GENERAL PATTERNS OF PUNCTUATION IN THE *PASTON LETTERS**

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Abstract

The late Middle Ages saw a proliferation in the number of marks of punctuation as a result of the development of cursive hands and scripts. While the punctus had been the principal mark used in the Anglo-Saxon period, other marks like the paragraphus, the virgule, the perioslash and the hyphen were progressively incorporated into the repertoire of punctuation. The inventory of marks and their functions settled over time, but it was not until the seventeenth century when we find the early symptoms of normalization (Calle-Martín forthcoming). Even though some recent studies have focused on the analysis of the punctuation system deployed in different text types–literary, scientific and legal material in particular–, letters have, however, not been the focus of these studies. This paper therefore analyses what marks are present in the *Paston Letters* and what their functions are. Particular attention is paid to the punctus and the virgule as marks with overlapping uses in the period.

Keywords: *Paston Letters*, grammatical punctuation, rhetorical punctuation, punctus, virgule.

PATRONES GENERALES DE PUNTUACIÓN EN LAS *PASTON LETTERS*

Resumen

La Baja Edad Media fue testigo de la proliferación de un número de signos de puntuación como resultado de la implantación de la escritura cursiva. Mientras que el punto había sido hasta entonces el principal recurso en el periodo anglosajón, signos como el parágrafo, la vírgula, el *perioslash* o el guion, entre otros, se incorporaron con posterioridad al repertorio. El inventario de símbolos y sus respectivas funciones se fueron especializando con el tiempo, y es en el siglo xvii cuando se detectan los primeros síntomas de normalización (Calle-Martín próxima publicación). Si bien los estudios recientes se han centrado en el análisis del sistema de puntuación empleado en diferentes tipos de texto–fundamentalmente literarios, científicos y legales–, las colecciones de cartas, sin embargo, han quedado en su mayoría al margen de los mismos. Este trabajo pretende, por tanto, dilucidar qué signos aparecen de manera recurrente en las denominadas *Paston Letters* y las funciones que estos desempeñan. Se estudian los usos del punto y la vírgula por su solapamiento en el periodo.

Palabras clave: *Paston Letters*, puntuación gramatical, puntuación retórica, punto, vírgula.

1. INTRODUCTION

The art of pointing, or a good command of it, is deemed of paramount importance for the correct understanding of any written artifact, both in Early and Present-Day English. This view of punctuation can be traced back to the Middle Ages in Chaucer's *The Romaunt of the Rose*, when the B-translator explicitly mentions that "a reder that poyntith ille / A good sentence may ofte spille" (lines 2161-2162). This is an intriguing digression by the B-translator "between Guillaume's promise that he is reporting the God of Love's speech word-for-word (lines 1055-1062) and his promise to narrate the dream in due course (lines 2063-2074)" (Knox 2022, 196). The references to *reading* and *pointing* in this digression can be interpreted, on the one hand, either from the perspective of the reader, where marks of punctuation rhetorically interpolate to guide their reading aloud with the necessary pauses; or from the perspective of the writer in his attempt to provide a coherent rendering of the source text by making the most of the marks of punctuation at his disposal (Parkes 1992, 70-76). Regardless of the interpretation, Chaucer's text unambiguously delves into the actual requirements of a text, both in terms of rhetorical and grammatical punctuation, to ensure its correct understanding and thus avoid, in Chaucer's own words, any likely deterioration of "a good sentence":

> Now is good to here, in fay,
> If ony be that can it say,
> And poynte it as the resoun is
> Set; for other gate, ywys,
> It shal nought well in all thyng
> Be brought to good undirstondyng:
> For a reder that poyntith ille
> A good sentence may ofte spille.
> The book is good at the eendyng,
> Maad of newe and lusty thyng;
> (Glasgow, University Library, MS Hunter 409,
> *The Romaunt of the Rose*, f. 42r, lines 2155-2164)[1]

In itself, Chaucer's interpolation perfectly summarizes the major concerns of medieval writers in their deployment of punctuation. The act of putting pen to paper–or ink to vellum–usually involved the making of a number of decisions which were directly associated with the appearance of the final product. The first

[1]   Transcription available at https://www.gla.ac.uk/myglasgow/library/files/special/Rose/html_mt/ 042r_mt.htm (accessed 2 September 2023).

had to do with the repertoire of marks of punctuation, which actually depended on the typology of the text.[2] Poetry, on the one hand, was often rendered without recourse to marks of punctuation, an example being the manuscript version of *The Romaunt of the Rose* in Glasgow, University Library, MS Hunter 409.[3] The rendering of prose, on the other hand, was more problematic in view of the greater need to clarify syntactic relationships, which obviously made room for a higher number of marks of punctuation. Moreover, prose presented as a single block of text must have been harder for a reader to parse, especially when it was written in the *currens* grade of script. Punctuation served to guide the reader and to facilitate parsing. Unfortunately, however, the medieval scribe did not have the present-day repertoire available to him to cater for all the grammatical needs. He had to make the most of, to a certain extent, a constrained repertoire at a moment in time when there was not a standard of punctuation. This predicament is logically connected with the overlapping functions of marks in the period according to which one and the same mark could be deployed in a number of contexts, and the extent of the overlapping was eventually a matter of scribal decision. Every handwritten artifact is therefore unique, thus embodying its own set of conventions and limitations based on the scribal choices (Calle-Martín forthcoming).

