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# Words on Walls

## An Approach to Exposed Writing in Early Modern Europe

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### Abstract

The article outlines an approach to different modalities of exposed writing in early modern Europe, following a discussion on the concept. Domestic, closed and public spaces are considered, in order to understand the multiple meanings – political, informational, devotional, promotional, testimonial and even as mere pastime, as is the case of many graffiti – of exposed writing. This approach always looks into the places where the writings were displayed, their supports (parchment, paper, cloth, stone, wall), the different ways in which they were made (written and painted by hand, printed, incised or chiselled) as well as the conditions of exposure, since all these aspects have an explicit impact on the function pursued by each writing fixed or written on a wall. There are clear differences between monumental inscriptions, commercial advertisements, libels and graffiti. Likewise, their placement in a street where everyone could see them or in a church, a prison or a domestic space entailed different functions. Depending on the place of exposure and the type of writing, they were used to question their contemporary society in one way or another; the questions that arise today, when we study the presence of these types of writing during that period, are just as manifold.

**Keywords:** *Domestic Space, Early Modern Europe, Exposed Writing, Meanings of Writing, Public Space*

Words on walls are words imposed by someone's will, whether that person is high up or low down, words imposed on the gaze of all the others who have no choice but to see them or receive them.  
Italo Calvino

### 1. Introduction

If we aim to propose a general approach to exposed writing in early modern Europe, we must begin by establishing the scope of that term. Our starting point has undoubtedly to be the definition given by Armando Petrucci in *La scrittura. Ideologia*

*e rappresentazione* (1986). In its preface, Petrucci also proposed a series of concepts – the social function of writing, the social use of writing, monumental writing, graphic space and writing space, domain of graphic space and programme of graphic exhibition – which are key to understanding the analysed written production. It is a production that appeals to the visibility and readability of the text both from the procedures of its manufacture (i.e. its materiality) and from the places where the text is exposed. In this context, exposed writing can be understood as ‘any type of writing designed to be used in open or closed spaces, which allows a plural (in-group, massive) reading, from a distance, of a text written on an exposed surface’. As a result, a ‘necessary condition for its use to be effective is that exposed writing needs to be sufficiently large, and to present the message it carries in an evident and clear (verbal and/or visual) way’ (Petrucci 1986, xx).<sup>1</sup>

Although the Italian palaeographer focussed his study mainly on monumental inscriptions, he also included other less solemn products, such as the defamatory posters of the modern age or the graffiti of different times, but especially of the last third of the twentieth century. Along with monumental writings, graffiti represent one of the most ancient types of exposed writing. However, they introduce some nuances in the conditions attributed to exposed writing, since the execution of graffiti did not always take into account whether size and location would make the messages evident and clear.

Further expanding this graphic universe, I will also consider in this essay any written manifestation – permanent or ephemeral – conceived to convey a message from an exposed surface. This nuance expressly affects all types of broadsheets or single-sheets used for the transmission of mandates and official regulations, proclamation of festivities, announcement of academic dissertations or commercial advertising. Many of these configured the cheap prints that constituted the main activity of plenty of printing shops, particularly from the second half of the sixteenth century. Yet, limiting the study to typographic formats, as usually happens since they are easier to trace, means to fragment the written culture of a given moment. This is especially so when the functions performed by the different materials do not depend on whether they were handwritten or printed.<sup>2</sup>

Under this global approach – rooted in the Petruccian concept of the history of written culture (Petrucci 2002, v-vi) – I propose a journey to the world of exposed writing in the early modern age. Undoubtedly, such a wide endeavour involves certain risks, both chronologically (since it covers a couple of centuries) and geographically (since only part of Western Europe is included). However, this essay, also limited in size, does not aim to focus on the specific aspects of each cultural, political or religious context, but on the common elements that emerge in the uses and meanings of exposed writings.

