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## “Let Him Walk With You”: Telling Stories about Fifteenth-Century Men, and the Women They Left Behind”

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Abstract: In this paper I adopt autoethnographic and creative writing practices to develop a new methodology for analyzing a selection of late medieval letters. I present three interlinked creative vignettes based on material from the Cely, Stonor, and Paston letter collections as a non-traditional means of accessing the homosocial content of the texts. I argue that in late medieval English letters we find elite men recounting their use of outdoor spaces (an orchard, a garden, a rabbit warren) as a place to facilitate and strengthen homosocial bonds. These episodes show that using outdoor spaces allowed men to potentially relax social hierarchies in ways that permitted emotional vulnerability and social bonding; they also facilitated casual misogyny and even sexual assault. This essay contains discussions of rape.

Keywords: homosociality, medieval history, fifteenth-century history, autoethnography, creative history, medieval letters, creative writing, sexual assault

In May 2015 the sun shone brightly over Harlaxton Manor in Lincolnshire. Viewed from the gardens, the 1830s Jacobethan house glowed golden, and I did a lot of walking and talking with colleagues who were also there to participate in a conference on masculinities in

the British landscape.<sup>1</sup> One of my clearest memories of the conference is that I wore a pair of red sandals, sensibly flat, for all that anticipated walking-and-talking. Despite wearing a practical heel, however, my feet swelled up in the mild May heat. When I took my shoes off on the first night, I found that the straps hadn't just rubbed my skin: they had bruised it. I was six months pregnant and, as I entered the third trimester, I found that my body was, in various ways, no longer fitting into places and things it had once found comfortable.

I have many great memories of that conference alongside that painful one: of talking late into the evening with people I had just met, the gleam of the afternoon sun against the stone of the manor house, social connections made that endure to the present. That juxtaposition sums up something of my feelings about academia over the past few years. Sometimes it has been a poor fit for me, and sometimes the best possible fit I can imagine. Sometimes—too often—it has felt like both at once, as I struggled to find a permanent home for myself and my work after I completed my Ph.D., a struggle that left its own bruises.

At that conference I gave my first paper on medieval orchards; that it has taken six years for that work to grow into something worth turning into an article is a legacy of those bruises. In academia, we are encouraged to walk one particular path, in a specific pair of shoes: a path shaped by traditional expectations of what an academic career looks like, walked by the stereotypical white, abled, cis male academic, who fits neatly into the well-worn shoes of his similarly white, male, abled forebears. All too often those of us who do not slip so easily into those shoes find that academia has encouraged us to cut off our heels and toes, like Cinderella's stepsisters, rather than just offering us a new damn pair of slippers that fits.<sup>2</sup>

In my 2015 conference paper I walked back and forth with Richard and Richard Cely, London wool merchants, father and son, in the orchard space they had bought and which they used to share

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1 The event was the Masculinities in the British Landscape Conference, hosted by the University of Evansville, May 14–16, 2015. Harlaxton Manor is a Victorian manor house built in the nineteenth-century “Jacobethan” style.

2 Hayley Thomas observes the ways in which mutilation and self-mutilation of women's feet marks their subordination to patriarchal control in Grimm's fairy tales. Hayley S. Thomas, “Undermining a Grimm Tale: A Feminist Reading of ‘The Worn-Out Dancing Shoes,’” *Marvels & Tales* 13, no. 2 (1999): 170–83.

confidences in the early summer of 1481. I remembered the old adage that to understand someone you have to walk a mile in their shoes, and I wanted to do that by unpacking the Cely walk and then writing about it. But I kept coming up against obstacles in starting that journey: maternity leave, a life-threatening pulmonary embolism, the end of my postdoctoral research post, some months in the wilderness, finding a permanent job at last, and then almost immediately experiencing my department going through a redundancy consultation, Covid-19 and all its attendant stresses. Now I come back to this draft after yet another long absence, this one caused by a major bereavement. Sometimes I have felt as if I am barely walking when I can see ahead of me many colleagues striding forward, forging new paths. Lately I have wondered if the way I have been taught that I needed to walk is, in fact, the only way I can get to my destination. Perhaps I might instead invite my reader to walk along *my* path as we explored my source material.