Apart from the limitations of the repertoire, medieval writers were also compelled to take a stand between grammatical and rhetorical punctuation. Grammatical punctuation signals the structural relationship between the sentence constituents to yield syntactic sense, while rhetorical punctuation, in turn, aims to provide the text with the necessary rest points for a meaningful oral performance (Calle-Martín and Miranda-García 2005a, 95). Even though the scope of grammatical and rhetorical punctuation was basically determined by the nature of the text and the context in which it was to be read–either written to be read silently or aloud–or the reader's level of literacy, the issue is not so straightforward for the medieval scribe as it basically depended on how dependent or interdependent speech and writing were then conceived to be (Baron 2001, 16). As a matter of fact, both types of punctuation coexisted throughout the Middle Ages, often intermingled in a single text, and writers gave more prominence to the grammatical or the rhetorical in view of the nature of the text or the particularities of the mark in a given context. It would not be until the advent of printing and the growth of silent reading that grammatical punctuation progressively toppled the rhetorical, albeit it has never ousted it completely.

These reflections contribute to shaping the medieval scribe as an actual facilitator of meanings whose decisions, as far as punctuation is concerned, shaped the handwritten text as it has eventually come down to us, both as regards the

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[2] The chapters in Bonapfel et al. (forthcoming) make it abundantly clear that norms and conventions varied by text-type.

[3] Some other poetical works might also resort to the punctus for the expression of the necessary illocutionary pauses in the middle of a line, as in the late fifteenth-century English version of Palladius's *Practice of Husbandry* in Glasgow, University Library, MS Hunter 104.

inventory of marks and the functions attributed to them. The problem, however, is that these decisions are usually not transparent enough to the modern reader, who is at a loss in the attempt to make some sort of order out of the apparent chaos presented by the manuscript folios. This order, unfortunately, is not easily attainable for the overlapping functions of some marks, which are the source of alternative readings and, in some cases, equivocal renderings (Lucas 1971, 19; Mitchell 1980, 412; Calle-Martín and Miranda-García 2005b, 28; Smith 2020a; Nedelius 2022).

This lack of transparency basically explains why medieval punctuation has often been disregarded in the relevant literature, in the previous century in particular, in view of its idiosyncratic and whimsical character (Jenkinson 1926, 154; Denholm-Young 1954, 77; Zeeman 1956; Parkes 1978, 138-139; Rodríguez-Álvarez 1999a, 27-28; Calle-Martín 2004, 407-408; Calle-Martín and Miranda-García 2005b, 27-28). The existing studies of Late Middle English materials are, however, descriptions of the inventory of marks found in particular pieces together with their uses and functions, usually by a single hand, with a focus on literary texts, even though medical and legal materials have been actively adopted as primary sources for analysis in the course of this century. Letters, however, have not been the focus of this effort.

The present study analyses the deployment of punctuation in Late Middle English correspondence which, as was mentioned above, stands out as a hitherto unexplored text-type as regards punctuation. Correspondence is now part of what is elsewhere known as historical 'ego' documents–together with diaries, travel accounts, witness depositions, etc. In Stenroos, Bergstrøm and Thengs's (2020) classification, the category of *correspondence* can be classified into other functional subcategories including *complaint*, *petition* and *request* material, together with a catch-all category subsuming "official, business and private letters dealing with a variety of topics" (2020, 50). The *Paston Letters* are then a prototypical instance of 'ego' documents involving private correspondence between a sender and an addressee, thus becoming "instrumental sources in shedding light on language variation and change in the past" (Hernández-Campoy, Conde-Silvestre and García-Vidal 2019, 288). The letters collectively bear testimony to the writing habits of many authors, whose individual habits themselves vary according to the circumstances under which their letters were produced. Paragraphing, for instance, is a typical case at hand with some letters divided into paragraphs and others presented as a single block of text with no subdivisions. When it comes to punctuation, the more hastily written letters that go to other family members do not often contain any punctuation at all, while the others are limited to the use of the single virgule, the double virgule at more important divisions, the punctus and the sporadic deployment of the punctus elevatus (Davis 2004, xxxiv).[4] Our study, then, is concerned with punctuation marks proper, that

