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Article

Binding Interdependence The Necessity of Marriage in the Stonor Letters

Sarah Emmett

UPON HER MARRIAGE TO WILLIAM STONOR IN 1475, ELIZABETH Stonor, née Croke, was no wedding amateur. Twice before, she had stood on the steps of the church, as was the custom, and promised to share her wealth and her body with her husband. Twice before, her husband had promised to provide for her and leave her a dower portion upon his death. Both grooms had offered Elizabeth gold and silver coins and a ring to seal their union, and both times, Elizabeth and her husband had prostrated themselves before the altar of the church and heard mass among their family, friends, and all the parishioners.¹ By the time of her third marriage, Elizabeth had seen her fair share of dowries, weddings, babies, and death, and yet, once again, she found herself in her best dress and veil, standing on the steps of church, ready to relinquish herself and her sizeable fortune to William Stonor, the young head of the aristocratic Stonor family. Three years later, in 1478, Elizabeth would once again put her experience to good use at the wedding of her daughter Katherine and her man of business Thomas Betson. Through the letters exchanged between these two couples and their associates, Elizabeth, William, Katherine, and Betson subtly make the case for medieval marriage as a means of mitigating insecurity and benefitting from interdependence.

1. Peter Fleming, *Family and Household in Medieval England*. Social History in Perspective. (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave, 2001), 45.

In 15th-century England roughly 10% of households were headed by widows, and, of those widows, 73% of them remarried.² So, although Elizabeth was experienced with both marriage and widowhood, she was by no means exceptional. Born the daughter of a London alderman and merchant, Elizabeth married Thomas Rich sometime in the early 1460s, and together they had four children: Anne, Joan, Katherine, and John. Rich's will was formalized in 1471 and by 1472, he had been dead long enough for Elizabeth to have married John Fen, who was also a successful textile merchant, like her father and first husband. In 1474, Fen died, leaving Elizabeth with two more children, a will to execute, and a significant fortune.³

Widows like Elizabeth Stonor enjoyed significantly more independence than other women, both married and unmarried. For possibly the first time in their lives, widowed women owned their own property outright and had control over their own finances after a lifetime of financial dependence on male relatives.⁴ On the death of her second husband John Fen, Elizabeth Stonor received the dower portion due her, which constituted a third of her husband's goods, an amount which she alone controlled.⁵ She was also named the executor of her husband's will, which gave her further control over the remaining two thirds of Fen's estate which would be reserved for his children. Fen's choice of Elizabeth as his chief executor speaks to her capabilities as a woman of business; however, it was not uncommon for wives to serve in this capacity. Chief executors were required to be deeply familiar with the properties, debts, clients, and desires of the deceased, and, wives, as partners in the family business, were often the natural choice.⁶ While Elizabeth was already experienced with the business and property that Fen left behind, as a widow, she now had direct and legally recognized control over a significant portion of her husband's affairs.

The increased independence of widowhood was, however, coupled with increased vulnerability, even among family members. Many widows were forced to sue their relatives for the payment of their dower portion, and others, disadvantaged by their lack of experience with the law, lost their portions altogether.⁷

2. Anne Crawford, ed, *Letters of Medieval Women* (Thrupp, U.K., 2002), 22. Barbara Hanawalt, *Growing Up in Medieval London* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 96.

3. Alison Hanham, "The Stonors and Thomas Betson: Some Neglected Evidence," *The Ricardian* 15 (2005), 34.

4. Fleming, 84.

5. Fleming, 85

6. Hanham, 34.

7. Fleming, 22–23.

Because Hugh Fen was no more than a toddler when his father died, Elizabeth was faced with a different set of problems. She was now responsible for maintaining her son's inheritance until he came of age, all while raising five other children. And though Elizabeth was the chief executor of the will, she was not the only executor, as Fen had appointed some of his business associates to the position as well.⁸ Elizabeth's independence was therefore limited by the opinions of men with little incentive to prioritize her well-being. In a letter dated to May 1478, four years after Fen's death, Elizabeth wrote of a meeting with the other executors, commenting that they were "reasonably well cooled: they be not so hot as they were, and yet they will be better hereafter, I doubt not."⁹ While the rest of the letter indicates Elizabeth's satisfaction with the meeting, it appears that two of the executors had previously been "hot" (passionate or intense) about some of their business. Negotiating the personalities and interests of men with little investment in her personal well-being could not have been easy for Elizabeth, and the supposed independence of widowhood was likely soured by its difficulties.

