

Joan was not his concubine but had been for many years his true wife; that a child had been conceived after their clandestine marriage Having heard the evidence of witnesses to the truth of Sir William’s claim it is hereby declared, acknowledged and published to all the faithful that they are and have been truly married.⁹⁶

⁹³ Introduction to the *PLP*, 7-8.

⁹⁴ *PLP*, Appendix I, no. 3, 230-34.

⁹⁵ *PLP*, Appendix II, no. 33, 263.

⁹⁶ *PLP*, Appendix II, no. 33, 263.

It is probably significant that Poteman was the Earl of Northumberland's godfather, and William Plumpton was a loyal retainer of the Percies.⁹⁷ Whether or not Poteman was showing favour to William, however, what is certain is that in one stroke he disinherited William's granddaughters and gave William a male heir.

Unsurprisingly, the Rocliffes and Sotehills did not just accept this verdict, and as a consequence the Plumpton family was involved in extensive and ruinously expensive litigation, and lost much of their estate. In this sense William's actions could be seen as a failure. On the other hand, the Plumpton name and line continued into the seventeenth century, and while William's act of fraud may have damaged the family fortunes irreparably, it did allow for the direct continuation of the male line for over a century. It would be fanciful to imagine that William had read *Sir Degaré* – but in the light of this unusual but not unbelievable historical episode, the fairy knight's determination to get a male heir through unusual and morally dubious actions do not seem, perhaps, so fantastic.

Conclusion

Although the legal and spiritual ties of guardianship and godparenthood respectively did not seem to engender fatherly feelings, they played a significant part in upholding patriarchal ideals. Guardianship, while often motivated by profit, protected the practises of patrilineage and primogeniture. As such it emphasised the importance of the father by having to put into place strong legal measures in the case of his death when his heir was underage. Once again the father's significance is proved by his absence. Godfathers may not have acted as fathers to their godchildren, but they do seem to be drawn into the nucleus of the family, suggesting that they had affective as well as spiritual roles in their godchildren's lives that would serve further investigation, since they are not well articulated in the letters. Guardianship and godparenting may serve as the outside markers of fatherhood:

⁹⁷ Introduction to the *PLP*, 8. Henry Percy was restored to his earldom in 1470.

these are the relationships that, although involving responsibility to a child and evoking some of the language of fatherhood, are not perceived as fatherly relationships.

Step-fatherhood and the fathering of illegitimate children, however, are seen as fatherly relationships – although the situations are not simply defined or negotiated. The crux of the difference between the stepfather and the father to a bastard is that the former is father in *name* to a child that is not his blood, while the latter is often not *named* father but knows that he and the child share blood. These dichotomies seem to create some ideological as well as practical problems for the fathers. For stepfathers, it may be difficult to establish the authority of a father toward a child who is not his by blood, whilst society expects that as the new *paterfamilias* he should immediately adopt paternal authority – and also take on responsibilities toward children who cannot contribute to his own line. At the same time stepchildren may chafe under the authority of a new and potentially unwelcome father figure, who has only earned the right to that authority through marriage, not through blood. Meanwhile, fathers of bastards may have cause to have strong affective ties with bastards, particularly if they are a product of a successful –albeit extramarital – relationship, but at the same time they may not wish to be publicly called fathers for the sake of their reputations. Bastards may find themselves favoured by their fathers, but for some it may have been frustrating to know that, unlike in romances, it was very difficult for illegitimate children to enjoy fully the fruits of their fathers' successes. Despite these issues, there do seem to have been a number of successful stepfather-stepchild and father-bastard relationships that involved mutual support and affection. The irony is that, unless a man was willing to risk public censure and elevate his illegitimate children, it may have been a lot easier for a man to be father to a stepchild than to a bastard.

CONCLUSION

Nothing can be said about ‘the father’ in general. Something can be said about a particular father conjoined with a particular mother, and about an absent father only in relation to the qualities of the mother.¹

We hope that we have shown that the father is a necessary and not a contingent figure in the child’s life and in society.²

Fathers matter. It is surprising that this needs saying about a society – late medieval England – that is widely accepted as patriarchal. Yet for all the critical assumptions about the father’s authoritarian role as part of the make up of a society dominated by men, ‘the father’ has garnered little attention from medievalists. Perhaps the father’s role is assumed to be understood and thus requires no explication. The effect of this, as I outlined in my Introduction, is to obfuscate the father and his role. So before outlining my conclusions in more depth, it makes sense to start with a statement so simple that it has been left unsaid. Fathers – and fatherhood – mattered in late medieval England. The purpose of the rest of this thesis has been to examine in what ways they mattered, and to whom.

Late medieval English society placed great weight of the practices of primogeniture, patrilineal descent, and patriarchal government. The language of political and social life was saturated with the language of fatherhood, whilst laws on inheritance privileged the father-son relationship. In purely legal terms, the identity of one’s father was imperative, whilst being a father was vital to ensure the continuity of patrilineal systems. The inheritance of property and the passing on of business interests were highly significant to the two distinct but closely related social groups I have examined in this thesis – the gentry and mercantile classes. Having legitimate offspring, particularly sons, was vital to ensure a family’s continuance.

¹ C. Chiland, ‘A new look at fathers’, *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child* 37 (1982): 371.

² Martin N. Baily, ‘Concluding comments’, in *The Importance of Fathers*, ed. by Trowell and Etchegoyen, 244.

Intertwined with these economic and political realities are the ideological constructions of fatherhood along with the domestic situating of actual and literary fathers. That fathers were important in the medieval conceptualising of the family, and in terms of legal practices, are facts taken for granted; what I have been looking at here is the ideological underpinnings of fatherhood, and considering how fatherhood is practised through the media of letters and romances. In doing so, I have treated letters as a genre much as romance is a genre. While other readers of gentry letters have been preoccupied with identifying historical ‘truth’ in the correspondence, I have been interested in how the letters artfully construct and maintain relationships through their vocabulary and form. I do believe that letters tell us something – sometimes a great deal – about real events, but what has mattered most here is how fathers and offspring choose to articulate their relationship with one another. That is why this thesis has been called ‘Fictions of Fatherhood’; it is not saying that letters and romances give a ‘false’ idea of fatherhood, but rather that the fictionality built into their generic nature provides striking insights into ideological concerns. The way genres are constructed, the very framework of their composition, gives a strong indication of the writers’ – and readers’ – priorities.

Throughout this thesis we have seen that the father is the dominant figure not only of medieval domestic life, but also of the medieval imagination. Even when a story is not apparently about fathers, the father manages to hold the key to answers within the narrative; sometimes he may have little part to play in the *plot*, but he still performs a vital role in the motivations and responses of the characters. Fatherhood, meanwhile, simultaneously underscores and promotes patriarchal norms. The establishing of fatherhood privileges adult males by making one of the key functions of fatherhood a means by which men are initiated into manhood, whilst the maintenance of fatherhood acts as proof for the validity of male dominance and the near-limitlessness of paternal authority, which can be threatened only by itself.

The privileging of fatherhood may make it an institution so entrenched that it is accepted unquestioningly not only by most medieval people, but also by most

medievalists. It also puts it in a position of coming under a great deal of stress from external and internal forces, while its function as a keystone of domestic life means that a range of pressures can come to bear on it. Medieval masculinity needs a great deal of reinforcement; fatherhood plays a role in that reinforcement, but is also subject to and partly the cause of similar pressures that threaten medieval masculine identities.

