

Lost Letters of Everyday Life: English Society, 1200-1250

Martha Carlin and David Crouch (eds.)

University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia: 2013. Hard Cover; 360 pages; 19 BW illustrations; RRP USD79.95; ISBN: 978-0-8122-4459-5.

At the turn of the millennium, Mary Garrison charged medieval historians, and indeed, historians of literacy in any age, not to assume that a lack of survival of ephemeral correspondence necessarily implied a lack of production.¹ Medieval letters, she argued, were not about only high politics and theology, with oral communication sufficient for every other form of human interaction and commerce. More likely, structural and social forces conspired against preserving the documentary traces of low level exchanges. Therefore, she suggested, by looking for accidental survivals, such as in archaeological contexts, some of these epistolary ephemera might be recovered. One such locus of unexpected survival can be found among the example letters in medieval formularies, that is, books of 'forms' of correspondence. In the volume under review, Martha Carlin and David Crouch edit and translate one hundred letters drawn from two early thirteenth-century English formularies: Oxford, Bodleian Library, Fairfax MS 27 and London, British Library, Additional MS 8167. Probably produced for or by students in the Oxford business schools which taught practical skills for administrative careers, these collections include almost every kind of model letter an aspiring scribe or secretary might need. Some appear to be copies of real letters, amended for general application; all are credible letters, since even the fictional examples needed to be relevant to the working life for which students were preparing. Together they substantially increase the evidence available in print for the kind of ephemeral letter writing that Garrison urged us to believe could have existed in the medieval period.

The principles of selection at work in this collection explicitly favour the everyday, since there are many other places where the interested reader can find diplomatic, royal and papal letters of this period in print. Indeed, more than a book about letters *per se*, this is a book about what letters like these can demonstrate about daily life in England in the thirteenth century. It will prove a treasure trove of sources for undergraduate teaching, but is equally valuable as a scholarly resource of such material, since careful editions of the Latin are provided together with a translation of and brief commentary on every item. To facilitate using these letters as sources, the collection is organised thematically, in five chapters: Money; War and Politics; Lordship and Administration; Family and Community; and A Knight's Correspondence. Searching within each of these thematic chapters can be further refined by reference to subheadings such as 'Credit, Debt and Commerce', 'The Jews', or 'Accounts'. A concise and useful

¹ Mary Garrison, "'Send More Socks': On Mentality and the Preservation Context of Medieval Letters," in *New Approaches to Medieval Communication*, ed. Marco Mostert, *Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy* 1 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1999).

introduction gives background on England, and especially Oxford in this period, and to the manuscripts, the medieval art of letter writing, or *ars dictaminis*, the formulary genre, and the underlying question of the extent of practical literacy in medieval society to which I have already alluded. Together, the introduction, structure and editorial principles of this volume make it highly accessible to the non-specialist while retaining key features expected by academic readers.

This collection is presented principally as a gathering of rare evidence for daily life, and functions well on that level. However, it seems likely that its most significant scholarly contribution will be to advance research in medieval pragmatic literacy, its utility and social penetration. Strikingly, many items in these formularies, and most of those selected for publication, reveal how much more widely literacy was used and expected to be used in early thirteenth-century English society than received views have implied.² For instance, the examples published here include letters from an earl to a vintner, to a draper, and to a skinner, as well as example replies from both the vintner and the skinner, suggesting that both noble households and trades-people could credibly have used writing to transact quotidian business. Interestingly, these examples envisage possible replies of both agreement and refusal, implying that there was no expectation that a nobleman's superior social status necessarily determined the outcome of an epistolary exchange with his creditors and suppliers – merely its appropriate expression and tone.

Of similar interest are the letters published here that envisage correspondence between men and women, for example, between a knight and his wife. Predating famous collections of household correspondence among the gentry, such as the Paston letters, by 200 years, these examples show that women were credible participants in epistolary exchange of this ephemeral kind much earlier than is generally recognised. They also call into question the traditional arguments around the adoption of the vernacular in letters as an explanatory factor in women's epistolarity. The thirteenth-century students of Oxford evidently anticipated producing letters in Latin for women as well as men. They also anticipated that correspondence would pass among members of a household separated by the practicalities of estate governance and life at court, just as it would later pass among the better-known members of the English gentry in the fifteenth century.

The thematic arrangement has many advantages for the main audiences of this useful book. However, it does obscure the original arrangement of these letters in their formulary context. This issue would no doubt be of interest to some readers. One desideratum would have been a system of annotation allowing those interested to reconstruct the original order of the selected letters. Full manuscript references are

² See, for instance, M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066–1307*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993).

given in each case, but each manuscript folio no doubt includes many of these brief items. Furthermore, consulting the British Library and Bodleian catalogues indicates that both formularies contain substantial materials beyond those printed here. Hence, it is not possible to reconstruct satisfactorily their original order. This is, however, a minor cavil, and perhaps one specific to scholars interested in the medieval theory and practice of letter writing itself, rather than the wider readership which this volume will surely reach. Overall, I strongly recommend it to anyone interested in medieval letters, commerce, social relations, and the lives of people beyond the more familiar royal and ecclesiastical courts. There is something here for everyone.

Kathleen Neal
Monash University

A Story Waiting to Pierce You: Mongolia, Tibet and the Destiny of the Western World

Peter Kingsley

Golden Sufi Centre Publications, Point Reyes: 2010, second printing 2011. (Hardcover) ISBN 13:978-1-890350-20-8; (Paperback) ISBN: 13: 978-1-890350-21-5.

Books on the exchange of religious and mythic ideas between the cultural spheres of the Classical world and the steppe regions of Inner Asia remain a rarity, even now, long after the return to comparative studies in the Classics through the agency of Burkert and West and Morris. Bolton's *Aristeas of Proconnesus*, Littleton and Malcor's *From Scythia to Camelot* and Mayor's various publications on the gryphon myth's connections with dinosaur skeletons in Mongolia, are perhaps among the most well known works on such topics, but often go undiscussed by wider audiences. It is for this reason, as someone with a profound interest in both of these fields, that Kingsley's most recent book, *A Story Waiting to Pierce You*, is a very welcome find indeed and invites much rereading, in spite of its considerable weaknesses.

At the centre of *A Story Waiting to Pierce You* is the simple thesis that the mysterious wandering Hyperborean-Scythian sage Abaris, most familiar in the short dismissive passage given by Herodotus (IV.36), travelled around the world on an arrow, met with Pythagoras, and thereby gave rise to the roots of Western Philosophy through mutual recognition of one another as the reincarnation of Apollo through the gifting of Abaris' arrow. In order to substantiate these claims we must turn to Kingsley's extensive endnotes, far longer than the compelling yet slim narrative, wherein the author attempts to elevate this meeting from its obscurity in the Pythagorean corpus to what he takes to be a key juncture in the development of mutual recognition between Western and Eastern philosophies.