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[4] Williams (forthcoming) finds the same set of marks and notes too that the punctus elevatus is rare among them. We record a mere two examples of the punctus elevatus in our selection of letters, both occurring in the same letter (Davis #39), while Williams focuses on the use of this mark by one

is, it excludes other side-elements such as titles, capitals, layout or colored initials and focuses instead on some recurrent patterns that stand out as common norms across the Paston writers.[5] Particular attention is paid to the punctus and the virgule as the marks sharing overlapping uses in the period.[6]

2. METHODOLOGY

The *Paston Letters* is the label employed to name a collection of authored documents written by fifteen members from the different generations of this Norfolk family between the years 1425 and 1503 (Turner 1897, 425). The letters were either committed to paper or vellum by the members of the family themselves or by their hired amanuenses, particularly in the case of the female members of the family. From these materials, we have picked a subset comprising 171 letters where we had ready access to both an electronic transcription and a corresponding digital image. The last two decades or so have witnessed a proliferation of studies based on the *Paston Letters* in view of their historical and philological interest, not only because of the fresh information about fifteenth-century England that they yield but also because of their linguistic dimension as material composed immediately before the Modern period, when the English language was undergoing a number of changes at all levels (Hernández-Campoy, Conde-Silvestre and García-Vidal 2019, 291-292).

The present study relies on the digital images of the *Paston Letters* currently available online for free from the British Library and housed in its Additional MSS 43488, 43489, 43490 and 43491, together with an additional manuscript volume containing further material from the second half of the fifteenth century.[7]

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of the legally-trained Paston amanuenses. This is James Gresham, who appears to use it in particular in interrogative or exclamatory contexts where it would be reasonable to expect rising intonation in speech. If this analysis is correct, Gresham's use of the mark exemplifies the beginnings of the process of specialization whereby the various marks eventually developed their present-day forms and functions.

[5]   It is a fact that there is more than a single writer and habits may differ from one another, generalization becoming then a desideratum unless it has been proved that they all follow similar patterns of usage. However, a systematic identification of the type of copyists and their output is unfeasible in view of the number of writers and their whimsical attitudes as regards punctuation. Instead of elucidating individual preferences according to the type of writer, the present study has been conceived to discern the common practices of the Paston family to obtain the set of uses shared by all its members.

[6]   See Weir (2018, 173-219) for a detailed analysis of the punctuation practice of the Paston family and their circle during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Chapter four explores the pragmatic features of Early Modern English correspondence, punctuation in particular, addressing the uses and functions of punctuation marks in these documents; the level of gender variation between male and female correspondents; and the variation found in the expression of a set of communicative acts across the generations of writers.

[7]   The five different volumes can be easily accessed from the British Library blog entitled "The Paston Letters Go Live" (https://blogs.bl.uk/digitisedmanuscripts/2015/04/the-paston-letters-go-live.html; accessed 15 November 2021).

These digital images have been supplemented with the electronic edition of their text available online at the *Oxford Text Archive*.[8] The digital images have been our source for the compilation of the different marks of punctuation in the original handwritten documents, while the electronic editions were used for the retrieval of the running text especially in cases of an obscure and difficult reading of the original, be it in terms of the handwriting itself or other external issues such as any likely deterioration of the physical folios with the passing of time. Our methodology has been first to remove the editorial punctuation from the edition, and subsequently to add the punctuation marks found in the letters by reading against the high-resolution color images. This process avoids the problem characteristic of electronic editions in general, this one included, that they did not attempt to reproduce the actual punctuation found in the letters themselves.

Procedurally, the instances were retrieved manually and subsequently classified in terms of the mark of punctuation involved. The corpus instances were saved in an Excel file. The respective columns of this spreadsheet contained the context preceding the punctuation mark, the mark itself, the context following it, and a reference to the letter in which that instance occurs. This type of concordance file was particularly adequate for our purposes as it allowed us to sort the instances alphabetically according to the word appearing both before and after a mark. This alphabetical sorting led to similar instances appearing in succession in the file, e.g., in view of a following conjunction, which allowed us readily to identify recurring patterns in the deployment of punctuation marks.

3. ANALYSIS

3.1. Inventory of marks of punctuation in the *Paston Letters*

The functions of punctuation in the late medieval period–and beyond–have never been fully codified, and a solid taxonomy of punctuation marks is still a desideratum. This gap is surely explained as a result of the primary difficulty of access to the source materials themselves. Hopefully, this situation is being rectified as high-resolution color images of more and more medieval texts are becoming available online. Another likely reason has to do with the genre and/or text-type of the particular document. It is a fact that medieval literary texts have received greater attention from both scholars and keepers of manuscripts than other types of documents, even though in the past decades both medical and legal material have gained important ground as objects of analysis. Notwithstanding this, literary

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texts are what repositories continue to prioritize when they choose what materials to make available online, and literary texts also provide the materials of choice for linguists to mine for linguistic data, including punctuation.