In this vulnerable position, Elizabeth sought a reliable ally and associate, her husband's former apprentice and business partner Thomas Betson. Betson was finishing up his eight-year apprenticeship around the same time that Elizabeth married John Fen, and, as the mistress and apprentice of the house, they were often in each other's company. Though Elizabeth was positioned above Betson in the household hierarchy, they were both below John Fen and dependent on his sense of duty and generosity. When Fen died, Elizabeth was left widowed and overwhelmed by the affairs of her late husband, and Betson was left insecure of his position in his master's business, of which he had only recently assumed more leadership.¹⁰ It was therefore practical for Elizabeth to trust Betson with the continued buying and selling of wool on which her fortune and the inheritance of her son relied. In return, she could expect Betson's guaranteed loyalty, as his future in wool was dependent on the Fen business, given his relative youth in the industry. Elizabeth couldn't leave her family to haggle over wool in Calais, and Betson couldn't rapidly amass the connections and fortune of his late master, so this alliance was beneficial to them both. However, even a reaffirmed business relationship with Thomas Betson couldn't fully alleviate Elizabeth's vulnerability.

8. Hanham, 34.

9. Hanham, 35.

10. Hanham, 34.

Elizabeth knew from experience that remarriage was a successful solution to the difficulties of widowhood. After the death of her first husband, Elizabeth's marriage to John Fen had provided her and her four children with a stable home, and, in his will, Fen had even set aside £100 for each of his stepchildren, indicating his sense of responsibility for them as members of his household.¹¹ While marriage would mean giving up her dower portion, the combined wealth of a successful union could ultimately prove more useful than her own independent resources. Additionally, remarriage would provide her young children with the male caretaker, educator, and benefactor that they would need to successfully navigate medieval society. And so, within months of Fen's death, Elizabeth was ready to find a new husband, and, with a now significant fortune, she could set her sights beyond the merchant class she was born and twice-married into.

Sometime in 1475, Elizabeth met William Stonor, the young head of a wealthy, landed Oxfordshire family. The Stonors were exceptional in two ways: first, their direct male line had lasted for eight generations, in comparison to the typical three, and, second, the family preserved their papers and letters in a collection spanning two centuries, from 1290 to 1483. Under William, the family would reach its zenith, with his knighthood and the enhancement of courtly connections.¹² A letter dated to 1474 or 1475, sent to William Stonor by his brother Thomas, contains what might be the first mention of Elizabeth in the collection. Thomas writes that he is puzzled by his brother's absence from London given how "greatly in conceit," or high regard, he stands "in London with a gentlewoman." Thomas then warns William that he might lose his chance with this London gentlewoman, writing: "greatly it is noised and has been told me with many persons that but ye be ware she shall be taken from you."¹³ If Elizabeth was the woman in question, then we know that William took his brother's advice and returned to London to fend off his challengers. The couple was married in 1475, and Elizabeth's property, money, and stake in her husband's business passed to William.¹⁴

11. Hanham, 34.

12. Elizabeth Noble, *The World of the Stonors: A Gentry Society* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2009).

13. *The Stonor letters and papers, 1290–1483; ed. for the Royal historical society, from the original documents in the Public record office, by Charles Lethbridge Kingsford*, Corpus of Middle English Prose and Verse, University of Michigan Library. <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/ACA1723.0001.001>, No. 142.

14. Crawford, 70.

From a practical perspective, the marriage was advantageous to both parties. The intensity of William's competition for Elizabeth speaks to her desirability, both financial and personal. For William, who already had significant landholdings, Elizabeth was his opening into the wool industry and the world of London trade. Marriage between the mercantile and aristocratic classes was already common; for example, in the 15th century, a third of the wives of London aldermen came from gentry families.¹⁵ William clearly valued not just the financial benefits of his relationship with Elizabeth, but also the connections it provided. In letters sent by Elizabeth to William, she often thanked him for gifts of venison and rabbit intended to be shared with her father, an example of William's commitment to the connections forged by his marriage to Elizabeth.¹⁶ Elizabeth, in turn, benefited from the support and security that William provided. She now had a male advocate to aid her in the execution of her late husband's will and the administration of her son's estate. Though her wealth technically became William's upon their marriage, Elizabeth assumed the position of mistress of the house, which put the resources of the wealthy Stonor family at her and her children's disposal.

Though William Stonor, as a young and wealthy landowner, might have seemed like the natural choice for the ambitious widow Elizabeth, there was another option. It was not uncommon for women of the mercantile class to marry their husband's senior apprentices, and that option, no doubt, crossed Elizabeth Stonor's mind.¹⁷ Betson and Elizabeth already knew each other well from living in the same household, and Elizabeth was closer in age to Betson than she was to William, who was only 25 at the time of his marriage.¹⁸ Additionally, their later letters indicate a mutual concern and respect for each other, and nearly all of Elizabeth's letters to her husband include some comment about either hearing or not hearing from Betson. Elizabeth's choice of William Stonor as her next husband may have been purely based on his superior financial and social position. However, from Elizabeth's affectionate letters we know that they genuinely cared for one another and missed each other while separated. The relationship between Elizabeth and Betson, for whatever reason, was to remain that of a patron and her client, and, later, a mother-in-law and her son.

