

Chapter VI

Household, Family and Marriage

Just as the gentry are often seen as the political pawns of their social superiors, the nobility, so too has the gentry family been presented as subject to the external agencies of the wider kin and the "good lord".¹ Any treatment of the attitudes, concerns and ambitions of the Leicestershire gentry must therefore necessarily consider the more intimate aspects of their lives. It must deal with the household which provided the setting for family life, with the family itself and the relationships formed within it between husband and wife and between parents and children and with the ties of kinship which bound one gentry family to another. Throughout this chapter our major concern will be with the extent to which the personal lives of the gentry were, indeed, subservient to external agencies.

The setting for family life was, of course, the household. Unfortunately, private correspondence, diaries and the more important household account books which can provide such valuable material about the size and organisation of gentry households have not survived for Leicestershire. Nevertheless, light may be thrown on gentry households by looking first at the manor houses which contained them. While the finest remaining examples of fifteenth-century secular architecture in the county were built by lord Hastings at Ashby-de-la-Zouch and Kirby Muxloe, only fragments of the relatively less grand gentry houses now stand as testimony to their own former dignity. Perhaps the most architecturally striking of these surviving fifteenth-

¹ L. Stone, The Family, Sex and Marriage, abridged edn., Harmondsworth, 1979, p.69.

century structures can be found at Holt, the home of Thomas Palmer and his family.²

The manor house of Holt (now Neville Holt) has been much changed by later accretions but the medieval hall, sandwiched between more recent constructions to its east and west, still remains, essentially unaltered.³ In form, the hall seems to differ little from that at Penshurst Place in Kent or of Haddon Hall in Derbyshire.⁴ Like them, it is two storeys in height, reaching up to an open timber roof. Screens at the eastern end of the hall probably separated it from the service quarters of kitchen, buttery and pantry but the screens have since been removed and all traces of the service quarters have been effaced by the building projects of subsequent generations. A spiral stairway in the south-east corner leads to a doorway which, before the removal of the screens, would have opened onto a minstrels' gallery above the screens and along the hall's eastern wall. The playing of music was clearly an integral part of at least more formal occasions such as Christmas or New Year.⁵

During the fifteenth century, Thomas Palmer made additions to the earlier structure. A fine bay window, or oriel, was built at the hall's south-west corner and this was balanced by a porch at its south-east

² N. Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Leicestershire and Rutland*, 2nd edn., Harmondsworth, 1984, pp.26-28. The most complete example of a medieval manor house is the manor house at Donington-le-Heath which dates from the late thirteenth century (T.L. Marsden, 'Manor House Farm, Donington-le-Heath, Leicestershire c.1280', *Transactions of the Ancient Monument Society*, new series, vol. x, 1962, pp.33-43).

³ For what follows, I am indebted to the detailed description provided by G.F. Farnham and A.H. Thompson, 'The Manor, House and Chapel of Holt', *T.L.A.S.* vol. 13, 1923-24, pp.232-235.

⁴ See D. Yarwood, *The Architecture of Britain*, London, 1976, pp.74-79. For the general lay-out of medieval gentry houses see, too, D. Starkey, 'The age of the household: politics, society and the arts c.1350-c.1550', *The Later Middle Ages*, ed. S. Medcalf, London, 1981, p.244.

⁵ Cf. Dame Alice de Bryene who played host to a harpist from Christmas Day, 1412 until 2 January, 1413. Another of Dame Alice's guests, Sir Richard Waldegrave, arrived on 10 January, 1413 with a minstrel of his own. (*The Household Book of Dame Alice de Bryene*, ed. V.B. Redstone, Suffolk Institute of Archaeology and History, Bungay, 1984, pp.25-28, 30.)

corner.⁶ The latter acted as protection against draughts while the oriel provided more light at the lord's end of the hall. However, as both bay and porch were divided into upper and lower floors, the prime concern seems to have been the need for additional private living space. At about the same time, the house was also crenellated. That the crenellations were intended to be decorative rather than defensive is suggested by the expanse of glass in the bay windows and by their closeness to ground level.

Thomas Palmer's extensions and decorative flourishes cannot be dated precisely. Certainly, they were undertaken before 1475, the year of Thomas's death.⁷ Nevertheless, even if the work had not yet begun, it is likely that Palmer was already planning a regime of beautification and extension as early as 1448. In that year he was granted permission to empark three hundred acres of land, meadow and wood in Holt and Keythorpe and it was not unusual for such changes in land-use on the manor to be associated with modifications to the manor-house itself.⁸

Whether Thomas Palmer extended the family's private apartments which would have been situated to the west of the hall, it is no longer possible to say. Later building-work has made it difficult to reconstruct the original lay-out. However, the survival of the upper part of a stairway near the oriel indicates the former presence of a solar. There would have been a chamber or chambers beneath this, too; but further than this, the archaeological evidence is silent. Yet, despite a shortage of evidence, the stone-built hall at Neville Holt still testifies both to the

⁶ The balance provided by oriel and porch was a fifteenth-century architectural convention. (M. Wood, The English Medieval House, London, 1965, pp.104-105.)

⁷ C140/55/9 m.2.

⁸ C.Ch.R., 1427-1516, Vol. VI, p.100. See, for example, permission granted to lord Hastings to crenellate and empark at Ashby-de-la-Zouch and Kirby Muxloe (ibid., p.242).

degree of domestic comfort demanded by a member of the fifteenth-century gentry, and to his pretensions.

That Thomas Palmer's building activities can be attributed to his pretension rather than to a need for extra space, becomes even more apparent when we examine the family circumstances. He married twice and by these marriages he fathered four daughters.⁹ At its most extensive, therefore, his family numbered six people. The dates of Palmer's marriages are unknown but he was certainly married to his second wife, Elizabeth Bishopsden, by 1429.¹⁰ In 1448, when, it has been argued, Palmer was planning his building projects, his daughters were either at, or approaching, marriageable age. One of the younger pair of daughters, Katherine, married two years later, in 1450. That she and her husband were granted the manor of Lubenham, indicates, despite Katherine's tender age, her move to a separate establishment.¹¹ It is highly probable that the older daughters were also married by this date. In the absence of a son, and with a contracting family, Palmer's alterations at Holt were a proclamation of his own personal wealth and status. No doubt, too, he and his wife, Elizabeth, would enjoy the extra comfort.

While detail of the private and service quarters of Neville Holt is lacking, we are better served for the manor-house of Staunton Harold. After the death of Sir Ralph Shirley in 1516, the archbishop of Canterbury's apparitor, John Rudding, made an inventory of Shirley's goods and chattels for the purpose of probate. Rudding was clearly a meticulous bureaucrat for he apparently wandered through the house, room by room, jotting down the items in each and noting their value. Little would have escaped his professional eye and his labours have

⁹ See Appendix X.

¹⁰ L.R.O. DE221/4/1/96.

¹¹ L.R.O. DE220/58.

provided us not only with a list of rooms but also with an image of how they were furnished.¹²

Rudding began his inventory in the hall. It was sparsely furnished, containing only a cupboard, four short tables and an equal number of forms attached to the floor. This was where members of the household dined; but although Alice de Bryene of Acton Hall in Suffolk regularly ate in the company of her household early in the fifteenth century, by the early sixteenth century, the relatively few pieces of furniture in the hall at Staunton Harold support the view that the family had retreated from this communal room into the greater intimacy of its own apartments.¹³

The inventory fails to explain how Staunton Harold's private rooms were arranged in relation to each other but they included a great parlour, an inner parlour, a great chamber underneath the hall, a countinghouse and various other chambers amounting to ten rooms in all. Unfortunately, John Rudding listed cushions and stools separately, so we are unable to say whether most of these rooms had assumed specialised functions or if they doubled up as bedrooms at night and living quarters during the day. Certainly, the countinghouse, which contained only a "cupboard with evidences", must have been reserved solely for transacting estate business. The great parlour, too, had a specialised function. The Flemish carpet and red sey hanging seem to have been designed for day-time comfort and the trestle table indicates that some meals were eaten here.

¹² L.R.O. 26D53/1949.

¹³ Alice de Bryene, p.1 and passim, Langland was already complaining in the late fourteenth century that the lord and lady 'liketh nought to sitte' in the hall but preferred 'to eaten by hymselfe/In a privee parlour'. (William Langland, The Vision of Piers Plowman, ed. A.V.C. Schmidt, London, 1978, passus X, ll.97-99, p.103.)

Seven of the rooms contained beds of various types, ranging in size and comfort from a cradle in the wardrobe chamber to the great feather bed in the inner parlour.¹⁴ There was also a number of pallets in four of the rooms. In total, this array of cradles, beds and pallets provided permanent sleeping arrangements for at least fourteen people, including infants. Possibly some of the beds and probably all of the pallets were reserved for the more important household servants such as personal attendants and, perhaps, a chaplain.¹⁵

The more menial servants were confined to the service quarters. This part of the house consisted of a kitchen, brewhouse, pantry, buttery, larderhouse, "a great parlour for servants", a "great chamber for weyne men" (waggoners), a kiln house and further chambers off each of the kitchen, brewhouse and buttery. Including a bed in the stable, there was sleeping accommodation for ten menial servants. Rudding also noted the existence of twelve additional bedsteads, "great and small", though he neglected to mention where they were stored. No doubt they could be trundled out, either above or below stairs as the need arose, when guests arrived or when the number of servants increased such as at harvest time.¹⁶

¹⁴ Rudding refers to a total of four feather beds. (L.R.O. 26D53/1949.)

¹⁵ Alice de Bryene's household included chaplains and her visitor, Morgan Gough, brought with him a chaplain of his own (Alice de Bryene, pp.16-17, 124). Sir Richard Graystoke used his chaplain to carry messages to William Stonor (Stonor Letters and Papers, vol. II, p.23) and Robert Litterer was chaplain and domestic servant to Sir William Plumpton (Plumpton Correspondence, p.lxxiv). The regular dispensations granted to the Leicestershire gentry to hear mass before daybreak, to have a portable altar and to have their personal household confessors show that Leicestershire households often contained chaplains. (Papal Registers, 1427-1447, vol. VIII, pp.42, 362; ibid., 1431-47, vol. IX, pp.231,233 and passim). Of course, a chaplain performed other tasks besides conducting religious services. Walter Norton, who was chaplain to Adam Warde of Shulton, acted as the latter's attorney in land transactions. (L.R.O. 72'30/II/11)

¹⁶ That the size of households fluctuated, see The Household of Edward IV. The Black Book and the Ordinance of 1478, ed. A.R. Myers, Manchester, 1959, p.21. During the August Harvest in 1413, Alice de Bryene often provided supper for over forty people and breakfast for thirty. Many of her boonworkers must therefore have stayed at, or near, the manor-house overnight. (Alice de Bryene, pp.85-91).