Even though it has been stated that medieval legal documents tend to contain very little punctuation,[9] recent work has demonstrated that this statement is not entirely valid, since a considerable proportion of them in fact contain punctuation marks proper–71% of the corpus looked at by Thaisen and Nedelius (forthcoming). It is our impression that the percentage is higher still in other document types. The amount of punctuation, however, varies across documents and, more importantly, writers use marks differently to the extent that one writer's punctus may turn into another writer's virgule, or the other way around in terms of their function. An additional problem is the representation of punctuation in electronic corpora, which may not be adequate, for example because editors' choice of a symbol to represent a mark may be constrained by the font that they use in their transcriptions. The *currens* grade of scripts in the Gothic Cursiva family, for instance, can be inherently ambiguous so that it can be difficult to determine whether a scribe intended a stroke to be a mark of punctuation or not. The Greeks and, later, the Romans placed a punctus at different heights to indicate periodus, kola and kommata: if this convention survived into the late Middle Ages, we might transcribe a full-stop to represent the punctus and then lose the height distinction in the process.

The *Paston Letters* do not contain very many different marks of punctuation. For our corpus of 171 documents, the inventory of marks is restricted to the following five marks: paraph, single virgule, double virgule, punctus and punctus elevatus. Setting aside the paraph which performs a macro-textual function, our counts are 463 instances of the punctus, 411 of the single virgule and 181 of the double virgule. The punctus elevatus occurs twice, with both instances found in the same text (Davis #39). As any experienced transcriber will be aware and as we hinted at in the previous paragraph, it can be difficult to determine whether a stroke is a part of a letter or a mark of punctuation. We have used our best judgment and have marked uncertain instances separately. For instance, a letter like <f> may terminate in a downstroke that is perpendicular on a cross-bar and the downstroke may be formally similar to a virgule and may be confused with it. Our principle has been to transcribe a virgule only when the stroke has unambiguously been separately executed from the cross-stroke with a pen-lift rather than a turn of the pen. The letter <e>, on the other hand, may terminate in a spur to the right that connects to

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9 Jenkinson's (1926, 154) assessment is that sixteenth-century legal documents continue a medieval trend whereby punctuation is "not infrequently so slight as to be negligible," while Petti (1977, 25) remarks that while punctuation increased in both range and frequency during the course of the late Middle Ages in other text-types, "the trend was quite the reverse in legal documents. Punctuation is almost completely absent from them by the early 15th century, and the pattern of minimal punctuation has persisted in English legal use" (1977, 25). Rodríguez-Álvarez (1999a) concurs, calling absence of punctuation a hallmark of a writer trained in law; cf. Rodríguez-Álvarez (1999b).

the lower part of the lobe and such a spur may terminate in a dot, becoming then difficult for a transcriber to determine whether a dot has been separately executed or terminates a spur.[10] In the same vein, the editorial practice here has been to interpret a mark of punctuation only when the dot has been separately executed on purpose.

Punctuation in the *Paston Letters*, in our opinion, is closely related to the letters' *mise-en-page* (layout). It is not possible to elaborate on the history of the interplay between punctuation marks proper and layout for reasons of space, but this is an issue which still awaits the labor of an insightful scholar in the future.[11] Layout in the sense of indentation, blank lines, headings and other features used to indicate textual divisions may characterize such text-types as financial accounts, wills or contracts. However, these features do not characterize the *Paston Letters*. Those *Paston Letters* that are letters, which make up the majority of the collection, are typically laid out as a single block of text, except that the recipient's name and address appear separately on the back. None of the ones that we have looked at contains more than one ink color neither rubrication nor colored initials.[12] Instead, many of them corroborate that they were the result of hasty writing or drafting, being then instances of plain, workaday documents. This makes letter writing the exception rather than the rule. However, one feature does characterize the *Paston Letters*: the writers are particularly committed to the use of capitalization serving the same functions as a mark of punctuation; therefore, the combination of both a capital letter and a punctuation mark is a frequent device in the letters (Calle-Martín forthcoming; Calle-Martín and Romero-Barranco forthcoming).

3.2. The functions of marks of punctuation in the *Paston Letters*

As far as the functions of punctuation marks are concerned, a few trivial uses may be noted for the record, which are described in the remainder of this section. As shown, punctuation is mostly deployed for the expression of macro-textual and sentential relations, while at clause and phrase levels it is restricted to the expression of apposition and some formulaic expressions.