<sup>1</sup>There is an English version of this work by Petrucci (1993), but it does not include the preface to the original Italian edition, where this and the aforementioned terms are defined. This article is the result of the research project ‘*Scripta in itinere: Discourses, Forms and Appropriations of Written Culture in Public Spaces from the Early Modern Era to the Present*’ (HAR2014-51883-P), funded by the Ministry of Science and Innovation and the National Research Agency of Spain. Here and elsewhere in this essay, translations of works not available in English are by Enrique Iñiguez Rodríguez, who translated this article from the Spanish original.

<sup>2</sup>I make this clarification because typographic fetishism sometimes leads to forgetting similar products copied by hand, as in Pettegree 2017.

Therefore, I prefer to deal with its communicative function in the broad sense, taking into account the plurality of its manifestations and the interaction between the messages and the places where exposed writing was registered and made visible, while considering specifically the urban space, which was the main scenario of said written activities. As we shall see, walls hosted a wide spectrum of written communication, where the word was imposed, inevitably in many cases, as Italo Calvino puts it in the quotation at the head of this essay. In other cases, however, the strength of this communication did not fall in the public presence, but in what the messages indicate about the intended motivations of those who wrote or painted on a specific wall or similar surface. Lastly, since the execution of certain kinds of exposed writings could lead to transgression due to the occupation of spaces not conceived for that purpose or to the dissemination of messages that were incompatible with the prevailing ideology in each territory, it seemed appropriate to close this article with a discussion of this subject.

## 2. *Between Private and Public: Home, Church and School*

The location par excellence of exposed writing is the public space, but this does not mean that writings were not executed as well in the domestic sphere under different materialities and temporalities. Devotional woodcuts, whose origin dates back to fourteenth-century Germany and, a bit later, Italy, were massively disseminated and one of the spaces in which they were used was the homes of medium and upper social groups, especially thanks to the multiplying effect introduced by the printing press. Those images of Christ, the Virgin and the saints, on planks and in particular as prints, often with their corresponding legends and prayers, were placed in canopies, pantries and hangings on the walls as a form of family devotion (Nalle 2008; González Sánchez 2017, 77-79) and as a means of educating children (Niccoli 2011, 22-42). Their presence was also a way to implore the mediation of the saints, thus fulfilling magico-religious functions comparable to those that have been observed of the so-called *nóminas* (cloth bags hung on the neck with written papers or images inside), *cartas de tocar* and other iconographic and textual amulets (Marquilhas 1999; Pérez García 2002).<sup>3</sup> Next to the images hung on the walls there could be a forecast, calendar or almanac with very varied information: astronomical and meteorological data, health recipes, agricultural advice, relevant events, festivities, etc. (figure 1);<sup>4</sup> i.e., a series of practical recommendations, some of them expressly useful for those who lived in rural areas or had agricultural properties. However, the product is much more complex and, whether in the hanging version or a small-format printed edition, it was also used in certain circumstances to comment on events and disseminate political content (Curto Ramada 2015, 186-191).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion on the magico-religious uses of writing, with a broad perspective, see Poulin 1979 and Cardona 1987, 154-193.

<sup>4</sup> For more information on the collection of almanacs of the Archivo Municipal of Toledo, centred mainly on the ways of indication of time, see Galende Díaz 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Since these can be found in greater amounts for the eighteenth century and later, a part of the bibliography has focussed on this period. Capp 1979, Salman 1999 and some authors of the collective volume Lüsebrink *et al.* 2003 have dealt with their dissemination in the previous period. For the case of Spain, see Moll 1996.



