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**From Letters to Loyalty: Aline la Despenser and the Meaning(s) of a
Noblewoman's Correspondence in Thirteenth-Century England**

Kathleen Neal

Sometime between the summer of 1273, and early August 1274, the Countess of Norfolk, Aline la Despenser, sent a letter to the Chancellor of England.¹ This was, in many ways, a completely unremarkable letter concerning a rather banal administrative matter; hardly the place one might naturally look for evidence of intersections between emotion and governance. Yet, as I argue in this chapter, Aline's letter was in fact a finely tuned articulation of affective persuasion. The beauty of its design lay in a delicate weaving between observing the expectations shaping letters of governance, and transgressing them in targeted and gendered ways which become clear when the letter is read against its particular context. Through simultaneous reproduction and disordering of the rules of letter-writing, it sought to evoke a range of positive responses in one person – the chancellor to whom it was addressed – in ways uniquely reflective of the relationship between him and its sender, the countess. Close reading of Aline's letter thus reveals how all senders of letters to royal officers might manipulate affective rhetoric to achieve their political, legal, or fiscal aims: it is a case study of how emotion and governance regularly interacted in medieval England. Further, it illuminates the circumstances in which women could enter epistolary exchange of this kind, and the gendered rhetorical strategies they might use when the opportunity to do so arose. The letter is an especially rich source for interrogating how women accessed this particular

discourse of authority, and how they adopted and adapted expected, masculine forms of rhetorical presentation to political ends.

The letter in question is first and foremost a straightforward request for the issue of certain letters patent by the chancellor, whose task it was to authorize such written instruments with the Great Seal. The request was entirely within the chancellor's power to grant and he granted many similar requests, although there is no extant evidence that he granted this particular one. Specifically, the letter requested the issue of letters patent of safe conduct for some 30 sacks of wool to be exported to the continent from the Earl of Norfolk's estates to cover the debts he had incurred in crossing the Channel to meet the new king, Edward I, recently returned from crusade. In translation, it reads:

To her own dear friend and well-wisher, Lord Walter de Merton, chancellor of our lord the King of England, from Aline la Despenser, Countess of Norfolk, greetings and dear friendship. Know, dear lord, that my lord the earl has commanded his bailiffs that they cause his wool to be transported overseas to pay for his debts which he has incurred through his passage to meet our lord the king. For which reason, lord, I pray you that you should wish to grant and to send us the king's letters patent of safe conduct by land and sea concerning the same wool, which amounts to 30 sacks or a little more. Lord, do this much for our prayer, if it should please you, that my lord should be grateful and thank you upon his return.²

The extant records of the thirteenth-century Chancery and Exchequer are full of similar requests for legal, para-legal, and fiscal preferment: it was documents like these through which high medieval English governance was produced and maintained. High medieval English rulers depended on letters and letter-writers. Kings and their officials were

rarely able to assert control by force;³ instead, persuasion was essential to effective government and diplomacy, both of which relied on maintaining stable and functional relationships. Furthermore, governance was more often reactive than proactive. The actions of royal officials were provoked by specific requests or demands more often than by centrally determined policy. Thus, both for the governors and the governed, letters were among the key written instruments for effecting real political outcomes and regulating political life.

The scope of letters addressed to royal officials varied widely, yet because of the letter's role in governance, all such letters represented political exchanges to some degree. Letters sent by the Prince of Wales addressing matters of Anglo-Welsh relations,⁴ for example, had considerably wider political ramifications than the countess's request for a relatively routine letter patent. Nevertheless, by virtue of being produced and sent, both laid claim to legitimate participation in a particular discourse of authority. This discourse operated within a set of rules, both articulated and implicit.

Following the explicit theories and unspoken expectations of epistolarity at the time, the countess's letter observes a five-part structure in which each section performs a specific rhetorical role. It makes use of a polite and appropriate address (*salutatio*); briefly explains the need for the letters requested (*exordium* and *narratio*); articulates a request for letters patent providing the detail necessary for their production (*petitio*); and closes with an expression of gratitude (*conclusio*). In these general features it is entirely unremarkable, and resembles nearly every other extant thirteenth-century letter of request addressed to a royal official. It demonstrates the degree to which the countess and/or her household staff, along with many hundred other correspondents, were familiar with the epistolary style of Chancery, and the requirements of letters patent.