15. Fleming, 34.

16. Nos. 168, 172.

17. Fleming, 97.

18. Hanham, 35.

Though Elizabeth chose not to marry Thomas Betson, she did have other plans for him: his marriage to her young daughter Katherine Rich. There is some disagreement among historians about the precise age of Katherine Rich at the time of her engagement. She was certainly alive in 1465 when she was included in the will of her great-grandfather.¹⁹ Charles Lethbridge Kingsford, original transcriber and compiler of the letters, suggested that Katherine was fourteen upon her engagement and sixteen when she was married in 1478, which fits with trends for upper class women of the era.²⁰ However, Kingsford based his estimate on the incorrect assumption that Katherine was the eldest child of Elizabeth and Thomas Rich, when in fact, Katherine's sister Anne was married in 1477 and gave birth to a child in 1478, as reported in a letter from Thomas Betson to Elizabeth Stonor. Alison Hanham, the first to point out Lethbridge's mistake, estimates that Katherine was closer to eleven or twelve at her engagement and thirteen or fourteen when she was married, earlier than the norm for most medieval maidens.²¹ In medieval England, twelve was the minimum age for marriage, and the average age of marriage for daughters of dukes was seven-teen.²² For peasant women, the average age was closer to twenty. Katherine was no duke's daughter, so, if Hanham is correct in her challenge of Kingsford, then there must be a reason why a merchant's daughter was married at an earlier age than some of the most desirable heiresses of the time.

Though Katherine was not an heiress, she did inherit some money, and this inheritance would have been enticing to a man like Thomas Betson. In his will, John Fen left a sum of £100 to each of his four stepchildren, including Katherine.²³ The average dowry for the daughters of aristocratic families at the time was upwards of 100 marks, or around 66 pounds, as a mark was equal to two thirds of a pound.²⁴ However, if a family hoped to marry their daughter to a knight, the dowry would be closer to 800 marks.²⁵ This means that Katherine's inheritance from John Fen, a merchant, was comparable to that of a lesser

19. Hanham, 38 and No 166.

20. No. 166 and Kim M. Phillips, *Medieval Maidens: Young Women and Gender in England, 1270–1540* (Manchester; New York, 2003), 38.

21. Hanham, 39.

22. Phillips, 38.

23. Hanham, 35.

24. University of Nottingham Manuscripts and Special Collections, "Money," Accessed November 18, 2021, <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/manuscriptsandspecialcollections/researchguidance/weightsandmeasures/money.aspx>

25. Fleming, 37.

nobleman's daughter. In addition to this amount, Katherine would have also been entitled to her share of the third of her father's estate set aside for his children, further adding to her financial value as a bride. Katherine's dowry wasn't enormous, but, for a previously obscure merchant like Betson, it was enough to make him all the more eager to tie the knot.

As Katherine's new stepfather, it is not unlikely that William Stonor might have also augmented Katherine's dowry, especially to incentivize her departure from his household. Unmarried daughters were seen as wasted assets by medieval families, and the fact that Katherine's sister Anne also was married at a young age suggests a certain urgency, probably on Elizabeth and William's part, to outsource the maintenance of as many of their children as possible.²⁶ In a letter written September 12, 1476, Elizabeth, in London, wrote to William, at Stonor: "And Sir, as touching my children I heartily thank you that it like you [pleases you] so for to tend them."²⁷ William, it appears, was an affectionate stepfather. However, Elizabeth's use of "*my* children" and the fact that she even felt it necessary to thank her husband for tending them in her absence suggests that she was still somewhat insecure about the consolidation of the two families. By marrying off her eldest daughters, Elizabeth could reduce whatever stress the maintenance of her children from past relationships placed on her current marriage.

It is also possible that Katherine's early marriage was more a product of Betson's value as a groom than of her value as a bride. The engagement was certainly finalized by April of 1476, when Betson enters the family letters in a brief, but deferential note to William informing him of a recent wool shipment to Calais, dated to April 12, 1476. Betson addresses his "right worshipful sir" and "good mastership," and recommends himself to both his "right worshipful mistress" Elizabeth Stonor and his "mistress Katherine." He continues, "thanked be the good lord, I understand for certain that our wool shipped be comen in best to Calais."²⁸ Betson's discussion of "*our* wool," and his promise of a further report of his actions in Calais indicates the beginning of a partnership between Betson and his mistress's new husband, now the owner of part of the business. Betson's recommendation of himself to Elizabeth also reminds us of the once-again crucial role that Betson played in Elizabeth's maintenance of her affairs. By continuing her business relationship with Betson and facilitating his partnership with her husband, Elizabeth continued to benefit from Betson's

26. Fleming, 22 and Hanham, 39.

27. No. 169.

28. No. 162.

expertise in the industry and his dependence on her patronage. By betrothing Betson to her daughter, Elizabeth formalized her relationship with him and his position in the family economic circle, while also maintaining his subordination to her in the household hierarchy.