(a) The single virgule and the double virgule are both often used as visual cues to indicate an interlinear insertion, while the single virgule is chosen to separate words unintentionally written too close together. Setting aside these uses of punctuation, the majority of punctuation marks, in turn, are certainly deployed both non-trivially

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[10]   The electronic edition, following Davis's practice, uses a semicolon to indicate the presence of such elaborate finishing strokes that have not been separately executed, thus <e;> and <t;>.
[11]   Little (1984) suggests that punctuation marks have been used either rhetorically, syntactically or typographically since Old English times, thus separating off layout as an independent dimension. We believe that our examples show that the typographical and the rhetorical are not independent of each other.
[12]   Even though the text is written in one ink color, there are sporadic corrections in a darker ink.

and non-randomly. Even though in the majority of cases these marks occur at clause boundaries, their function is not found to be strictly grammatical and writers do not seem much concerned with expressing the syntactic relationships of the utterance. A mark of punctuation, for instance, is systematically rendered to signal a major textual division such as the beginning of a new statement or sense unit or a change of topic in the utterance. Writers are not particularly committed to the use of a line break or indentation after the last letter of the last word of a section, and this explains the higher dependence on capitalization for the opening of a new section or a statement in the text. In these cases, the writers often have recourse to a formulaic lexical element to open the new section of text, the word *item* ('and, also, besides') in particular, either abbreviated or spelled out in full.[13] As a matter of fact, elements such as *item*, *also, then*, *moreover*, *furthermore* and *first* were recurrent devices to indicate the beginning of a sense unit in the fifteenth century, either preceded by a punctuation mark or not, a practice which was mostly popularized through its commonplace use in legal writing (Ikegami 1990, 209; Rodríguez-Álvarez 1999b, 12-13). Examples 1-2 below show how the single virgule and the double virgule are frequently used in these contexts. In these and subsequent examples, we have emboldened both the punctuation mark and the context in which it appears so as to enhance clarity:

> (1) [...] of othere maters also the whych I may not wryte to you of at thys tyme **// Item** I haue spoke w[[yth John]] Strange of the matere that ye wrote to me of (Davis #184)
> (2) [...] they can in-to her power for to have hys good lorchep **/ Item** yf it please you me thynkythe it ware ryght nessessary þat (Davis #178)

The word *item* also introduces a new topic without being preceded by any mark of punctuation and in these cases it is often capitalized so that, in effect, the capitalized form itself stands for an actual mark of punctuation helping the reader to identify the beginning of the new section or sense unit. Example 3 is an extract from a single letter illustrating this usage:

> (3) **Item** I pray yow send me woord as hastyly as ye can how the world goothe No more but God lant yow lansman and rather then to stand in dowght remembyr what peyn it is a man to loose lyberte The Flet is a fayir preson but ye had but smale lyberte ther-in for ye must nedys aper when ye wer callyd **Item** I haue fownd Jamys Greshamys oblygacyon **Item** he comyth to London ward thys day Wretyn þe xiiij day of Maye J P (Davis #340)

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[13] In addition to the existence of prototypical legal formulae, another strategy used in legal texts to indicate the beginning of sense units is the use of *item* or its English equivalent *also*. The presence of these strategies may well respond to the familiarity that some members of the Paston family had with legal language given that they exercised professions related to the law (Turner 1897, 429).

An alternative to the word *item* is the phrase *as for/and as for*, as in example 4. Both *item* and *as for/and as for* coexist in the same letters, frequently used in combination with capitalization.

> (4) [...] trowe hathe be wyth yow **/ Item** as for John Maryot I haue sent to hym for þe xl s but I haue non answer **// Item** I haue spok wyth Barker and he hathe no money nor non can get tyll haruest when he may dystreyn the cropp vp-on þe grownd He seyth ther is not owyng past v mark and on Saterday next comyng he shall send me a vewe of hys acompte whyche I shall send yow as sone as I haue it **// As for** Fastolffys v mark J Wyndham hathe be spokyn to by me half a doseyn tymys to send to hym for it and he seyth he hathe doon so **// Item** Syr John Styll hathe told Jwde when ye shall haue the chalys Ax Jwde of your crwetys allso **Item** the prowd pevyshe and euyll dysposyd prest to vs all Syr Jamys . seyth þat ye comandyd hym to delyuer þe book of vij Sagys to my brodyr Water an he hathe it **Item** I send yow the serteynte her-wyth of as myche as can be enqweryd for myn oncyll (Davis #353)

(b) Formulaic expressions are recurrently used by the writers, especially in the opening of letters as a direct appeal to the addressee introduced by the intensifier *right* ('very, extremely') and subjected to some level of lexical variation. These formulaic expressions are in most cases rendered with the use of a capital at the beginning and a mark of punctuation flagging the sequence, the punctus, the single virgule and the double virgule predominating in these environments. Even though the capital letter is found to be a systematic practice of the *Paston* writers, the punctuation mark at the end is more a matter of choice, as shown in examples 5-8:

> (5) **Right** trusty and welbeloved I grete yow hartily well **. and will ye wyte** þat where hit is so þat (Davis #62)
> (6) **Right** worchepful hosbond I recommand me to yow **/ Please yow to wete** þat (Davis #160)
> (7) **Ryght** worchepfull and my most good and kynd moder in as humbyll wyse as I can or may I recomand me to yow and beseche yow of your dayly blyssyng **//** Moder **please it yow to vndyrstand** that (Davis #378)
> (8) **Right** worchepfull hosbond I recommand me to you **Please you to wete** þat (Davis #159)