It ought not to surprise us that Aline should have acquired such familiarity. Aristocratic women were expected to send and receive letters as part of their work of estate and household management. For instance, in his *Rules*, Robert Grosseteste, the famous Bishop of Lincoln, urged Countess Margaret de Lacy to employ 'her letters' to instruct her householders, agents, and labourers in their duties.⁵ Indeed, as Philippa Maddern has argued, 'any woman with rights over, or possession of, land or resources had to be prepared to take some share in the massive textual activity involved in determining and maintaining ownership'.⁶

In the thirteenth century, the 'share' taken in textual activity such as letter-writing by any aristocratic person, man or woman, would likely have consisted of instructing or dictating to a scribe. The final product was the result of collaboration between sender and scribe, both of whom required some working understanding of the governing expectations of the genre. The scribe, whose education equipped him in the *ars dictaminis*, or art of letter-writing, would take some degree of responsibility for shaping the content into an appropriate form. The sender would then read or listen to drafts of their letters and approve them prior to sending.⁷

Despite the ubiquity of letters and letter-writing among the aristocracy for the management of their estates, few women figure among the correspondents whose letters have survived. Occasionally, model letters with notional female senders are included in formulary collections,⁸ suggesting that women participated in epistolarity often enough that scribes saw value in being prepared for the eventuality. Nevertheless, the infrequency of such examples reinforces the overriding masculine focus of scribal training and work. The typical concerns of contemporary theoretical and practical manuals for clerks point to an assumption of and aspiration to a career writing letters

(and other documents) largely for noble men.⁹ At the level of the realm, therefore, governance through letters was gendered in ways which largely excluded female participation. Aline's letter is thus both expected and unexpected. Interrogating this tension is a key goal of this chapter.

Among the implicit rules of corresponding with the officers of the crown was that participation was restricted within certain networks of sociability. Unlike other avenues and written genres through which one might make requests of royal government in the late thirteenth century, letters relied on a specific and personal relationship between sender and addressee. Among the extant letters of this period, pre-existing personal connections can normally be traced between sender and addressee where the correspondents can be identified, and letters of request on behalf of those apparently without acquaintances at court were generally written by their better connected friends or associates.¹⁰ Furthermore, contemporary theories of letter-writing described a rhetoric of address that reflected the societal, structural relationship between correspondents, based on their nobility and office, and also on degrees of personal affinity and affective bonds.¹¹ The epistolary codes which regulated appropriate articulation in letters of governance were thus inherently personal and emotional, even while the content might be procedural and bureaucratic.

This underpinning assumption, in which the exchange of letters of governance was both affective and instrumental, was also strongly gendered. Although women were embedded in aristocratic networks of sociability,¹² and expected to be competent in textual administration, corresponding with the crown in the thirteenth century was principally a male activity. In the first place, the business in which the king's clerks were engaged was chiefly concerned with legal and para-legal matters of rule and

lordship, effectively restricting relevant letter exchange to those members of the aristocracy with full legal competence. Contemporary correspondence associated with the departments of Chancery and Exchequer and preserved in The National Archives,¹³ for example, addresses the appointment of justices and escheators, the assignment of cases to a particular hearing date or justice, instructions to justices, sheriffs, and other royal agents, pleas and essoins, the distribution of funds for 'public' works such as bridge building, grants of rights such as estovers or timber for building works, and financial or mercantile protections, licences, and safe conducts. The forms of these letters and their content support the legal association of correspondence of this kind. While the overall structure of letters derived from the *ars dictaminis*, the genre of letters of governance was dominated by the model of the writ, the crown's formal instrument of legal instruction. Since full legal competency was not available to most women, except in certain specific jurisdictions or circumstances, women were not frequently represented in this kind of correspondence.

Letters of governance thus reproduced the wider social order, in which women were legally subject to the authority of a governing, male presence, typically a father or husband. The extant letters of SC 1 bear out the suggestion that corresponding with the crown was principally a preserve of men in the thirteenth century. Over 93 per cent of the surviving thirteenth-century examples were sent in men's names, while there are just 440 women's letters (approximately 6 per cent) in the class, representing the correspondence of 125 individual women. This dramatic quantitative distinction supports the contention that only certain, limited circumstances enabled women's participation in this particular genre of textual activity.