Figure 1 – *Almanaque o calendario deste año del Señor de 1681* (1680), Madrid, Julián de Paredes. Courtesy of Archivo Municipal de Toledo

In some dwellings, the protection invoked by religious images was materialised more permanently through maxims incised or painted on the walls of the rooms. As noted by Juliet Fleming, William Phiston’s compilation *Welspring of wittie conceites* (1584) proposed in its final part ‘certaine worthie sentences, very meete to be written about a Bedchamber or, to be set up in any conuenient place in a house’ (2001, 95). Contemporaneously the appendices of Thomas Tusser’s *A hundreth good pointes of husbandry, lately married vnto a hundreth good poynts of huswifery* (1570) included a series of ‘husbandry poesies’ for the different rooms of the house (hall, parlour, guest’s chamber, bed chamber). Among others, in the form of a question and its answer, the following ‘wise sentence’ was recommended for the bedroom wall: ‘What worse dispaire, than loth to die, for feare to go to Hell? What greater faith than trust in god, through Christ in heuen to dwell’ (1570, fol. 40v). Inscriptions in Arabic with the texts ‘Al-Mulk-lillah’ (‘The kingdom is God’s’) and ‘Al-Shukr-lillah’ (‘Thanks be to God’), found in several rooms on the ground floor of a medieval manor house in Sigüenza (Guadalajara, Spain), built in the fifteenth century on a previous dwelling (Lavado Paradinas 2006), show the roots of these devotional decorations in different cultures.<sup>6</sup> A similar function can be determined for the inscriptions with sacred names carved on the lintels of the doors or the symbols of the cross, widely disseminated in rural areas (Cruz Sánchez 2010). In this regard, the presence of cruciform signs in the form of graffiti in the Morisco houses that survived in Spain in the sixteenth century has been interpreted as a way to purify them against the Islamic content of other motifs, such as six- and eight-

<sup>6</sup> In the Islamic world the use of writing with decorative characters was widely disseminated on account of the prohibition of representing the human figure.

pointed stars, six-petal rosettes or inscriptions in Arabic (Barrera Maturana 2008).<sup>7</sup> Thus, the inscription of religious symbols and maxims on visible surfaces was a way of sanctifying the houses practised by different cultures, which remained in force during the early modern age and even later.

Transcending into public space, and surely as a form of popular catechism linked to the effects of the Catholic Reformation, the biblical sentence ‘En la casa del que jura, no faltará desventura’ (‘The house of a man that useth much swearing shall be filled with misfortune’, rephrasing Sirach 23:11) – an exhortation against blasphemy and unnecessary swearing referring in turn to a paraphrase of the book of Zechariah (5:3-4) – was recorded or painted between 1549 and 1682 on the outside of many churches and civil buildings, mainly town halls, in the Spanish provinces of Álava, Burgos, Cuenca, Guadalajara, La Rioja, Navarra, Biscay and Zaragoza (González Blanco and Calatayud Fernández 1996, 2001 and 2004). Aiming at the moral edification of the nuns, the *Ceremonial pour l’usage des religieuses carmelites deschaussées* (1659), by Father Giovanni Agostino Gallicio, general of the congregation of Clerks Regular of Saint Paul, or Barnabas, included a chapter – book XVI, chapter xv – on the sentences that were to be written in different places of the convent of Saint-Denis, founded in 1625 and converted today into the Musée d’Art et d’Histoire. However, this phenomenon occurred likewise in other convents in France, Belgium and Luxembourg (Rollin 1986, 46). Although the writings that have been preserved date back to a plan executed in 1869, the historical record was immortalised earlier in the painting *L’infirmierie du carmel*, by Guillot, an eighteenth-century French painter. They were mainly quotes from the Old and New Testament, followed by writings of saints, and among these some from the founder of Carmel, Saint Teresa of Jesus. As the ceremonial text says, the purpose of the writings was to help people ‘raise their soul to God’:

Un des foins que doiuent ceux á qui Dieu commet le gouvernement des maisons religieuses, c’est de les remplir d’objets qui puissent aider les personnes qui y demeurent, á enlever leur ames à Dieu. C’est pour cet effet que cet ordre a en usage d’avoir des sentences tirées de l’Écriture Sainte et des oeuvres de divers saints en quelques endroits du monastere, savoir au Chapitre, au Novitiat, au Refectoir, au Chaufoir et au Parloir. Ces sentences sont écrites autour des murailles et enfermés dans de cartouches. Et comme ces sentences doiuent être appropriées à chaque lieu on a jugé à propos de les inserer ici et d’en faire un Chapitre. (Gallicio 1659, 427)<sup>8</sup>