Stenroos, Bergstrøm and Thengs (2020) argue that clerks progressively developed English equivalents of Latin formulae over time, as in the following examples, where the corresponding Latin formulae are rendered in English, regardless of any orthographic, morphological, lexical and/or syntactic variation. The verb *lekit* ('like') in example 9 is here preferred instead of *pleasyt* ('please') in example 10, both of them capitalized regardless of the additional material coming before and after the verb. This same statement, however, can also be accompanied by a mark of punctuation, as shown in examples 11-12, where a single virgule and a double virgule are used, respectively, to introduce the verb *plesyt* as a sentential device to inform the reader about the beginning of a new sense unit and secure the correct understanding of the utterance. As shown, the statement *ryght wurchipfull*

introduces the greeting while formulae such as *lekit it ʒow to wethe* or *pleasyt yow to wett* would then mark the beginning of the body of the letter.

> (9) **Ryththe** wurchipfull broder I recomand [me] to ʒow **Lekit it ʒow to wethe** (Davis #91).
> (10) **Ryght** worchepfull modyr aftyr all dwtes of humble recomendacyon in as humble wyse as I can I beseche yow of your dayly blyssyng **Pleasyt yow to wett** that (Davis #380)
> (11) **Ryght** wourchipful husbonde I recoumaunde me to yow dyssyryng hertely . to here of yowr welfare thankyng yow of yowr grett chere that ye made me and of the coste that ye dede on me Ye dede more cost thanne myn wylle was that ye choulde do but that it plesyd yow to do so God gyf me grase to do that may plese yow **/ Plesyt yow to wett** that on Fryday after myn departyng fromme yow I was (Davis #192)
> (12) Most reuerent and worchepfull fadyr i recomande me to yow lowly preying yow of yowyr blyssyng and hertly desyiryng to her of yowyr welfare and prosperyte the whyche I prey God preserue and kepe to hys plesans and to yowyr hertys desyir **// Plesyt yow to haue knowlage** þat (Davis #318)

When it comes to the closing of these expressions, the formulaic element *written* is systematically capitalized and frequently flagged by a punctuation mark, as in examples 13-15. The punctus, single virgule and double virgule are all found serving this function. The participial form *written* is generally preceded by well wishes (e.g., *the blessed Trinity have you in his keeping*, *God keep you* or *God have you in his keeping*, as in examples 13-16 below).

> (13) And the blyssyd Trinyte haue yow in hys kepyng and send yow good sped in all yowyr materys **Wretyn** in haste at Norwyche the Monday next be-for Seynt Edmu[n]de the Kynge (Davis #164)
> (14) Item þat he come by Cambrigge and bryng with hym Maister Brakkeles licence from þe prouynciall of þe Grey Freres . I prey you recomaunde me to my modir **. Wretyn** at London the Thursday next to-fore Middesomer . John Paston // (Davis #55)
> (15) and lete hym w[[ete]] þat my cosyn his suster hath childe a doughter **/ Wretyn** at Norwich the iiij day of September (Davis #39)
> (16) God haue yow in hys kepyng **Wretyn** in hast on Seynt Martynys Evyn (Davis #318)

(c) Marks of punctuation, in turn, are frequent devices flagging a legal formula or key contents. This is in fact commonplace in the particular case of legal texts (Rodríguez-Álvarez 1999b, 12-14) such as leases, contracts or wills, especially in fair copies of them (Thaisen and Nedelius forthcoming). Example 17 is a deed concerned with the sale of plate and the first three punctūs that it contains are deployed in its opening lines in order to mark the price, the recipient and the Habendum clause introduced by the legal doublet *to haue and to hold*, respectively, thus suggesting the scribe's familiarity with legal conventions. In its closing lines the legal phrase *in witnesse*, which introduces a deed's Testatum clause, is both

capitalized and flagged by the use of a punctus. In between comes the clause describing conditions of the contract, with the "And if X happens" part and the "then Y will be the consequence" part both introduced by capitals.

(17) This indenture witnessith that Sir John Paston knyght being possessed of xx disshes and a sawser of siluer weying by Troy weight xxvij lb ix vncis and di in playn and open market in the Citee of London hathe bargayned sold and deliuered the day of the date of thise indentures to Edmund Shaa citezein and goldsmyth of London the saide xx disshes and sawser **. for l li sterlinges** by the said Edmund to the forsaid Sir John Paston aforehand paid wherof the same Sir John Paston knowlachith him-self truly contented and satisfied by thise presentes **. to haue and to hold** the forsaid xx disshes and sawser **. to the said Edmund his executours and assignees** as theire propre godes foreuermore [...] **And** if defaulte be made in payment of the saide l li in parte or in all at the saide xiijth day of Octobre **. Than** [...] foreuer **. In witnesse** wherof the parties aforsaid to thise indentures entierchaungeably haue sette theire sealles **. Youen** the third day of July . in the xth . yere of the . reigne of Kyng Edward the Fourth (Davis #250)