Responding to the structural assumptions operating against women as royal correspondents, women's letters of governance laid claim to legitimate epistolarity in gender-appropriate ways. For women, reference to enabling circumstances seems to have been an important part of claiming authority to 'write'. The widow is the classic and most common example of the medieval woman's opportunity to act and be represented in her own name,¹⁴ and indeed, widows account for the majority of women's letters in SC 1 (Table 1.1). Two hundred and seventy-seven, or 63 per cent of women's letters in the class were sent in widow's names. Widows who were not remarried held an unusual degree of independent agency and legal competency in thirteenth-century England.¹⁵ Their letters reflect their status as *femme sole*: their independence from male protection/control was a key enabling circumstance of their correspondence, and was normally directly referenced in the letter itself. Frequently, widowed women would draw attention to their widowed status in the address clause of their correspondence, where diplomatic convention and dictaminal theory dictated the social ranking and relationship of the parties should be outlined. Widows not only mentioned the fact of their widowhood, but also used the *intitulatio* of their address to place themselves in dyadic relationship to a known male figure; a relationship which implicitly authorized their epistolarity itself. Thus, 'Mata, widow of Amanieu d'Albret VI lord of Casteljaloux', 'Gaillarda, widow of Amauvin de Ambarès, lord of St Louis-de-Montferrand', 'Margaret, widow of Ralph de Ludington', 'Maud Walerand, widow of Robert Walerand', 'Margery, widow of William de Munslow', 'Julia, widow of Simon de Faversham', and 'M., widow of William Tirel of Lewes' constructed their appropriate participation in letter exchange as an extension of their late husbands' networks of sociability, authorized by his decease.¹⁶

Table 1.1 Women's letters in SC 1 (Ancient Correspondence):
widows and non-widows

<i>Category</i>	<i>Letters</i>
Widows	277 (63%)
Non-widows	
royalty	48 (11%)
relations	60 (14%)
religious	21 (5%)
other	27 (6%)
Unidentified	7 (2%)
Total	440

Source: Kew, The National Archives, SC 1.

Aline la Despenser shared none of the natural or legal advantages of widows and kin in constructing her right to approach the government of England by epistolary means: one might ask, then, how her letter came to be written at all. As in men's letters, and widows' letters, networks of sociability underpinned the legitimizing discourse of her letter to the chancellor, but they were presented quite differently. As a married woman, the language of widowhood with its affective and persuasive resonance was not available to her. Instead, both structure and vocabulary drew attention to other circumstances which authorized her epistolary activity.

In real terms, the letter's composition was enabled by the absence of her husband, the earl, who had crossed the Channel to meet the king. These circumstances are mentioned in the letter itself both explicitly and obliquely, for example, when the letter cites the earl's 'passage to meet our lord king' and in the promise that 'upon his return' he will be grateful if his wife's request has been met. These references occur in important positions within the expected structure of letters as defined by the *ars dictaminis*: the *narratio*, and the *conclusio*. In the former section, the background to the matter at hand was to be outlined in such a way as to imbue the following request with a sense of naturalness and inevitability, and in the latter, the chief rationale for complying

with the request was to be expressed in a convincing manner.¹⁷ By drawing attention to the earl's absence in these positions, the countess's letter manipulated its rhetorical and affective power to legitimize both the fact of her letter, and the request it conveyed. Although the letter used little gendered vocabulary, its construction thus served to emphasize Aline's gender-appropriate behaviour and decorous, wifely obedience. It showed that she had legitimate authority to act in her own name; and that her action was implicitly sanctioned by her husband. The letter adapted the expectations of contemporary epistolarity in order to justify the countess's own, in some respects transgressive, participation in it.

The specific background to Aline's association with the chancellor is also relevant to her ability to access letter-writing within the context of this specific exchange. It colours even the letter's stock phrases with particular affective resonance. The countess's capacity to address a letter to the chancellor did not rest only on demonstrating that she acted in good faith as an obedient wife. Nor did the networks of sociability she activated through writing this letter derive solely or chiefly from her marital situation. Rather, they derived from her natal family. She shared a history of old family friendship, political allegiance, and feudal property ties with her correspondent, and her letter exploited this history as part of its overall rhetoric of legitimacy, and to place the countess herself in a position of agency in an ongoing patronage relationship.

The Chancellor, Walter de Merton, founder of Merton College, Oxford, was an educated cleric, a former Archdeacon of Bath and soon to be appointed Bishop of Rochester. He had only recently been reappointed to the chancellorship. He had first served in the early 1260s, during a brief reassertion of royal power in the midst of the baronial revolt led by Simon de Montfort.¹⁸ He had probably been attached to the

Chancery since the mid-1230s,¹⁹ and his personal history was firmly royalist, which is no doubt why he had been entrusted with the chancellorship in the absence of the new King Edward, first on crusade and subsequently in Gascony.