The engagement of Thomas Betson to Katherine and Elizabeth's marriage to William Stonor provided the stability and status for which Elizabeth had hoped. Elizabeth and William shared the administration of their joint business, and their business associates deferred to both of their judgement. For example, on May 12, 1476, Goddard Oxbridge, an assistant of William's, wrote to William to report on some property and an agreement regarding its tenants. Oxbridge asks for further information about the agreement, and then writes: "for I can nothing say to [the tenant] till I have an answer from you or from my mistress."²⁹ Oxbridge defers to either Elizabeth or William's judgement, indicating their equal involvement in certain affairs. A few months later, July 12, 1476, Oxbridge wrote directly to Elizabeth in reply to a letter of instruction she sent. He apologizes for his failure to carry out certain instructions, which are not entirely clear from his letter, and he reports on various purchases that she had requested, including fish and gowns.³⁰ Years later, on June 18, 1478, Betson reports to Elizabeth that Goddard Oxbridge has yet to be paid and would like for Elizabeth to speak to William about the matter, indicating her continued oversight of Betson's work on her behalf.³¹ Oxbridge's trust in Elizabeth and his deference to her orders is evidence of her leadership in both the Stonor household and the family business. In the words of Anne F. Sutton, Elizabeth was "an active merchant in her own right."³²

As William's wife, Elizabeth was neither totally dependent on her husband nor completely independent from him. Even for aristocratic families without connections in trade, medieval marriages were clearly intended to be business partnerships concerned with the business of expanding the familial wealth and property. According to Anne Crawford in *Letters of Medieval Women*, "what in theory looked like total dependence of a woman on her husband, when examined closely begins to look much more like inter-dependence."³³ This

29. No. 165.

30. No. 167.

31. No. 216.

32. Anne F. Sutton, *Wives and Widows of Medieval London* (Lincolnshire: Shaun Tyas, 2016), 305.

33. Crawford, 21.

interdependence is evident in Elizabeth's letters to William, which discuss both the independent affairs of the couple, and their continued reliance on each other in certain matters. In the fall of 1476, Elizabeth was away in London, still wrapping up her late husband's affairs. In one letter, she asks William to bring candlesticks so she can light a candle for John Fen's soul.³⁴ In another, from September 12, 1476, Elizabeth reports that she "[has] not been merry in [her] heart," and that she wishes that William had been with her, writing: "for I would will that ye could an answered in certain matters better than I."³⁵ In the 15th century, the word "merry" was more an indicator of overall health than of mood, so, it appears, that Elizabeth had not been well and sought her husband's counsel in her own business matters, likely related to the execution of Fen's will and the administration of his estate.³⁶ It appears that Elizabeth's decision to marry, rather than remain a widow, paid off, for she had gained a trusted advisor and advocate in William.

William also relied on Elizabeth in his efforts to augment his family's prestige among the nobility. In October of 1476, Elizabeth attended the royal court with William's sisters and waited on the queen mother, Cecily Neville, Duchess of York. Elizabeth's letter is a full report on the people she talked with and the connections she made. She also discusses her desire to safeguard the family reputation after the unsatisfactory clothing of her sisters-in-law drew the criticism of a "lady Southfolk," probably Elizabeth of York, Duchess of Suffolk, sister of Edward IV.³⁷ It is possible that such efforts by Elizabeth contributed to William's eventual knighthood in January of 1478.³⁸ Elizabeth ends her letter on the grandeur of court with a simple note that she is sending William a bladder of powder to drink at bed because it is "wholesome."³⁹ Regardless of the wealth and business that Elizabeth brought to her marriage, she was valuable in and of herself, using her lively, determined nature to further the family's ambitions, and caring deeply for William's well-being.

34. No. 168.

35. No. 169.

36. Deborah Thorpe, "I Haue Ben Crised and Besy': Illness and Resilience in the Fifteenth-Century Stonor Letters," *The Mediaeval journal* 5, no. 2 (2015): 85–108, doi:10.1484/J.TMJ.5.108526.