Autoethnography is a method of both research and writing that seeks to describe and analyze personal experience in order to understand broader cultural experiences.<sup>3</sup> It is a methodology that has the potential to be deeply, radically feminist, and one that is also subject to misinterpretation and outright dismissal.<sup>4</sup> As Vik Turbine argues in a recent article, “employing auto-ethnography enables me to tell ‘stories’ that might have otherwise been left unwritten—out of the professionalized biographies of ourselves as academics. There are so many silences and processes of silencing aspects of our life to maintain the image of a successful academic. ... [A]uto-ethnography is a ‘transgressive’ form of writing—it is the telling of experiences that are often hidden or

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3 Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur B. Bochner, “Autoethnography: An Overview,” *Qualitative Social Research* 12, no. 1 (2011) <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs1101108> [accessed 3 February 2022]. For a useful summary of the history of autoethnography as a methodology, see Leon Anderson, “Analytic Autoethnography,” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 35, no. 4 (2006): 373–95.

4 Judith Lapadat notes that autoethnography poses both career and personal risks for the researcher; “In having the courage to make the private visible, autoethnographers embrace personal vulnerability but cannot know how it will play out as the written material takes on a life of its own.” Judith C. Lapadat, “Ethics in Autoethnography and Collaborative Autoethnography,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 23, no. 8 (2017): 594.

obscured.”<sup>5</sup> Within the social sciences, the growth of autoethnography as methodology reflects a growing dissatisfaction with traditional research methods which, under the guise of so-called “objectivity,” privilege the perspectives of those in hegemonic power.<sup>6</sup> Autoethnography involves peeling back the façade of the “objective” academic and revealing the human being beneath it, and in doing so encourages the researcher to find “more transparent, reflexive, and creative ways to do and share their research.”<sup>7</sup>

With that in mind, I determined to approach my current sources from a new methodological direction. I have published extensively on the Cely family of wool merchants, but my praxis, while feminist, has been relatively traditional.<sup>8</sup> What I want now, though, is to undertake work that not only admits but actively revels in its subjectivity, its reflexivity—its potential to be generative, in many possible senses of that word. Autoethnography has offered me a route into a kind of research that welcomes me bringing all my baggage to the table, instead of telling me to quietly stow it away along with my coat in a British Library locker. But autoethnography has, typically, been a methodology firmly rooted in the present, in research done by researchers who can interact with their subjects in real time and in person. Everyone I research is long dead. I cannot pretend that my twenty-first-century life experience can be easily mapped onto the lives of fifteenth-century people. My own story can take me only so far.

The way I have spanned this divide—of time as well as of culture—is to think more broadly about storytelling. “Two or three things I know

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5 Vik Turbine, “First Generation Feminist? Auto-Ethnographic Reflections on Politicization and Finding a Home within Feminism,” *Genealogy* 3, no. 33 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy3020033>.

6 Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, “Autoethnography.”

7 Tony E. Adams, Stacy Holman Jones, and Carolyn Ellis, *Autoethnography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 22.

8 See for example: Rachel E. Moss, “Ready to Disport with You: Homosocial Culture amongst the Wool Merchants of Fifteenth-Century Calais,” *History Workshop Journal* 86 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/dby014>, and Rachel E. Moss, “An Orchard, a Love Letter, and Three Bastards: Extramarital Sexual Behavior and the Formation of Adult Male Identity in a Fifteenth-Century Family,” in *What Is Masculinity? Historical Dynamics from Antiquity to the Contemporary World*, ed. John H. Arnold and Sean Brady (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 226–44.

for sure, and one of them is that personal narrative is liminal,” Kristin Langellier wrote the year before I went to university, long before I had difficult questions to answer about medieval history but many years after I had started writing *stories*.<sup>9</sup> Some of my earliest stories were about thresholds, about doors to other worlds, and it seems to me that by beginning with my own story I can open the door to a kind of telling the past that marries a traditional close reading of historical texts with an imaginative appreciation of their content. In this approach I have taken inspiration from the Storying the Past reading group, a loose confederation of historians devoted to creative approaches to history.<sup>10</sup> As Will Pooley argues in a blog post for the Storying the Past project, “Both in our own work, and in our teaching, historians can use the tools of the creative writer to ask different questions, to imagine new problems, and to celebrate and pay attention to a resource that we too often treat as a weakness: ignorance.”<sup>11</sup> For the medieval historian, the historical record is filled with lacunae we regularly lament, writing that we cannot know what X was thinking or what happened after Y. Pooley’s suggestion is that thinking creatively about the past may involve an element of invention, by seeing those gaps as an opportunity rather than a limitation.