Walter's connection to Aline was of long standing. She was the daughter and heiress of another prominent royalist and administrator, Philip Basset, who had been Chief Justiciar in the early 1260s during Walter's first tenure as chancellor.²⁰ The two men had been professionally acquainted for many years, and there are two letters from Philip to Walter from the 1260s that also survive in the archives.²¹ Philip's working association with Walter continued when he was appointed to the Lord Edward's council of lieutenants in 1270, as the future king departed on crusade.²² Their acquaintance and common political affiliation was strengthened by the fact that Walter had been a tenant in Philip's lands in Surrey, since 1266.²³ Furthermore, since the death of Philip in 1271, Walter's lord in these lands had been Aline's second husband, the Earl of Norfolk, Roger Bigod, who held them through her right as heiress.²⁴ Thus, despite the importance of the earl's absence in legitimizing Aline's letter itself, the approach to Walter was based on his enduring personal links to the countess, and not to his direct acquaintance with the earl. The connections between Aline and Walter were well established, and this was significant both in enabling the countess to address him, and for the meaning of their ensuing correspondence.

The history of their association indicates that, after her father's death, Walter was probably the most senior and perhaps the only personal connection that Aline retained at the heart of the royal administration. As such, he was both the obvious person for her to approach for aid, and an important source of patronage, which it was in her interests to cultivate. Clientelic or patronage relationships were powerful but fragile

social instruments, requiring constant re-affirmation.²⁵ Letters, even of a banal sort, were an effective mechanism for keeping patronage relationships alive, and for activating them at need.²⁶ Indeed, in this sense, women's typical exclusion from the exchange of letters at the level of royal government could have contributed to their relative exclusion from the direct lines of political access and the patronage networks which facilitated governance, serving to reinforce their wider political disenfranchisement. If we hypothesize that a woman writing a letter was thereby inserting herself not only into a largely masculine discourse of authority, but also a masculine sphere of political participation and networking, it becomes clear why women might have needed specific rhetorical means of justifying their very presence in the exchange of such correspondence: it was a powerful political tool.

Although issuing letters patent was a legitimate and regular activity of the Chancery, the evidence of the SC 1 letters indicates it is still appropriate to see the countess's request as patronage in action, and a routine matter of governance. A number of rhetorical features of Aline's letter link it directly to the operation of patronage, in ways which were standard and unusually gendered. The *conclusio* most explicitly marks it as a member of a clientelic 'genre'. It offered Walter the thanks of the earl himself in return for the requested letters, implicitly giving a promise of future favours from that quarter. Such pseudo-contracts lay at the heart of patronage in later medieval England, and Europe generally. Specifying who would owe thanks to whom was a common way of closing letters in SC 1,²⁷ and similar phraseology can be found in the more celebrated patronage correspondence of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Florence.²⁸ Importantly, while at first glance perhaps appearing to emphasize the earl's interests as a central rationale for responding positively to the countess's request, this phrase also served to

position Aline as the central agent in the proposed exchange of patronage. It constructed her as the broker of the chancellor's favour on her husband's behalf.

We can identify similar rhetorical positioning of Aline as the pivotal figure in the very opening clause, in the use of specific words ordained by the *ars dictaminis* to highlight the direct, personal association of the correspondents. Words like 'dear friend', 'well-wisher', and 'dear friendship' were among those advocated in the theoretical text books of the day for use in letters between real and long-term friends.²⁹ As we have seen, this was a true reflection of Aline and Walter's association, but in practice, such discourse occurred almost exclusively between male associates. In its use of friendship vocabulary, the address was thus both utterly standard and strikingly unique. I have found the word 'friendship' in just one other letter from a woman in the SC 1 collection, one sent by Princess Eleanor of England to her cousin Edmund of Cornwall,³⁰ and the word 'friend' in just two letters by women sent to senior clerics as part of the compound phrase 'friend-in-God'.³¹

The vocabulary and rhetoric thus sets Aline's letter apart from other women's letters in the SC 1 class, even while it associates it with many other letters of request exchanged by men. Women's letters more commonly used words that conjured up kinship, maternal, or marital roles, and expressed voluntary subordination to the other, for example, in phrases like 'due reverence and honour'. Such terminology was advocated for use by the inferior party writing to a superior, as a means of flattery and engendering a positive affective response through explicit recognition of an existing difference in social rank.³² It was therefore entirely appropriate for articulating the feminine position in an exchange of letters, yet Aline's letter did not adopt this vocabulary. In this respect, her letter departed boldly from the standards expected of it.