(d) In addition to the previous uses, which are especially conceived for macro-textual purposes, punctuation is also found to signal other kinds of sentential and clausal relations. In this vein, punctuation is then deployed to separate the elements in a list. Especially in cases where the statement lists a number of items, writers were then committed to signaling their boundaries to avoid any likely misinterpretation. Example 18 shows the sequence of five elements in a series which are separated by the punctus. This practice, however, is taken to be sporadic in our data and it may then reflect scribal idiosyncrasy.[14]

(18) ¶ Item that **Debenham . Lee . Tymperle . and his old cownseyl and attendans . as well as þe gode ladijs servawntys** be avoydyd and Tymperle of malys apelyd of treson (Davis #46)

(e) Punctuation is also used to separate elements that are in an apposition-like relation to each other, the second element often introduced by a phrase like *that is to say*, as shown in example 19. Even though this is a recurrent practice in other types of documents, it is rare in our corpus. It may be that it is subjected to some kind of scribal idiosyncrasy and possibly transferred from other text-types. This phenomenon is found to be a frequent device in other types of documents, as in scientific (Calle-Martín 2004, 415; Calle-Martín and Miranda-García 2005b, 41) and legal writing (Calle-Martín and Miranda-García 2008, 369; Thaisen and Nedelius forthcoming).

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[14] Thaisen and Nedelius (forthcoming) have found a sufficient number of examples in the *Middle English Local Documents* corpus (Stenroos, Thengs and Bergstrøm 2017-) tentatively to corroborate that the separation of elements is a recurring function across writers and text-types.

(19) þe seyd William / were induced to trete in þe same matier in þe fourme þat folwith **// þat is to seyne** þat þe seyd William schuld sue forth þe seyd pleynt and þe execucion þer-of at hese owne will / and þe seyd Walter schuld defende hymself in þe seyd pleynt at hese owne will / except þat he schuld no benefice take by noon proteccion ne wrytte of corpus cum causa ne of no lordes lettres vp-on þe seyd sute // (Davis #5)

4. DISCUSSION

It is not possible for us to classify every instance of a punctuation mark in the corpus into functions a-e. The remaining instances amount to a substantial number, and it is not immediately transparent to us what their function, or functions, are. However, it does seem to us that some generalization is possible, if not in relation to what mark is used for what function but, more importantly, in relation to what the functions are, namely functions a-e.

The present survey also argues for punctuation marks and capitalization serving much the same functions, which in turn reminds us of the set of functions familiar from studies of the *mise-en-page* of manuscripts housing late medieval literary texts. A literary text, for instance, may use rubrication and a slightly different script for the Latin text in the same way as the *Paston Letters* furnish the Latin adverb *item* or its English equivalents *and* and *also* with a punctuation mark. In this same vein, a literary text may use a *littera notabilior* to indicate a major textual division in the same way that the *Paston Letters* deploy a punctuation mark. Manutius the Younger's *Orthographiae ratio* is considered the first treatise establishing and advocating a system of grammatical punctuation. It did not appear until 1561 while the majority of the *Paston Letters* date from the previous century. In the absence of a standard of punctuation at the time, writers were thought to belong to communities of practice which, through the repeated use of their punctuation habits, spread the understanding and socialization of particular conventions (Bergs 2005, 30-31). Even though it goes without saying that there was not a standard of punctuation in the medieval period, there were some common norms which every single writer consciously applied to the written text, which eventually became reflected in the implementation of a system of punctuation out of the poor resources of the medieval repertoire. Even though overlapping was–and still is to this day–just a side effect of the limited inventory of marks, writers were surely acquainted with these common norms requiring the use of punctuation marks in particular contexts.[15] The choice of a mark, however, was not haphazard since it is true that both a punctus and a virgule

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[15]   Present-Day English punctuation presents the same kind of overlap insofar as full stops, for instance, are used at the end of both abbreviations and sentences while commas, in turn, are used to separate elements in a list and frequently after adverbials or between a subclause and a main clause.

could be used to introduce appositions but it was rather improbable that a paraph appeared before a prepositional phrase (Mark Faulkner, personal communication).

These functions are also in line with Parkes's (1992) observation about punctuation that "its primary function is to resolve structural uncertainties in a text" (1992, 1). Resolution of structural uncertainties may not have much to do with whether readers were reading aloud or silently (Smith 2020a, 205-218), but it would surely have aided the less experienced reader in the task of parsing the text. More proficient readers have less need for punctuation to help them parse a text to such an extent that the amount of punctuation is inversely proportional to the writer's and/or the reader's degree of literacy. From our modern perspective, novelists such as William Faulkner and James Joyce are well-known for their decision to make the least use of punctuation to such an extent that the former begins *Absalom, Absalom* with a 122-word sentence that contains only one comma. They both argue that there is no need to punctuate to write properly and punctuation is then pragmatically conceived by an author in the light of the readers' different levels of literacy, thus contributing to meaning conveyance (Jucker and Pahta 2011, 3; Calle-Martín and Romero-Barranco forthcoming). This issue is connected with our discussion of the *Paston Letters* in view of the fact that a fair copy was more likely to contain punctuation than a draft. The writer of a draft, whether an amanuensis or one of the male Pastons, was self-evidently literate and would furnish their letter with punctuation when the reader was someone other than themselves (see also footnote 6).