Of course, Sir Ralph Shirley's establishment as described in 1516 bears little resemblance to the Staunton Harold of John Staunton's day almost a century earlier. When John Staunton died in 1421 the manor was said to consist of a hall, two chambers, a kitchen, a stable, two barns or granaries (orria) and a dovecote.¹⁷ Like Thomas Palmer at Holt, the Shirleys must have undertaken extensive building works during the fifteenth century or even very early in the sixteenth. The question therefore arises of how typical was Staunton Harold of gentry houses for the fifteenth century.

The little that remains from the fifteenth century at Neville Holt shows that Staunton Harold was not unique either in form or in that it was built of stone. But not even two swallows make a summer. That so few examples of Leicestershire gentry houses remain from the fifteenth century may, of course, testify to the vigour with which later generations demolished the old and built anew. However, a more likely explanation for the paucity of archeological evidence is that the Leicestershire gentry, like their urban cousins in Leicester and Loughborough, built their houses of timber which is less likely to endure.¹⁸ We should also keep in mind that both Shirley and Palmer belonged to the upper gentry, to knightly and potential-knightly families respectively. Their houses would, therefore, have been more substantial than most, neither typical for the gentry as a whole nor atypical of the houses of others of their elevated status.

The houses of the middle-ranking gentry, the esquires and prosperous gentlemen, were, we may assume, smaller than those of the Shirleys at Staunton Harold and the Palmers at Holt. They probably

¹⁷ E149/127/12. Farnham is incorrect in placing Staunton's death in 1406 (Pedigrees, p.101). He died on 12 September 1421, five months before the death of his son, Thomas, on St Valentine's Day 1422, (C139/1/21 m.2; E149/127/12).

¹⁸ The Itinerary of John Leland, vol. 1, p.14; The Illustrated Journeys of Celia Fiennes, p.145.

differed little from Thomas Walsh's manor houses at Burton Overy and Wanlip. Burton Overy consisted of a hall, two chambers, a kitchen, two barns and a stable, while Wanlip boasted a hall, three chambers, a kitchen two barns, two stables and a dovehouse.¹⁹ Furthermore, the manor-house at Wanlip was either wooden framed or built entirely of wood for it had become unroofed sometime before 1440 thereby exposing its timbers to the elements and causing them to rot.²⁰

Little can be said with certainty about the households which these manor-houses contained. Obviously, the size of the household depended on the capacity of the house itself and this in turn was determined by the wealth and status of the particular gentry family.²¹ Size was also controlled by the composition of the family, by whether its head was single, married or widowed and by the presence or absence of offspring who required nurses during infancy and tutors during childhood. The widowed Alice de Bryene's household consisted of a lady's maid, a chamberlain and an unspecified number of squires, chaplains, grooms, clerks of the chapel and boys.²² Judging by the number of meals served each day and by subtracting named guests from the total, we can calculate that her regular household may have amounted to approximately fifteen people.

However, the only clue to the size of specifically Leicestershire gentry households is provided by John Rudding's inventory. Although Rudding's mandate did not run to listing servants, a household of twenty-four is suggested by the number of beds at Staunton Harold.

¹⁹ C145/309/47; L.R.O. 5D33/177 f.77.

²⁰ Loc.cit. The manor-house at Wanlip appears to have been no larger than Munden's chantry at Bridport which consisted of a hall, kitchen, pantry, two chambers (and possibly one or two other guest rooms) and a dovecote. (A Small Household of the Fifteenth Century, ed. K.L. Wood-Legh, Manchester, 1956, p.xx.)

²¹ J-L. Flandrin, Families in Former Times, trans. R. Southern, Cambridge, 1979, pp.61-62.

²² Alice de Bryene, pp.v, 124.

Significantly, this figure coincides exactly with the size of household envisaged by the author of Edward IV's Black Book for a knight banneret worth over £200 per year.²³ The same author considered a household of sixteen as suitable for a knight bachelor worth over £100 and a household of ten for an esquire with an income of over £50 per year.²⁴ It seems reasonable to accept these figures as a rough guide to the size of households in Leicestershire.

Perhaps the most important point to emerge from our brief study of the Shirley and Palmer building programmes is that they highlight a paradox. On the one hand, the emphasis upon external grandeur at Neville Holt is a public affirmation in stone of Palmer's status within county society. Inside both Neville Holt and Staunton Harold, the maintaining of the traditional medieval hall is an only slightly less public affirmation of the family's position within the household. But a further emphasis upon smaller, intimate and more comfortably furnished rooms for the sole use of the family also attests to a growing demand for privacy. If these two examples of fifteenth-century gentry architecture, Neville Holt and Staunton Harold, may be taken as our guide, they suggest a developing dichotomy between the public household and a private or personal family life, a distinction between the public persona and the private person but with the concerns of the latter assuming increasing importance. A closer analysis of the family which occupied the core of the household should indicate whether such an hypothesis is justified.

It is now recognized that the late medieval family was a nuclear, rather than an extended, multi-generational or joint, family.²⁵ The

²³ The Black Book, pp.107-108.

²⁴ Ibid., pp.108, 110, 129-30.

²⁵ P. Laslett, The World we have Lost, 2nd edn., London, 1979, pp.93-94; R.A. Houlbrooke, The English Family 1450-1700, London, 1984, p.18; M. Mitterauer and R. Sieder, The European Family. Patriarchy to Partnership from the Middle Ages

Leicestershire evidence tends to confirm this view. By the time Ralph Woodford died he had already given lands to his younger sons, Mathew, John and Robert, which action suggests that they possessed independent establishments.²⁶ In 1450, John Chesilden I's sons, William and John II, also had separate households at Adloxton and Uppingham respectively.²⁷ Joint families, if they occurred at all, must have been exceedingly rare.

Very occasionally, however, we do encounter extended and multi-generational families. When John Brokesby married Joan, daughter of Sir Leonard Hastings, Hastings agreed to maintain the couple, presumably in his own household, until they came of age.²⁸ Much the same arrangement must have applied to the young John Sotehill and Elizabeth Plumpton after their marriage. Elizabeth was only three years old when her grandfather delivered her to John's father, Henry Sotehill, and no doubt the infant pair continued to reside with Elizabeth's in-laws for some years after the wedding.²⁹ In each case, the multi-generational arrangement was dictated by the extreme youth of the second generation. But child marriages were the exception and most marriage settlements reveal parents providing endowments for their children to establish separate households.

Although contemporaries recognized the obvious need for very young married children to share a household with one or other set of parents, the sheltering of aged or widowed parents by their married children was a responsibility not lightly to be shouldered. The formal indenture between Sir Robert Plumpton and his son, William, whereby William agreed to allow both his father and mother "to take their ease

to the Present, trans. K. Oosterveen and M.Hörzinger, Oxford, 1982, p.13; Stone, op.cit., p.69.

²⁶ PROB11/11/23/183-183v.

²⁷ C1/19/473.

²⁸ H.M.C. Hastings, i, pp.300-1.

²⁹ Plumpton Correspondence, p.lxxi.

and reast, and to be at board with the said William", is a curiosity.³⁰ It is especially curious because neither Sir Robert nor his son had any illusions about the sufficiency of paternal and filial affection to maintain domestic harmony between the generations. They agreed in advance that "any break or variencie" be submitted to the arbitration of the local clergy. As they were fully aware of the potential problems, we may safely assume that the arrangement was not seen as inherently desirable but was, instead, imposed by the age and probable infirmity of the older generation.

Special conditions applied, too, in the case of the widowed Alice Plumpton. Her son, also called Robert, granted his mother "sa table sufficaunt et convenable a son degre" and "une chambre, appelle le closetts, ou une petit chambre faite enhaut deincs le dit closett, au son propre use, et sufficaunts luminere et fououk".³¹ Alice had a brood of young children and Robert's sense of duty as head of the family was directed as much towards his younger siblings as it was towards his mother.

Predictably, it was the older generation which recognized the dangers inherent in outstaying its welcome. Elizabeth Pole, daughter and coheir of Reginald Moton, stood *in loco parentis* to her teenaged grandson, German, and temporarily shared a household with him and his young wife at Radburne. However, as soon as German came of age, although he was prepared, if not happy, for his grandmother to remain in the household, the astute Elizabeth understood that the time had come for her to move elsewhere and, as she put it, "to get me into a litle cornner".³² Although there is more than a hint of Mrs Gummidge in the tone of Elizabeth's letter, her instincts were basically sound. The

³⁰ The full text of the indenture is printed in *ibid.*, pp.cxxiii-cxxv.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp.xxvii-xxviii.

³² *Ibid.*, p.190.

condition for her continued residence at Radburne, that she "be as kynd to my sayd son [sic] Germyne as he intendeth to be to me", was easier to promise than to honour. German may have been naïve enough to believe that good intentions would suffice. His grandmother knew better.

Similarly, Eleanor Shirley knew her hard-nosed son, Ralph III, only too well to delude herself that they would be able to sort. As it was, their dispute over her dower rights required the mediation of, among others, the legal-minded Thomas Keble, serjeant-at-law, and William Littleton, eldest son of the justice of common pleas.³³ By the time agreement was reached, Eleanor had taken herself well away from Ralph at Staunton Harold to the family's manor of Middleton in Warwickshire.

Even more rare than the multi-generational family was the extended family. A notable exception of very limited scope is provided by the Walsh family. Thomas Walsh, variously described as "a person of unsound mind", "a lunatic with lucid intervals", "demented" and as "an idiot", lived first with his sister, Margaret, and her husband, Sir Thomas Gresley.³⁴ The precise nature of Thomas's disability or of the problems it may have caused to those around him is unclear. What is clear is that no innate sense of charity prompted the Gresleys to become good Samaritans. It was probably Thomas Walsh's heir, his brother, Richard, with his eye on the value of his future inheritance, who realized that in clutching Thomas to the bosom of their family, the Gresleys were motivated less by fraternal devotion than by mercenary considerations. They were accused and found guilty by a royal commission of enquiry of having caused "great wastes and destructions" on Thomas's lands. As a result of this finding, the unfortunate Thomas, along with his wasted

³³ L.R.O. 26D53/83, 315; D.N.B., xi, p.1253.

³⁴ C.P.R., 1422-29, p.4; ibid., 1436-41, pp.371, 424.

lands, was removed from the doubtful care of Sir Thomas Gresley and assigned to the custody of his nephews, the sons of his other sister, Elizabeth Boyville.³⁵

In the few instances, therefore, where we can find multi-generational or extended families these unusual arrangements had stemmed from distinctive circumstances. When child marriages were contracted, the children, as a matter of course, would continue to live with their in-laws until they came of age; aged parents might cohabit with married offspring if the vexations of age were compounded with burdensome infirmities; or a disabled person might be provided with shelter of sorts in the household of a sibling or of a more distant relative. But the rarity of such examples indicates that the nuclear family was the norm. Certainly, the problems anticipated by Elizabeth Pole and actually encountered by Eleanor Shirley show that the nuclear family was recognized as desirable by contemporaries for very good, personal reasons.

