
Women's Voices, Emotional Expression, and Manuscript Materiality in *Medieval Love Letters: A Critical Anthology*

Myra Stokes & Ad Putter, *Medieval Love Letters: A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge University Press, 2025)

Éva Székely¹

Medieval Love Letters: A Critical Anthology opens a window onto the varied ways medieval writers shaped and recorded emotional experience. Drawing on Latin, French, German, and English sources, Stokes and Putter gather fictional, instructional, and documentary letters into a single, carefully structured collection. Their presentation highlights the fluid relationship between poetic convention and personal sentiment, offering a clear and engaging view of how medieval love writing functioned within its manuscript environments.

The Introduction (Section I) orients the reader with clarity. Stokes and Putter outline the *ars dictaminis*, describe the structure expected of a medieval letter, and explain the continued prominence of French as an epistolary language in England. Their discussion of verse in love letters is particularly illuminating. They show that verse was not merely a stylistic choice but a conventional mode for articulating affection, one that shaped both the cadence and the emotional nuance of the text. They are also attentive to how writers balanced sincerity with formula, recognising that medieval expressions of feeling often move through established rhetorical patterns rather than unmediated confession. The result is a balanced and accessible account of the literary and cultural forces that informed medieval love-letter writing.

Chapter 2 turns to gendered voices and the presence—sometimes slight, sometimes surprisingly candid—of women in the surviving corpus. The editors describe the rhetorical strategies women employed to express longing while maintaining propriety, and they pay close attention to the conditions in which these traces have endured. Drafts written in blank spaces, brief entries on flyleaves, and occasional

¹ University of Oradea, Romania

additions to manuscripts with entirely different primary purposes all contribute to the fragmentary yet compelling picture of women's written emotional expression. Stokes and Putter present these pieces with sensitivity, allowing their careful, hesitant, or deliberate tones to remain visible.

Chapter 3 widens the perspective, exploring letters produced in clerical and conventual settings. These examples demonstrate that emotional or affectionate expression circulated even in environments where one might not expect it. Here the editors reconstruct the textual and devotional frameworks in which such letters were produced, showing how spiritual language, literary convention, and personal sentiment sometimes converged. This material broadens the understanding of where emotional writing could appear and reveals the variety of contexts in which love letters might be composed, copied, or preserved.

Section II turns to fictional and instructional models, offering insight into the literary and pedagogical influences that shaped epistolary practice. Boncompagno da Signa's *Rota Veneris* stands at the intersection of instruction and literary performance, illustrating how writers learned to frame persuasive declarations of affection. The Anglo-French model epistles in Harley 3988 reinforce the expectation that love letters should be written in verse, while *The Parliament of Love* demonstrates how narrative works themselves could include exemplary letters, integrating emotional expression into literary storytelling. Taken together, these texts show how young writers encountered the language of desire within structured templates and familiar poetic forms.

Section III is the core of the anthology, bringing together letters that were either demonstrably written by historical individuals or that bear strong signs of having been composed for genuine exchange. The Norfolk Letters, for example, reveal how verse written from personal motive could find a place within a manuscript devoted primarily to ecclesiastical matters. The draft preserved in Corpus Christi MS 154—written, it seems, in an unoccupied space—offers a rare glimpse of an individual voice caught in a moment of composition. Its mixture of hesitancy and directness makes it one of the most striking items in the collection. The Armburgh correspondence, where personal exchanges incorporate recognisable lines or motifs from familiar poetry, provides a vivid illustration of how literary authority and emotional expression might merge within a single document. The letters associated with Remiremont further underscore the role of manuscript environment, shaped by both the institution in which they were produced and the

hands that later copied or preserved them.

Throughout the anthology, the editorial work is careful, measured, and transparent. The translations maintain the tone and rhythm of the originals while remaining accessible, and the glosses provide helpful guidance without intruding on the reading experience. The editors offer a concise note on their choices regarding normalisation, which allows readers to understand how the texts have been prepared. Although the volume does not foreground codicological analysis, it offers enough manuscript context to anchor each letter in its material environment and to suggest how these texts entered the written record.

Taken as a whole, *Medieval Love Letters: A Critical Anthology* presents a cohesive and finely balanced selection of texts that illuminate the range of emotional writing preserved in medieval manuscripts. By attending to both the literary conventions that shaped these letters and the manuscript environments in which they survive, Stokes and Putter offer a clear and engaging view of how medieval writers negotiated the boundaries between art and lived experience. The anthology invites close reading and rewards attention to both its details and its broader narrative of how affection and rhetorical craft intersect in the medieval record.