Becoming a man and sustaining masculinity: the functions of fatherhood

Fatherhood, I have demonstrated, played a vital role in the movement from adolescence to manhood. The late medieval concept of 'adolescence' was not exactly synonymous with biological puberty; the adolescent of late medieval England may have not moved into the fully 'adult' life phase until he was well into his twenties. I have noted that this 'youthful' phase is a highly significant part of the male life cycle, and as part of that life cycle a certain degree of sexual licence was permitted and perhaps even encouraged. The siring of illegitimate children was a natural consequence of extramarital sexual activity, and it seems to have been a regular feature in the lives of many males in their late adolescence.

However, although fathering bastards may demonstrate a male's physical and sexual maturity, it is not enough to make him a man. It is not exactly the process of fathering children that makes a man a man – it is the *context* in which that process happens. Manhood comes when a man sires children within a legitimate framework: that is, marriage. When this happens, a man is contributing to more than his own immediate nuclear family; he is adding to his lineage, and taking his place as father in a line of fathers of his blood. The adolescent lives in the present; the male who has achieved manhood through fathering heirs is linked to both past and future by providing for continuity of heritage. In romance, we see that continuity is heroic: the man who cannot provide an heir suffers a crisis of masculinity, whilst the aim of all young knights errant is to marry and procreate. In the gentry and mercantile letters, the heroism of continuity may seem more mundane, but it is no less pressing:

threatened by a high mortality rate, it is difficult to sustain these families, and as a result the desire to sustain them becomes acute. Moreover, becoming a father fulfils societal expectations for men of these classes; it demonstrates stability, authority and maturity, which are particularly important qualities in heads of households and leaders in business and the community.

The sustaining and stabilising role of fatherhood in masculinity was significant. It seems to have provided a definite proof of secular masculinity that even prowess, that hypermasculine trait, could not, because prowess needs to be constantly demonstrated in order to confirm and reconfirm a man's masculine status. Fathering offspring seems to have provided something of a 'safety net' in this regard, and also served to prove that a man was thinking outside his personal interests, prioritising the needs of his family and of his estates. Duty was an essential part of male life in these social spheres, with a complex web of mutual obligation underlying social and political interactions, and fatherhood was a performance of a very similar kind of duty. Marrying and becoming a father gives the knight errant a legitimate reason to settle down, and even valorises this course of action; but of course this prioritising of fatherhood leads to its own problems. Some fathers respond to these challenges by becoming good fathers; others misuse the authority that comes with fatherhood.

'Good' and 'bad' fathers

The bad father is a popular enough trope in romance. Whilst fathers are rarely as thoroughly depraved as Gower's Antiochus, the romance landscape is littered with fathers who are used by the plot as obstacles to the hero or heroine's happiness. The principal way of providing an obstacle is for the father to impede the marriage of the hero to the heroine. The motivations for this vary; in a number of tales there are overtones of incestuous desire, though this can be quite oblique, while other reasons seem centred around demonstrations of power, or a desire to recapture lost youth. Whatever the motivations, the root cause seems to be a deep selfishness on the part of the father. Many of these fathers are tyrants, or show tyrannical traits, and tyranny

appears to be the result of a very particular myopia – the short-sightedness of self-interest. The tyrannical father is motivated only by his own desires. He seems to have little concern with his offspring's future interests, and as not only father but also *paterfamilias* he also forgets his duty as head of the family – to preserve the family line. By prioritising his own wishes, he risks ending his bloodline.

The good father is one who places his family's interests at the forefront of his concerns. This does not mean that he lacks authority or that he is subservient to his children in any way. What it means is that his actions are for the sake of the family, both in the sense of his immediate nuclear family, and also in the sense of his lineage. The good father ensures that his bloodline will continue, and continue in prosperity. When the dying Athelwold seeks a guardian for his infant daughter in *Havelok the Dane*, what he seeks to protect is threefold: his daughter, his lineage, and his country. Good fathers do not just provide for their bloodline by siring children and dying so that those children can inherit, however. Many fathers, both real and fictional, work energetically to protect the present and future prosperity of their family. John Paston I's legal expertise builds the Paston fortunes and raises the family's social expectations. This would not be enough to make a man a good father, however. Antiochus, for instance, is a great warrior, but this cannot cancel out his failure as a father. The good father also helps his offspring follow in his footsteps. He must provide them with an inheritance, but he needs to give them the ability to build upon his successes. Degaré's father, by passing him the broken sword, gives his son the impetus to become a great knight; Degaré does so in order to find his father, but also finds that he has become a worthy successor to his father in the process. Less fantastically, Richard Cely senior gives his sons the necessary skills to follow him and to continue building the family business by educating them in the wool trade. Both gentry and mercantile fathers provide their sons with opportunities to advance themselves in business and politics, and also assist both sons and daughters in making marriages that will advance the family. These are the duties of fatherhood, and a man who neglects them is in danger of becoming a tyrant – not through cruelty, as this seems a more minor concern, but through neglect.

Paternal authority and fatherly affection

Something that becomes apparent in studying both good and bad fathers is that their paternal authority is not different, but rather it is the way they choose to make use of that authority that differs. The father's power within his family is nearly limitless; he has the absolute right to govern his household as he wishes. Even when the father's behaviour is clearly immoral, narratives cannot oppose his power itself, only what he chooses to do with it. In *Emaré*, the princess may object to her father's lust, but she does not object to his right as king to sentence her to death. His use of his power may be unjust, but as king he has the absolute right to pass sentence on her. This is an extreme example, and complicated by his sovereignty, but within the real families I have studied it is clear that the father is the ultimate source of power within the family, and he expects to be obeyed.

There is evidence, however, that offspring chafe under the weight of this socially and legally enforced authority of the father, and it is here that there emerge tensions between the 'ideal' fatherhood and its 'reality' in plot and everyday life. Friction particular occurs between fathers and sons, as sons are raised to emulate their fathers – yet the system does not allow for two dominant men to occupy the same space. Like the patronage system, the late medieval family requires hierarchical relationships. Resentments and frustrations can emerge when sons become men, but in real life the father does not immediately die and leave his son to step seamlessly into his place the way he often does in romance. A father must, to be a good father, turn his son into a competitor for his dominant position, and so he needs to reinforce his paternal authority. But if his authority is supposedly inviolate, how can it need to be reinforced? This contradiction builds in further anxieties and tensions.

These difficulties do not preclude affection, however, and nor does the father's dominant position within the family. As I have previously noted, critical assumptions about medieval fathers have focused on the formal and hierarchised

relationship between fathers and children, and have assumed that these structures resulted in cool and rigid relationships that are unable to become truly affectionate. I have demonstrated, however, that father-child – particularly father-son – relationships did not work *despite* these structures; they worked *because* of them. Letters, for instance, are highly ritualised and structured, and carefully craft a particular relationship where the son is dutiful and deferent and the father holds authority. What has been missed is that these rituals of letter writing, through their particular vocabulary and modes of expression, formulate a relationship that through the language of duty and obligation creates a strong sense of *mutuality*. Fathers and sons need one another. The power dynamic is not equal; but there is no sense that this would be desired. Deference on the son's part and the father's patronage of his son's interest are often ways of demonstrating and developing affection, not of smothering it.

This power difference is reinforced by the absence of daughters from the letters; what could seem like a problematic gap in evidence becomes a fascinating window of insight, as the interplay between the 'silence' of letters and the wealth of daughters in romance narratives makes clear the enormous power of the patriarch, and how vital fatherly authority was in both the household and in broader social structures. However, whilst occasionally having difficult relationships because the extremes of their respective authority can make communication difficult, fathers and daughters are sometimes freer to build loving relationships than fathers and sons. Daughters can never compete with their fathers, and because fathers are not moulding daughters in their own image, they seem to provide fewer opportunities for frustrating their fathers.