Having established that the typical Leicestershire gentry family consisted of mother, father and children, we are now confronted with the problem of how many children.³⁶ The question is more intractable than it seems. The most obvious difficulty is the absence of parish registers of baptisms but although this deficiency can be partly balanced by recourse to other material, the nature of that material can produce results which are not altogether satisfactory.³⁷ For example, inquisitions post mortem name the heir to the patrimony. They are particularly helpful, therefore,

³⁵ *Ibid.*; C145/309/47; L.R.O. 5D33/177, f.77.

³⁶ It will be appreciated that our primary concern is with specific families rather than with population in general. Little is to be gained, therefore, by taking into account those who did not marry or by trying to establish an acceptable multiplier (See J.C. Russell, British Medieval Population, Albuquerque, 1948; J. Kraus, "The Medieval Household: Large or Small?" Econ. Hist. Rev. second series, ix, 1957, pp.420-432).

³⁷ See Appendix X, reference column.

such as in the case of Thomas Palmer, where the family consisted of daughters only. As joint heirs, all daughters are named in the inquisition.³⁸ Nevertheless, inquisitions are much less helpful when a male heir had younger siblings. Given that the latter had no legal claim on the patrimony they were ignored in the escheator's return. Nor, of course, do inquisitions recognize the former existence of children who had died.

Wills also pose problems of their own. Naturally, they concentrate on those children who have survived until the time that the will was made. They therefore ignore not only children who died in infancy but also more mature offspring who died even a short time before their parent or parents. Furthermore, when a testator had already provided settlements of land and dowries for married sons and daughters he may justifiably have considered that these children had no further claim on his benevolence after his death. Like the dead, previously endowed children could be ignored in wills. Even the expectant heir was often omitted. Ralph Woodford, for example, made bequests in his will to his sons, Mathew, John and Robert, and to his daughter, Joan Neville, but he saw no need to donate gifts to his heir, William, who would, in any case, inherit the bulk of his father's estate as a matter of course.³⁹ Similarly, as the time approached for Robert Moton II to settle his worldly affairs, his largesse extended to his four sisters while his son, Edward, and his daughter, Elizabeth, receive not so much as a mention in his will.⁴⁰ If Elizabeth were married, then her dowry was obviously considered to have been sufficient provision, but she may, in fact, have been dead. Her

³⁸ Sir F. Pollock, and F.W. Maitland, The History of English Law before the time of Edward I, 2nd edn., vol. II, Cambridge, 1952, p.260. For Palmer's daughters, see C140/55/9 m.2; E149/232/10. The same consideration applies where the joint heirs are sisters or the offspring of sisters of the deceased as in the case of John Bellers II (C140/52/27).

³⁹ PROB11/11/23/183v.

⁴⁰ PROB11/11/25/201.

brother, Edward, however, was still alive. Once again, there was no pressing need to name him in the will as the property would devolve on him anyway.

These problems inherent in the more important evidence demand that the children named in Appendix X should be regarded as the absolute minimum number of offspring in each family. As we would expect, therefore, the figures yield a very low average of 2.5 children per family.⁴¹ Little, apart from guessing, can be done to compensate for the under-recording of children who were not heirs but at least some compensation can be made to accommodate child mortality. If we take into account a mortality rate of 30% among children up to the age of fifteen years then the average size of the family increases to 3.6 children while a mortality rate of 40% yields 4.2 children per family.⁴² Nevertheless, it is worth noting that about 20% of Leicestershire gentry families consisted of five or more children.

The largest of these families, those of Thomas Neville who had nine children and of John Shirley who had twelve, belonged to the knightly group. This fact may tempt us to propose that family size, like household size, was determined by wealth and status.⁴³ However, a closer inspection of the figures reveals no such correlation. Just over 22% of knightly families consisted of five or more children while the proportion for esquire families was also about 22%. Nor can we find any significant correlation between early marriage and fertility rates.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Although the family of William Hastings has been included in Appendix X to provide information, it has been excluded from all calculations. Hastings married after his elevation to the peerage and his children therefore fall outside the scope of this aspect of the study.

⁴² For mortality rates see Starkey, *op.cit.*, p.230. Children of the first and subsequent marriages are counted as one family.

⁴³ For the relationship between household size and wealth and status see above p. . . See, too, D. Herlihy and C. Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans and their families. A Study of the Florentine Catasto of 1427*, New Haven, 1978, p.286.

⁴⁴ See Russell, *op.cit.*, p.164; Starkey, *op.cit.*, p.230. It must be admitted here that the sample is very small, eleven families in all.

Certainly, two of our large families, Thomas Neville and John Sotehill's, followed early marriages; but Ralph Shirley III's child-marriage produced a single daughter while Thomas Erdyngton II's marriage appears to have been barren. In fact, although five teenage marriages produced five or more children, six resulted in families of two or fewer.⁴⁵

It would be interesting to determine the relationships forged between these children and their parents and among siblings. In the case of the Pastons in East Anglia their personal correspondence has proved both illuminating and rewarding in this regard but, in the absence of such material for the Leicestershire gentry, our statements about their relationships must be impressionistic and somewhat tentative. This caveat aside, the Leicestershire evidence suggests that attempts to portray our medieval forebears as lacking in affection are presenting only part of the picture.⁴⁶

Of course, discord within families was by no means unusual. Mention has already been made of the strained relationship between Ralph Shirley III and his mother, occasioned by a dispute over her dower rights.⁴⁷ Ralph also withheld his sister, Jane's, marriage portion which she had been granted under the terms of her father's will.⁴⁸ He justified his actions on the grounds that Jane had had an incestuous relationship with, and borne a child to, her father-in-law.⁴⁹ Whatever the legal merits of Ralph's case, there can be no concealing the tones of priggish conceit in his revelations about Jane's alleged peccadilloes. Lacking respect for his sister's honour, Ralph could have had little affection for her person.

⁴⁵ Ralph Shirley II is included in the latter figure though he did subsequently sire six children by his second wife.

⁴⁶ See F.R.H. Du Boulay, *An Age of Ambition. English Society in the Late Middle Ages*, London, 1970, p.116; Stone, *op.cit.*, pp.82, 87; Starkey, *op.cit.*, pp.231, 235.

⁴⁷ See above, p.168.

⁴⁸ L.R.O. 26D53/1947.

⁴⁹ C1/289/48-52. See, too, Appendix XI, n.1.

In the Moton family, variance resulted from the conflicting claims of brothers of the half-blood. Robert Moton I had first married Margery Malory, producing a son, Reginald, who in turn had two daughters, Anne and Elizabeth. Robert later married Elizabeth Mulsho who also produced a son, William. We can understand Robert's desire to provide as lavishly as possible for William who would, after all, perpetuate the family name. Similarly, we can understand Reginald's determination to ensure that William was not provided for at the expense of his own daughters. The clash of interests resulted in a bitter dispute between Robert and his elder son, Reginald, involving the forgery of deeds and hints of blackmail.⁵⁰ There can be little wonder that this particular dispute became the topic of gossip in the county.

There may have been tension, too, in the Keble family between Thomas Keble and his son, Walter, though Thomas's early death probably prevented these tensions from developing into outright hostility. Nevertheless, it is clear from Thomas's will that he was well aware of his son and heir's delinquent tendencies which made the father apprehensive about the future.⁵¹ Apart from bequeathing Walter his books of scripture "to the entent that he shall the rather apply him to virtue and conning" and exhorting him to "eschew all vice and misrule", Thomas arranged for his executors to keep possession of his lands and goods until Walter reached the relatively mature age of twenty-four years. During the intervening period the executors were closely to monitor Walter's moral development and if he failed "to amend and apply him to virtue, truth and goodness then he [was to] have no part thereof" until he did amend.

⁵⁰ C1/13/162-163; C1/15/125-126; C1/22/114a-d.

⁵¹ PROB11/12/3/22v-23v.

But against these examples of internal family friction we can cite instances of harmonious co-existence, loyalty and, occasionally, affection and love. Thomas Keble was certainly apprehensive about his son's juvenile shortcomings but his tone is one of disappointment rather than despair. He still had sufficient faith in his son to hope for a reformation and that he took such pains to make that reformation possible points to paternal concern and affection rather than bitterness or animosity. Once he was made privy to the strictures of Thomas's will, the immature Walter may, of course, have viewed his father's well-intentioned endeavours with a more jaundiced eye.

Although Thomas Keble's feelings for his son may not have been reciprocated, there can be no gainsaying the mutual respect evident between Robert Woodford and his mother, Mabil. The two worked in tandem. Mabil's dower property was granted to her without quibble or rancour. Later, we find the pair jointly farming out tenements in Melton Mowbray and the trust between them developed sufficiently for Mabil to make Robert her attorney and for Robert to make his mother one of his feoffees for his manors and lands before he headed for the wars in France.⁵² No doubt, it was during this time that Mabil's reputation as matriarch of the family was established. Her fame was such that her great-grandson, Ralph, remembered her by name in his will, leaving money to provide prayers for the repose of her soul, though it must be admitted that the passage of time had made him unsure of their exact relationship.⁵³

Wills also provide evidence of loyalty to, and concern for, siblings. Robert Moton II left bequests of money to each of his sisters and Edmund Appleby generously left his sister 20s. per year for life.⁵⁴ John Sotehill

⁵² B.L. Cotton Claudius A XIII, ff.59d-60, 93d-94, 102d, 174-175, 223.

⁵³ PROB11/11/23/183-183v.

⁵⁴ PROB11/11/25/201; 15/1/7.

arranged for the division of his goods among his wife, mother and three brothers while Ralph Woodford's gift to his sister, Katherine, was a practical assortment of livestock and some money.⁵⁵ As none of the beneficiaries had any legal claim on the testator's benevolence, these bequests speak of the bonds between the donors and the recipients.

Something much stronger than mere bonds, harmony, loyalty or affection can be glimpsed in the will of Elizabeth Sotehill.⁵⁶ Perhaps it was the early age at which she had been wrenched from the bosom of her biological family in Yorkshire and transferred to the Sotehill household in Leicestershire that explains the strength of her attachment to the Sotehill family.⁵⁷ But whatever the psychological reasons may have been, only the depth of Elizabeth's love for both her husband and her eldest son can explain her solution to the emotional dilemma which she faced as her own death approached. Her husband, John Sotehill, and their son, Henry, had already died by the time Elizabeth made her will. John had been buried at Stockfaston in Leicestershire but Henry was interred at the Grey Friars in London. Wishing to be as close to these men in death as she had been in life, Elizabeth arranged for her body to be buried beside her son while her heart was to be removed and laid to rest with her husband. Other endearments in her will directed towards her daughter-in-law, Joan, Henry's widow, suggest that in their mutual grief at Henry's death, the two women found solace in each other's company and further reveal Elizabeth Sotehill as one of the more likeable characters of the fifteenth century, rivalled only, perhaps, by the better known Margery Paston.⁵⁸

55 PROB11/10/15/121; 11/23/183v.

56 PROB11/15/19/151v.

57 Plumpton Correspondence, p.lxxi.

58 See H.S. Bennett, The Pastons and their England, Cambridge, 1951, pp.42-46.

In the sensitive Elizabeth Sotehill we are confronted, therefore, with the antithesis of the unattractive Ralph Shirley III - her tenderness and love contrasting with his selfishness and spite - and between these two extremes we find a field of family feeling ranging through respect, loyalty and affection. In fact the array of sentiment found in the nuclear family was no less varied and rich in the fifteenth century than it is today. Then, as now, some families could live harmoniously, caringly and lovingly; some could not. How irritating, then, are studies which dwell on the latter at the expense of the former, thereby implicitly denying the immutability of human nature.⁵⁹

Relationships among the wider kin are less well documented than those between siblings or between parents and children. In part, this lack of evidence may be explained by the greater geographical distance separating kinfolk, leading to less physical contact, and in part by the greater emotional distance between kin. As absence does not necessarily make the heart grow fonder, these two conditions are closely linked. Nevertheless, when we can, occasionally, determine relationships among kinfolk we find, once again, a range of sentiment.

