

Surviving Personal Correspondence Between Medieval Elite Spouses (13th-15th Century)

A Research Guide for Comparative Studies of Marital Affection

Introduction

Your work on Joan I of Aragon and Violant de Bar operates within one of the richest archival environments in medieval Europe—the Archive of the Crown of Aragon preserves an unusual density of royal correspondence that simply doesn't exist for most Western European monarchies. This guide maps comparable surviving spousal correspondence across thirteenth- through fifteenth-century Western Europe, with particular attention to documents that might illuminate affectionate or emotionally expressive dynamics between married couples.

The fundamental challenge is that personal correspondence between spouses almost never survived systematically. Letters were preserved when they served institutional, legal, or evidentiary purposes. The survival of affectionate spousal correspondence is thus always anomalous and requires explanation.

Part I: The Iberian Exception

The Archive of the Crown of Aragon

The Archive of the Crown of Aragon (Barcelona, founded 1318 by Jaume II) is exceptional in European terms for preserving both incoming and outgoing royal correspondence alongside chancery registers. Unlike English or French practice, where incoming letters were rarely enrolled, the Aragonese system created conditions for spousal correspondence to survive in ways impossible elsewhere.

Your case study (Joan I and Violant de Bar) benefits from this archival exceptionalism. The registers of the royal chancery, combined with *cartas reales* (royal letters series), preserve correspondence that would have been lost in other kingdoms. This includes both formal and semi-personal communications between monarchs and their consorts.

Key archival series:

- *Cartas Reales* (series organized by reign)
- *Cancillería Real* registers
- *Pergaminos* (parchment collection)

The ACA now provides over four million digitized images freely accessible online through their PARES portal (pares.mcu.es).

Comparative potential: The marriages of Pere III to Eleanor of Sicily and Maria of Navarre, the correspondence of Martí I, and documentation of Alfons IV's relationships all merit investigation for comparative analysis of spousal dynamics.

Part II: English Gentry Letter Collections

England possesses five major fifteenth-century family letter collections, all now digitized through the **Medieval Family Life** database (Adam Matthew Digital). Unlike royal archives, these survive because families preserved documents for legal and evidentiary purposes—making survival patterns different from Iberian royal correspondence.

1. The Paston Letters (c. 1422-1509)

Archive: British Library (Add MS 43488-43491, Add MS 33597), digitized **Volume:** Approximately 1,000 letters and documents **Key scholarly edition:** Norman Davis, *The Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1971-1976)

Spousal correspondence showing affection:

Margaret and John Paston I (married c. 1440, he d. 1466) Margaret's letters to John constitute one of the largest surviving bodies of correspondence between medieval English spouses. While primarily concerning estate management, legal disputes, and household business, they contain passages suggesting genuine affection:

- December 1441: Margaret, heavily pregnant, writes requesting a new girdle because she has grown "so fetys" (elegant/fat). She notes her pregnancy constantly reminds her of her husband "when she would prefer to be sleeping."
- 1443: During John's illness in London, Margaret writes: "By my troth, I never had so heavy a season from the time that I knew of your sickness until I knew of your amending, and still my heart is in no great ease... I would rather have you than have a gown, though it were of scarlet."

Margery Brews and John Paston III (married 1477) The famous "Valentine letters" of February 1477, written during marriage negotiations:

- Margery addresses John as "my right well-beloved Valentine" and signs as "your Valentine, Margery Brews"
- She writes: "For no one knows what pain it is I suffer and even on pain of death I dare not disclose it"
- Post-marriage letter (December 1484): "I pray that you will wear the ring with the image of St. Margaret that I sent you for a remembrance... you have left me such a remembrance, that maketh me think upon you both day and night"—she was pregnant.

Historiographical caution: Rachel Moss and Maria Cannon have emphasized that these letters were dictated to scribes and preserved as legal documentation of marriage negotiations. The "affection" they express may have been strategically deployed to advance familial interests. However, the 1484 letter suggests the marriage did develop genuine emotional intimacy.