37. No. 172.

38. Noble, 34.

39. No. 172.

Though Elizabeth clearly augmented her family's wealth, prestige, and connections, she remained unsuccessful in one crucial marital responsibility; she had yet to produce a Stonor heir. As a mother of six living children, part of Elizabeth's appeal to William must have been her history of fertility. Despite this, Elizabeth and William remained childless, and not for lack of trying. In the postscript of one letter, Elizabeth writes fondly to William of "the bed when you and I lay last together."⁴⁰ Elizabeth and William's efforts were not entirely fruitless, as it appears that Elizabeth was pregnant at least once in March of 1477. In another postscript, the part of the letter generally reserved for sensitive information, Elizabeth tells William: "I am crazed in my backet: you wott [know] what I mean."⁴¹ Multiple historians have interpreted this statement as a subtle pregnancy announcement. In middle English, the word crazed denoted a general unease of a person's physical or emotional condition (like that caused by pregnancy) or it could be an alternate spelling for "cresen," a word for growing larger or increasing. The word "backet" could refer to the small of Elizabeth's back, which, if increasing, would denote pregnancy, or it could be an alternate spelling of "bucket," a simple euphemism for Elizabeth's womb.⁴² This pregnancy was either unsuccessful or the child it produced died shortly after being born, which is not entirely surprising given that Elizabeth was now in her mid- to late-thirties. A letter from Betson a year later in April of 1478 could indicate a possible second pregnancy. Betson writes: "My lady your wife is reasonably strong waxed, the good lord be thanked: and she took her will in that matter like as she doth in all other."⁴³ It's unclear exactly what matter Betson is referring to, but his remark that Elizabeth is strong waxed suggests that, when he saw her, Elizabeth was increasing in size, perhaps, specifically, in her belly. Unfortunately, if this letter does indeed refer to a second pregnancy, that pregnancy would have also been unsuccessful. Though William and Elizabeth's marriage had proved to be a profitable romantic and financial partnership, it still retained a degree of uncertainty due to its lack of issue. Elizabeth had already experienced a significant degree of dependence in her marriage, due to her gender, but it was now William who found himself entirely dependent on Elizabeth for the heir he needed to secure his family line.

40. No. 175.

41. No. 180.

42. Thorpe.

43. No. 207.

Though Elizabeth and William were often occupied with their own private matters at court and in the bedroom, their business and personal connection with Thomas Betson remained constant over the course of their letters. In letters between the three of them, we can follow the financial and personal connections that they shared. None of William's letters to his wife and future step-son-in-law survive, but many of Elizabeth and Betson's letters acknowledge his having written previously, suggesting reciprocal correspondences. Out of the ten letters that Elizabeth wrote to William between 1476 and Katherine and Betson's marriage in 1478, eight of them mention Betson—either visiting with him, hearing from him, or expecting a letter. And of the six letters sent by Betson to William between 1476 and 1478, five of them contain either a request to be remembered to Elizabeth or of a report of a visit with her. Of Betson's four surviving letters to Elizabeth, three contain recommendations to William. Though Elizabeth's letters to William are full of her children, her family, her business associates, and her court connections, no other figure is mentioned as frequently as Thomas Betson. In one letter, Elizabeth mentions her "son Betson's chamber," indicating that his place in the family was not restricted to the London world of business, but also extended to the more personal Stonor estate.⁴⁴ Betson's discussion of Elizabeth's possible pregnancy further suggests this closeness with the Stonors, while also exemplifying the three-way network of communication between him and the Stonors.

Though Thomas Betson's social circle expanded to include the elite Stonor family, the details of his work mostly remained the same as before Elizabeth and William's marriage. Betson's first duty was buying wool in the Cotswolds from local farmers and middlemen. The wool would then be sent to London where it would be packed and shipped to Calais, the city designated by the Company of the Staple for the selling of wool. It was illegal for British merchants to receive payment for their goods within England, so merchants like Betson would travel to Calais for months at a time to oversee the sale.⁴⁵ One summer, he shipped 2,348 fells (unshorn pelts) to London "in the name of Sir William Stonor knight and Thomas Betson."⁴⁶ Betson would have liked the look of the word "knight" right next to his own and the prestige that it brought to his business. He also would have felt proud that his connection to such a noble family was

44. No. 172.

45. Eileen Power, *Medieval People* (New York, New York: Barnes & Noble, 1963), 121.

46. Power, 136.

more than nominal, given his engagement to Katherine, his friendship with Elizabeth, and his position in William's household.

Despite these strong connections, Betson still exhibits a certain degree of insecurity in his letters, especially regarding his relationship to William. While his letters to Elizabeth grow increasingly familiar, often including gossip about her family members or gentle financial advice, his letters to William remain flattering and deferential.⁴⁷ In one of his first letters to William, written April 22, 1476, Betson expresses his intense gratitude for William's "gentle cheer" and "faithful love... of [Betson's] behalf nothing deserved." He continues: "how be it God knowing my good heart and will, and my prayer shall ever be ready for your mastership and all your household."⁴⁸ Alison Hanham notes that "such ingratiating phrases rarely occur in similar collections. When they do they mean that the writer is begging a favour, whether from superior or equal. In Betson's letters to Elizabeth and William they suggest insecurity."⁴⁹ Despite the obvious advantages of his newfound Stonor connections, it is not unsurprising that Betson's relationship with William, a man five years his junior and ten times his superior, was uncomfortable. While Elizabeth's marriage allowed her to successfully occupy both the world of trade and the world of the aristocracy, Betson and William were more firmly planted in their respective positions. Their difference in background and social class, not to mention the fact that Betson had worked closely with Elizabeth's late husband, surely made things awkward at times. It is not surprising that Betson's relationship with William was an unequal relationship and, for Betson, a discomfoting one.