For example, the breach between Ralph Woodford and his uncle, Walter, was so complete that the latter feared for his life at his nephew's hands.⁶⁰ The source of their conflict can be traced back to the 1430s or '40s when Sir Robert Woodford, Walter's father and Ralph's grandfather, was endowing his younger sons with purchased lands to the detriment of his heir.⁶¹ After Sir Robert's death, Ralph determined to seize his uncle's portion and, if necessary, to hold it by force. Walter was unable to defend his rights as he lived "far out" of Leicestershire, so Ralph's illegal entry onto the property endured for over ten years.

⁵⁹ See, for example, Stone, *op.cit.*, pp.82, 87 and *passim*.

⁶⁰ C1/33/10.

⁶¹ B.L. Cotton Claudius A XIII, f.175d.

Property rights also lay behind a dispute between Thomas Keble and his cousin, Thomas Hotoft, the brother and heir of Richard Hotoft the younger.⁶² Relations between Richard and Thomas Keble had been close enough for Keble later to request to be buried in the chapel where "my kind cousin Richard Hotoft ... lieth",⁶³ and, apparently, for Richard to have made Keble one of the executors of his will.⁶⁴ In this will, Richard had charged Thomas Keble to use the profits of certain lands to pay for prayers in the church of Humberstone. However, when Richard died, his feoffees, acting on the promptings of Thomas Hotoft, refused to release the lands into Keble's hands on the grounds that the latter wished personally to profit from the arrangement. Keble, in turn, accused Thomas Hotoft of being motivated by envy and malice.⁶⁵ The case is interesting in that it reveals how affection for, and a sense of duty towards, one relative could lead to friction with another.

Although signs of affection such as existed between Richard Hotoft and Thomas Keble are rare among the wider kin we do find at least a sense of duty binding them together. While Ralph Woodford was antagonistic towards his uncle Walter, he could still be modestly generous to other kin. He provided money and livestock to a tribe of nieces and nephews, including a nephew ("cousin") from Staffordshire. Woodford himself had earlier received a present of a primer from his wife's maternal uncle, "my cousin", John Bellers.⁶⁶ Everard Dygby II left his nephew, Rowland, eleven cows, a black steer and six ewes.⁶⁷ Thomas Keble's bequests included considerable sums of money to nieces,

⁶² The term, "cousin", encompassed a variety of relationships. Thomas Keble's maternal grandfather and Richard and Thomas Hotoft were full cousins, making Keble and the Hotofts first cousins twice removed..

⁶³ PROB 11/12/3/22v-23v.

⁶⁴ The will itself has not survived but for references to it see C1/42/89-92.

⁶⁵ C1/42/90.

⁶⁶ PROB11/11/23/183v.

⁶⁷ PROB11/16/11/81-81v.

nephews and cousins.⁶⁸ Even the parsimonious Ralph Shirley III was uncharacteristically generous towards his niece, Elizabeth Hasilrigge, to whom he gave a hundred marks towards her marriage. He made other bequests to his nephew, Ralph, and a "cousin", Richard Sacheverell. Sacheverell and another cousin, John Port, King's solicitor, along with Ralph's brother-in-law, Robert Hasilrigge, were just trustworthy enough to be made his executors. Shirley did not neglect, however, to invoke God's curse on these executors if they failed to follow his will.⁶⁹ Trust could, after all, be misplaced. A sense of duty may also lie behind John Hotoft's bequests of property at Stretton to Richard Hotoft II and of £20 towards the marriage of Richard's daughter, "little Joan", but "little Joan" is also sufficiently familiar to indicate John's affection for her.⁷⁰

Of course, one of the distinguishing features of late medieval society was its increasing concern about status and about the livelihood which maintained it.⁷¹ As that livelihood largely depended on landed property, it is hardly surprising that most family disputes revolved around the estate. This fact holds for disputes both within the nuclear family and among the wider kin. Sir Robert Woodford's standing in Leicestershire resulted in part from John Woodford's judicious marriage to the Leicestershire heiress, Mabil Folville, who provided the family with its caput at Assheby Folville, and in part from a policy of land acquisition by purchase, pursued by Robert's father and grandfather.⁷² But by endowing his younger sons with estates, Robert came to threaten the wealth, and

⁶⁸ PROB11/12/3/22v-23v.

⁶⁹ PROB11/19/1/8v; L.R.O. 26D53/1948.

⁷⁰ PROB11/1/15/118. John's relationship to Richard is unknown. He may have been an uncle. He was the same John Hotoft who was treasurer of the household (E404/46/241).

⁷¹ See, for example, the Statute of Additions, (Stat. Realm, ii, 171) and the attitude of Salisbury, Warwick and March to the parvenu, lord Rivers, (Paston Letters, I, 162). See too, John Russell's injunctions on the relative worth of the various estates in John Russell, "The Boke of Nurture", The Babees Book, ed. F.J. Furnivall, E.E.T.S., London, 1868, rept. 1969, p.186ff.

⁷² B.L. Cotton Claudius, A. XIII, ff.18d-43d, 47d-48d, 116d, 175.

therefore the status within county society, of his heir, Ralph. Hence, we can comprehend Ralph's violent attitude towards his uncle Walter who was unfortunate enough to have been given lands in Leicestershire, where he could not defend them, rather than beyond his nephew's reach.⁷³

Similar extenuating circumstances help to explain Ralph Shirley III's squabbles with his mother and sister. Throughout much of the fifteenth century, the Shirley lands were encumbered with the claims of a succession of long-lived dowagers. Ralph I's mother, Beatrice, lived as a widow for thirty-seven years until 1440, just three years before the death of her son.⁷⁴ Ralph II's step-mother, Alice, survived her husband by twenty-three years, drawing her income from manors and lands in Leicestershire and Nottinghamshire and being provided with over £4 yearly in lieu of her rights to other manors and lands in Derbyshire and Leicestershire.⁷⁵ When Alice died in May, 1466, Ralph could at last retrieve her dower property but he enjoyed its benefits for a mere seven months before his own death in December.⁷⁶ Ralph II's son, John, fared little better. At least his step-mother, Lucy, had already agreed in 1458 to confine her claims to the manors of Brailsford, Borowes and Thurvaston and not to make further demands on Alice's property whenever it should become available.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, she, too, was a drain on the patrimony for fifteen years after the death of her husband.⁷⁸

When Ralph III eventually succeeded his father, his prospects must have appeared bleak indeed. His mother, Eleanor, was provided with the

⁷³ Cf. John Frende's advice to Thomas Stonor either to go to Devon to defend his property there or, failing that, to sell his lands in the county. (Stonor Letters and Papers, vol. I, pp.55-57.)

⁷⁴ C139/101/65 m.2; Stemmata Shirleiana, pp.37, 43.

⁷⁵ E149/219/9; L.R.O. 26D53/344.

⁷⁶ C140/19/18 m.3.

⁷⁷ L.R.O. 26D53/195.

⁷⁸ Stemmata Shirleiana, p.39.

manors of Hoon, Brailsford, Bradley and Edington in Derbyshire, Ratcliffe-on-Wreake in Leicestershire and with manors in Nottinghamshire to the value of £80 yearly.⁷⁹ Under the terms of their father's will, each of his six brothers was entitled to eight marks per annum for life while four of his five sisters were to receive sustenance until their marriage and then marriage portions of 100 marks apiece, the money to be set aside from landed income at the rate of £40 yearly.⁸⁰ With his mother and siblings acting as a drain on his inheritance, we can understand Ralph's attempts to lighten his financial burden at their expense.

Disputes about property were more likely to involve kindred of the blood or widows, each of whom contended for a share of finite resources. The affinal kin, on the other hand, had no claim on the family estate which fact has led to the contention that ties with them tended to be stronger than with consanguineous kin.⁸¹ There is certainly much evidence to support this view. Time and again, testators turned to members of the affinal kin in preference to closer blood-relatives to execute, supervise or witness their wills. Rather than entrust the disposition of her daughter, Anne's, jointure to her surviving sons, Elizabeth Sotehill turned, instead, to her daughter-in-law, Joan.⁸² Although the supervisor of John Turville's will was Robert Fouleshurst, a relative of his mother's, one of the witnesses was his wife's nephew, Thomas Hasilrigge.⁸³ Thomas Pulteney's will was witnessed by, among others, William Assheby who was either the brother or nephew of Pulteney's wife, Agnes.⁸⁴

⁷⁹ L.R.O. 26D53/315.

⁸⁰ L.R.O. 26D53/1947; 26D53/83.

⁸¹ Houlbrooke, *op. cit.*, p.19.

⁸² PROB11/15/19/151v.

⁸³ PROB11/15/15/119v. See, too, Appendices X and XI (under Staunton).

⁸⁴ PROB11/15/24/193v.

The apparent preference for appointing members of the affinal kin to positions of trust extended to the selection of feoffees, too. John Bellers' feoffees were his brother-in-law, Nicholas Griffin and his niece's husband, Ralph Woodford.⁸⁵ Ralph Shirley II also used his brothers-in-law, Walter and Thomas Blount, as feoffees for his manor of Long Whatton.⁸⁶ One of Laurence Sherard's feoffees was his wife's nephew, Sir Thomas Berkeley, the son of Isabel Sherard's sister, Jane.⁸⁷ That the protection of the estate was a prime consideration when selecting feoffees can be seen in the case of Thomas Farnham. Farnham justifiably came to suspect his son, John's, intention to dissipate his inheritance. He therefore made his "cousin", John Danvers, one of his feoffees in preference to his spendthrift son.⁸⁸

But, despite the wealth of evidence pointing to close ties with the affinal kin, we find that members of the consanguineous kin were also appointed to positions of trust. John, Thomas and Hugh Boyville acted as feoffees to his use for their cousin, Richard Boyville.⁸⁹ Geoffrey Sherard, Ralph Woodford, Richard Perwych, Everard Dygby II and Richard Belgrave all used their sons as executors of their wills.⁹⁰ Everard Fielding turned to both his son, William, and his brother, Martin, to execute his will.⁹¹ The strength of one's trust depended, it seems, more on the perceived personal merits of one's kin, regardless of whether they were consanguineous or affinal, and the conventions were flexible enough to permit a degree of personal choice. The variety and choice available to members of the gentry when forming relationships

85 C1/56/236.

86 L.R.O. 72'30/1/37.

87 C1/10/198.

88 Quorndon Records, pp.155-156.

89 C140/17/23 m.2.

90 PROB11/9/23/176v-177; 11/23/182v-183v; 14/30/233; 16/11/81-81v; 16/17/127.

91 PROB11/18/5/30.

either within the nuclear family or among the wider kin indicate that individuals were not so much subject to external influences but, instead, merely adopted the universal maxim that they follow their own self-interest.⁹² Of course, self-interest and the interest of others may coincide but in those cases where it did not, it was the former which prevailed. It remains to be seen however, if the most important relationship of all, that between husband and wife which joined gentry families, one with another, was subject to less personal constraints.