Another relevant issue is whether the Paston writers considered punctuation grammatical or rhetorical. We have described it as if a writer had consciously to choose between the two alternatives. But Manutius's treatise post-dates our letters, as we have mentioned, and it goes without saying that all these functions we have identified are invariably rhetorical, especially designed to aid the correct reading aloud and to ensure the correct parsing of the text. The marking of key content might additionally have enabled an experienced reader quickly to locate specific pieces of information on a folio. At best, we can accept as grammatical, punctuation deployed in co-ordinate structures such as to mark apposition-like relationships or to separate elements in lists. When punctuation signals hierarchical relationships between sense units, those units can be of any length and will often coincidentally share boundaries with grammatical units such as clauses and sentences. Such coincidences do not, in our view, show that the late medieval writer had the same theoretical conception of a sentence or clause as we do today, but rather that those boundaries are natural to the English language. We also note that while the beginning and end of a sense unit may coincide with a sentence boundary, any sentence boundary internally in the sense unit will not be so marked.

We are far from the first to discuss whether punctuation is grammatical or rhetorical, be it Present-Day English punctuation or late-medieval English punctuation. While this question remains open and both types are still in use today alongside one another in prose texts that follow the norm, there seems to be a consensus that grammatical punctuation has become more prominent over time at the expense of the rhetorical alternative. Perhaps the reason why it is hard to find a clear answer is that it is, to some extent, the dilemma itself that is false. Rhetorical

punctuation is sometimes equated with prosodic punctuation, as both adjectives evoke functions to do with pauses and intonation patterns when reading aloud, and many medieval Latin grammars do indeed instruct a reader to hold their breath for certain lengths of time upon encountering punctuation in a text. We have followed suit, but delivery was merely one aspect of the ancient art of rhetoric. The art also included discovering and developing arguments that could be used to persuade a listener, which suggests that discourse-organizing functions can also be subsumed under the label without them necessarily having much to do with how to read aloud. Those functions produce the coincident boundaries discussed in what has preceded and ultimately, logically, make the two systems of punctuation indistinguishable from each other.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The present study has shed some light on the recurrent patterns of punctuation in a body of so-called 'ego' documents, private correspondence in particular, which for some reason have been disregarded as the input for this kind of approach. Even though there is certainly a great deal of variation in the use of punctuation marks across the members of the Paston family and their amanuenses, the study has tentatively confirmed that, regardless of the mark at hand, the writers had already developed a set of common norms leading to the function of marks of punctuation in particular contexts. Importantly enough, there seems to be a consensus as to the need of a mark of punctuation for the expression of macro-textual needs to signal the major textual divisions along with the beginning of a sense unit or a change of topic in the utterance. This macro-textual concept of punctuation is also witnessed with both legal formulae and formulaic expressions, generally rendered with a mark of punctuation–and clearly enabling an experienced reader to scan a text in order to locate key pieces of information. There is not, however, such a consensus about the need for punctuation to mark off sentential and clausal relationships since punctuation is found erratically to introduce appositions and sequences of elements. This, in fact, is deemed more a matter of scribal idiosyncrasy perhaps having to do with the formality of the letter or assumptions about the background of the addressee.[16]

There are still unanswered questions as far as Middle English correspondence is concerned, not only about the *Paston Letters* but also about other collections of the period such as the *Cely Letters* and the *Stonor Letters*. As shown, the study of punctuation in medieval private correspondence is still a desideratum from different perspectives. As far as authorship is concerned, on the one hand, the material was rendered by different members of the family and therefore becomes the ideal input

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[16] In this same vein, Smith's (2017) work on the trial of the Earl of Bothwell views punctuation according to the assumed literacy background of the audience, and not strictly in terms of sentential or clausal relationships (2017, 223-238).

for the analysis of the phenomenon from the perspective of intra-speaker variation. The collections, on the other hand, also house different types of letters, e.g., private or business, to a wide array of recipients, which can shed some light on the possible correlation between marks of punctuation and the nature of the letter. More importantly, however, further studies along these lines will cumulatively lead to a solid typology of marks and functions allowing to relate it to this particular text-type and its sociocultural function (Smith 2020a; 2020b, 150). In the meantime, we will patiently wait for these new insights to fill this gap and gather a more comprehensive understanding of punctuation in this text-type.

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