Significantly, it does not seem that the countess's letter was expressed in this startling way as a result of being composed to a standard form by a regular household scribe more accustomed to the correspondence of his master. None of the Earl of Norfolk's extant letters uses this combination of vocabulary.³³ I therefore argue that this choice of expression was a conscious strategy for foregrounding Aline's personal links to Walter. This strategy was ostensive, in that by transgressing the expected, gendered patterns of letters of governance it drew attention to itself, thus amplifying its affective impact on the chancellor's good will. To identify an ostensive means of deploying the available rhetoric was the ideal strategy of letter-writers, who needed to be seen both to observe the form, and yet simultaneously to make their request distinct and personal in order to persuade. Yet such a departure from the appropriate gendered forms of epistolarity could only have been undertaken in the context of the kind of relationship shared by the chancellor and the countess. To lay claim to such a degree of intimacy and social equality without that history of association would have been a fatally risky strategy, moving beyond the merely ostensive to the truly transgressive, and endangering the good reception of the letter itself. This adaptation of the expectations of letter-writing was particular to its context.

The remarkable ostensive language of the *salutatio* and its implication of the countess's agency within this letter, are suggestive of the letter's most intriguing possible meaning, which necessarily must remain somewhat conjectural. This is the suggestion that the countess's letter was intended both as an explicit request for letters patent, and as a coded statement of royalist loyalty, with specific political implications for herself and her children. The early 1270s was a significant time during which to address oneself to the royal government. It was less than eight years since the baronial

revolt led by Simon de Montfort had been put down.³⁴ That royal authority had been firmly re-established by this time is only clear in hindsight. Robert Burnell, future chancellor and confidant of King Edward, wrote to de Merton at this time warning of the dangers to the king's interests from 'uncertainly within the realm' and 'those who wish to promote dissension'.³⁵ To many contemporaries, there remained a clear and present danger of rebellion from within.³⁶

The absence of King Edward on crusade and then in touring his Gascon lands, mentioned obliquely in the countess's letter, could have provided dissenters with an ideal reason to avoid acknowledging the authority of the interim government by corresponding with it or respecting its written instruments. Indeed, the fact that the king was not present in person to authorize his letters was exploited by Llewellyn ap Gruffydd, Prince of Wales, to justify disregarding politically unpalatable orders.³⁷ In the charged atmosphere of the late thirteenth century, even language use may have been a choice with political resonance: recent work suggests that commissioning vernacular literature in English had become a way of stating one's loyalty to the baronial cause by the early 1260s, while conversely using Anglo-Norman was to proclaim one's association with the royal court.³⁸ Under these circumstances, I suggest that Aline's decisions to write to the royal government at all, and to eschew Latin for Anglo-Norman, which was not yet common in correspondence of this type, could have constituted performances of personal loyalty to which her ostensive *salutatio* drew attention.

In addition to the uncertainty engendered by the new king's absence, an ongoing diplomatic disagreement with Flanders had led to an embargo on the export of wool to that country. The latter was a circumstance of particular significance both to the crown

and its vassals since the wool trade was a major source of England's royal revenue and private wealth.³⁹ The centrality of wool to the comital bottom line is reflected in the main request of the countess's letter, for letters patent of safe conduct for wool to be sent from Norfolk by land and by sea. Yet, observance of the embargo on wool was haphazard at best, and many people simply disregarded it: the king himself wrote angrily to his ministers that the streets of Flanders were so awash in English wool that he was the laughing stock of Europe.⁴⁰ It has even been suggested by some modern scholars that Earl Roger was among those who flouted the ban.⁴¹ However, the existence of the countess's letters seems to suggest an intention to act within the law, and is consistent with an overall intent to perform loyal obedience to the crown. Whether this intention was the earl's or his lady's cannot be determined, although it is notable that the *narratio* of Aline's letter describes the earl ordering the export of his wool, but not the securing of letters patent which is the substance of her request. Subtly, it claimed the agency of this lawful and loyal action for the countess herself.

Insofar as the countess intended a performance of loyalty to the crown through this letter, it was not a redundant gesture. Although Aline's husband, Roger Bigod, was a royalist sympathizer, and her father had been a noted and unwavering royalist during the revolt, her own actions and associations had not always been so politically appropriate. Her first husband, Hugh le Despenser, had been a vassal and close friend of Simon de Montfort, and died at his side at Evesham while fighting against the royal forces. The Despensers have even been implicated in commissioning anti-royalist literature in English during the rebellion.⁴² Aline herself had been placed in charge of the Tower of London and its royalist prisoners during 1264–65, only relinquishing them when she received news of the rebels' defeat and Hugh's death.⁴³ It seems to have been

only through the personal intervention of her father that Aline escaped the disinheritance that many rebels' widows and children suffered after the restoration of royal rule,⁴⁴ and it is probable that he arranged her marriage to the Earl of Norfolk as part of her political rehabilitation.⁴⁵

In this context, the adoption of certain standards based on epistolary exchange between male peers can be understood as a rather bold claim on the chancellor's special attention. It was, in Umberto Eco's phrase, a 'self-focusing appeal', which signalled the possibility of readings other than the most explicit within the letter itself.⁴⁶ Far from being a merely mechanical application of formulae, it was a strategy that reminded the chancellor of his long acquaintance with the countess, and focused his attention on her turn of phrase, encouraging him to look for deeper implications.