The present study is based on a total of 194 marriages. 157 of these involved males, mostly family heads and their heirs male, while 57 involved gentry daughters. The marriages of gentry males and females are recorded separately in Appendices X and XI respectively, though there is some overlap in cases where Leicestershire gentry married daughters of other Leicestershire gentry. In order to avoid double counting, the cases of overlap have been omitted from the total of 194. The appendices reveal the way in which the Leicestershire gentry were interrelated through marriage but, being confined to a limited period, they do less than justice to the extent of that interrelatedness.⁹³

⁹² See J. Butler, Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel and a Dissertation upon the Nature of Virtue, ed. W.R. Matthews, London, 1967, *passim*.

⁹³ A.J. Pollard has revealed a similar kinship network through marriage in Richmondshire (A.J. Pollard, "The Richmondshire Community of Gentry during the Wars of the Roses", Patronage Pedigree and Power in Later Medieval England, ed. C. Ross, Gloucester, 1979, pp.47-48). To illustrate the Leicestershire relationships more graphically, two genealogical tables are provided in Appendix XIII (a) and (b). In each case an individual was chosen and the marriage links extended as far as space would permit. No significant criteria were used in making this choice and it is clear that similar tables would result from the selection of almost any other individuals. The starting point for (a) was Robert Woodford and that for (b) was Margaret Bugge. By the third and fourth generations in (a), the Woodford network encompassed Palmers, Skeffingtons, Villerses, Berkeleys, Sherards, Neeles, Bellerses, Asshebys, Nevilles, Pulteneys, and Malorys. By the third generation in (b) the Bugge network embraced Motons, Turvilles, Grymmesbys, Fouleshursts, Hotofts, the two branches of Stauntons, Shirleys, Hazilrigges, Entwysells, Wyvylls, Danverses, Boyvilles, Perwyches, Brokesbys, Walshes, Sotehills, and Pulteneys. Neither network can claim to be complete. For example, Thomas Berkeley in (a) married as his first wife, Emma Brokesby whose family has proved difficult to reconstruct (see Appendix X n.3) If a relationship could be established

These interrelationships were the product of a slight though distinct preference for selecting marriage partners from within the county. 53% of gentry males married women from Leicestershire while 59% of gentry daughters married within the shire. At times, spouses were chosen from among near neighbours such as in the cases of Robert Farnham's marriage to Margaret Whatton, both of whose families held land at Quorndon, and of Thomas Boyville's marriage to Elizabeth Walsh. Boyville held land at Ilston-on-the-Hill, only two miles from the Walsh manor of Burton Overy. Geographical proximity also seems to have played a part in the marriage bonds forged between Berkeleys, Woodfords and Sherards, who all held lands in the east of the county close to the border with Rutlandshire. There can be little doubt that such families were well acquainted long before the sealing of marriage agreements.

Horizons were not always quite so narrow as these examples suggest. The search for marriage partners ranged county-wide and beyond. John Pulteney, who came from Misterton in the far south of the county, married Margaret, daughter of Thomas Walsh from Wanlip, north of Leicester, and Alice Shirley from Staunton Harold, close to the Derbyshire border in the north-west, married into the Brokesby family whose lands were north-east of Leicester at Frisby. Nor must we neglect the 46% of gentry males or the 41% of females whose respective wives and husbands came from beyond the county boundary from as far away as Devonshire in the south, Carmarthen in the west and Northumberland in the north.⁹⁴

However, distance does not preclude prior social intercourse between families which were later to be connected by marriage.

between Emma Brokesby and Robert Brokesby (b) and between Agnes Pulteney (a) and John Pulteney (b), then the networks could be combined at two points.

⁹⁴ Everard Dygby II, Elizabeth Hastings and Elizabeth Kinsman. (See Appendices X and XI).

Admittedly, both the Stonor and the Paston letters reveal that prospective grooms relied upon a network of friends to gather information about, and procure introductions to, eligible partners hitherto unknown to them or to their families.⁹⁵ No doubt some Leicestershire marriages resulted from similar pre-nuptial manoeuvrings. Nevertheless, the need for such assistance should not necessarily be considered as universal. Within the county itself, points of contact among the wider community were provided by shire elections and the local bench of justices of the peace. Thus, at the election of 1422, among the electors were Richard Turville and Thomas Fouleshurst whose children were later to marry, Baldwin Bugge, whose sister was already married to Richard Turville, and Alan Moton, who was the uncle of one of Margaret Bugge's later husbands, Reginald Moton.⁹⁶ Similarly, the commission of the peace of 1448 included Leonard Hastings and Bartholomew Brokesby whose children were to marry five years later.⁹⁷ Thomas Palmer and Richard Neele sat on the same bench as members of the quorum, though their professional paths had crossed as early as 1442, again on the bench as members of the quorum.⁹⁸ Palmer and Neele were still acting as justices of the peace on the commission of 1475, the year of Thomas Palmer's death.⁹⁹ When Palmer's granddaughter married Richard Neele's son, the families were therefore already well acquainted.

The more informal points of contact which could bring eligible partners together must not be neglected, either. It is that same informality which explains why these occasions usually pass unrecorded but in the case of Alice de Bryene one is confronted by the extent of

⁹⁵ Stonor Letters and Papers, Vol. II, p.126; Paston Letters, Vol. II, p.96.

⁹⁶ C219/13/1

⁹⁷ C.P.R., 1446-52, p.590; H.M.C. Hastings, i, 300-301.

⁹⁸ C66/465 m. 29d; C66/451 m. 29d.

⁹⁹ C66/535 m. 31d.

entertaining that occurred in medieval households.¹⁰⁰ Among her regular guests can often be counted a brood of sons and daughters. While it is impossible to say whether any of these specific gatherings resulted in matrimony, they certainly supplied the requisite opportunities.

Although the families of Leicestershire spouses, whether close neighbours or not, were probably already well known to each other at the time of a marriage, we are still left with a large proportion of partners who came from outside the county. The majority of outsiders, 82%, in fact came from neighbouring counties. Invariably, one or other or both families held lands in the other's county. The Willoughbys, who married into the Belgrave family, also held land in Leicestershire at Wymeswold and Cossington, just a few miles from the Belgrave holdings at Thurmaston and Belgrave.¹⁰¹ Anketin Malory, the father of Margery who married Robert Moton I, held a quarter of a knight's fee at Kirkby Mallory, less than a mile from the Motons' manor of Peckleton.¹⁰² Thomas Sherard already possessed land in Rutland before he married Margaret Hellewell from that county.¹⁰³ Even in the case of Elizabeth Hastings, who married Sir John Donne from Kidwelly in distant Carmarthenshire, there had been close links between the two families dating back to as early as 1415. In that year Elizabeth's father, Leonard Hastings, and Sir John's father, Griffith Donne, had fought together at Agincourt where both were probably members of the earl of March's retinue.¹⁰⁴ Contacts between the two families were subsequently maintained through mutual attachment to the house of York and

¹⁰⁰ Alice de Bryene, p.28 and *passim*.

¹⁰¹ Feudal Aids, iii, 104, 120.

¹⁰² Ibid., iii, 125.

¹⁰³ E179/240/269.

¹⁰⁴ Wedgwood, Biographies, p.433; T.W. Newton Dunn, "The Dwn Family", Transactions of the Cymmrodorion Society, 1946-47, pp.273-75.

through service in the French wars.¹⁰⁵ Taking these links into account, we can conclude that approximately 80% of marriages involved families which were either already acquainted or were in a position to be so. We may assume that neighbours, friends and acquaintances maintained a keen interest in each other's growing families from which to select wives and husbands for their own offspring.

Service in France may also have been instrumental in furthering marriage alliances between the Hastingses and the nobility. Richard Hastings married a daughter of Henry, lord Beaumont, while his brother, Leonard Hastings, married a daughter of lord Camoys.¹⁰⁶ Thomas Erdyngton's wife, Joyce, also came from a noble family; she was the granddaughter and coheir of lord Burnell. Their marriages lend support to the claim, based on a study of Richmondshire gentry marriages, that "there was no rigid barrier between gentry and peerage".¹⁰⁷

In Leicestershire, however, marriage between gentry daughters and members of the nobility was totally unknown. William Hastings' marriage to Katherine Neville, daughter of the earl of Salisbury and widow of lord Bonville, followed his own elevation to the peerage, while Ralph Shirley's marriage to a sister of Walter Blount predated the latter's elevation to the peerage in 1465. Even were we to admit the Shirley's into this exclusive group which formed marriage alliances with the nobility, it is clear that there certainly were barriers, possibly not rigid but nonetheless real, separating gentry and peerage. The nobility selected partners from no lower than the knightly group and even within that group their marriages were confined to the wealthiest.¹⁰⁸ A similar

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p.274; E101/70/6/725; *Somerville*, i, pp.242, 640.

¹⁰⁶ Richard Hastings: E404/31/312; E101/70/725. Thomas and Henry Beaumont: E404/43/159; 52/165; 52/15; B.L. *Harl.* 6166, f.69d. Leonard Hastings: Wedgwood, *Biographies*, p.433. Lord Camoys: E404/31/357.

¹⁰⁷ Pollard, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

¹⁰⁸ See Ch. 2 above.

reticence on the part of the gentry to marry beneath them can be seen at the lower end of the social scale. The only certain example of a marriage involving gentle and non-gentle spouses was that between Joyce Langham and Robert Jakes who, in status, may have occupied that grey area separating gentry and yeomen. These exceptions apart, most gentry marriages were endogamous.

According to the traditional view, one of the purposes of medieval marriage was to provide a male heir who would ensure the continuation of the lineage and preserve the integrity of inherited property. A judicious marriage could also bring additional property to extend the estate, thereby maintaining, or even enhancing, one's social standing within the community. Marriage had a further attraction in that it could cement political alliances not only between gentry and their social superiors but also among the gentry themselves.¹⁰⁹ Whether marriages were arranged by the parents or kin of the intended partners or by the partners themselves, these considerations of preserving the lineage or of pandering to social, economic or political ambitions make of marriage a commercial enterprise with the intended spouses constituting the bills of exchange.¹¹⁰ Presented thus, medieval marriage, it seems, was governed by the head and the purse rather than by the heart and showed little or no concern for the prospects of connubial happiness. First impressions of Leicestershire marriages suggest that they conformed to this pattern.