Outside the nuclear family

So far in this conclusion I have mostly written about legitimate offspring, largely because the balance of available source material provides far more information about these children. This does not mean that bastards and stepchildren were

unimportant, however. Looking at these groups allows for the testing of hypotheses about fatherhood, and how ideologies of fatherhood can face problems in the 'real' world. The step relationship demonstrates the difficulty of a man who in legal terms is now the father to his wife's children, and is expected to have paternal authority over them, but who may find complicated the reality of becoming a head of a new or merged household. Some stepfathers probably had successful relationships with their stepchildren, and there seems to be evidence that some stepfathers truly took on the role of father and were accepted in that role by their stepchildren. Other stepfathers may have found it difficult to enforce their authority, particularly with their stepsons. Bastards, meanwhile, posed a different kind of problem: how to deal with a child by blood who cannot by law form part of the lineage of the family. Some bastards seem to have formed a second 'tier' within the family – not necessarily in affection, but in terms of wealth and opportunity – and some bastards seem to have been disassociated from the family beyond some sense of monetary obligation. In rarer cases, the bastard manages to circumvent law and become as great as his father; but with very few exceptions, that is the stuff of wish fulfilment. What is important to note is that this is not necessarily just the wish of a disaffected child; if Sir William Plumpton is anything to go by, fathers may also have desired to make their bastards more fully their own, but unlike Plumpton most men were probably either more scrupulous or less daring than he in achieving this desire.

Beyond fatherhood: the next step

This thesis has only ploughed the first furrows in a virgin field. Studies in masculinity have in recent years begun to develop in earnest; questions about male experience are being asked, and assumptions are being revisited and reworked. As part of this, I hope that fatherhood will receive greater attention in medieval studies and beyond. There are many questions I have left unanswered, and probably a great deal more unasked. If the space of this thesis would permit, I would like to consider the great lacuna of this work, which is the relationship of fathers to children, not just to adult offspring. My sources do not provide that evidence, however, and would

have required a very different kind of thesis. Moreover the work thus far on medieval childhood in general is, with a handful of notable exceptions, still limited; but as work on medieval childhood has become of wider critical interest in the past decade, I think that progress on this topic will become possible in the near future.

It would also be useful to look at the father's role beyond his offspring and in the context of both his household and his wider role as head of household. My research here has drawn up interesting parallels between fathers' roles and the patronage system, and I think that there is a great deal to be explored in the concept of the 'father' beyond the nuclear family, particularly in a political and administrative context. The term 'patriarchy' needs in this context to be revisited so that it is no longer used simply as shorthand for male dominance, but instead considers the complex dynamics of a system that privileges fatherhood.

Of course, all this work is based on conclusions about gentry and mercantile families, and whilst these were important classes, they certainly did not make up the whole of medieval society. My conclusions about the ideologies of 'fatherhood' may well not have applied to the classes above or below these groups, and a comparative study would undoubtedly yield interesting results.

'Alas! Father, why dyd ye so?' is the plaintive cry of the heroine of *The Squire of Low Degree*.³ As we saw in my third chapter, her question is left unanswered by her tricky and controlling father, who never explains his motivations or actions to her. I hope I do not leave the reader as unsatisfied as the princess. I believe I have begun to explore something of what fathers 'dyd', and why. In such a new area, however, I can only give preliminary answers to the question 'who was the father?' Perhaps the most important thing is that this question has been finally asked. Whoever the late medieval English father was, he was enormously significant both in the formation of late medieval society and in the medieval imagination. Fathers mattered.

³ *The Squire of Low Degree*, l. 987.

APPENDICES

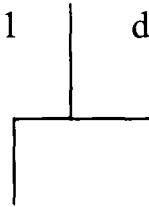
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d. before 1410/11