How one determines what is an “acceptable” level of invention to add creative depth to a historical research project is a difficult question to answer, and probably one that can be answered only by experimenting. As Laura Troiano writes at the conclusion to a creative narrative of Prohibition history, “What this narrative has become is a venue for me to grapple with what constitutes historical scholarship. To try to understand how historians reconcile the holes that cannot be filled in their research ... To find out if there is someone who can tell me why I cannot use ‘I’ in my work even though it has ‘me’ all over it.”<sup>12</sup> Jayne

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9 Kristin M. Langellier, “Personal Narrative, Performance, Performativity: Two or Three Things I Know for Sure,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 19, no. 2 (1999): 138.

10 *Storying the Past*, <https://storyingthepast.wordpress.com/> [accessed 5 June 2018].

11 Will Pooley, “Creative Writing as a Tool of Sustained Ignorance,” *Storying the Past*, <https://storyingthepast.wordpress.com/2018/06/05/creative-writing-as-a-tool-of-sustained-ignorance-by-will-pooley/> [accessed 5 June 2018].

12 Laura Troiano, “Slippery When Wet: A Young Historian’s Journey into the World of Creative Non-Fiction,” *Rethinking History* 16, no. 1 (2012): 105.

Pitard describes using autoethnographic vignettes (much like my anecdote of the red sandals) to “reveal layers of awareness that might remain experienced but concealed”: another form of making visible the invisible.<sup>13</sup> Troiano uses narrative fragments—or windows, as she delightfully titles them—to provide vivid snapshots into Prohibition-era America. She does not pretend that this type of writing gives sweeping insights into the period. Her observations are narrow but deep, a crack that lets light into unseen places.

That is my ambition here. This kind of research and writing “offers nuanced, complex, and specific knowledge about particular lives, experiences, and relationships rather than general information about large groups of people.”<sup>14</sup> This approach is in many ways radically out of step with the demands of wider academia. The modern academy, shaped by relentless rounds of job applications and grant applications, insists that every new piece of work should be dizzyingly ambitious in scope, each output changing the field. In one of my recent experiences, when I read a friend’s grant application, I told her to dial up the superlatives about her project’s potential impact. After all, when I won a prestigious Leverhulme Early Career Fellowship in 2014, I promised to give fundamental answers to questions about medieval patriarchy.

I am no longer interested in making such promises. What I offer here instead is three creative vignettes from the history of the Cely men and their near contemporaries, constructing narratives based on both a very intimate familiarity with the sources and their wider context, *and* on my subjectivity as an embodied being, a white woman in the twenty-first-century academy. They are works both of fiction and of history. Every event discussed here is real; every line of conversation recorded in italics is a direct translation out of Middle English. But although fifteenth-century letters are often more vivid and lively than their stodgy reputation would suggest, they are necessarily scant on the kind of detail that rounds out a story. These men wrote off-the-cuff, in the middle of business, and we are left with sketches that are full of personality but lacking fine detail. Having grown to know these letters over the past fifteen years, I use both contextual data and gut instinct to add color and texture to the picture. As far as I am concerned, it is not

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13 Jayne Pitard, “Using Vignettes within Auto Ethnography to Explore Layers of Cross-Cultural Awareness as a Teacher,” *Forum Qualitative Social Research* 17, no. 1 (2016): 1.

14 Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis, *Autoethnography*, 22.

so very different from any other kind of academic reading of a text; all of us put into our reading as much as we take out of it. Writing history has always been a form of narrative-making, and the postmodernist turn has meant we have firmly rejected the idea that there is *one* story, *the* story of “what happened.”<sup>15</sup> What I am attempting here is merely another means of telling.

So here I present three creative interpretations of three specific moments in time, followed by some interpretation in the context of scholarship on medieval outdoor space, homosociality, and sexual violence. It has been argued that in late medieval England the concept of privacy was in flux, developing into something more closely resembling modern norms, and something of that change is reflected in the stories I tell here: intimate stories shared outdoors, in places that are both private and public, hidden and in view.<sup>16</sup> After all, the late medieval household was not a space that permitted much privacy in the sense of being shut away from both ears *and* eyes. Medieval literature and court cases feature overhearing or seeing intimacies as plot devices and evidence; it was very easy to be seen or heard doing things that were, however, characterized as “private.” Late medieval society increasingly desired privacy but found it hard to achieve. When privacy becomes desirable, secrets turn into currency.

That currency is, of course, gendered. As Jean-Jacques Rousseau observed, “The male is only a male at times; the female is a female all her life and can never forget her sex.” In the context of secrets, a man has the privilege of forgetting his sex in secret-making, while for women simply being placed in the cultural category of “female” makes them a source of secrets to be mined by men.<sup>17</sup> Karma Lochrie’s formidable work on medieval secrecy argues that “Masculine secrets are secrets of knowledge, while feminine secrets are secrets of nature ... The circulation and exchange of women’s secrets between men creates a masculine

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15 See Alun Muslow’s *Narrative and History*, 2nd ed. (London: Bloomsbury, 2019) for a full discussion of history as a narrative-making activity.