2. The Stonor Letters (c. 1290-1483)

Archive: The National Archives (SC 1/46), with additional materials in various repositories **Scholarly editions:**

- C.L. Kingsford, *Stonor Letters and Papers* (1919)—now considered unreliable

- Christine Carpenter (ed.), *Kingsford's Stonor Letters and Papers, 1290-1483* (Cambridge, 1996)
- Alison Truelove, *Fifteenth-century English Stonor letters* (for linguistic analysis)

Spousal correspondence: Sir William Stonor (c. 1449-1494) was married three times (Elizabeth 1475, Agnes 1480, Anne 1481). Letters from all three wives survive, making this collection valuable for comparing spousal epistolary conventions.

Elizabeth Stonor added autograph postscripts to letters drafted by scribes—these handwritten additions often contained the most personal content. She addresses William with conventional warmth but also discusses business with competence.

Deborah Thorpe's article "'I Haue Ben Crised and Besy': Illness and Resilience in the Fifteenth-Century Stonor Letters" (*The Mediaeval Journal* 5 [2015]) analyzes how health concerns—including emotional distress described as "crised"—appear in letters from female family members.

3. The Cely Letters (1472-1488)

Archive: The National Archives, digitized **Scholarly edition:** Alison Hanham, *The Cely Letters, 1472-1488* (Oxford, 1975) **Companion study:** Alison Hanham, *The Celys and Their World: An English Merchant Family of the Fifteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1985)

Character: The Celys were London wool merchants trading with Calais and Flanders. Their letters concern primarily commercial matters but include personal family correspondence.

Spousal content: Letters between Richard Cely and his wife Agnes survive, though they are primarily businesslike. More interesting for affective content is the correspondence documenting courtship negotiations by the sons (George and Richard Jr.) seeking marriages—showing the interplay of affection and calculation characteristic of gentry marriage-making.

4. The Plumpton Letters (c. 1460-1519)

Archive: West Yorkshire Archives **Scholarly edition:** Joan Kirby (ed.), *The Plumpton Letters and Papers* (Camden Fifth Series, 8; Cambridge, 1996)

The Plumptons were a Yorkshire gentry family with service to the crown. Letters extend into the early sixteenth century. Spousal correspondence survives but is less extensively studied than the Paston materials.

5. Thomas Betson and Katherine Riche

From the Stonor collection comes one of the most charming medieval English love letters—written June 1, 1476 by Thomas Betson (wool merchant, mid-30s) to his young fiancée Katherine Riche (13-14, stepdaughter of his business partner William Stonor):

"Mine own heartily beloved Cousin Katherine, I recommend me unto you with all the inwardness of my heart..."

Thomas pleads with Katherine to eat more meat for her health, sends tokens of affection, and writes with evident tenderness. This letter circulates widely in anthologies of medieval correspondence.

Part III: Italian Merchant Correspondence

The Datini Archive (Prato, 1384-1410)

Archive: Archivio di Stato di Prato, Fondo Datini **Digital access:** Datini Online (through Archivio di Stato di Prato website)—fully searchable with scanned originals **Volume:** Over 150,000 letters and 500 account books total; approximately 251 letters from Margherita to Francesco survive

Key scholarship:

- Iris Origo, *The Merchant of Prato: Francesco di Marco Datini, 1335-1410* (1957; reprinted NYRB Classics)
- Ann Crabb, *The Merchant of Prato's Wife: Margherita Datini and Her World, 1360-1423* (University of Michigan Press, 2015)
- Carolyn James and Antonio Pagliaro, trans., *Letters to Francesco Datini* (2012)

Character of correspondence: Francesco Datini (1335-1410), a wealthy Tuscan merchant, married Margherita Bandini (1360-1423) in 1376. Because Francesco's trading activities required extensive travel, the couple corresponded "about every two or three days" from 1384 until his death in 1410.

Affective content: The Datini correspondence is described as "affectionate but as often bitter and reproachful." Iris Origo noted that "the letters between the childless couple... are perhaps what will most stay with you." This is a relationship documented with unusual intimacy—showing both genuine concern and considerable friction.

Key themes:

- Margherita's infertility was a persistent subject of discussion (and attempted medical treatment)
- She initially dictated letters (being unable to write), but learned to write so she could correspond without intermediaries
- Her letters demonstrate "sound advice and backchat" in response to Francesco's "incessant instructions"
- When Francesco brought home his illegitimate daughter Ginevra (born 1392), Margherita and the child "bonded immediately"

Methodological significance: The Datini archive demonstrates what *can* survive when conditions are favorable—a merchant who systematically preserved correspondence, documents protected by bequest to the city, and rediscovery in 1870. It provides a model for the kind of spousal correspondence that must have existed elsewhere but was lost.