Joan Brokholes =
d. 1443

2. Thomas Aspall d. by 1420

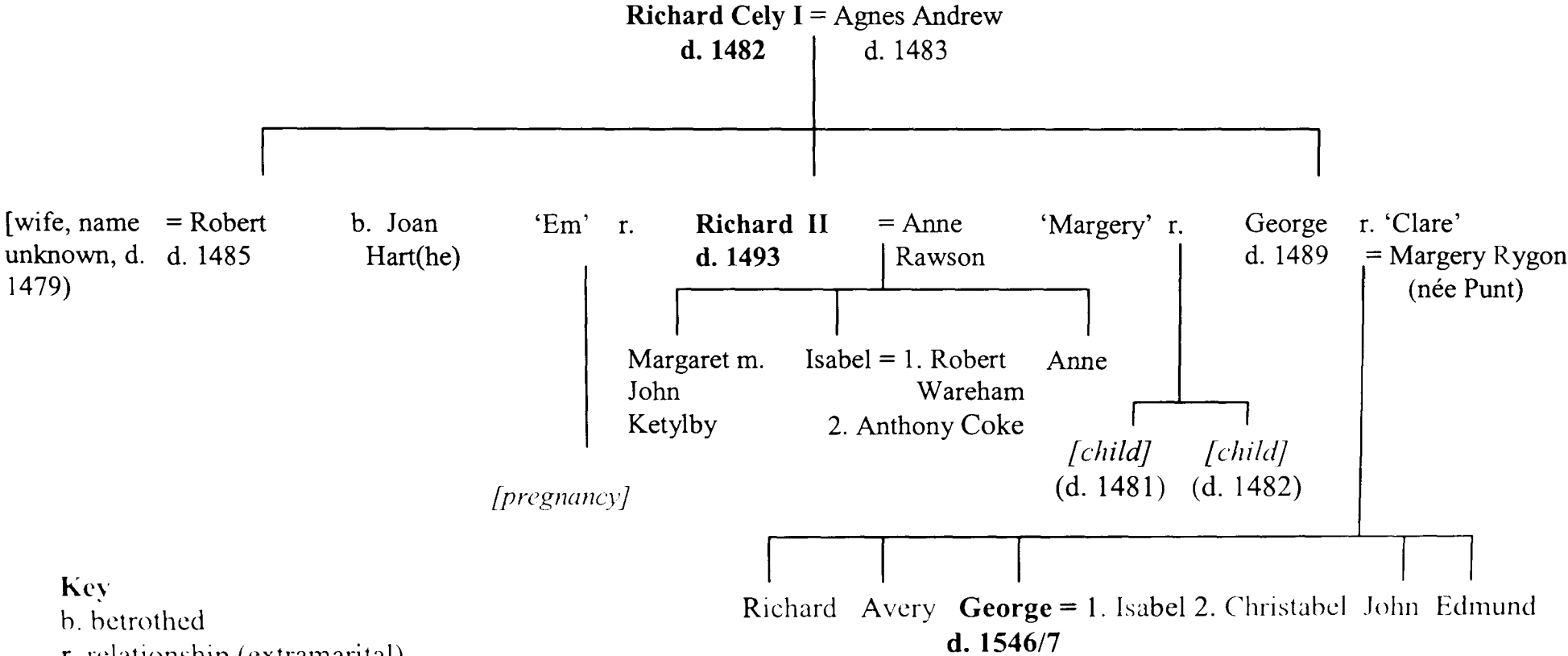
3. Robert Armburgh d. before 1453



[unknown wife] = Robert
d. 1430

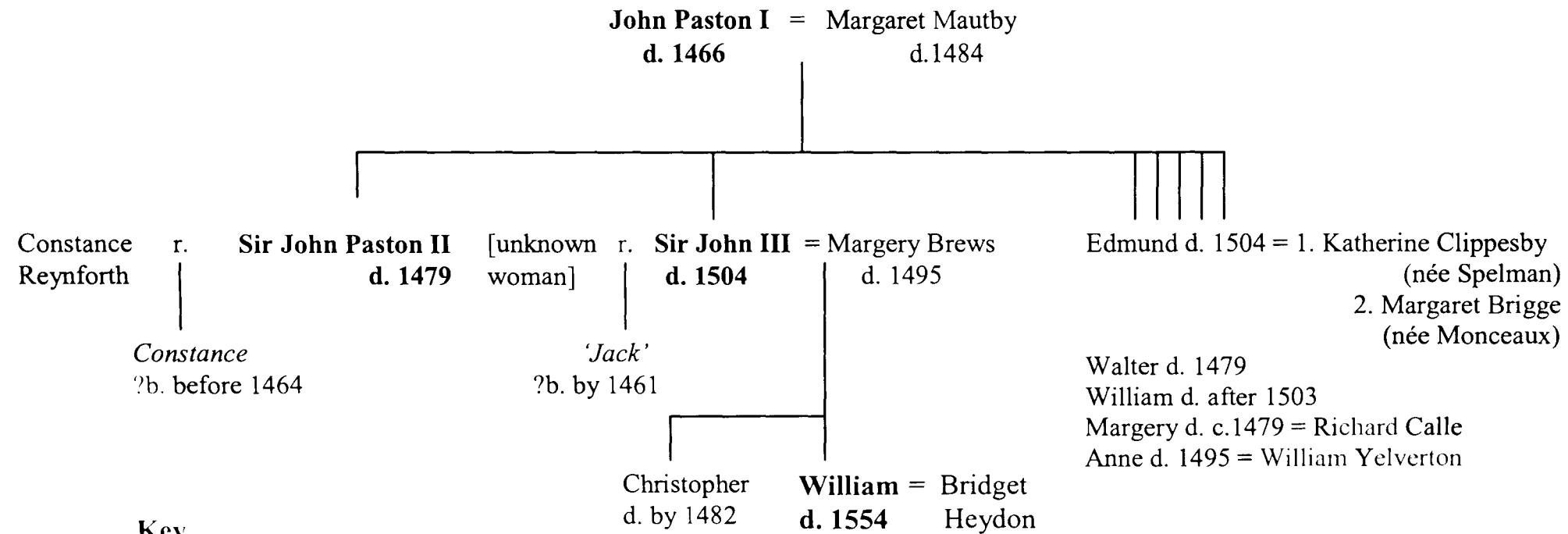
Margaret = 1. William Walkerne
2. John Prisot

The Cely Family



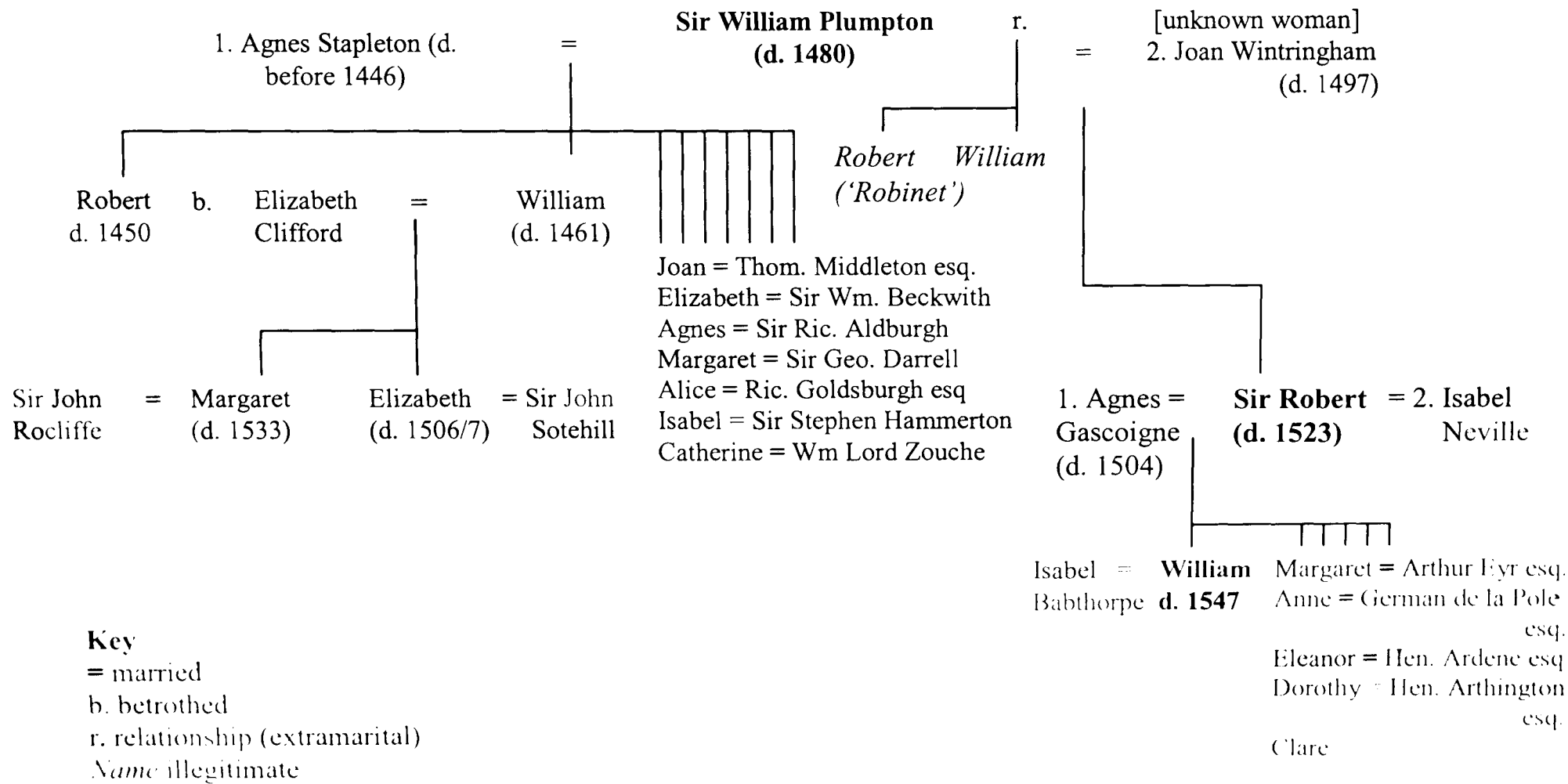
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r. relationship (extramarital)
Name illegitimate