16 See Diana Webb, *Privacy and Solitude in the Middle Ages* (London: Hambleton Continuum, 2007), and Diane Shaw, “The Construction of the Private in Medieval London,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 26, no. 3 (1996): 447–66.

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



bond at the same time it dispossesses women of their secrets.”<sup>18</sup> In Lochrie’s book men share secrets that give them entrances to power by controlling knowledge, but the emotional landscape of my sources is more complicated than simple domination. Sharing private knowledge forms bonds because it requires intimacy and vulnerability between men while simultaneously stripping women of their privacy and dignity. In the three episodes I discuss here, all feature what might be seen as secrets belonging to women: two pregnancies, marriage negotiations, sexual assault. In all three cases, these secrets are shared between men and used as a mechanism for shoring up family bonds, while the women are forgotten. I do not forget them.

### ONE: *SPRING IN THE ORCHARD*

The history of the Cely family is unknown prior to 1449, but their surviving correspondence begins in 1475, by which time they were a well-established family engaged in the wool trade.<sup>19</sup> In June 1481, George Cely received a letter from his older brother Richard. Both men were at this point in their early twenties and were employed in the family business. Richard was in London with their parents and George was in Calais, which city was at this time still a possession of the English Crown and was also a Staple port where much of the business of the English wool trade was carried out. George seems to have lived full time in Calais, and much of the correspondence is letters between the brothers in which, amidst much hastily written discussion of the intricacies of the wool trade, we find regular updates on the personal lives of themselves and their wider circle. On this occasion, Richard junior wrote to his brother that he and his father had met in their new orchard and that they had talked extensively about George.<sup>20</sup>

They always talked about George. When Richard was a boy, newly out of his uncle’s service, it was hard to come back to London with his northern *quhiches* and *ats* and see George fussed over and adored by his mother. Sometimes it was even hard to see him fussed at by their

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18 Karma Lochrie, *Covert Operations: The Medieval Uses of Secrecy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 123.

19 *The Cely Letters: 1472–1488*, ed. Alison Hanham, Early English Text Society, O.S. 273 (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), hereafter *CL*.

20 *CL*, no. 117, 107.

father, who fussed at everyone.<sup>21</sup> George was fun in a way nervy Richard wasn't. George danced; he made people laugh; they missed him when he was gone.<sup>22</sup> Richard wrote to George about *our friends*, but if they weren't George's first they soon became his foremost. It's hard to play second fiddle to your brother, harder when he's younger, and hardest when despite all that he's your best friend.<sup>23</sup>

But he was all those things—a younger brother to be looked after, a friend to be protected—which was why Richard was walking in the early summer heat of a June afternoon in a London orchard, while his father sweated and fussed beside him. And because, even if they were once again talking about George, at least here in the ripening orchard, moving between the green spaces of trees, Richard had his father to himself. No servants, no messages, no noise from the street. Only the buzz of bees in their hives and his father's persistent cough.<sup>24</sup>

*I told him all as it was*, Richard wrote to George later, *and that our father was right sorry for the death of the child*. Not *your* child: not

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21 Richard Cely junior makes several linguistic choices in his letters not mirrored in the writing by the rest of his family; Alison Hanham speculates convincingly that his use of *qwh* for *wh* and *at* for *that* may indicate he might have spent part of his youth in the north of England. Alison Hanham, *The Celys and Their World: An English Merchant Family of the Fifteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 9. As for Agnes Cely's favoring of George, one of my favorite incidents in the letters is when Agnes tells Richard junior that he must borrow one of George's gowns, while George gets a new one in exchange. *CL*, no. 40. Richard Cely senior's fussy, particular, but ultimately affectionate attitude toward his sons is lovingly drawn out by Hanham, *The Celys and Their World*, 14–17.

22 As George's good friend John Dalton wrote, "God knows we greatly miss you. I had rather than the best gown I have that you might abide here still with us. You shall understand more at your coming—it—is of mirth the cause I would have you for." *CL*, no. 44, 41.

23 The obvious affection between Richard junior and George makes for one of the greatest pleasures in reading the Cely letters. See Hanham, *The Celys and Their World*, 30–35, and Rachel E. Moss, *Fatherhood and Its Representations in Middle English Texts* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: D. S. Brewer, 2013), 48–53, 86.