Betson's letters also indicate his insecurity in his relationship with his young fiancé Katherine. On June 1, 1476, Betson, still working in Calais, attempted to write a love letter to Katherine, a girl he had shared a household with since she was eight and he was twenty-three.⁵⁰ Historians are divided on the tone and effectiveness of this love letter. To Eileen Power, who wrote a life sketch of Betson in *Medieval People*, the letter was charming, romantic, and most likely sealed with a kiss, since she was still functioning under Kingsford's assumption that Katherine was fourteen, rather than twelve.⁵¹ To Peter Fleming the letter "reads like the awkward solicitudes of a rather distant uncle to his teenage niece."⁵² Taking into

47. Noble, 168.

48. No. 162.

49. Hanham, 36.

50. No. 166.

51. Power, 129.

52. Fleming, 35.

account Katherine's young age and her familiarity with Betson, Alison Hanham treads the middle ground and characterizes the letter as playful and familiar, while still indicative of Betson's discomfort with Katherine's youth.

Throughout the letter, which appears to have been written over the course of a few days, Betson's tone towards Katherine is more like that of an affectionate older brother than a fiancé or a "distant uncle," though he occasionally waxes romantic. He can't seem to decide whether Katherine should be treated like the child he knew or the wife he hoped for. Writing to Katherine the child, Betson advises her to eat her meat so she can grow fast, asks her to greet his horse and take care of it in his absence, and promises to arrive shortly "with all hands and all feet." He jokes that Katherine must commend him to a personified clock and "pray him amend his unthrifty manners, for he strikes ever in undo time... and that is a shrewd condition." Consistent with his child-friendly address, when Betson speaks of Katherine's womanhood, it is a developing condition, not fully realized. When advising Katherine to eat her meat, it's "like a woman" that she must do it, and, in the last lines of his letter, he prays that "almighty Jesus make [her] a good woman" and give her a long life, once again referring to future, rather than present, womanhood. Only at one point in the letter is Katherine's womanhood discussed as a current condition: when Betson references the recommendations or greetings that Katherine sent him, "full womanly and like a lover."⁵³ Betson has no delusions about his fiancé's young age, but his frequent reference to her womanly growth indicate that he was impatient for her maturation.

Betson's comments about the clock and the speeding of Katherine's growth through meat consumption are essentially playful in nature; however, they also suggest Betson's underlying insecurity about Katherine's young age. As a twelve-year-old girl, Katherine had barely entered the stage of life known as "maidenhood" to medieval people. Maidens, or unmarried girls between the age of twelve and their mid-twenties, were viewed as the peak of femininity: young, beautiful, and pure. Historian Kim M. Phillips suggests that maidenhood was defined by its paradoxical combination of virginity and sexual maturity.⁵⁴ In his letter to Katherine, we can see Betson's hope for her speedy maturation. Though she was technically a maiden, she had yet to develop the inherent sexuality that defined maidenhood. The onset of menarche in well-nourished young women in medieval England was usually around the age of 12–15.⁵⁵ For malnourished

53. No. 166.

54. Phillips, 7.

55. Phillips, 36.

young women, it could occur even later.⁵⁶ Menarche itself was not always the sole condition for marriage, and many medieval people felt that it was best for girls to wait a couple years after menarche to begin having children.⁵⁷ With everyone around her eager for her marriage to take place, this would not be the case for Katherine.

Though no more of Betson's letters to Katherine are included in the Stonor collection, we know from Betson's correspondence with Elizabeth that he continued to write to Katherine—with no response. In a letter dated to December of either 1476 or 1477, Betson writes: "I am wroth with Katherine, because she sendeth me no writing. I have to her diverse times and for lack of answer I wax weary." Katherine's lack of response reinforces our perception of her youth and lack of maturity. It is possible that Katherine disliked Betson, but it is more likely that she was only acting as any twelve- or thirteen-year-old girl would act if she were expected to carry on a correspondence with a man closer to her mother's age. In his letter to Elizabeth, Betson advises that Katherine get a secretary, if the physical act of writing is what was preventing her reply. He concludes: "and if she will not it shall put me to less labour to answer her letters again."⁵⁸ By threatening to not answer Katherine's letters, it appears that, at some point, Katherine might have written to Betson, but that she had failed to respond more recently. In either case, Betson's complaints to Elizabeth once again point to Katherine's youth. Betson likely hoped that Elizabeth would use her motherly influence to encourage her young, inexperienced daughter to respond to his letters. Betson's application to Elizabeth also remind us of her crucial role in the relationship between Katherine and Betson, as both the mother of the soon-to-be bride and patron of the soon-to-be groom. She was the one who had facilitated their match, and, as such, Betson found it appropriate to air his grievances with Katherine to the woman that connected them.