The Paston Family

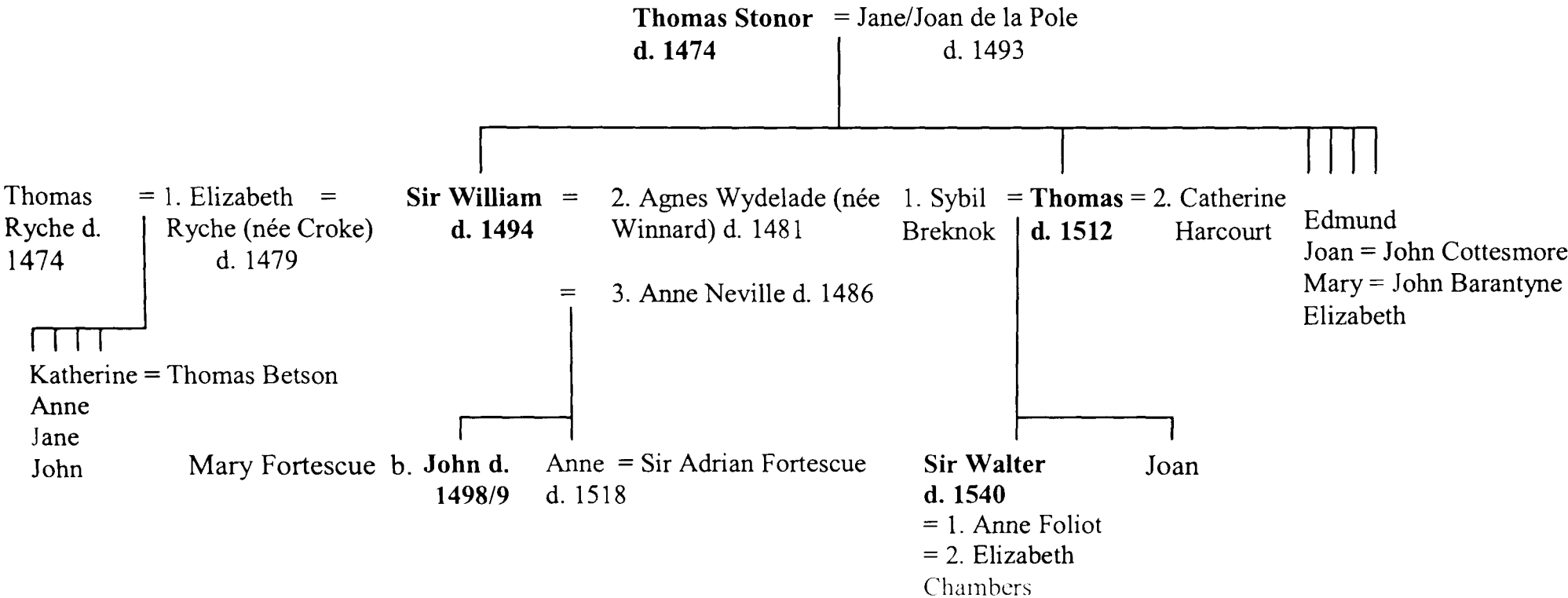


Key
= married
r. relationship (extramarital)
Name illegitimate

The Plumpton Family



The Stonor Family



APPENDIX II

Romances: Provenance of Manuscripts and Plot Summaries¹

The following table indicates in which manuscripts are found the romances I have used in this thesis. Nearly all of the romances I have used are found in miscellanies; I have noted where this is not the case. This table is followed by brief summaries of the composition and manuscript provenance of the individual romances, as well as plot summaries. The plot summaries are intended to provide an overview of the narratives to aid the reader, rather than as a blow-by-blow account of the plots.

Manuscript Contents

Manuscript and abbreviated title	Date	Romances
Aberysythwyth, National Library of Wales, MS 572 (fragments) (NLW, MS 572)	Early fourteenth century	<i>Guy of Warwick</i> (fragments)
Cambridge, Caius College, MS 107 (single romance) (Caius College, MS 107)	Mid to late fifteenth century	<i>Guy of Warwick</i>
Cambridge, Caius College, MS 175 (Caius College, MS 175)	Early fifteenth century	<i>Bevis of Hampton</i>
Cambridge, Cambridge University Library, MS Ff.II.38 (CUL, MS Ff.II.38)	Mid-fifteenth century	<i>Bevis of Hampton, Le Bone Florence of Rome, Guy of Warwick, Octavian, Sir Degaré, Sir Eglamour</i>
Cambridge, Cambridge University Library, MS Additional 4407 (fragments) (CUL, MS Additional 4407)	Fifteenth century	<i>Havelok the Dane</i> (fragments)
Cambridge, Trinity College, MS 0.2.13/IV (medical collection) (Trinity College, MS 0.2.13/IV)	Late fifteenth century	<i>Bevis of Hampton</i> (unfinished)
Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, MS Advocates 19.2.1	1330-40	<i>Bevis of Hampton, Guy of Warwick, Sir Degaré</i>

¹ Details about manuscripts taken from the editions of each romance, and from Gisela Guddat-Figge, *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Middle English Romances* (Munich: W. Fink, 1976).

(Auchinleck MS)		
Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, MS Advocates 19.3.1 (NLS, MS Advocates 19.3.1)	Second half of the fifteenth century	<i>Sir Gowther</i>
Lincoln, Lincoln Cathedral Library, MS 91 ('Thornton' MS 91)	1430-40	<i>Octavian, Sir Eglamour</i>
London, British Library, MS Additional 14408 (fragment) (BL, MS Add. 14408)	Fourteenth century	<i>Guy of Warwick</i> (fragment)
London, British Library, MS Cotton Caligula A.ii (BL, MS Cotton Caligula A.ii)	1446-60	<i>Chevelere Assigne, Emaré, Lybeaus Desconus, Octavian, Sir Eglamour</i>
London, British Library, MS Egerton 2862 (BL, MS Egerton 2862)	Late fourteenth century	<i>Bevis of Hampton, Sir Degaré, Sir Eglamour</i>
London, British Library, MS Sloane 1044 (fragment) (BL, MS Sloane 1044)	Early fifteenth century	<i>Guy of Warwick</i> (fragment)
London, British Library, Royal MS 17.B.43 (BL, Royal MS 17.B.43)	Second half of the fifteenth century	<i>Sir Gowther</i>
London, Lambeth Palace, MS 306 (Lambeth Palace, MS 306)	Second half of fifteenth century	<i>Lybeaus Desconus</i>
London, Lincoln's Inn, MS 150 (Lincoln's Inn, MS 150)	Early fifteenth century	<i>Lybeaus Desconus</i>
Manchester, Chetham's Library, MS 8009 (Chetham's Library, MS 8009)	Late fifteenth century	<i>Bevis of Hampton, Sir Torrent of Portyngale</i>
Naples, Royal Library, MS XIII B29 (Naples Royal, MS XIII B29)	c.1457	<i>Bevis of Hampton, Lybeaus Desconus</i>
Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Ashmole 61 (Bodleian, MS Ashmole 61)	Late fifteenth or early sixteenth century	<i>Lybeaus Desconus</i>
Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 261 (Bodleian, MS Douce 261)	c.1564	<i>Sir Degaré</i> (fragment), <i>Sir Eglamour</i>
Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud 108 (Bodleian, MS Laud 108)	Fourteenth century (compiled in fifteenth century)	<i>Havelok the Dane</i>
Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS	Late fifteenth	<i>Sir Degaré</i>

Rawlinson Poetry 34 century
(Bodleian, MS Rawl. Poet. 34)

Individual Romances

Bevis of Hampton

Manuscript Provenance

Bevis of Hampton was composed in the 1320s and survives in seven manuscripts, six of which are complete versions. Four of these manuscripts are from the fifteenth century. The manuscripts are: Auchinleck MS (1330-40), BL, MS Egerton 2862 (late fourteenth century), Caius College, MS 175 (early fifteenth century), CUL, MS Ff.II.38 (mid-fifteenth century), Trinity College, MS 0.2.13/IV (late fifteenth century, unfinished), Chetham's Library, MS 8009 (late fifteenth century), and Naples Royal, MS XIII B29 (late fifteenth century). *Bevis* also appeared in an early print edition by Wynkyn de Worde.