24 Richard Cely senior was ill repeatedly in the period 1480–1481 before dying five months after this letter was written, though the cause of his death is unclear. The cough is a creative liberty signposting the fragility of his health.

on paper, not even in a letter between brothers, because no correspondence is truly private in two busy merchant households or in the journey between them. There was no surety of a space for secret conversation within the Cely household, either, not even as they advanced in the world, expanded into a London townhouse and an Essex manor. Their homes were cluttered with apprentices and journeymen, not to mention with women, servants, and Richard's mother. These conversations—about George, sometimes about their errant brother Robert, much more rarely about Richard himself—were conversations for men moving through the privacy of the outdoors, matching strides.<sup>25</sup>

Eleven months later the apple trees were blossoming in the Cely family orchard and Richard wrote another letter to George.<sup>26</sup> *I need you here*, he wrote; *Em is with child*. Their father was six months dead and Richard was the master of the household now. He didn't feel very masterful as he wrote to his younger brother about his rash Shrovetide night with their maid and its consequences. But George would reassure him. George had done this twice over. He'd taken care of—God, what was her name? The pudding house slut. Margery. He'd know what to do.

Richard finished up with *I will tell you more at your coming*. He'd take George out to the orchard, away from the household and his mother and Em, and unburden himself. It might not be the same as talking to his father, but at least George was less likely to tell him off.

## TWO: *LET HIM WALK WITH YOU*

“In this orchard, when you would be comforted, you must walk and see both fruit and herbs” opined the fifteenth-century Syon Abbey translation of Catherine of Siena's *Dialogue of Divine Revelation*.<sup>27</sup> A handful of years before Richard Cely was walking in an orchard with his father, the Stonor family retainer Thomas Mull urged his friend

25 For extensive exposition about George, Robert, and Richard junior's activities, see Moss, *Fatherhood and Its Representations*, 50–57, 171–76, and Hanham, *The Celys and Their World*, 30–107.

26 *CL*, no. 169, 156.

27 *The Orchard of Syon*, ed. Phyllis Hodgson and Gabriel M. Liegey, Early English Text Society O.S. 258, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), 62.

and master Thomas Stonor, an Oxfordshire gentleman, to go for a walk with his son and give him some comfort.

William Stonor tried hard to be the kind of son his father wanted and was always left with the faint sense of being a disappointment. Bookish William, prone to fits of brooding, irritated his stoical father, and Mull had become their go-between out of affection for them both. Marriage making was very much a collective, not individual endeavor in late medieval England, and family friends often played a key role in the smooth running of courtships and prenuptial negotiations.<sup>28</sup> Long service meant that in 1472 he could write in exasperation to Stonor senior—*for God's sake call him forth with you when he is at home with you, and let him walk with you, and give him words of good comfort*—and then the final sting—*and be a good father to him, as I certainly know you to be*.<sup>29</sup> William had dutifully found a lady his father would view as a good prospect for a wife, who was as virtuous as she was rich. Given she had a hundred marks in land in her own right and would have half the residue of her father's estate after his death, this meant she was pretty virtuous indeed.<sup>30</sup> Mull, knowing he spoke Thomas's language better than William could, carefully wrote up Margery Blount's manifold attractions in a letter to Stonor senior, and William's suit was permitted to proceed.<sup>31</sup>

Unfortunately for William, gentlemen were ten-a-penny in 1470s England, and an eligible woman like Margery Blount—heiress and widow both together, a fifteenth-century jackpot—would not hand herself over in marriage to just anyone.<sup>32</sup> She made it plain that she

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28 Anna Dronzek discusses the role of family friends in marriage negotiations in her "Gender Roles and the Marriage Market in Fifteenth-Century England: Ideals and Practices," in *Love, Marriage, and Family Ties in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. Isabel Davis, Miriam Muller, and Sarah Rees Jones (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003), 66–68.

29 *Kingsford's Stonor Letters and Papers 1290–1483*, ed. Christine Carpenter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), hereafter *SL*. *SL*, no. 124, 215–16.

30 *SL*, no. 123, 214–15.

31 *SL*, no. 121, 212.

32 On the appeal of widows in the medieval marriage market, see Barbara Hanawalt, "Remarriage as an Option for Urban and Rural Widows in Late Medieval England," in *Wife and Widow in Medieval England*, ed. Sue Sheridan Walker (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 152–57.

liked William, but she also valued herself. Too highly, according to Thomas Stonor, who had offered in his opinion a fair jointure and was ruffled when Margery demanded more.<sup>33</sup> Mull had gently warned William not to get his hopes up. Having found a rich lady that he liked who liked him back, sensitive, moody William had nevertheless privately decided he was in love.<sup>34</sup>

Mull knew better than to try to persuade Thomas Stonor to offer more in the marriage settlement; it was a fair price, because Thomas was always fair, though rarely generous. But William was crushed and, though he was irritated with them both, Mull was most frustrated by Stonor senior. William was twenty-three: he might be a man but he was still a very young one, and his heart had been bruised for the first time.<sup>35</sup> Stop being the patriarch and be his father, was the message in Mull's letter to his master. Go outside, away from the house and its formalities, duties, and obligations. Walk in the garden and give your son comfort.