The apparently least contentious purpose of marriage was the need to preserve the lineage through the production of sons. It is clear from his subsequent attitude towards his son, Reginald, who sired only daughters, that Robert Moton's expectations from his second wife had

¹⁰⁹ Du Boulay, *op. cit.*, pp.92-96; Houlbrooke, *op. cit.*, p.75; P.M. Kendall, *The Yorkist Age*, London, 1962, p.364 ff.; Pollard, *op.cit.*,pp.27-59, esp. p.47; Starkey, *op. cit.*, p.232; Stone, *op. cit.*, p.37.

¹¹⁰ Pollard, *op. cit.*, p.47; Starkey, *op. cit.*, p.235; Flandrin, *op. cit.*, p.1; Mitterauer and Sieder, *op. cit.*, p.122.

been for another son.¹¹¹ The much married Ralph Shirley III also seems to have been hoping for a son, though only his fourth and last wife, Joan Sheffield, obliged him by producing one. John Bellers II's wives were not so accommodating and with him the Leicestershire branch of the family died out in the male line. Sir Thomas Erdyngton anticipated that a similar fate probably awaited his family. By 1444, his wife, dame Joyce, was already past child-bearing age and was showing no signs of embracing death to clear the way for a second wife. Rather than await the day when his manor at Barrow-on-Soar would escheat to the chief lord, Sir Thomas paid forty marks into the hanaper for a licence to sell the reversion of his manor to John, viscount Beaumont, in exchange for 1000 marks.¹¹² Nevertheless, he still hoped for children and arranged that if he were so blessed then his agreement with Beaumont would be void.¹¹³

However, we should not too readily assume that in failing to produce male heirs, the gentry themselves exaggerated what must have been a personal disappointment into a family disaster. No doubt, Sir Thomas Erdyngton derived some consolation from his windfall of 1000 marks but others adopted a more emotionally satisfying way of filling the vacuum caused by the lack of a son. John Hotoft clearly found in his son-in-law, John Barre, an adequate substitute for a biological son. Throughout his will, Hotoft refers to Barre as "my sonne" and lavishes upon him treasured family possessions. But the true indicator of Hotoft's obvious affection for his son-in-law lay in his bequest that Barre should have the reversion of certain lands at £100 below their market value even if his wife should die without issue.¹¹⁴ Alternatively, in default of legitimate heirs, an illegitimate son could retain the family

111 See above. p.173.

112 C.P.R. 1441-46, pp. 279-80; H.M.C. Hastings, i, pp. 72-73.

113 For the text of the indenture, see L.R.O. 5D33/108/98.

114 PROB11/1/15/118-118v.

name. John Bradgate arranged for an estate of all his lands and tenements in Bradgate, Cropston, Thurcaston, Barkby, Thorp, Hamilton and Busby to be made to his bastard son, John Bradgate.¹¹⁵ In time, the circumstances of John II's birth would be forgotten and at least the appearance of continuity of the lineage preserved.

The limited significance of the lineage to the gentry is, in fact, placed in perspective by the fate of property devolving on coheirs rather than a single heir. The attempt by the last lord Basset of Drayton to disinherit his heirs general is already well known.¹¹⁶ To prevent his estate from being divided between the descendants of his grandfather's sisters, namely, Thomas, lord Stafford, and Alice Chaworth, Ralph Basset devised all his lands on his nephew, Hugh Shirley, son of Basset's uterine, or possibly illegitimate, sister, Isabel, with remainder to William Stafford, younger brother of Thomas. As Hugh Shirley had no rights by inheritance to the property and as William Stafford's claim was secondary to that of his elder brother, it is clear that lord Basset's device was intended to preserve the estate intact.¹¹⁷ Thomas Palmer's coheirs, his four daughters, were not treated as cavalierly as lord Basset's coheirs had been. Nevertheless, the core of the family property at Holt, rather than suffering a fourfold division, passed entirely to one daughter, Katherine, and her husband, William Neville.¹¹⁸ The integrity of the Walsh family's caput at Wanlip was similarly preserved, in its case by agreement between the husbands of the coheirs. Ralph Shirley III,

¹¹⁵ C1/27/205.

¹¹⁶ G.E.C., ii, 3-6; K.B. McFarlane, The Nobility of Later Medieval England, Oxford, 1973, p.76.

¹¹⁷ Ralph Basset's feoffees released the Basset manors and lands in Nottinghamshire, Leicestershire, Warwickshire and Worcestershire to Hugh Shirley's son, Sir Ralph, in August, 1424. (C.A.D., v, A11388.) Humphrey earl of Stafford and Sir Thomas Chaworth later forcibly disseised Sir Ralph of lands in Nottinghamshire and Warwickshire, prompting Shirley to petition both the king and parliament to assist in their recovery (L.R.O. 26D53/64, 65).

¹¹⁸ T.L.A.S., vol. 13, 1923-24, p.217.

husband of Elizabeth Walsh, received Wanlip, while William Littleton, husband of Elizabeth's sister, Ellen, was compensated by grants of other lands of equal value.¹¹⁹ It was, therefore, the preservation intact of the core of the estate rather than the maintenance of the lineage that taxed the ingenuity and was the prime concern of the gentry.

It is a simple matter, too, to exaggerate the importance of marriage to the advancement of political alliances.¹²⁰ That there were marriages involving political allies cannot be gainsaid, the most notable being William Hastings' marriage to Katherine Neville, sister of the earl of Warwick. Mention has also been made of the political affiliations shared by Leonard Hastings and Griffith Donne before the marriage of their children.¹²¹ Nevertheless, as William Hastings was later to learn, political alliances could be fluid and membership of a lord's retinue did not automatically lead to harmonious associations. Geoffrey Sherard and William Lacy were both servants of lord Hastings yet fell to "variance and discord" over the manor of Teigh in Rutlandshire.¹²² In fact, marriages involving political allies may be seen more as a reflection of the opportunities that pre-existing alliances presented rather than as attempts to form new alliances or to strengthen old.

The same conclusion holds even at the more mundane level where members of the gentry required local allies to witness deeds, charters and wills or to act as executors or feoffees. That in-laws performed these tasks is undeniable but to assume that the aim of marriage was to acquire their services is to confuse the purpose of marriage with its result.¹²³ After the

¹¹⁹ L.R.O. 26D53/543.

¹²⁰ Cf., for example, C. Carpenter, "The Beauchamp affinity: a study of bastard feudalism at work", *E.H.R.*, xciv, 1980, p.522, where a contrary view is adopted.

¹²¹ See above, pp185-186.

¹²² L.R.O. DG40/282.

¹²³ For the use of in-laws in this capacity see above pp.89-90. A contrary view is to be found in S.M. Wright, *The Derbyshire Gentry in the Fifteenth Century*, Derbyshire record society, Chesterfield, 1983, p.54.

marriage between John Brokesby and Joan Hastings, for instance, we find Brokesbys acting as feoffees for their Hastings kin.¹²⁴ However, a Brokesby had been acting as feoffee for a Hastings as early as 1427, many years before the families became allied through marriage.¹²⁵

Although doubts may be cast on the importance of the lineage and of advancing political alliances in the formation of marriages, it is the mercenary side of the arrangements that particularly galls the sensibilities of historians.¹²⁶ There is nothing edifying in Agnes Paston's violent, but unsuccessful, attempt to marry her daughter, Elizabeth, to the ageing and disfigured, albeit wealthy, Stephen Scrope.¹²⁷ Sir William Plumpton's disposal of his infant granddaughters and putative coheirs is also open to censure.¹²⁸ If Agnes and Sir William were typical in their concern for financial gain then we can fully understand the blanket condemnation of those who "were ready to traffic in their flesh and blood to serve their own ends".¹²⁹

Most marriage agreements which set out the terms of this unseemly traffic, tended to be settled between the parents of the prospective partners rather than between the partners themselves. The father of the bride provided the groom's father with a marriage portion while the groom's father promised a jointure for the bride's maintenance during her widowhood. The value of the marriage portion and jointure were set by negotiations, during which, if the Stonor correspondence is a reliable guide, the negotiators could indulge in brinkmanship, either to secure the best deal or, perhaps, to fend off an unwanted suitor. When

¹²⁴ H.M.C. Hastings, i, 4-5, 291, 309, 310.

¹²⁵ Ibid., p.83; L.R.O., 5D33/108/105.

¹²⁶ See Bennett, op. cit., pp.27-41; Mitterauer and Sieder, op. cit., p.122; Kendall, op. cit., pp.369-375.

¹²⁷ Paston Letters, i, 31-32.

¹²⁸ Plumpton Correspondence, pp.lxx-lxxi.

¹²⁹ Bennett, op. cit., p.28.

William Stonor showed matrimonial interest in Margery Blount, her demand for a jointure of between £100 and £133-6-8 was sufficient to cool his ardour.¹³⁰ Some years later, when Walter Froste wished to marry Stonor's kinswoman, probably his sister, William replied that a jointure of £20 worth of land should be forthcoming otherwise all communication between them should cease.¹³¹

Although Margery Blount's demands indicate that negotiations provided some room for manoeuvre, the sums of money involved were determined more by a family's wealth and the perceived value of the intended spouse. In 1436 the Belgraves of Belgrave admitted to the modest annual income of £13.¹³² Three generations later, Richard Belgrave could set aside only £6.13.4. per annum to build up a fund "for the putting forth of my children ... in marriage and other preferments".¹³³ With four younger children to be "put forth", the resulting fund would have been meagre enough. In contrast, among the upper gentry, Anne Vernon's father provided a marriage portion of £433.6.8. while her husband, Ralph Shirley III, promised a jointure consisting of £50 yearly from land, £60 from rent and a further £10 yearly once Ralph's mother, Eleanor, died.¹³⁴ Clearly, both Ralph Shirley and Sir Henry Vernon were keen on the match but the sums agreed upon are as much an affirmation of the perceived status of the two parties.

Less worthy was Anne Warner, Ralph's third wife. Whether her father's status was not so elevated as that of the Shirleys, whether he had less to offer with his daughter as a portion or whether Anne's personal charms were found wanting, is not recorded. But whatever the reasons,

¹³⁰ Stonor Letters and Papers, Vol. I, p.125.

¹³¹ Ibid., Vol. II, pp.75-76.

¹³² E179/192/59.

¹³³ PROB11/16/17/127. For this and what follows, see Appendix XII.

¹³⁴ L.R.O.26D53/2552.

at £47, her jointure was considerably below half that of Anne Vernon.¹³⁵ Similarly, Sir Leonard Hastings gave £300 as a marriage portion with his daughter, Anne, who married Thomas Ferrers II.¹³⁶ Five years later, when another daughter, Joan, married John Brokesby, her marriage portion was only £200.¹³⁷ With Joan Hastings we see that fine balance which had to be achieved during negotiations. The Brokesbys were a substantial county family but they hardly compared to the Ferrerses whose landholdings spanned seven counties and who were direct male descendants of the last Ferrers, lord Ferrers of Groby. On the other hand, to have provided Joan with a much smaller portion would have been not only to her disparagement but also a reproach to Sir Leonard himself.

