



Christian Høgel and Elisabetta Bartoli, eds. *Medieval Letters: Between Fiction and Document*

Christian Høgel and Elisabetta Bartoli, eds. *Medieval Letters: Between Fiction and Document*. *Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy* 33. Turnhout: Brepols, 2015. x, 471 p. ill. ISBN 9782503555201. EUR €110.00 (hardcover).

Born out of a 2013 Siena conference on the same subject, *Medieval Letters: Between Fiction and Document* presents a nuanced view of the medieval relationship to letters, and indeed, of a modern reader's mediated relationship to these medieval letters. Consisting of 29 essays modified from conference presentations and with a new preface by Francesco Stella and Lars Boje Mortensen, this book is a valuable resource to scholars interested in the literary, rhetorical, or historical contexts of medieval letters and letter-writing. The majority of essays are written in English and Italian, with one essay each in Spanish and French.

Høgel and Bartoli have organized the essays into seven thematic parts, named as follows: 'Methods'; 'Before *ars dictaminis*: The Early Middle Ages'; 'The Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries: *Ars Dictaminis* and the "epistolary turn"'; 'Women and Love Letters'; 'Documents, Literary Letters and Collections in Byzantium and Beyond'; 'The Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries and the Diffusion of Epistolary Rhetoric'; and 'Late Medieval Court Letters.' Several of the essays feature translations or critical editions, notably Greti Dinkova-Bruun's critical edition of Aegidius's prose letter to Bishop Odo of Sully and Peter Dronke's translation of Latin women's love letters from Tegernsee. Other standout articles include Sylvie Lefèvre's fascinating exploration of the form and function of the standard greeting in a letter and Joan M. Ferrante's "What Really Matters in Medieval Women's Correspondence," which outlines the emotional role women played as both political and personal correspondents.

The central theme tying these essays together is the dichotomy that exists between truth and fiction, with special attention paid to the very different ways that modern and medieval readers understood this dichotomy. In the preface, Francesco Stella and Lars Boje Mortensen note that "this interdisciplinary crossing and enlarging of a scholarly domain turns the typology of the material into a continuum of grey zones and moves it away from the black-and-white of defining the Truth as if it were a logical problem" (3). Høgel and Bartoli's choice to place Wim Verbaal's "Epistolary Voices and the Fiction of History" opposite Walter Ysabaert's "Medieval Letters and Letter Collections as Historical Sources: Methodological



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Questions, Reflections, and Research Perspectives (Sixth-Fifteenth Centuries)” at the beginning of the collection clearly situates the practice of letter-as-literature and letter-as-history against each other and allows the reader, primed by Stella and Mortensen, to consider interdisciplinarity as the lens through which they can view the remaining essays.

This collection of essays sits at an intersection of authorship, reading, and publication. A medieval experience of a private letter was necessary very different than a modern reading of the same private letter; the recopying and “publication” of a private letter and the ostensibly public formulae of the *ars dictaminis* mark even personal letters as public constructions. The essays in this volume make the reader aware of this constructed truth and potential fiction. Mark Thue Kretschmer notes in “The Play of Ambiguity in the Medieval Latin Love Letters of the Ovidian Age (Baudri of Bourgueil and Gerald of Wales)” that “our modern almost automatic urge to determine whether a medieval letter is authentic or fictional does not seem to have troubled medieval readers (or listeners)” (247). The juxtaposition of the medieval reading and the modern reading is a valuable one, and invites the modern reader to consider truth and fiction through the lens of the ambiguous medieval letter.

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