Summary

The elderly Guy of Hampton decides he needs an heir and so marries the daughter of the King of Scotland. She is not pleased by the match, and although they have a son, Bevis, she plots his murder with the help of her lover the Emperor of Germany. The earl is decapitated, and the treacherous couple are married. Bevis calls his mother a vile whore and attacks his stepfather. His mother sells him to merchants. He ends up at the Armenian court of King Ermin and is trained as a knight. The king's daughter Josian falls in love with Bevis. King Brademond threatens war on Ermin if he will not give him Josian's hand in marriage. Bevis defeats Brademond and makes him swear fealty to Ermin, and Josian declares her love for Bevis. Bevis is shocked by her assertiveness, but softens toward her when she promises to convert to Christianity. Brademond starts a rumour Bevis has deflowered Josian, and Ermin asks him to kill Bevis. Bevis meets Terri, the son of his old teacher. Brademond

throws Bevis into a pit. After seven years, Bevis prays desperately to be saved, and he manages to escape. On returning to the Armenian court in disguise he finds that Josian has been married off. Josian recognises the pilgrim and insists she is still a virgin. Various adventures ensue, and Josian is eventually married to Bevis and baptised. She becomes pregnant with twins, and Bevis returns to his patrimony where he confronts his stepfather. The emperor is killed, and Bevis's mother, witnessing this, falls from her tower and dies. After she gives birth, Josian is kidnapped, and the rest of the narrative relates her searching for her family and Bevis and his son Guy converting Armenia to Christianity. At last Josian and Bevis are reunited, and live happily together for twenty years before they die in each other's arms.

Le Bone Florence of Rome

Manuscript Provenance

Le Bone Florence survives in only one manuscript, the late fifteenth-century miscellany Cambridge University Library MS Ff.II.38. The romance is written in a north-east Midlands dialect and probably dates to the early fifteenth century.

Summary

Otes, Emperor of Rome, loses his wife in childbirth. He personally educates his daughter Florence, and she is beautiful and learned. The elderly but still formidable Garcy, King of Constantinople, hears of Florence's beauty and sends emissaries to sue for her hand. When Otes supports Florence's decision to refuse him, Garcy makes war on Rome. Two Hungarian princes, Mylys and Emere, come to Otes' assistance. Florence and Emere fall in love. Otes is killed in battle. Florence and Emere wed, but she says she will not lie with him until Garcy is dead. Emere entrusts Florence to his brother's care when he is in Constantinople. Mylys tries to win Florence's affections by pretending that Emere has died. When news of

Emere's return reaches Florence, she and Mylys set out to meet him. Mylys attempts to take Florence's virtue; when her prayers stop him, he hangs her from a tree by her hair. Sir Tyrry rescues her and takes her home. His steward Machary tries to seduce Florence, and when she rejects him, he frames her for murder and she is exiled. Eventually she reaches a convent, where she stays and becomes famed as a healer. She heals both Mylys and Machary of disease, and they confess their falsehoods. She is reunited with Emere. They have a son they name Otes, who becomes a great emperor after his father.

Chevelere Assigne

Manuscript Provenance

Chevelere Assigne is extant in only one manuscript, the fifteenth-century miscellany BL, MS Cotton Caligula A.ii. The romance was probably composed in the late fourteenth century.

Summary

King Oreyns of Lyor and his wife Beatrice have no children. Beatrice sees a woman with twins and says she must have committed adultery. Oreyns rebukes her. Beatrice becomes pregnant and gives birth to six sons and a daughter. The king's mother, Matabryne, replaces the children with puppies, and says that Beatrice has lain with hounds and other men. Oreyns imprisons his wife. Matabryne gives the infants to her servant Marcus and tells him to kill them. Instead he hides them in the forest, where they are found by a hermit. Each child has a silver chain round his or her neck. Malkedras, a forester, sees the children and tells Matabryne. Marcus admits he disobeyed her, and Matabryne has his eyes put out. She orders Malkedras to kill the children. He returns to the hermitage. The hermit is out with one of the children, Enyas. Malkedras strikes off the silver chains and the children turn into swans and escape. He returns with the chains. Matabryne gives the chains to a

goldsmith, who turns one into a cup for her but keeps the other five chains hidden. Twelve years have passed, and Matabryne asks Oreyns why Beatrice has not been executed. He agrees to burn her. The hermit is visited by an angel, who reveals Enyas' history and says the boy must fight for Beatrice. Enyas sees Beatrice being led out to be killed, and he confronts the king. He says he will fight for Beatrice, and so he is knighted. He fights with Malkedras and kills him. Matabryne tries to flee, but is caught and burned at the stake. The whole story is revealed. The goldsmith brings out the five chains, and when placed around the swans' necks they turn back into humans. The sixth swan, with no chain, remains in bird form. The family are reunited and the children are baptised.

Emaré

Manuscript Provenance

Emaré is extant in only one manuscript, BL, MS Cotton Caligula A.ii, which dates from the early fifteenth century. The dialect features in *Emaré* suggest a late fourteenth-century Northeast Midlands or East Anglian dialect.

Summary

The Emperor Artyus is a widower with a daughter. The King of Sicily visits Artyus, and brings him a gift of embroidered and jewelled cloth. An Emir's daughter embroidered it with images of famous lovers. The King of Sicily won it by force from the Sultan, and presents it to the Emperor. Artyus summons his daughter to him, and finds she has grown in a beautiful woman who looks much like her mother. He decides he wishes to marry her, and sends messengers to the Pope to get him a dispensation from the laws of consanguinity. They return with a papal bull. Artyus has a dress made from the cloth for Emaré, and in it she has unearthly beauty. Artyus announces his intention to marry her, and Emaré refuses. Artyus is furious, and puts her out to sea in a small boat with no provisions. Emaré is cast ashore at

Galys. Sir Kadore finds her and takes her to the castle. She tells him she is called Egaré. Emaré starts teaching embroidery and matters of courtesy at the court. The King of Galys sees Emaré and determines to marry her. His mother disapproves and says Emaré, in her unworldly garb, must be a demon. The king ignores her and marries Emaré. The king goes to fight Saracens, leaving a pregnant Emaré at his court. She gives birth to a son, Segramour, who has a birthmark. The queen mother burns the letter Emaré writes to the king to tell him of the news and substitutes it with one saying Emaré has given birth to a monster. The king is grieved by this news, but sends a kind letter to Emaré. The queen mother intercepts it and replaces it with a letter saying Emaré must be cast to sea with her child. Emaré and the child are washed ashore at Rome. A merchant finds them, and takes them into his home. Meanwhile, the king returns home. He enquires after his wife, and so discovers his mother's treason. He wants to burn her at the stake, but his lords propose that she is exiled instead. Seven years pass, and the King of Galys decides to go to Rome to do penance of the Pope. He lodges at the merchant's house. Emaré tells Segramour to bring the king to her. The family are reunited. At this time, the Emperor Artyus decides he should go to Rome to do penance for his crime. Emaré asks her husband to see Artyus, and she tells Segramour to bring Artyus to her. Emaré and her father are reunited, and a great feast is held. Segramour becomes emperor after Artyus.