As the amount spent on marriage portions was often considerable, in many cases some financial difficulty must have resulted. In 1467, Vernon property had been valued at about £171.¹³⁸ It would have been virtually impossible, therefore, for Anne's father to have paid her sizeable portion in a lump sum. Instead, Henry Vernon agreed to pay £166.13.4. down and a further £33.6.8. each year for eight years until the debt was paid.¹³⁹ The marriage portion of Ralph Shirley's fourth wife, Joan Sheffield, was also paid in stages for when Ralph died, his father-in-law still owed £33.13.8. "for marriage money".¹⁴⁰ Nicholas Griffin, too, opted to pay his daughter's portion of £233.6.8. in instalments, in his case, over three years.¹⁴¹ Alternatively, one's kin sometimes agreed to lend financial assistance, especially if they were wealthy enough to do so. The aforementioned Joan Brokesby's brother, William lord Hastings,

135 L.R.O. 5D33/86 ff.1-2.

136 H.M.C. Hastings, i, 300.

137 Ibid., i, 301.

138 Wright, op.cit., p. 7 citing C140/24/24.

139 L.R.O. 26D53/2552. See Appendix XII.

140 L.R.O. 26D53/1949.

141 L.R.O. DE220/90-91.

bequeathed his sister's daughter £133.6.8. towards her marriage.¹⁴² Elizabeth Hasilrigge's uncle, Ralph Shirley III, left her £66.13.4. towards her portion which, given that John Shirley had provided no more for each of his own four daughters, must be seen as very generous.¹⁴³ Robert Sotehill supplied his niece, Elizabeth Sotehill, with £100 as part of her marriage portion, though in his case he was discharging a long-standing family debt.¹⁴⁴ Failing all else, the gentry could always adopt Thomas Stonor's solution. In 1431, Stonor arranged for his son's marriage to be sold to raise capital towards the marriage of his daughters.¹⁴⁵

It was evidently felt that money invested in marriage portions was well spent, provided it attracted the right sort of husband. Among the nobility, other nobles were the preferred choice. In 1455, William lord Lovell left his granddaughter, Anne, £200 towards her marriage "if she be married worshipfully and to such as is or shall be a lord of name".¹⁴⁶ A similar concern about status exercised the minds of the gentry. John Shirley's bequest of 100 marks towards the marriage of each of four daughters was to be paid only if they remained virtuous and eschewed marriage "to suche persones as shalbe to them dysparyssement".¹⁴⁷ Gerard Danet also wished to ensure that his daughters' husbands were selected wisely by making payment of their marriage portions contingent upon their choice being ruled by his widow.¹⁴⁸

For gentry males, the simplest way to maintain or enhance their status was to acquire additional lands through marriage to an heiress. In part, the Neele family owed its advancement to Sir Richard Neele's legal

142 PROB11/7/10/77v.

143 L.R.O.26D53/1947; PROB11/19/1/8v.

144 PROB11/15/19/151v

145 Stonor Letters and Papers, vol. 1, p. 47.

146 L.A.O. Epis. Reg. XX [Chedworth], f.22v.

147 L.R.O. 26D53/1947.

148 L.R.O. 5D33/180.

career in the king's service but, from relatively humble beginnings in Shepshed, it owed its manor in Prestwold to Richard's marriage to Isabel, daughter and coheir of William Ryddyngs. Sir Richard's son, Christopher, added to the estate by marrying another heiress, Margery Rokes, from whose maternal grandparents, Thomas Palmer and Elizabeth Bishopsden, he acquired the manor of Keythorpe and lands in Keythorpe, Tugby, Goadby and Billesdon and her share of the Bishopsden inheritance in Warwickshire.¹⁴⁹ Another legal family, the Kebles, came by its caput at Rearsby through Walter Keble's marriage to the heiress, Agnes Folville.

But the number of Leicestershire heiresses was limited and the shire gentry had to compete with outsiders in order to secure them. In fact, it was through marriages between heiresses and husbands from outside Leicestershire that the county gentry was replenished. The Shirleys, Sotehills, Turpyns, Hasilrigges and Nevilles all owed their arrival in the county to marriages with Leicestershire-born heiresses. By the same token, native gentry married heiresses from other counties. In this way, Thomas Palmer and Everard Dygby I were able to extend their interests into Warwickshire and Rutland respectively.

So great was the demand and so limited the supply that widowed heiresses were also valued. Margaret Bugge had already been married to Richard Turville by whom she had a son, William, before she married Reginald Moton. A child's hold on life was tenuous, as Thomas Neville recognized in his will.¹⁵⁰ Reginald Moton would have been no less perceptive when he married Margaret Bugge. William Turville's life was the sole barrier between Reginald's future offspring and the Bugge inheritance. Heiresses were, therefore, highly prized commodities in the

¹⁴⁹ T.L.A.S., vol. 18, 1934-35, pp. 5-6.

¹⁵⁰ L.R.O. DE220/94.

marriage market and this fact helps to explain why almost two thirds of Leicestershire marriages involving minors aged eighteen years and under also involved an heiress.¹⁵¹ Any delay in laying claim to an heiress may have resulted in losing her to another contender.

Although the major point at issue during marriage negotiations was the size of portions and jointures, expenditure on the wedding celebration itself was also negotiable and would sometimes be formally recorded in the indenture of agreement. Then, as now, the bride's father usually shouldered most of the costs. When Sir Leonard Hastings' daughter married Thomas Ferrers II, Hastings agreed to "bear the expenses" of the wedding except for Thomas's apparel.¹⁵² Bartholomew Villers also paid for his daughter's wedding but there was a limit to his largesse. He agreed to supply food and drink for his future son-in-law's friends "provided that only such as were named by Bartholomew should come".¹⁵³ At times, though, a wedding might call for greater financial resources than the gentry could muster. When Anne, daughter of Richard Harcourt of Oxfordshire, married Henry Fiennes, son and heir apparent of Lord Saye, the presence of nobles at the wedding dictated the need for additional splendour. In this case, both sets of parents equally bore the cost of the occasion.¹⁵⁴

It is this apparently tasteless emphasis on the commercial side of marriage, the concern for portions, jointures and miscellaneous costs, that has understandably produced the belief that the selection of spouses in the Middle Ages was determined not by notions of love and affection

¹⁵¹ See Appendix X. F.J. Furnivall concedes that property arrangements were a factor in child-marriages but suspects that attempts to evade wardship were the chief cause. (Child-Marriages, Divorces and Ratifications etc. in the Diocese of Chester, A.D. 1561-6, ed. F.J. Furnivall, London, E.E.T.S., orig. series, 108, 1897, Kraus rept., 1978, p. xxxix.)

¹⁵² H.M.C. Hastings, i, 300.

¹⁵³ Ibid., i, 141.

¹⁵⁴ L.R.O. DE221/3/2/31.

but by social and economic needs.¹⁵⁵ This view is further supported by the fact that marriage agreements were often settled between the parents of the intended spouses and sometimes involved unions between children who, if they at all understood the nature of the arrangements, were hardly in a position to protest effectively.¹⁵⁶ Whether partners in marriage were the pawns of their parents or subject to social and economic imperatives, our vision of their predicament remains depressing.

Yet, alongside these cheerless images stands the Knight of La Tour-Landry's attitude towards his wife. By the time he wrote his educational works for the benefit of his children, Geoffrey de la Tour was already a widower; but there can be no concealing the intensity of his love for his wife during her lifetime. It is worth quoting him at length.

y delited me so moche in her that y made for
her love songges, balades, rondelles, virallës,
and diuerse nwe thinges in the best wise that
y couthe --- but dethe --- toke her from me, the
whiche hathe made me haue mani a soruffull
thought and grete heuvinesse --- for a true
loveris hert forgetith neuer the woman that
enis he hathe truli loued.¹⁵⁷

In Geoffrey's words we find none of the cold calculations of courtly love, no evidence of the poet's conceits. He writes from the heart and, in so doing, reminds us that medieval marriage could be a source of great warmth and delight.

Happily, his voice is not solitary. When Sir Richard Harcourt wrote to Thomas Stonor shortly before the marriage of Stonor's daughter to John Cottesmore, he prayed God "to graunt them bothe moche Joy

¹⁵⁵ Mitterauer and Sieder, *op.cit.*, p.122; Kendall, *op.cit.*, pp. 364, 369.

¹⁵⁶ K. Dockrey, "Why did Fifteenth-Century English Gentry Marry?: The Pastons, Plumpton and Stonors Revisited", *Gentry and Lesser Nobility in Late Medieval Europe*, ed. M. Jones, Gloucester, 1986, pp. 64-65.

¹⁵⁷ *The Book of the Knight of La Tour-Landry*, ed. T. Wright, E.E.T.S., old series, no. 33, London, 1906, rev. edn., 1969, pp. 1-2.

together",¹⁵⁸ thereby revealing that marital bliss was a natural expectation; and Elizabeth Stonor's letter to her "ryght enterly and --- most specyall belouyd husband" shows that these expectations were sometimes fulfilled.¹⁵⁹ Two years earlier, in an otherwise quite formal letter dealing with business matters, Elizabeth had confided in her husband, William, that "I longe sore ffore you, to se you her in London".¹⁶⁰ The economy of expression in her plea fails to mask the pains of separation. Thomas Betson was another who suffered prolonged periods of separation from his loved one, in his case his future wife, Katherine Ryche. Nevertheless, his letter to her shows him to have been both attentive to, and caring about, her welfare.¹⁶¹ But the most famous of all fifteenth-century love matches is provided by the clandestine marriage between Margery Paston and Richard Calle. Their love withstood the opposition and active hostility of Margery's family.¹⁶² Nor must we forget the love between John Sotehill and his wife, Elizabeth.¹⁶³

Historians are, therefore, presented with a paradox. On one side, we can call on evidence to indicate that medieval marriages provided scope for the expression of strong affection and love and that partners were expected to attain joy together. On the other side, there is a mass of evidence that apparently points to marriage as a purely business transaction with little or no interest in the future happiness of the married couple. The latter view is further supported by private letters which reveal the appeal of present wealth and future economic prospects of the chosen partner rather than of his or her more personal qualities.¹⁶⁴

158 Stonor Letters and Papers, vol. I, p. 114.

159 Ibid., vol. II, p. 66.

160 Ibid., vol. II, p.16.

161 Ibid., vol. II, pp. 6-8.

162 Paston Letters, I, pp. 342, 541; ibid., II, pp. 498-500; Bennett, op.cit., pp.42-46.

163 See above, p.175.

164 Paston Letters, II, p. 32; Stonor Letters and Papers, vol. I, pp. 123-124.

While not wishing to disparage Katherine, duchess of Norfolk, we can assume that, to her twenty year old husband, the attractions of this "juvencula, aetatis fere iijxx annorum", were other than carnal.¹⁶⁵ Elizabeth Paston's marriage to Robert Poynings seems to have been equally loveless. She wrote to her mother:

As for my mayster, my best beloved that ye call,
and I must nedes call hym so now, for I fynde
noon other cause, and as I trust to Jesu never
shall.¹⁶⁶

Her words are pregnant with bitter irony and whatever her motives were for marrying Poynings, we may deduce that they did not include affection.¹⁶⁷

Admittedly, historians have made some attempt to resolve the paradox by claiming that, as an unexpected bonus, love could develop during a marriage.¹⁶⁸ Although there can be no quibble with the second part of this proposition, it leaves the essential elements of the paradox untouched. It still accepts that marriages were contracted for worldly reasons and that affection played little or no part in the arrangements.