These edifying uses of certain types of exposed writing are rooted in a long tradition exemplified by the inscriptions, mosaics and phylacteries traced everywhere in worship places of different faiths. From this perspective, the recovery of writing with political and civil functions in open spaces that took place between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, comprehensively studied in Italy

<sup>7</sup> Other graffiti found in a house of medieval origin in the port city of Toulon, France, dating from the second half of the sixteenth century to the first quarter of the seventeenth century, reveal an Arab-Islamic influence. This constitutes an atypical set of Islamic anthropomorphic figures, animal and plant motifs, naval representations and some inscriptions in Arabic, and they could prove the existence of relations between members of the Christian and Islamic communities – particularly commercial relations – despite the evident differences and cultural and religious barriers of those times (Molina *et al.* 2015, 181).

<sup>8</sup> ‘One of the tasks of those to whom God commits the government of religious houses is to fill them with objects that may help the people who live there to raise their souls to God. It is for this purpose that this Order is in the habit of having sentences from the Holy Scriptures and the works of various saints in some places of the monastery, namely the Chapter house, the Novitiate, the Refectory, the Calefactory, and the Parlour. These sentences are written around the walls and enclosed in cartouches. And since these sentences must be suited to each place, it has been deemed appropriate to insert them here and build a Chapter around them’.

(Petrucci 1993, 1-15), was also reflected in a wide display of epigraphy and other expressions of the *visibile parlare* in sacred spaces.<sup>9</sup> During the early modern age the practice of placing large-sized inscriptions in the most relevant places of the churches continued uninterrupted. Culminating the approach to God, that was intended for the construction in height, a text of the Gospel of Matthew (16: 18-19) was inscribed at the base of the dome of St. Peter in Rome, between 1603 and 1613, to remember the ecclesiastical mandate of Christ to Saint Peter: ‘TV ES PETRVS ET SVPER HANC PETRAM AEDIFICABO ECCLESIAM MEAM ET TIBI DABO CLAVES REGNI CAELORUM’; while on the entablature of the main façade – by Carlo Maderno – another inscription of equal solemnity commemorated the culmination of the works in the time of Pope Paul V: ‘IN HONOREM PRINCIPIS APOST. PAVLVS V BVRGHESIVS ROMANVS PONT. MAX. AN. MDCXII. PONT. VII’ (Lansford 2009, 510, 526).

Inside St Peter’s basilica, the funerary monument of Urban VIII by Bernini, a true testimony of the baroque *pathos* of death (Petrucci 1998, 94), brings us closer to another of the most widespread types of visible words: funerary epigraphy. Despite the reluctance that different sectors of the Catholic Reformation showed towards *ad sanctos* burials, inside the churches, the funeral culture of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries encouraged them in large quantities, as had been the case since the fifth century, when Christianity put an end to the pagan disgust with the proximity of the dead. The protection of the martyrs was sought through those burials, not only for the mortal body of the deceased, but for their whole being, for the day of Resurrection and the last Judgement (Ariès 2011, 41-45 and 59-61). As Martín Carrillo, doctor in canons and member of a religious order, puts it in his *Explicación de la bula de los difuntos* (1615), this custom gave the deceased the opportunity to take advantage of the intercession of the patron saints of each temple and of the prayers of the faithful, as, meanwhile, the latter could find models of behaviour in the lives of the deceased. They could also become aware of the transience of life, which was remembered, according to this author, by the epitaphs: ‘Quién, llegando a una iglesia, viendo tantas sepulturas, tantos epitafios dellas, no se acordará que es mortal y se ha de ver bien librar en semejantes lugares, principalmente leyendo algunos epitafios curiosos’ (Carrillo 1615, 87v).<sup>10</sup>