Guy of Warwick

Manuscript Provenance

Guy of Warwick exists complete in three manuscripts spanning the fourteenth to mid-fifteenth centuries, and is found in a fragmentary form in three further manuscripts. Guy's story was very popular not only in the middle ages but also right through the early modern period. It is found in the following manuscripts: Auchinleck MS (1330-40), NLW, MS 572 (early fourteenth century, fragment), BL, MS Add. 14408 (fourteenth century, fragment), BL, MS Sloane 1044 (early fifteenth

century, fragment), Caius College, MS 107 (mid to late fifteenth century), and CUL, MS Ff.II.38 (mid-fifteenth century).

Summary

Guy is in love with Felice, daughter of the Earl of Warwick, and she tells him to become the greatest knight in order to win her hand in marriage. Guy has many adventures before returning to England. He weds Felice, and she conceives a child. After fifty days of marriage, Guy is suddenly struck by remorse for his deeds, which have been provoked by a desire for worldly renown rather than a desire to serve God. He determines to live a more devout life, and despite Felice's protests he leaves. In his absence Felice has a son. Disguised in poor garb, he has extensive adventures (amounting to several thousand lines of text) in the Holy Land, including slaying the Saracen giant Amorant. Years later Guy returns in disguise to England, where he aids the English against the Danish invaders by defeating the giant Colobronde. Disguised as a poor man, Guy is fed by an unknowing Felice as she gives charity to the poor at her castle gate. Guy retires to a hermitage, and he is visited by an angel who tells him his death is approaching. Guy sends his ring to Felice; she visits him on his deathbed. Following his death, a miraculous sweet smell emanates from Guy's body. Felice dies soon after her husband, and they are buried together.

Havelok the Dane

Manuscript Provenance

Havelok the Dane was composed between 1300 and 1325. The fourteenth-century manuscript, Bodleian, MS Laud 108, is a composite manuscript compiled in the fifteenth century. A fragment of *Havelok* also survives in the fifteenth-century manuscript CUL, MS Additional 4407.

Summary

King Athelwold of England dies, entrusting his daughter Goldeboru to Earl Godrich, who seizes the throne and imprisons Goldeboru. In Denmark King Birkabeyn dies, and Earl Godard usurps the throne and murders Birkabeyn's daughters, and hands over Prince Havelok to Grim the fisherman to kill. Grim and his wife see a strange light coming from the boy's mouth as he sleeps, and notice a cross-shaped birthmark on his arm, and so recognise his heritage. They flee with Havelok and their children and come to England. When Havelok is grown, England is wracked with famine, and so he goes to work, first as a fisherman and then as a castle porter. He becomes well known for his great strength. Godrich, believing Havelok is a commoner, marries Goldeboru to him. She sees the birthmark and the light on their wedding night, and recognises he is noble. Havelok determines to win back his patrimony. The couple travel to Denmark, where they stay with Earl Ubbe. Havelok defeats bandits who attack Ubbe's house. Ubbe also sees the mysterious light when Havelok sleeps. Recognising his king, he swears fealty to Havelok, and they raise an army and defeat Godard. Havelok is crowned. They return to England, where Havelok defeats Godrich and has him executed. He rewards his followers and Grim's family, and leaves Ubbe as steward of Denmark, as Havelok takes up the rule of England. He and Goldeboru have fifteen children together.

Lybeaus Desconus

Manuscript Provenance

Lybeaus Desconus in a fourteenth-century dialect, and survives in five manuscripts, all of which date to the fifteenth century. The manuscripts are: BL, MS Cotton Caligula A.ii (1446-60), Lincoln's Inn, MS Hale 150 (early to mid-fifteenth century), Naples Royal, MS XIII B29 (c.1457), Lambeth Palace, MS 306 (second half of the fifteenth century), and Bodleian, MS Ashmole 61 (late fifteenth or early sixteenth century).

Summary

Gawain sires a child on a woman in a forest. She calls the boy Bewfīz because of his looks. She keeps him from men to protect him. He discovers a dead knight, and takes his armour and goes to Arthur's court. Arthur names him Lybeaus Desconus, 'Fair Unknown', and knights him. Elaine and a dwarf come to court, looking for a champion to save the Lady of Synadowne from imprisonment. She is not happy when Arthur gives her the young Lybeaus. Gawain arms Lybeaus. Lybeaus defeats a series of knights, sending them to Arthur to swear fealty, and Lybeaus' fame spreads. On one of his adventures, he saves a city from a giant, and he is welcomed into the home of the enchantress Dame Amour. He forgets about Elaine and his quest until Elaine confronts him a year later. He is shamed, and renews his quest. They arrive at Synadowne, where the constable Sir Lamberd refuses to let any knights in. He defeats Lamberd, who tells Lybeaus that the Lady of Synadowne has been enchanted by two clerks and is captive in a magical tower. Lybeaus fights Mabon and kills him, and wounds Jrayne, who escapes. A monster with a woman's face comes through a window. Lybeaus is petrified as it kisses him. It turns into the Lady of Synadowne, who reveals that only the kiss of Gawain or one of his blood could save her. She offers to marry him and he agrees. They go to Arthur and are married.

Octavian

Manuscript Provenance

Octavian was composed in the mid-fourteenth century. There are two Middle English versions of the story extant, the Northern *Octavian* and the Southern *Octavian*. My thesis focuses on the Northern version, which appears in two of the three surviving manuscripts and also in a sixteenth century print edition by Wynkyn

de Worde. The manuscripts are: CUL, MS Ff.II.38 (mid-fifteenth century, Northern), Thornton MS 91 (Northern), and MS Cotton Caligula A.ii (1446-60).

Summary

The Emperor Octavian and his wife have not had a child after seven years of marriage. The empress suggests they build an abbey, and she conceives twin boys. When they are born, Octavian's mother claims the cook's serving boy has sired the children, and she places the knave in the empress' bed. Octavian kills him and exiles his wife and sons. An ape seizes one child and a lioness the other. The empress finds the lioness and her son Octavian on her journey to the Holy Land, and the empress and Octavian junior join the entourage of the King of Jerusalem. The other son eventually comes under the protection of the burgher Clement, who names him Florent. Florent's noble nature contrasts with his foster parents' values. Years later, France has been attacked by Saracens, and Octavian comes to King Dagobert's aid. Florent defeats a giant and saves the sultan's daughter Marsabelle. Dagobert knights him. Octavian wonders how Clement could have such a noble son, and Florent's story is revealed. Marsabelle agrees to become Christian so she can wed Florent. Florent, Dagobert and Octavian are captured. Octavian the younger comes with the empress to France and defeats the Saracens. He says his mother is innocent, and Octavian arranges to have his mother executed; she escapes this by committing suicide. Marsabelle is baptised and she marries Florent, and the family returns to Rome.

Sir Degaré

Manuscript Provenance

Sir Degaré is extant in four manuscripts of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and one sixteenth century manuscript, as well as in three early printed editions. The romance was probably composed in the early fourteenth century. The manuscripts

are: Auchinleck MS (1330-40), BL, MS Egerton 2862 (late fourteenth century), CUL, MS Ff.2.38 (mid-fifteenth century), MS Rawl. Poet. 34 (late fifteenth century), and Bodleian, MS Douce 261 (c.1561-4).