Literary evidence, however, suggests that economic considerations were not the only criteria used in the selection of marriage partners. The anonymous author of "How the Wise Man taught his Son" advised,

And sonne, if thou would have a wyf
Take hir not for coueitise
...
Though sche be poore, take thou noon hede
And sche wole do thee more good service

¹⁶⁵ William Worcester, "Annales Rerum Anglicarum", Letters and Papers Illustrative of the Wars of the English in France, 2 vols., Rerum Britannicorum Medii Aevi Scriptores, ed. J. Stevenson, London, 1861, vol. II, pt. ii, p. 783.

¹⁶⁶ Paston Letters, I, p. 206.

¹⁶⁷ Surprisingly, the normally sensitive H.S. Bennett says "it is difficult to judge whether or no she had at last found happiness" (Bennett, op.cit., p. 33). The measured coldness so apparent in Elizabeth's letter indicates that she had not.

¹⁶⁸ Starkey, op.cit., p. 233; Du Boulay, op.cit., p. 102; Kendall, op.cit., p. 369.

Than a riccher, whanne thou hast neede.¹⁶⁹

Granted, the author implicitly recognizes that there were marriages "for coueitise", but he also advocates a higher ideal. Despite his counsel, the lesson not to marry for money was lost on Margery Blount who demanded a jointure of between £100 and 200 marks. Nevertheless, her suitor's suspicion "that she then had loved [his] londe better than [him]self" must have contributed to his dropping of his suit.¹⁷⁰ Money was, in fact, a secondary consideration in Sir William Stonor's quest for a wife. One unnamed contender had an income of 500 marks from land but reports that she was "fowle ... but lytyll and sumwhat rownde" were deemed sufficient handicaps to make her an unsuitable match.¹⁷¹ John Paston and Margery Brews also refused to overrate the significance of wealth to their future happiness. They both fully understood that the financial side of their marriage arrangements was a matter for their parents to haggle over but, despite major, albeit temporary, problems in that sphere, the couple were, nonetheless, determined to marry. Margery's letter to her "good, trewe, and lovyng Volentyne" signals the strength of her affection and one feels certain that in their case the financial cloth was eventually cut to fit the emotional suit rather than the other way round.¹⁷²

John and Margery's success highlights the fact that although parental control over jointures and portions provided them with some

¹⁶⁹ Babees Book, p. 50, l. 73ff.

¹⁷⁰ Stonor Letters and Papers, vol. I, p. 126.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., vol. II, p. 126. It is worth bearing in mind that even the pious Henry VI, of whom one finds it hard to imagine his being overly concerned with the pleasures of the flesh, ordered his ambassadors to survey a selection of prospective brides rather than just one "to the intent that we may have choice" and for them to pay particular attention to looks and physique. He was also well aware that the latter could be enhanced by the use of artificial devices either to restrain a spreading waist-line or to improve an unfashionably large or small bosom and, to counter any attempted deception on that score, the ladies were to parade before the ambassadors in plain kirtles (E.H.D., no. 137); the scene would have been pure Utopian. (Sir Thomas More, Utopia, Harmondsworth, 1965, p. 103.)

¹⁷² Paston Letters, I, pp. 662-663.

voice in the selection of their children's marriage partners, ultimately, a marriage was made by the consent of the partners themselves.¹⁷³ Still greater independence of choice could be exercised in second, third or fourth marriages. In Leicestershire, over a fifth of all marriages fell into this category.¹⁷⁴ Jane Shirley's marriage to Sir John Brown seems to have been an affair entirely of her own handling. Jane's father was already dead by the time she married and, if her brother, Ralph III's, later attitude is any guide, he was not altogether pleased with the match.¹⁷⁵ Perhaps, like Miss Frances in Mansfield Park, Jane married, "in the common phrase, to disoblige her family". Even child-marriages allowed for the exercise of choice once the parties came of age. The number of annulments granted in the ecclesiastical courts indicate that children were well aware of their rights in this matter.¹⁷⁶ That parents, too, were conscious of the need to allow their children to escape from an unwanted marriage is shown in William Hastings' will which made provision for the dissolution of his daughter, Anne's, child-marriage to George, earl of Shrewsbury.¹⁷⁷

But our negative impression of fifteenth-century attitudes towards marriage has been moulded by, and owes the greatest debt to, indentures of agreement which dwell on the settlement of jointures and portions. At least in private correspondence we often find the cash motive tempered by less mercenary concerns. In indentures, on the other hand,

¹⁷³ M.M. Sheehan, "Choice of Marriage Partners in the Middle Ages", Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History, vol. 1, old series, xi, 1978, p. 7; C.N.L. Brooke, "Marriage and Society in the Central Middle Ages" and M. Ingram, "Spousals Litigation in the English Ecclesiastical Courts c.1350-c.1640", in Marriage and Society. Studies in the Social History of Marriage, ed. R.B. Outhwaite, London, 1981, pp. 27, 48-49.

¹⁷⁴ See Appendices X and XI.

¹⁷⁵ C1/289/48-52.

¹⁷⁶ Child Marriages ... in the Diocese of Chester, pp. 1-55; The Register of Thomas Langley Bishop of Durham 1406-1437, 3 vols., ed. R.L. Storey, Surtees Society, London, 1956-59, vol. II, p. 92.

¹⁷⁷ PROB11/7/10/77v.

the business aspect of marriage finds triumphant expression. The indenture which preceded the marriage between Henry Vernon's daughter, Anne, and Ralph Shirley III, supplies us with a particularly fulsome example. Apart from settling the amounts payable as a portion and jointure, the indenture allows for the enfeoffment of Vernon's friends and sons with lands held in jointure, from which position of trust they could best guarantee Anne's interests. It covered, too, such matters as the deliberate wasting of property jointly held by Anne, bequests to be made to daughters born of the union and the repayment of part of Anne's marriage portion if she were to die prematurely.¹⁷⁸ Henry Vernon was clearly trying to cover every possible pecuniary contingency.

Apart from Ralph Shirley's shoddy treatment of his mother and sister, indications are that Anne Vernon needed all the legal protection her father could provide.¹⁷⁹ Despite the fact that some women, such as Mabil Woodford, could act as partners in estate management and that many were appointed to positions of trust as feoffees and executors, few can have been versed in the intricacies of the law in the way that Margaret Paston or Elizabeth Stonor were.¹⁸⁰ There must have been many such as Jane, second wife of John Staunton, who, after the death of her husband, was too naïve to prevent her father- and brother-in-law from defrauding her of part of her inheritance.¹⁸¹ Ellen, widow of James Bellers, was another who foolishly ordered her feoffees to make an estate of her dower property to her father-in-law, Ralph. Ralph, in turn, derived the profits from these lands without making any compensation to Ellen.¹⁸² Wives and their children also needed protection against wastrel husbands whose spendthrift ways could leave their dependants

¹⁷⁸ L.R.O. 26D53/2552.

¹⁷⁹ See above, pp.168, 172.

¹⁸⁰ Bennett, *op.cit.*, pp. 63-66; *Stonor Letters and Papers*, vol. II, pp. 66-67.

¹⁸¹ C1/58/322.

¹⁸² C1/9/356.

destitute. Ellen Bellers' predicament stemmed from her husband's accumulation of debts. John Farnham also falls into this category though in this case, to his credit, John's father, Thomas, defended the rights of his daughter-in-law against the younger Farnham's attempt to alienate his livelihood.¹⁸³

These are the sorts of problems that marriage indentures attempted to anticipate and counteract. Henry Vernon's indenture, therefore, was not simply setting out the terms of a "traffic in his flesh and blood"; he was displaying a natural paternal concern for his daughter's future welfare. Given that both spinsters and married women lacked any economic independence, it was incumbent, first, upon fathers to ensure that their daughters would be suitably provided for during their widowhood and, second, upon fathers-in-law to ensure that this dependence did not constitute a drain on finite resources. It is unreasonable, therefore, for us to expect terms of endearment or signs of affection in what is, after all, a business document designed to strike a balance between these conflicting claims.

We can only conclude that in the formation of marriages, the fifteenth-century gentry were less subject to external constraints than at first appears. Beyond seeking out partners of comparable social status, there was sufficient scope for them to follow the dictates of the heart rather than the purse. To emphasize the latter at the expense of the former is to present only part of the picture and, in the cases of John Paston and Margery Brews, of Margery Paston and Richard Calle and of John Sotehill and Elizabeth Plumpton, that would be a very small part of the picture indeed. Certainly there were mothers such as Agnes Paston and her equally unprepossessing daughter-in-law, Margaret, or fathers and grandfathers such as Sir William Plumpton, who mercilessly

¹⁸³ Quorndon Records, pp. 155-156.

manipulated their children and grandchildren to further their own selfish purposes. But we should not assume that Agnes, Margaret and Sir William were archetypes of their age. Fortunately, the human mould allows for greater diversity than that.

The relative unimportance of external constraints in the formation of many marriages applies equally to family strategy as a whole. As we have seen, the demands of the wider kin or of the lineage were hardly a consideration when selecting feoffees, executors or witnesses or in the disposal of one's property. Nor did the formation of political alliances, whether with a "good lord" or with one's social equals, greatly impinge upon the gentry's personal lives. In short, if we wished to depict the medieval gentry family as a cock-boat tossed in a sea of external agencies then Leicestershire will not provide us with our canvas.¹⁸⁴ Individualism, or that emphasis upon the private person which, we have argued, was reflected in the domestic architecture at Neville Holt and Staunton Harold,¹⁸⁵ is equally revealed by an independence of spirit in family relationships.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁴ See S. Ozment, When Fathers Ruled. Family Life in Reformation Europe, Cambridge, Mass., 1983. In claiming that "humankind is more the master of its fate than mastered by it", (*ibid.*, p. vii) Ozment is not so much expressing his bias, as he humbly puts it, but proclaiming a truism.

¹⁸⁵ See above, p.165.

¹⁸⁶ A. Macfarlane seems to anticipate that the gentry may not have been individualistic (The Origins of English Individualism, Oxford, 1978, p.206). However, they were clearly just as "ego-centred in kinship and social life" (*ibid.*, p.163) as their social inferiors.