But Thomas Stonor—who a few years previously in the wake of the loss of his own father had written to his wife Jane, calling her *sweet-heart* and asking her to *comfort me when I come home*—was not the kind of man who found it easy to open his heart, not even to his son, not even amidst the trees and scented walks designed to bring solace to the spirit.<sup>36</sup> William never wrote about Margery Blount again.<sup>37</sup>

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33 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's research was around 10 per cent of the dowry, although women who were particularly desirable due to their wealth or status could demand a higher proportion. Margery Blount's demand of 300 marks does seem particularly high. Barbara J. Harris, *English Aristocratic Women 1450–1550: Marriage and Family, Property and Careers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 49–51. For more information on how jointures worked, see Joseph Biancalana, *The Fee Tail and the Common Recovery in Medieval England, 1176–1502* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 142–43.

34 There is no direct evidence for this assertion; but Mull reports on William's low mood after the breakdown of negotiations and describes the young man as a "muser and studier," suggesting an introspective nature that might be ripe for taking a failed marriage negotiation to heart. *SL*, no. 124, 216.

35 Indeed in late medieval terms William would be classed as an adolescent at twenty-three. See Moss, *Fatherhood and Its Representations*, 41–48.

36 Letter to Jane Stonor, *SL*, no. 91, 185.

37 That is, there are no further references to Ms Blount in the surviving let-

THREE: *RAPE IN A RABBIT WARREN*

At around the same time that William Stonor was brooding over lost love, a couple of hundred miles away in Norfolk, Edmund Paston wrote to his older brother John. It wasn't fair, he said pettishly, that his mother had insisted he dismiss his servant Gregory. *He is as true as any living person*, Edmund insisted, and was sorry that his mother was, frankly, being a prude. What had Gregory done? Nothing no single man hadn't done, surely, which was fuck a harlot under cover of darkness, on the edge of the Paston estate.<sup>38</sup>

True, two plowmen had spotted Gregory, but no harm done. They were, Edmund said, *as delighted as Gregory by that matter*, and negotiated with him to have the woman for the rest of the night. Gregory, out of a sense of brotherly feeling, shared his good fortune. The plowmen took the woman to the stable to enjoy her; this circumstance, Edmund thought, was at the heart of his mother's disapproval. Margaret Paston had repudiated her own daughter Margery for daring to fall in love with the family steward Richard Calle and was deeply concerned with maintaining the family's good reputation.<sup>39</sup> Margaret felt no gendered solidarity with some unnamed whore—she could have turned a blind eye to it if it had happened outside the estate. But Gregory had forced her hand by enabling immoral conduct under her roof, even if that roof was a stable.

Gregory had washed his hands clean of the girl by then, so surely, Edmund complained, it was unfair to deprive Edmund of his service on account of some mere wench?<sup>40</sup> Whether or not the unnamed

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ters; but given how firmly Thomas Stonor had laid down the law, and how William seems to have been in other situations an entirely obedient son, it seems likely to me that this was, indeed, the end of the matter.

38 *The Paston Letters*, ed. James Gairdner (Gloucester: A. Sutton, 1983, microprint of 1904 edition in 5 vols.), hereafter *PL*. *PL*, no. 870, 5:232.

39 On Margery Paston's marriage to Richard Calle and her family's treatment of her, see *PL*, no. 721, 5:38, and no. 710, 5:21.

40 In fact, Edmund uses the word "queen," a word in Middle English that could fold together both a professional sex worker and a woman of low repute. But wench seems an appropriate modernization, as a word with historical and

woman consented to be used by the plowmen is not something Edmund thought was worth recording, if he even thought to ask the question in the first place. After all, he had far more important things to think about. Lowborn women were raped every day, but a reliable manservant was difficult to replace.<sup>41</sup> I expect that while his mother was punishing him for bringing his bad behavior home, she might have sympathized with the general principle. After all, the Paston family kept Richard Calle employed as their family steward, but there is no evidence that they ever forgave Margery. A badly married daughter was as much a *persona non grata* as a nameless whore.