One feature of the funerary culture of the modern age was the eloquence and size of the epitaphs, so that the brief pious exhortation of other times became, in the sixteenth century, the ‘edifying account of the life of the deceased’, within a *modus operandi* increasingly inclined to collective register, i.e. the memory of the whole family (Ariès 2011, 249). Accompanied on occasion by images and in some cases replaced by these, the inscriptions, often especially extensive, narrated the sad or glorious avatars of the deceased (figure 2). Thus, among the tombstones of the Roman churches in the sixteenth century, one lamented the death of Alberto, two and a half months old, the son of the baker of Pope Clement VII; while another lamented the death of the bricklayer Antonio di Treda, recounted the death of his wife and his daughter, who must have died tragically as the word ‘discratiata’ of the epitaph suggests (D’Achille 1987, 96, 98; Niccoli 2010, 340-341). At a graphic level, the funerary memory of the early modern age confronted the clarity of the Renaissance tombs with baroque effects. In this period the epitaphs broke with the traditional epigraphic formats by dislocating the writing in curved and wavy lines, decomposing the text into sections, simulating non-stone materials as graphic spaces (wood, rags, paper, shells, skins) and resorting to polychromy (Petrucci 1998, 92-95).

<sup>9</sup>The expression *visibile parlare*, coming from Dante’s *Divina Commedia* (Purgatorio, Canto X, 95), has been used to name different modalities of the exposed writing (Ciociola 1992 and 1997).

<sup>10</sup>‘Who, entering a church, seeing so many tombs, so many epitaphs on them, shall not remember that he is mortal and shall not consider it good to pass time in such places, mainly reading some curious epitaphs’.



Figure 2 – Funerary monument of William Cokain (1626), partially destroyed in the great fire of London in 1661. Dugdale 1658, 65v., Guildhall Library, A 5.2 NO 6, London. Courtesy of Guildhall Library, London

As much as some epitaphs suggest a different phenomenon, the funerary culture of those centuries is a good example of social and gender inequalities with respect to what Petrucci called the right to ‘writing death’ (1998, xvi). The language of the epitaphs, the location of the tombs and the different types – tombstones at ground level, embedded tombs, funerary monuments attached to the walls and, to a lesser extent, exempt tombs, seen negatively by the Church – contributed to perpetuate those inequalities among the living, at a time when there was a change in attitude towards death (Ariès 2011, 261-272).<sup>11</sup> In the domains of the Spanish monarchy, the ostentation reached by some tombs motivated the intervention of the Church in the second half of the sixteenth century. In addition to combating the erection of exempt tombs, the Spanish synods issued rules to avoid some excesses that had been committed up to that time, in particular exaggerated luxury, the placement of pagan elements to identify the deceased and the exaltation of lineages by means of shields and other symbols (Martínez Gil 2000, 209; Polo Sánchez 2015, 390).

<sup>11</sup> In addition to the aforementioned works by Armando Petrucci and Philippe Ariès, for Britain we can highlight the studies of Llewellyn 2000, Sherlock 2016 and Newstok 2009, the latter focused on the poetics of the epitaphs. For a comparison of burial cultures in London and Paris, see Harding 2002.



Monumental, commemorative or funerary epigraphy symbolises the most visible and indelible aspect of the ecclesiastical graphosphere. Along with it, the interior of the temples was the scene of a preaching to the eyes that relied on the paintings hung on the walls, in which the images used to be accompanied by explanations or larger texts on the story represented in the painting or the life of the person portrayed. In addition, as had happened in the Middle Ages (Pritchard 1967; Champion 2015), the practice of graffiti inside churches was common in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This was immortalised by the Dutch painters Pieter Saenredam, Gerard Houckgeest and Emanuel de Witte in some of their characteristic paintings of interiors (figure 3).