None of the background circumstances I have outlined in this chapter would have been unknown to Walter. Alerted to the unconventional undercurrents of the letter by its unusual address he would easily have understood a deeper significance in her request for royal authorization for the wool export, the mention of the earl's motives for travelling 'to meet the king', and the hint that the debts needing repayment had been incurred only in this noble enterprise. In almost every part of the letter, except in the *salutatio* where it was most expected, occurs some reference to royalist loyalty and decorous subordination to superiors. All these things were appropriate and formulaic sentiments to include in a letter of request, and of the letter of a dutiful wife. That is the beauty of its construction. This apparently innocuous, and seemingly formulaic text can be construed as a carefully targeted and disguised appeal to enter into the book of those in royal favour, the name of Aline la Despenser and by extension that of her son and heir, the younger Hugh.⁴⁷ This is not to suggest that the countess expected one brief

letter to be enough to achieve that goal, but it does suggest that she took any and every opportunity to convey that message to agents of the crown; and that a letter was a text capable of conveying it.

The Countess of Norfolk's letter is unusual in the degree to which we can uncover and suggest multilayered meanings, but its exceptional nature merely serves to highlight the kind of weaving between the expected and the transgressive, the adoption and the adaptation of epistolary rules through which letters of governance could at once conform to the rules of epistolary composition, and express a distinctive appeal with an affective impact on the recipient. Effective correspondence with royal officials was both a bureaucratic and an emotional undertaking. Women were largely excluded from this kind of textual activity, which was a legal and political undertaking, resting principally on male networks of sociability. This created particular challenges for constructing women's authority to produce letters of governance at all. Nevertheless, when the opportunity to participate presented itself, the tension between observing and challenging the standards of genre which was inherent in creating persuasive epistles also generated particular, gendered opportunities for women to articulate their intentions with affective resonance. Aline's letter demonstrates how such affective articulation could be encoded in surprisingly banal ways in letters of governance, and how deeply the historian must interrogate both the context of an individual exchange, and the norms which governed it, in order to understand its full implications.

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Source: Kew, The National Archives, SC 1.

¹ Earlier versions of this essay were delivered at the biennial meeting of the Australian and New Zealand Association for Medieval and Early Modern Studies in Dunedin, New Zealand, and the Annual Meeting of the Medieval Academy of America in 2011. I thank Philippa Maddern for encouraging me to prepare it for print.

² Kew, The National Archives (hereafter TNA), SC 1/7/84. The letter is printed in F. J. Tanqueray (ed.), *Recueil de Lettres Anglo-Françaises* (Paris: H. Champion, 1916), p. 10; cf. my translation with Anne Crawford (ed.), *Letters of Medieval Women* (Stroud: Sutton, 2002), p. 192. I thank Paul Brand and Paul Hyams for advice on the translation; errors remain my own.

³ David A. Carpenter, *The Reign of Henry III* (London: Hambledon, 1996); David A. Carpenter, *The Struggle for Mastery: Britain, 1066–1284* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Michael T. Clanchy, *England and Its Rulers: 1066–1272*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

⁴ Kathleen Neal, 'Words as Weapons in the Correspondence of Edward I with Llywelyn Ap Gruffydd', *Parergon*, 30, no. 1 (2013), 51–71.

⁵ 'The Rules of Robert Grosseteste', in *Walter of Henley and Other Treatises on Estate Management and Accounting*, ed. Dorothea Oschinsky (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), pp. 388–407.

⁶ Philippa Maddern, 'A Woman and Her Letters: The Documentary World of Elizabeth Clere', in *Maistresse of My Wit: Medieval Women, Modern Scholars*, eds Louise d'Arcens and Juanita Feros Ruys (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004), pp. 29–45 (p. 33).

⁷ Neal, 'Words as Weapons', p. 57.

⁸ For instance, an isolated example of a letter from a wife to an absent husband is recorded in London, British Library (hereafter BL), MS Additional 8167, and printed in *Lost Letters of Everyday Life: English Society, 1200–1250*, eds Martha Carlin and David Crouch (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), pp. 238–41. A single letter from the dowager queen, Eleanor of Provence, was preserved as an 'outstanding letter of request' in a late thirteenth-century formulary from Salisbury. See BL, MS Royal 12 D. XI, fol. 87 b.