Summary

The King of Brittany's wife dies giving birth to a daughter. On the anniversary of the queen's death, the king, princess and their retinues go to her grave. On the way, the princess stops to relieve herself and becomes separated from her ladies in waiting. Lost in the woods, she meets a fairy knight. The knight rapes her, and then says that she will bear him a son. He gives the princess a broken sword, keeping the point in his purse, and says she should give it to their son with the instruction that he should seek out his father. The princess tries to hide her pregnancy, fearful that people will suspect her of incest with her father. She gives birth, and has the child abandoned with a pair of her gloves, gold, and a letter. A hermit finds the baby and christens him Degaré. He takes the baby to his sister, and Degaré is raised in her household until he is ten. He then returns to the hermit to be educated until he is twenty. The hermit gives Degaré his mother's note and gifts. Degaré sets out to find his family, bearing an oak sapling as a weapon. Degaré uses the sapling to beat a dragon to death, saving an earl, who subsequently knights him and gives him a horse and armour. Degaré learns of a joust held by a king who will give his daughter to any man who can defeat him. Degaré defeats the king, and weds the princess. Before they go to bed, Degaré remembers the gloves, and tries them on the princess, revealing her to be his mother. She gives Degaré his father's sword, and he sets forth. He comes to a castle, where he feasts with a beautiful lady who takes him to her chamber. Degaré falls asleep and is chastised by the lady for not keeping watch. Degaré saves the lady from a rapacious knight. The lady offers herself to him in reward, but Degaré says he will return after he completes his quest. He comes to a forest, where a knight accuses him of poaching. They fight until the knight recognises the sword Degaré bears. Degaré is reunited with his father, and

proposes that they go to his mother. His parents are wed, and Degaré marries his lady.

Sir Eglamour of Artois

Manuscript Provenance

Sir Eglamour of Artois was composed around 1350, and is first preserved in a manuscript dating to the end of the fourteenth century. It is found in four fifteenth century manuscripts and five sixteenth century print editions, attesting to its continued popularity. The romance was also dramatised in the fifteenth century. The manuscripts are: BL, MS Egerton 2862 (late fourteenth century, fragment), Thornton MS 91 (1430-40), BL, MS Cotton Caligula A.ii (1446-60), CUL, MS Ff.2.38 (mid-fifteenth century), Bodleian MS Douce 261 (c.1561-4).

Summary

Eglamour is in service to the Earl of Artois, and loves his daughter Christabelle. Earl Prynsamour agrees to the marriage if Eglamour can carry out three tasks. Eglamour slays a series of monsters, and in the course of this he saves a princess, Organata, who promises to wait fifteen years for him. He returns to Artois, and Christabelle and Eglamour plight their troth and go to bed. Prynsamour sends Eglamour away to complete his third task. Christabelle gives birth to a son, Degrebelle, and her father has them set adrift. A griffin carries the baby to Israel, where he is raised by the king. Christabelle lands in Egypt and is taken in by the king there. Eglamour returns and discovers what has happened, and goes on pilgrimage for fifteen years. The family are reunited at a pilgrimage where Christabelle's hand is offered to the victor. Degrebelle nearly marries his mother, but Eglamour comes to claim her. Degrebelle marries Organata, and they all return to Artois. The earl tumbles to his death from his tower on the news of their return, and Eglamour becomes ruler.

Sir Gowther

Manuscript Provenance

Sir Gowther is found in two late fifteenth-century manuscripts, BL, Royal MS 17.B.43 and NLS, MS Advocates 19.3.1. Both are written in a North-east Midlands dialect, but the versions vary considerably, with Royal leaving out many of the more gruesome details of Gowther's crimes.

Summary

The Duke of Estryke and his wife have failed to have a child. He says he will put her aside because she is barren. The duchess prays that she might have a child by any means necessary. A man who looks like her husband comes to her and they lie together. The man then reveals his true nature as a fiend, and tells her she will bear a child. She goes to the duke and tells him an angel gave her a vision that they will have a child if they lie together that night. She bears a son called Gowther. He is so hungry that he sucks the life from his wetnurses, and tears off his mother's nipple. He grows faster than other children, and by fifteen is fully grown and badly behaved. The duke knights him to try to control his wickedness, but it does not work, and the duke dies from grief. Gowther attacks churches and rapes nuns, until he is confronted by an earl who says Gowther must be a demon's son. Gowther confronts his mother, who reveals the truth. Stricken by remorse, Gowther goes to Rome to seek penance. The pope tells him he must not speak and can only eat food snatched from dogs' mouths until he receives a sign from God. Gowther goes to an emperor's court. The emperor's dumb daughter looks after Gowther. A sultan makes war on the emperor, and on three successive days a disguised Gowther does battle. Gowther is wounded, and the princess in sorrow falls from her tower and lies as if dead. At her funeral, the princess awakens and miraculously is able to speak, and

tells Gowther that God has forgiven him. She and Gowther are married, and after his father-in-law's death he becomes Emperor, and is dreaded by the Saracens.

The Squire of Low Degree

Manuscript Provenance

The Squire of Low Degree is only known from printed sources, unlike the other romances listed here. It was first published by Wynkyn de Worde in around 1520. It was possibly composed in the late fifteenth century.

Summary

The squire is in love with the King of Hungary's daughter. She overhears his lovesick lament, and says she will marry him if he becomes a great knight. She instructs him on how to achieve this. The steward overhears and tells the king. The king does not mind, and gives the squire permission to go abroad and perform feats in order to earn the princess' hand. The squire goes to take leave of the princess. He is attacked by the steward, who the squire kills. The king throws the squire in prison. The princess believes the steward is the squire, and so embalms him and keeps him in a tomb in her chamber. The king sends the squire away for seven years. He returns, having had many adventures. The princess has mourned the squire all this time, but eventually her father reveals the truth. The squire and the princess are married, and the king gives up the throne to his new son-in-law.

Torrent of Portyngale

Manuscript Provenance

Torrent of Portyngale is found in one manuscript, the late fifteenth-century miscellany Chetham's Library, MS 8009. The romance was composed in the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century.

Summary

Sir Torrent is in the King of Portugal's service, and falls in love with King Calamond's daughter Desonell. The king capitalises on Torrent's love by asking him to carry out heroic tasks for her sake. The king privately tells the queen that he does not want an earl's son to marry the princess, but he keeps giving Torrent challenges and lets him think he can win Desonell's hand. After another quest, Torrent hears Desonell is being wed to the Prince of Aragon and returns to stop the wedding. Calamond recognises Torrent's right to Desonell, but asks them to wait six months to be married. Torrent spends the night with Desonell, and then receives a letter from the King of Norway asking for his help in killing a giant. Torrent gives Desonell two gold rings in case she is pregnant, and leaves for a year. Desonell's pregnancy becomes obvious, and her father is furious. She gives birth to two sons, and Calamond has her and the children set adrift. When they reach shore, a griffin takes one child and a leopard takes the other. Each child has one of Torrent's rings. The King of Jerusalem finds the child with a leopard and calls him Leobertus. St Antony finds the boy with the griffin and takes him to the King of Greece, who calls the child Antony Fitzgriffin. Desonell is taken in by the King of Nazareth. Torrent returns to Portugal and learns of Calamond's treachery. He and the council decide to put the king to sea in a boat full of holes. Calamond drowns. Torrent is given the crown, but he leaves the throne to the queen and goes on crusade. The King of Jerusalem attacks, and Torrent is captured by Leobertus. Leobertus is touched by Torrent's plight and asks the king to free him. Torrent teaches Leobertus to joust. Torrent, Leobertus, the King of Greece and Antony Fitzgriffin go to a joust. Torrent and his sons are the best jousters. Desonell sees Torrent and swoons, and the family is reunited. He weds Desonell and takes up the throne of Portugal, and then Torrent

gives his sons as heirs to the kings of Jerusalem and Greece. He is elected emperor, and spends the rest of his life building abbeys and churches.

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