



Kathleen B. Neal, *The Letters of Edward I: Political Communication in the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2021) ebook, 240 pp., RRP £24.99, ISBN 9781800101104

*Review*

*The Letters of Edward I: Political Communication in the Thirteenth Century* by Kathleen B. Neal examines the socio-political significance of letters and letter writing. Medieval letters have typically been viewed as administrative, legal documents, rather than products of rhetoric or political discourse. In her study, Neal argues that royal letters should be considered ‘proclamations of ideology and identity that serve to legitimize government to itself, and bind its representatives to its purpose’ (p. 8). Across six chapters she analyses how Edward I used epistolary correspondence to construct his royal persona and maintain his relationship with his allies and royal agents in England and on the continent.

The first two chapters focus on the conventions of letter writing and the production of royal letters. Chapter one, ‘Royal Letters: The Authority of a Form’, indicates how letters inscribed royal authority and articulated royal commands. Neal begins by comparing the abstract and personal format of petitions and letters before discussing the rhetorical forms of royal letter writing that clerks could employ in their epistolary exchanges on behalf of the king, including writs, the theory of *ars dictaminis*, and the *cursus*. In chapter two, ‘Rhetorical Refinement: Epistolary Editing and its Implications’, Neal contends that medieval letter writing

was a collaborative activity between the king and his clerks. This chapter marks a transition in the study, moving away from the theory of letter writing in the first two chapters to a more in-depth analysis of specific examples of Edward's letters in the subsequent chapters. Neal initially outlines the process of medieval epistolary production in the chancery, showing how royal clerks were instrumental in 'implementing [...and] forming the ideology and policies that shaped Edward's epistolarity' (p. 54). She then examines the scribal revisions made to several letters addressing Philippe IV's annexation of Gascony, along with Edward's correspondence with Llewelyn ap Gruffydd between his military campaigns in Wales. Through her analysis, Neal demonstrates how 'royal epistolary language was curated by the king, his councillors and his clerks to manage the rhetorical, legal and political implications of the royal voice' (p. 74).

Chapters three and four consider the role of formal and informal letters in managing diplomatic relationships. In 'Announcing the Message: Communities of Reception and Royal Ideology', Neal provides an overview of the oral performance and aural reception of medieval letters, and shows how Edward used rhetorical formulae in his early letters to his interim chancellor, Walter de Merton, to articulate the priorities of his rule and influence the values of his royal officials until he was able to return to England and assume the throne. The following chapter, 'Dear Cousin: Affect and Epistolarity beyond Borders', focuses on a selection of informal letters – including letters of patronage, intercession, family news, and personal matters – that used relational rhetoric to engage 'the goodwill of potential allies in

the hope of influencing the counsel and decision-making that would determine outcomes' (p. 98). The number of informal letters produced illustrates their popularity in the later thirteenth century, and Neal situates Edward's correspondence in relation to his diplomatic and extended kinship networks in France and Scotland. The contrast between formal and informal letters in these chapters indicate the success of Edward's rhetorical strategies, along with his ability to manipulate language to fulfil his royal agenda at home and abroad.

The final two chapters trace the development of Edward's correspondence from the 1270s to the 1290s. Chapter five, 'Keeping Friends Close: Strategies of Epistolary Alignment', compares the different rhetorical strategies Edward used to manage his relationship with his magnates in England and Gascony during the 1280s. Neal demonstrates how Edward used the discourses of loyalty and patronage to present his interests in line with his English magnates and encourage support for his claim to the duchy. In chapter six, 'Rhetoric under Strain: Re-writing Royal Epistolarity', Neal claims that Edward developed a 'more commanding and less conciliar epistolary mode' (p. 150) in response to growing political and diplomatic pressures. The discussion of royal letters in this chapter is carefully contextualised against the loss of Gascony in 1294 and the 'crisis' of 1297 when Edward's authority was threatened by his magnates. Neal suggests that Edward responded to this crisis by adopting an increasingly authoritarian tone in his letters to his magnates, but that this epistolary module was ultimately ineffective. She proposes that Edward subsequently adopted the discourses of service, satisfaction, and displeasure to

direct and correct his officials, and later adopted the privy seal as a tool of royal governance.

This study emphasises how Edward used language and rhetoric to construct his royal persona and manage his political and diplomatic relationships; it also includes a substantial appendix that contains transcription and translation of Edward's letters that have not been previously published. Each chapter presents an interesting case-study in political rhetoric, but linguistic analysis is sometimes limited as the letters are usually provided in translation, with some key words in the main text, and the original Latin or French text given in the footnotes. The proposed arguments are not always clearly articulated, and improved signposting would help indicate how the argument develops throughout each section, especially as the chapters often begin with the principles of epistolary writing before addressing specific context of Edward's letters. Overall, this study will be of interest scholars working on letters and letter writing, political rhetoric, royal studies, and the presentation of kingship.

Victoria Shirley

Cardiff University



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).