⁹ Ian Cornelius, 'The Rhetoric of Advancement: *Ars Dictaminis*, *Cursus*, and Clerical Careerism in Late Medieval England', *New Medieval Literatures*, 12 (2010), 289–330.

¹⁰ See, for example, the many letters of intercession sent by Eleanor of Provence to officers of the crown, on behalf of various suppliants, discussed in Margaret Howell, *Eleanor of Provence: Queenship in Thirteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 298–9.

¹¹ Giles Constable, 'The Structure of Medieval Society According to the *Dictatores* of the Twelfth Century', in *Law, Church, and Society: Essays in Honor of Stephan Kuttner*, eds Kenneth Pennington and Robert Somerville (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1977), pp. 253–67.

¹² For example, see Lars Kjær, 'Food, Drink and Ritualised Communication in the Household of Eleanor de Montfort, February to August 1265', *Journal of Medieval History*, 37, no. 1 (2011), 75–89; Emma Cavell, 'Aristocratic Widows and the Medieval Welsh Frontier: The Shropshire Evidence', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th series, 17 (2007), 57–82; Barbara A. Hanawalt, 'Lady Honor Lisle's Networks of Influence', in *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, eds Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowalski (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988), pp. 188–212.

¹³ TNA, SC 1. The class includes 7,049 items dating from the reigns of Henry III and Edward I; all figures derived by my calculations from Patricia Barnes (ed.), *List of Ancient Correspondence of the Chancery and Exchequer. Revised edition* (New York: Kraus Reprints, 1968).

¹⁴ Rowena Archer, "'How Ladies ... Who Live on Their Manors Ought to Manage Their Households and Estates': Women as Landholders and Administrators in the Later Middle Ages", in *Woman is a Worthy Wight: Women in English Society, 1200–1500*, ed. P. J. P. Goldberg (Stroud: Sutton, 1992), pp. 149–81; but for the fluidity of the categories of 'married' and 'unmarried' see Cordelia Beattie, "'Living as a Single Person": Marital Status, Performance and the Law in Late Medieval England', *Women's History Review*, 17, no. 3 (2008), 327–40.

¹⁵ Beattie, "'Living as a Single Person'"; Sue Sheridan Walker (ed.), *Wife and Widow in Medieval England* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993).

¹⁶ These examples come from TNA, SC 1/18/210; 19/121; 22/36; 24/180; 30/164; 33/145; 62/17.

¹⁷ Martin Camargo, *Ars Dictaminis / Ars Dictandi* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1991).

¹⁸ C. A. F. Meekings, 'Walter de Merton', *Studies in 13th-Century Justice and Administration* (London: Hambledon, 1981), ch. IX, pp. lviii–lxxv (p. lxix).

¹⁹ See Meekings, 'Walter de Merton', p. lx.

²⁰ R. Malcolm Hogg, 'Philip Basset at the Court Coram Rege, 1261–63', *The Irish Jurist*, 21, no. 2 (1986), 272–89.

²¹ TNA, SC 1/7/33; translated in G. O. Sayles, *The Functions of the Medieval Parliament of England* (London: Hambledon, 1988), pp. 97–8; see also TNA, SC 1/7/34.

²² Richard Huscroft, 'Should I Stay or Should I Go? Robert Burnell, the Lord Edward's Crusade and the Canterbury Vacancy of 1270–73', *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, 45 (2001), 97–109.

²³ Meekings, 'Walter de Merton', p. lxxiv.

²⁴ Marc Morris, *The Bigod Earls of Norfolk in the Thirteenth Century* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2005), p. 105.

²⁵ Michael H. Gelting, 'Reflections on the Insertion of Bureaucratic Structures in Medieval Clientelic Societies', in *Law and Power in the Middle Ages: Proceedings of the Fourth Carlsberg Academy Conference on Medieval Legal History 2007*, eds Per Andersen, Mia Münster-Swendsen, and Helle Vogt (Copenhagen: Djøf, 2008), pp. 257–68; Paul D. McLean, *The Art of the Network: Strategic Interaction and Patronage in Renaissance Florence* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

²⁶ Margaret E. Mullett, 'Byzantium: A Friendly Society?', *Past & Present*, 118 (1988), 3–24; Julian Haseldine, 'Friends, Friendship and Networks in the Letters of Bernard of Clairvaux', *Cîteaux: Commentarii Cistercienses*, 57 (2006), 243–80.

²⁷ Xavier Hélary, 'Les Liens Personnels entre les Cours de France et d'Angleterre sous le Règne de Philippe III, 1270–1285', in *Thirteenth Century England XII*, eds Björn Weiler, Janet Burton, and Phillipp Schofield (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2008), pp. 75–89. Hélary has remarked on the frequency of such phrases in letters from members of the French court, but did not proceed to analyse them in the context of patronage.

