Did Margery Paston's story have a happy ending?

In 1469 Margery Paston was a young woman of about 20. She was about to face the most important and difficult months of her life. Would everything turn out well for Margery? We don't have to wonder for long. Thanks to her family's letters, we can find out quickly what happened. However, to understand Margery's feelings, we have to remember that she faced months of uncertainty and struggle, never knowing what was going to happen next. Did her story have a happy ending? You'll have to read to the end to find out!

Who Is Who in The Paston Family?

Margery – a young woman of about 20

Margaret – Margery's mother and widow of John Paston I

John I – Margery's father who had died in 1466

Sir John – Margery's eldest brother, aged 27 (also known as John II)

John III – Margery's second brother, aged 25

An angry family

The first evidence we have comes from a letter written in April by Margery's mother, Margaret. In the middle of a letter to her son, Sir John, is just one paragraph about Margery:

> 'I wish you to arrange for your sister to live with my Lady of Oxford or my Lady of Bedford or in some other worshipful place that you think best. I will help with her expenses for we are weary of each other. I shall tell you more when I speak to you …'

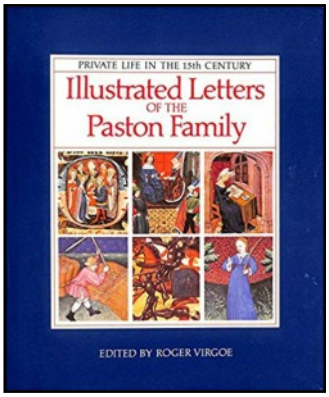
What had made Margaret and Margery so weary of each other? The answer begins to appear in a letter written a month later by another of Margery's brothers, John III. John III was deeply angry, which is unusual as his letters were usually cheerful. Writing to his brother, Sir John, he says:

> 'I understand that you have heard of RC's plan that he has made with the agreement of our ungracious sister [Margery] … even if my father were alive and had agreed to this plan and even if you and my mother had agreed too, I would never agree and give RC my goodwill to make my sister a shopkeeper, selling candles and mustard in Framlingham …'

Who was RC? What plan had RC and Margery agreed to? Why was John III so angry?

Margery and Richard

RC was Richard Calle. Richard worked for the Pastons as manager of their estates, a very important job. He was clever and hard-working but the Paston family did not expect Margery to fall in love with him and then marry him. The Pastons expected Margery to marry a man from a wealthy, powerful family, not Richard, who was 'only' the son of a shopkeeper in the town of Framlingham. That's why Margery's mother, Margaret, were so angry. That's why John hated the idea of his sister 'selling candles and mustard in Framlingham'.



Separation

Margaret tried to prevent the marriage by keeping Margery at home and stopping her writing to Richard. Margery must have wondered if she would ever see Richard again but Richard did write to her. In one letter he said:

> '… this life we lead now is no pleasure to God nor to the world, considering the great love there is between us and on my part never greater. We that ought to be most together are most asunder. It seems a thousand years ago since I spoke with you and I would rather be with you than possess all the goods in the world.'

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From: Ian Dawson, The Wars of the Roses, Macmillan

The Pastons were a wealthy family who lived in Norfolk. There are no pictures or descriptions of what they looked like but this drawing gives you an idea of the kinds of clothes they wore. We know so much about them because so many of the letters they wrote to each other have survived.

Richard also described Margery as his 'very true wife before God' – so were Richard and Margery already married? At that time, a couple did not need to be married by a priest in a church to be legally married. They were married if they simply said to each 'I take you for my husband/wife'.

This is exactly what Richard and Margery had done, some time before her family found out. That's why Richard described Margery as his 'very true wife'. Even so, the Paston family still tried to end the marriage. They insisted that the Bishop of Norwich question Margery and Richard, hoping that Margery would give in and say that she wasn't really married.

In September, the Bishop questioned Margery but she insisted that she and Richard were truly married. Then the Bishop interviewed Richard to make sure their stories agreed and they were not making up the story of being married. Then, instead of making a decision, the Bishop put it off for a month, four more weeks for Margery and Richard to wait, not knowing if they would be allowed to meet again. Richard had to leave his job with the Pastons though he told them that he would be happy to return if they wanted him.

A happy ending?

It was! The Bishop said that Richard and Margery were legally married. They were finally able to set up home together. They must have been delighted. Margery's mother was far less happy. She felt that Margery had betrayed her by getting married in secret. 'In losing her we lose a wretch' she wrote.

Did Margaret ever forgive Margery? We don't know. The only clue is in Margaret's will in 1482. She left money to Margery's three sons so perhaps she did feel less bitter towards Margery. One thing we do know is that Richard went back to working for the Pastons – they needed his intelligence and thoroughness.

Reading their story, I feel really pleased for Margery and Richard. It took a lot of courage to stand up to Margery's family. Even so, for six months they did not know what was going to happen. Looking back, we know how events turned out but we must always remember in history that the people we're reading about never knew what was going to happen next.

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Notes for Teachers

1469 was the Pastons' worst year. Not only was there the shock of Margery's clandestine marriage but the family's hold on Caister Castle was in danger. The Duke of Norfolk was taking the opportunity created by Edward IV's political problems to besiege Caister. John III was in charge of defending Caister so this may make his uncharacteristically angry response to Margery's marriage understandable.

Status was the issue linking Margery's marriage and Caister. The Pastons' rise to a place amongst the Norfolk gentry was the result of the highly successful legal career of Judge William Paston (and consequent land purchases) but his death in 1444 placed their gains in jeopardy. For the next forty-five years the Pastons battled to hold onto their lands and status, a struggle made more difficult by national politics and its impact on the power of the local nobles from whom the Pastons sought help. Hence sensitivity about status was central to their reactions to Margery's relationship with Richard Calle even though Calle was their most valued servant, a man they couldn't really do without. John II was the one family member who was perhaps more relaxed – as he was about most things.

We know very little about Margery after the settlement of this dispute as she's no longer mentioned in letters and the letters reduce in number from the 1480s too. She may have died by 1479 as she's not mentioned in a letter of that year though her sister is. Richard was still alive in 1503.

This dispute was almost re-enacted in 1472 when Margery's sister Anne fell in love with another servant, John Pampyng. However Pampyng was sent to work for the family in London and then Calais and a husband, the son of a judge, was found for Anne although not until 1477. The Pastons were particularly bad at arranging marriages for daughters.

Reading for Teachers

Helen Castor, *Blood and Roses* (2004) is the classic account of the Pastons with many quotations and placing the family's story in the broader historical context.

The best collections of letters in modernised versions are

> **Roger Virgoe**, *Illustrated Letters of the Paston Family* (1989) has been a favourite of mine for years, there's plenty of letters plus lists of key dates, mini-biographies of the main letter writers, short essays on a variety of aspects of 15thC life and lots of linked illustrations.
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> **Diana Watt** (ed.), The Paston Women: Selected Letters (2004) contains 92 letters, all written by or on behalf of women who were part of or linked to the Paston family. There are also two very informative essays on the writers, processes of composition etc.
>
> **Norman Davis** (ed.), *The Paston Letters: a selection in modern spelling* (2008) has about 140 of the letters (c10%) though, while a lot of the spelling is modernized, you still need to make extensive use of the glossary.

DVD - Helen Castor's three excellent television programmes (originally shown on BBC4) on Births, Marriages and Deaths in the later Middle Ages have been published on DVD.

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