CHAPTER 4

CORPOREAL STYLE: REPRESENTING THE GENTRY HOUSEHOLD

In 1450, a landowning neighbor of John Paston was fined the substantial amount of one noble for beating his servant and drawing blood. The fine was dismissed on appeal after the neighbor presented an apparently irrefutable analogy: he asked “if a man myth not betyn hes owyn wyfe.”

This anecdote witnesses the functional equivalency between wives and servants in the late medieval period as well as the effective exclusion of both from the dominant legal discourse, a discourse that envisioned them as “things” to be disposed of by their masters rather than juridical subjects in their own right. An unqualified notion of objectification, however, does not adequately account for the gentry wife’s active role as keeper and caretaker of her husband’s household. Despite the fact that the fifteenth-century legal system recognized few differences between a servant and a wife, the Paston letters themselves witness the ways in which gentry women viewed their own work managing households qua work, work clearly differentiated from that of servants.

The division of labor in the late medieval household subjected the female head of household to domestic discipline from two distinct quarters: she was responsible for regulating the labor of household servants and agricultural laborers but was, in turn, regulated by her husband; she had to manage his property while not forgetting that she was his property. The gendered position of the gentry housewife was thus a double one: on the one hand, she occupied and organized the bounded, private sphere of household stuff (where she formed a continuum with the chairs, the food, the chattels of the house); on the other hand, she was expected to act decisively in the public sphere, representing the legal and financial interests of her frequently absent husband. This chapter explores this ideological contradiction and its effects on the gendered self-representation of the gentry.

K. Robertson, *The Laborer’s Two Bodies*
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housewife as portrayed in the letters of Margaret Paston. Throughout I propose to read these texts alongside late medieval literary, legal, and economic documents—“economic” in the sense that linked the household or oikos to the ownership of property. To think about the labor of gentry women in the context of contemporary discourses about labor is to come face-to-face with the contradictions of the late medieval household as a site of both production and consumption. Such contradictions are best understood through the metonymies that underwrote household labor: the first was the substitutability of both wife and servants for the lord himself in relation to his property; the second were the tropes that governed the wife’s body as his property.

In exploring models of female gentry work found in the writings of the Pastons and their circle, this chapter demonstrates how the corporate body of the household came to be equated with the individual body of the housewife not only in legal discourses but in the housewife’s rhetorically self-conscious representations of her own work to her husband. This is not to suggest, however, that the female head of the household was identical to either the stuff of her husband’s household or to her image in legal and literary discourses that sought to subordinate her to the patriarchal exigencies of a male-dominated household. Indeed, this chapter explores the contradictions between a legal ideology that conflated the roles of gentry women and servants over and against the lived experiences that gave the female gentry significant power over both people and things, within and without the manor.

The Paston documents (as well as other early English epistolary collections like those of the Stonors and Celys) are often read for the light they shed on the sociohistorical position of late medieval women. They have been mined for evidence attesting the reality of late medieval women’s lives: their attitudes toward marriage, widowhood and childbearing. While the information that they offer on these topics is invaluable, the letters themselves raise the question of Margaret’s own position within the field of literate production. We have more than a hundred letters sent by Margaret over a forty-year period (roughly 1440 to 1480), and these letters are written in no less than twenty-nine different hands. This multiplicity of hands suggests, according to their most recent editor Norman Davis, that Margaret could not herself write and that she “called on whatever literate person happened to be most readily at hand”; frequently this person was one of her sons or the family chaplain. While it appears that Margaret dictated these letters, several passages within the letters suggest that she could actually read, and her long correspondence, together with explicit injunctions to her sons to keep copies of their papers, demonstrates the high premium she placed on written documents. Her quasi-literate status may very well be