Comparison with your work: The Datini correspondence offers a bourgeois counterpoint to royal correspondence. Margherita's letters show a wife managing household and business in her husband's absence—functionally similar to some of what queens did, but without the apparatus of chancery documentation.

Part IV: French Royal and Noble Correspondence

Documentary Survival Patterns

French royal correspondence presents challenges similar to England's. The royal chancery enrolled outgoing letters on registers, but incoming correspondence—including letters from queens to kings—was not systematically preserved.

Louis IX and Marguerite of Provence

Archives: Primarily Bibliothèque nationale de France; letters in various edited collections **Online resource:** Epistolae database (epistolae.ctl.columbia.edu) includes letters by Marguerite

Character of documentation: Louis IX (r. 1226-1270) and Marguerite of Provence (married 1234) were, according to multiple sources, "deeply devoted to one another." Jean de Joinville's chronicle (*The Life of Saint Louis*) describes the couple sneaking through the palace at night "like lovers" to evade Louis's jealous mother Blanche of Castile, who "frequently strove to keep the young couple apart."

Surviving correspondence: Marguerite's letters that survive are primarily diplomatic—she was frequently involved in mediation between France and England (her sister Eleanor was queen of England). A 1263 letter to her brother-in-law Alphonse of Poitiers requesting ships to support her sister shows her diplomatic agency.

No personal correspondence to Louis survives. The affection attested by chroniclers cannot be verified through epistolary evidence.

Marguerite and Eleanor of Provence

More interesting for comparative purposes is the correspondence between Marguerite of Provence (Queen of France) and Eleanor of Provence (Queen of England)—sisters who maintained close relations throughout their lives. Eleanor died in 1291; Marguerite survived until 1295. This sisterly correspondence—showing intimacy between women in parallel positions—offers a different model of affective epistolary relationships than spousal correspondence.

Part V: The Heloise and Abelard Tradition (12th century)

While technically outside your thirteenth-fifteenth century parameters, the correspondence of Heloise and Abelard (c. 1132-1138) is foundational for understanding medieval epistolary expressions of affection.

Archives: Multiple manuscript traditions **Key editions:**

- Betty Radice, trans., *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise* (Penguin Classics)
- Constant Mews, *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard* (2008)—113 additional letters potentially attributable to the couple

Significance: Heloise's letters express passionate attachment with startling directness: "If Augustus, Emperor of the whole world, thought fit to honor me with marriage... it would be dearer and more honorable to me to be called not his Empress but your whore."

Historiographical complications:

- Authorship debates have persisted for centuries
- The letters were preserved in formulary collections (model letter books) and may have been edited
- They represent a clerical/intellectual milieu, not lay aristocratic correspondence

Comparative value: The Heloise-Abelard correspondence demonstrates that medieval people *could* express passionate attachment in letters—but the unique circumstances (famous scandal, monastic separation, philosophical sophistication of both parties) make generalization hazardous.

Part VI: German and Imperial Correspondence

Documentary Traditions

German-speaking regions present particular challenges. The Holy Roman Empire's decentralized structure meant correspondence was scattered across princely, episcopal, and municipal archives. No equivalent to the Archive of the Crown of Aragon centralized royal documentation.

Epistolae Database Resources

The Epistolae project (Columbia University) includes letters involving German imperial women through the thirteenth century:

- Agnes of Poitiers (Empress, 11th c.)
- Various abbesses and noble women

For your fifteenth-century focus, the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* series *Epistolae* contains edited correspondence but is weighted toward ecclesiastical and diplomatic materials rather than spousal intimacy.

Part VII: Key Secondary Literature

Methodological Works on Medieval Letter Survival

- Mary Garrison, "'Send More Socks!': On Mentality and the Preservation Context of Medieval Letters" (1999)—essential for understanding why certain letters survive
- Jennifer Douglas, "'Kepe wysly youre wrytyngys!': Margaret Paston's Fifteenth-Century Letters" (2009)—the only close analysis of a medieval woman's recordkeeping practices
- James Daybell (ed.), *Early Modern Women's Letter Writing, 1450-1700* (2001)—includes Alison Truelove on Stonor women

Editions and Anthologies

- **Anne Crawford**, *Letters of Medieval Women* (Sutton, 2002)—letters from c. 1200-1500, arranged by relationship (to parents, siblings, husbands, children, etc.). Essential anthology.