Betson's letters to William and Elizabeth also suggest the same impatience for Katherine maturation that is expressed in the love letter. In a letter to Elizabeth written May 12, 1478, Betson writes: "I dreamed once [Katherine] was thirty winter of age; and when I woke I wished she had been but twenty, and so by likelihood I am sooner like to have my wish than my dream, the which

56. Mary Lewis, Fiona Shapland, and Rebecca Watts, "On the threshold of adulthood: A new approach for the use of maturation indicators to assess puberty in adolescents from medieval England," *American Journal of Human Biology* 28, no. 1 (2015). <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajhb.22761>.

57. Philips, 36.

58. No. 185.

I beseech all mighty Jesus heartily may be when it shall please him.”⁵⁹ Like his imagined feud with the slow-ticking clock, Betson’s account of his dream is a playful anecdote which also suggests his impatience and insecurity in his relationship with Katherine, and, consequentially, the whole Stonor family. In another letter from June 18, 1478, Betson expresses his sadness that he was unable to see Katherine in London, but he also concludes that it might be for the best, since seeing her would only bring him more pain. He laments: “I must needs suffer as I have done in times past, and so will I do for God’s sake and hers.”⁶⁰ Betson, once only impatient, was now distraught after two years of engagement.

Why was Betson so distressed by the length of his engagement? His compliments to Katherine, in his letters to both her and her mother, would suggest the simple possibility that Betson respected and loved his fiancé, and was eager to start a family with her, though to our modern sensibilities, love between a twelve-year-old and a thirty-year-old seems unsavory. Beyond the sentimental reasons, marriage would also provide Betson with more independence in the wool industry and financial opportunities. According to the shipping quotas of the next century, married members of the Staplers Guild were permitted to ship more wool than unmarried merchants.⁶¹ Though, with William’s partnership, this restriction was likely not an issue for Betson, it could potentially become one should Betson ever leave the Stonor orbit and strike out on his own. Katherine’s dowry, which has already been discussed, would also allow for more financial security and investment of his own.

Additionally, Betson was probably uneasy about his complete dependence on the Stonors. When Elizabeth facilitated Betson’s partnership with William and his engagement to Katherine, she secured Betson’s loyalty, but she also relegated him to a state of insecure dependence on the Stonor family. For Elizabeth, Betson’s continued administration of her business was ideal, given their history together and their mutual regard for one another; however, despite its convenience, her partnership with Betson was not entirely essential, since Elizabeth, now the wife of a wealthy landowner and knight, had significant resources at her disposal should Betson’s service prove unsatisfactory. Betson, on the other hand, relied on his business with the Stonors, and his dependence on their continued trust and generosity heightened the insecurity of his position. Through his marriage to Katherine, Betson could formalize his connection to the family

59. No. 211.

60. No. 216.

61. Hanham, 38.

and perhaps slightly correct the balance of power, which was heavily in William and Elizabeth's favor.

Disagreement between some of the Stonors' associates were even more reason for Betson to feel insecure of his position. In a letter sent by Goddard Oxbridge at Betson's request we learn that Davy Wrixham, one of the Stonor's servants, had accused Betson of seeking to undermine his position with William. Oxbridge explains his own role in the spread of the rumors, and, since he writes at Betson's request, he emphasizes Betson's innocence in the matter.⁶² Betson's apparent fear that William had lost his trust in him over a servant's rumor shows how precarious Betson perceived his position to be. And if any part of the rumor was true, and Betson really had sought to undermine Wrixham within the business, that would be further indication of Betson's anxiety.

As if Betson was not already insecure enough, a downturn in the wool market also impacted his perceived position with William. In 1476 and 1479, inflation slowed the Flemish wool market, corresponding exactly with the commencement of Betson's partnership with William.⁶³ Even worse, Betson struggled to find buyers for his wool within the same week that Oxbridge wrote to William. In a letter from May 17, 1478, Betson tries to reassure William that, although business had been slow, his priority would always be their mutual profit. He writes: "And sir, I trust to God's mercy, if the world be merry here, to somewhat that shall be both to your profit and mine. As yet there cometh but few merchants here; here after with God's grace there will come more." Later in the letter, Betson once again emphasizes his commitment to the Stonors and their financial success. Betson probably also had his dispute with Wrixham on his mind, in addition to his business troubles when he wrote: "And sir, I trust to God as for my part so to endeavor me for your mastership that with God's grace both ye and my lady your wife shall well understand and know that I love both your worships, and your profit, and so it shall prove in deed with God's help."⁶⁴ After six years in Elizabeth's household and two years as William's right-hand man in the wool industry, Betson still felt the need to assure the couple of his love and commitment to their financial interests. He still viewed the loss of their favor as a possibility. For him, his wedding to Katherine could not come soon enough.