### ANALYSIS

In these three examples across 1470s and 1480s England, men made use of outdoor spaces for a range of homosocial purposes. The locations they chose to use were carefully delineated while offering a flexibility not found in brick-and-mortar walls, and all of them can be characterized as in some ways bounded by the domestic household while at the same time remaining at a physical distance from the house itself. Katherine Weikert usefully distinguishes between “spaces” and “places” in the medieval world, where a space is created within a place, requiring both fluidity and intentionality. One physical place may contain many spaces, shaped both by the people who use them and the uses they put them to.<sup>42</sup> For example, an orchard might be a space to

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contemporary resonances of a similar sort. As Carissa Harris explains, by the late Middle Ages “wench” was a word commonly used for women of subordinate social status and questionable sexual reputation, and since then has continued to have sexualized (and eventually racialized) implications. Carissa Harris, “A History of the Wench,” *Electric Literature*, 3 June 2019, <https://electricliterature.com/a-history-of-the-wench/>.

<sup>41</sup> The Pastons lament the loss of good quality servants on other occasions—see for example John Paston II’s complaint about the loss of his servant Woode to other employment in 1473: *PL*, no. 832, 5:185.

<sup>42</sup> Katherine Weikert, *Authority, Gender and Space in the Anglo-Norman World, 900–1200* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2020), 12–13.

pick fruit for the servants employed to that task, but it could also be a space for a sick middle-aged man like Richard Cely senior to take a soul-nourishing walk with his son. It could become a space to share secrets, or to make them.

While orchards, in the late medieval imagination, might be associated with spiritual reflection and replenishment, there is also a liminal element to orchards that may also mean they were associated with potential breaches of orderliness. The late medieval romance *Sir Gowther* survives in two late fifteenth-century manuscripts—their north-eastern dialect makes me wonder if Richard Cely junior might have known the story—and details a very significant sexual encounter that takes place in an orchard.

In the story, the duke and duchess of Estryke are childless and the duchess prays for a child by any means necessary, which any reader of fairytales could tell you is a bad idea. Subsequently, a demon disguised as her husband waylays her in their orchard and she conceives a baby that will grow up to be a man of prodigious appetites of all kinds.

In her orchard upon a day  
She met a man, the truth to say,  
That her love besought,  
And looked as much like her lord as could be;  
He laid her down under a tree,  
And with her his will he wrought.<sup>43</sup>

The orchard belongs to the castle but lies outside it, thus apparently offering an ideal space to be occupied by both demonic and prosaic presences. The devil reveals itself to the duchess and says that she will conceive. Dismayed but determined, the clever lady goes to her husband and tells him that an angel has told her she will conceive that night. The normalcy of the duke and duchess's subsequent coupling is underlined by them retreating to bed at nighttime, which can be contrasted with the irregular outdoor and daytime lovemaking of the lady and the fiend. The lady, however, had showed no particular surprise at being taken in the orchard by her supposed husband; that could be down to the romance's brevity (all of this excitement happens in only

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<sup>43</sup> *Sir Gowther*, in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, ed. Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995), ll. 68–72. The translation is mine.



forty lines), or it may be that the orchard was a private enough space it did not seem out of the bounds of credibility for it to be used for a sexual encounter.

Perhaps this straddling of the barrier of the respectable and illicit was what made an orchard an ideal place for the Richards, senior and junior, to discuss George Cely's sexual escapades and their consequences. The orchard was probably at a little distance from their home but was a formalized and likely walled area of cultivation.<sup>44</sup> In practical terms, it offered privacy from eavesdropping, perhaps specifically from the ear of Mrs. Cely, but it seems to do medieval people a disservice to imagine that all their decisions would be made purely pragmatically. Perhaps when Richard Cely thought "I want to have a private conversation with my father," choosing an orchard as a location came as much out of imaginary spaces that had grown from his reading as from a practical desire to be out of his mother's earshot.

The rabbit warren where Edmund Paston's manservant had sex seems potentially ripe with such resonances too. By the fifteenth century rabbit hunting was a well-established trope for sexual pursuit, found in literary texts such as the *Roman de la Rose*, while the rabbit itself was frequently used as slang for the vulva.<sup>45</sup> The well-established fecundity of rabbits, paired with the warren as a fenced-in but still partially wild space for animal husbandry, situates this part of the Paston estate in a liminal space between the controlled and managed agricultural landscape adjacent to the domestic household, and to the wilder woods and hills beyond it. The sexual encounter between Gregory and the unnamed woman was potentially consensual and perhaps a paid transaction; however, when the woman is taken to the barn the agreement was made not between her and them but between Gregory and the plowmen. The woman here was reduced to the status of domesticated animal, one subject to the will of the agricultural workers as much as any oxen they might have harnessed to their plows.