²⁸ See McLean, *Art of the Network*.

²⁹ Anonymous of Bologna, 'Rationes Dictandi', in *Three Medieval Rhetorical Arts*, ed. James J. Murphy (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 1971), pp. 1–25. There is an extensive literature on the historical meanings of

'friendship'. See, for example, *Friendship: A History*, ed. Barbara Caine (London: Equinox, 2009); Julian Haseldine, 'Understanding the Language of *Amicitia*. The Friendship Circle of Peter of Celle (c. 1115–1183)', *Journal of Medieval History*, 20, no. 3 (1994), 237–60; Philippa Maddern, "'Best Trusted Friends": The Concepts and Practices of Friendship in Fifteenth-Century Norfolk', in *England in the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Nicholas Rogers (Stamford: Paul Watkins, 1994), pp. 100–17.

³⁰ TNA, SC 1/30/58.

³¹ Two letters from Eleanor of Provence to Robert Burnell (TNA, SC 1/23/11 and SC 1/23/34); and an unusual letter exhibiting other strange vocabulary choices from Katherine Paynel to John Langton (TNA, SC 1/27/133). For the text and comments on the latter, see K. Edwards, 'The Social Origins and Provenance of the English Bishops During the Reign of Edward II', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th series, 9 (1959), 51–79.

³² Constable, 'Structure'; Laurie Shepard, *Courting Power: Persuasion and Politics in the Early Thirteenth Century* (New York: Garland, 1999).

³³ Seven are extant: TNA, SC 1/7/38; 15/64; 25/175; 26/115 & 116; 28/48; and 29/191. The latter is illegible. Only two use the word 'friend' (*amico* in SC 1/7/38; *amy* in SC 1/25/175), and none use 'friendship' or 'well-wisher'.

³⁴ J. R. Maddicott, *Simon de Montfort* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

³⁵ TNA, SC 1/7/211; Sayles (*Functions*, p. 100) incorrectly attributed this letter to Philip Basset and gave a date of 1261. I follow Patricia Barnes (see n. 13) and J. R. Maddicott ('Edward I and the Lessons of Baronial Reform: Local Government, 1258–80', in *Thirteenth Century England I*, eds P. R. Coss and S. D. Lloyd (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1986), pp. 1–30) in preferring Burnell, with a date of c. 1272–73.

³⁶ See Maddicott, 'Lessons'; Richard Huscroft, 'Robert Burnell and the Government of England, 1270–1274', in *Thirteenth Century England VIII*, eds Michael Prestwich, R. H. Britnell, and Robin Frame (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2001), pp. 59–70.

³⁷ TNA, SC 1/19/22. Calendared in *Calendar of Ancient Correspondence Concerning Wales*, ed. J. Goronwy Edwards (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1935), p. 86.

³⁸ Mark N. Taylor, 'Aultre Manier de Language: English Usage as a Political Act in Thirteenth-Century England', in *Medieval Multilingualism: The Francophone World and its Neighbours*, eds Christopher Kleinhenz and Keith Busby (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), pp. 107–26.

³⁹ T. H. Lloyd, *The English Wool Trade in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁴⁰ TNA, SC 1/22/28; Huscroft, 'Burnell and Government', p. 67.

⁴¹ Richard H. Bowers, 'English Merchants and the Anglo-Flemish Economic War of 1270–1274', in *Seven Studies in Medieval English History and Other Historical Essays Presented to Harold S. Snellgrove*, ed. Richard H. Bowers (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1983), pp. 21–54 (p. 42); cf. Morris, *Bigod Earls*, p. 109.

⁴² Taylor, 'Aultre Manier'.

⁴³ Thomas Wykes, 'Chronicon Thomae Wykes', in *Annales Monastici*, ed. Henry Richards Luard, 5 vols (London: Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts, and Green, 1864–69), IV (1869), 175. I thank Susan Higginbotham for this reference.

⁴⁴ For the disinherited, see C. H. Knowles, 'The Resettlement of England after the Barons' War, 1264–67', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th series, 32 (1982), 25–41; for Philip's intervention, see *Calendar of the Close Rolls Preserved in the Public Record Office, 1279–1288* (facs. edn New York: Kraus Reprints, 1970), p.

88; TNA, SC 1/8/16: Philip was careful to secure a copy of the relevant charter for his daughter's own records from the chancellor in 1265.

⁴⁵ Morris, *Bigod Earls*, p. 105.

⁴⁶ Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

⁴⁷ That is, Hugh Despenser the Elder.