And come it did, despite Betson's anxieties. The Stonors still had reason to strengthen their connection with him, however precarious he perceived it to be. In a letter from June 24, 1478, only a month after the drama with Davy

62. No. 213.

63. Hanham, 37.

64. No. 212.

Wrixham, Betson, still harried and anxious, wrote to Elizabeth, but this time for a happier purpose. He was tasked with purchasing clothing for Katherine, in preparation for their wedding, and he reported to Elizabeth that he had no idea what he was doing: “Therefore, I must beseech your ladyship to send me [advice] how I shall be demeaned in such things as shall belong unto my cousin Katherine, and how I shall provide for them: she must have girdles, three at the least, and how they shall be made I know not: and many other things she must have, ye know well what they be, in faith I know not.”⁶⁵ Katherine, though still only about fourteen, was now officially woman enough to wed, and she would need new clothes to do it properly. That same day, Betson wrote to William, apparently responding to a letter from William which details Katherine’s behavior and education. Betson gushes that without William’s attentive parenting “she could not be of that disposition virtuous and goodly, her youth remembered and considered.”⁶⁶ Betson is still all too aware of his bride’s youth, but he is satisfied by her reportedly “womanly disposition” and “goodly demeanor” adding that “she can do right well if she lists [wants].”⁶⁷ (Though grown up, it appears that Katherine remained willful.) Betson’s flattery of Katherine’s education and personality is not insincere, but in his letter to William, it serves mostly as a way of complimenting William and thanking him for his attention. Though his marriage was now on track, Betson’s business difficulties were not over, and he found it wise to strengthen his relationship through praise and flattery with William whenever he could. In Betson’s words: “I fair like a sorry piper, when I begins I cannot leave.”⁶⁸

Since the family was all together for the wedding, we have no letters to report on it. However, on August 1, 1478, Thomas Henham, a servant of the Stonors sent a letter inquiring if Elizabeth would like him to order beer and ale “against [her] coming home unto London.”⁶⁹ Though Elizabeth had spent her time moving between her townhouse and her country estate, London was truly her home, the city of her childhood, two of her marriages, and her business. She had made the match between Katherine and Betson in the wake of her widowhood, using it to secure her late husband’s business and her young daughter’s future. Surely the sight of Katherine, daughter to her first husband, and Betson, apprentice to her second, standing outside a church, perhaps the

65. No. 217.

66. No. 218.

67. No. 217.

68. No. 218.

69. No. 225.

same one she had been married in once, reminded her of her own weddings, her own veils, rings, coins. By October 5, 1478, we know that Katherine and Betson had definitely been married, as Elizabeth reports in a letter to William that the newlyweds send their greetings as a unit.⁷⁰ The clock had finally “amended his unthrifty manners;” Betson got his bride, a degree of financial security, and a solidified relationship with his business-partner and patron.⁷¹ William and Elizabeth had one less child to care for and a family tie with their partner in the wool industry. And what about Katherine? She got an early leap from maidenhood to womanhood, and at least three new girdles, handpicked by a harried Betson at her mother’s advice.

Thomas and Katherine Betson and Elizabeth and William Stonor all had different reasons for marrying, some economic, some personal, some a combination of the two. However, for all four of these medieval people, marriage mitigated insecurity and converted unstable dependence into binding interdependence. Betson depended, first, on John Fen and then on the Stonors for his employment; marriage to Katherine formalized his dependency, but it also stabilized his position in the Stonor household. Katherine depended on her parents and then two different stepfathers for her support and survival; as Betson’s wife, she was equally dependent on him, but she was now his only wife, as opposed to one of six stepchildren. As a widow, Elizabeth depended on strangers and business-associates; marriage to William meant giving up her independent wealth, but in exchange, it offered support, security, and prestige. Even William, high up on the medieval hierarchy, depended on Elizabeth for an heir, but this dependency was ill-fated, as none of Elizabeth’s pregnancies by William were successful. Elizabeth died in late 1479, perhaps in childbirth, and, with her death, Betson’s relationship with William all but ceased. The dissolution of Elizabeth and William’s marriage meant the end of Katherine and Betson’s secure ties to the Stonor family. A tragic, but compelling example of how entire families and business structures depended on marriage, just as husbands and wives depended on each other.

70. No. 229.

71. No. 166.