- **Joan Ferrante, *Epistolae: Medieval Women's Latin Letters*** (epistolae.ctl.columbia.edu)—database of letters to/from women, 4th-13th centuries, with Latin texts and English translations
- **Norman Davis, *Paston Letters: A Selection in Modern Spelling*** (Oxford, 1999)—accessible edition for students
- **Diane Watt (ed.), *The Paston Women: Selected Letters*** (Boydell, 2004)—situates letters in context of medieval women's writing

Studies of Medieval Marriage and Affection

- **Frances and Joseph Gies, *Marriage and the Family in the Middle Ages*** (1987)
 - **Helen Castor, *Blood and Roses: The Paston Family in the Fifteenth Century*** (2004)
 - **Conor McCarthy, *Marriage in Medieval England: Law, Literature and Practice*** (2004)
 - **Shannon McSheffrey, *Marriage, Sex, and Civic Culture in Late Medieval London*** (2006)
-

Part VIII: Research Recommendations

For Comparative Analysis of Spousal Affection

1. **The Datini correspondence** offers the most abundant and accessible comparative material for bourgeois/merchant class marriage. Ann Crabb's 2015 study and the digitized Archivio di Stato di Prato materials should be your first stop for comparison with Violant de Bar's correspondence.
2. **The Paston letters**—particularly the correspondence of Margaret and John Paston I and the later letters of Margery Brews Paston—provide the best English material for spousal affection in context. The December 1484 letter from Margery to John (post-marriage, during pregnancy) is particularly revealing.
3. **The Stonor women's letters** offer comparative perspective on how multiple wives of one man employed epistolary conventions.
4. **The Epistolae database** provides context for queenly correspondence patterns across Western Europe through the thirteenth century.

Archival Priorities

If conducting new archival research, the following repositories merit attention:

- **Archivo de la Corona de Aragón (Barcelona)**—for comparative Iberian royal correspondence beyond your immediate subjects
- **Archivio di Stato di Prato**—Datini materials, fully digitized
- **British Library**—Paston letters (Add MS 43488-43491), digitized
- **The National Archives (Kew)**—Stonor and Cely papers, SC 1 series

- **Bibliothèque nationale de France**—French royal and noble correspondence

Methodological Considerations

The fundamental insight from this research is that **spousal correspondence demonstrating affection survived only accidentally**. The Archive of the Crown of Aragon is exceptional precisely because its systematic preservation of incoming correspondence created conditions for survival that did not exist elsewhere.

This means:

1. Absence of affectionate correspondence elsewhere does not mean absence of affection
2. The Iberian material you're working with is genuinely exceptional and deserves to be framed as such
3. Comparative analysis must account for differential survival patterns, not assume comparable documentation

Your work on Joan I and Violant de Bar operates at the intersection of exceptional archival preservation and exceptional historical circumstances. The comparative materials identified here can help contextualize your findings, but the richness of the Aragonese documentation should be emphasized as a historiographical opportunity that simply doesn't exist for most medieval royal marriages.

Appendix: Digital Resources

Medieval Family Life (Adam Matthew Digital)

- Paston, Stonor, Cely, Plumpton, Armburgh papers
- Manuscript images and searchable transcripts
- Requires institutional subscription

Epistolae: Medieval Women's Latin Letters

- epistolae.ctl.columbia.edu
- Free access
- Letters to/from women, 4th-13th century

Datini Online

- Through Archivio di Stato di Prato
- Free access to digitized correspondence

PARES (Portal de Archivos Españoles)

- pares.mcu.es
- Includes Archive of the Crown of Aragon materials

British Library Digitised Manuscripts

- www.bl.uk/manuscripts
- Includes Paston materials

Medieval Family Life Companion Resources

- Family trees, chronologies, interactive maps
 - Teaching tutorials
-

Compiled for comparative research on medieval spousal correspondence and affective expression in royal/noble/bourgeois marriage.