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44 Unfortunately, we do not know the location of the Cely orchard, but London was crisscrossed with orchards in the Middle Ages. See Teresa McLean, *Medieval English Gardens* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1981), 77–78.

45 See David Stocker and Margarita Stocker, "Sacred Profanity: The Theology of Rabbit Breeding and the Symbolic Landscape of the Warren," *World Archaeology* 28, no. 2 (1996): 265–72 and Malcolm Jones, "Folklore Motifs in Late Medieval Art III: Erotic Animal Imagery," *Folklore* 102, no. 2 (1991): 192–219.

We are given little indication of what kind of space in which Mull imagined William and Thomas Stonor took their walk. It is easy to imagine them turning about the garden of the manor house, discussing the finer points of William's marriage suit in the shadow of the house where he would, hopefully, bring a wife home. While Thomas Mull suggested that William might need a private space to unburden his heart, the matters the Stonor men were discussing were as much questions of family economy as of human feeling, and were necessarily closely bound up with the household. William needed space not to protect his reputation or his employment, but because his friend understood that a man of his temperament could not speak freely before an audience, and that a man like his father would probably not listen as kindly if he felt compelled to react publicly as the Stonor patriarch, rather than just as William's father.

A gentry household would have been a busy place, with dozens of people occupying spaces throughout the day. While a later age encouraged seeing servants as something akin to living furniture, whose presence made no impact on family discussion, in the fifteenth century the line between servants and family was blurrier, particularly with regard to high status retainers.<sup>46</sup> It would be very difficult for any interaction between father and son in such context *not* to be performative, both playing a well-established role in the family hierarchy. Thomas Mull clearly understood that and also strikingly understood that, for the sake of healthy family relationships, sometimes one needed to step outside those formal roles and just be a father and son, taking comfort in one another.

In all of the episodes I have explored here, women's stories have been used as a means of secret-sharing between men, providing opportunities for male bonding. In the Cely letters, the exploration of a painful family secret makes the men involved vulnerable to each other, sharing emotional intimacies difficult to find in other kinds of historical sources. In the Stonor letter from Thomas Mull, that a family friend sees so clearly what his friend cannot—that his friend's son desperately needs his father's affectionate care—gives the correspondence unexpected poignancy. The Paston letter is a rude reminder, though, of something implicit in the Cely and Stonor correspondence. In Edmund Paston's letter, he has "natural" sympathy for the masculine

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46 Rosemary Horrox, "Service," in *Fifteenth-Century Attitudes: Perceptions of Society in Late Medieval England*, ed. Rosemary Horrox (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 61–78.

bonhomie between Gregory and the plowmen, and none at all for the woman they raped. I like to imagine that exuberant George, particular Richard, and introspective William might have cared better for their Margeries and Ems. Just because men were good friends to each other, however, does not assure us, unfortunately, of good intent toward women, and the fact of the matter is that in the telling of their stories, it is only their feelings, not what happened to the women in question, that carry any weight. Margaret Paston's response to the rape on her estate, meanwhile, is a salutary reminder that patriarchy thrives at least in part because of the willingness of many privileged women to act as its handmaidens.

## CONCLUSION

In outdoor spaces related to, but distinct from, the interior domestic space, elite medieval men might have been able to exercise a homosocial intimacy freed from some of the constraints of the regulated household. There might have been the possibility for emotional vulnerability, a blurring of hierarchical lines, an easing of social control; there might also have been the kind of camaraderie that facilitated rape.

All these examples feature negotiations in some way about women; however, in all these cases the woman, despite seeming to be at the center of those negotiations, disappears. Women are the impetus for men to talk to other men: to open their hearts, to tease and brag and bond. Mothers with lost babies, widows with self-worth, working girls: those aren't the stories men tell each other. If I truly wanted to walk in their shoes, I'd call Mistress Blount a grasper, Margery of the pudding house a tart, Em the servant a slut—and the woman in the field at Paston, whether she was a sex worker by profession or not, a whore, of course.

The men's miles are much easier to walk; the documents they have left behind, as well as centuries of easy stereotypes, makes these journeys mappable. But years of my own lived experience have made me both wary and weary of wearing men's shoes or of following too closely in their footsteps. Here, and going forward, I choose to go forward barefoot. The risks are higher when it is my tender skin rather than well-worn shoe leather walking on an unfamiliar road, but I think that is a road worth taking.