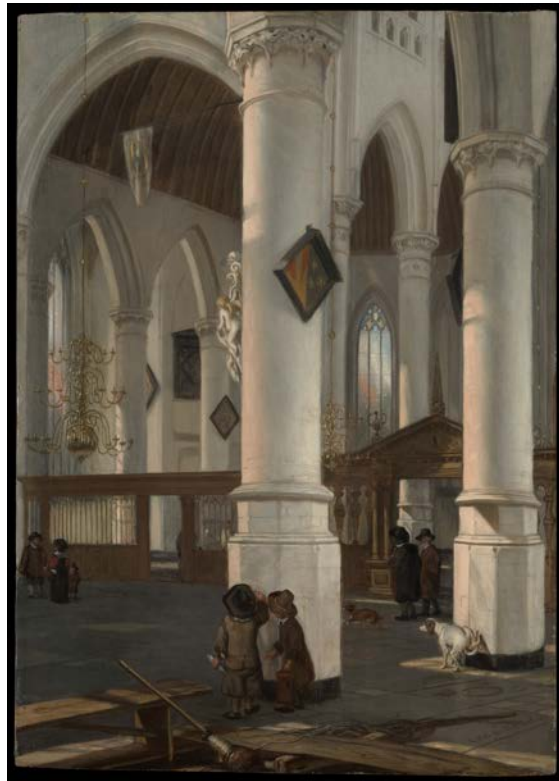


Figure 3 – Emmanuel de Witte, *Interior of the Oude Kerk, Delft* (ca. 1650).

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, CC0 1.0 Universal (CC0 1.0) - Public Domain Dedication

In the foreground you can see the moment when two boys paint, probably with charcoal, on the base of a temple column. Although profane, the theme does not clash with reality because the studies on graffiti in churches during the modern age have shown their thematic and social heterogeneity, in some cases linked to the specific use of the spaces where they were executed (Trentin 2010). In the baptistery of Parma, dates of birth and records of baptism were engraved on the marbles (Dall'Acqua 1976, 74). Even richer is the group of about one hundred and fifty graffiti, dated between the beginning of the sixteenth and the end of the nineteenth centuries, made on the frescoes of the oratory of San Sebastiano in Arborio, which thus became a true 'palimpsest of senses' (about this term, see Bailey 2007, 208). In them, we can see the preference of the authors for placing the inscriptions near the figures of



the saints, again seeking their protection, but also as a 'form of bullying, of intimidation, to ensure that the saints do their job' (Plesch 2014, 139). Furthermore, the graffiti in Arborio evidence the individuals who went to the oratory – pilgrims, shepherds, soldiers – and document events of critical importance for the town and its inhabitants (wars, plagues, good and bad harvests, etc.), which makes them a sort of inventory of fears. As they wrote on the wall, people assumed a certain level of control over the events and in this way their individual memories were incorporated into the collective register as a kind of community memorial (Plesch 2005, 2014 and 2018).

The walls of the temples also served for the dissemination of all kinds of pastoral notices on masses, festivities, prayers or sermons. In this sense, in the synod of the diocese of Toledo held in 1480 in Alcalá de Henares, it had been agreed that the principles of Christian doctrine be exposed in a 'board' to be hung from 'un clavo en lugar público eminente donde cualquier persona la pueda leer e informarse de lo en ella contenido'.<sup>12</sup> This mandate was later reproduced in different Hispanic synods of the sixteenth century and the location of the 'board' used to be the door, where the lists of sinners and those threatened with excommunication were also fixed (Castillo Gómez 2016a, 207-212).

By means of publications such as these, the Church intervened in the life of the community, publicising its precepts and publicly sanctioning those who did not comply. In certain cases, the disapproval of sinful behaviour was made visible by forcing the transgressors to wear around their necks a text with the account of the sin or crime committed. After stealing the flutes from the organ in the convent of Santa Catalina, in Barcelona, on 2 July 1612, Gabriel Monclús was forced to walk wearing a piece of parchment through the streets of the city.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, on 23 July 1648, the Venetian Inquisition sentenced the bookseller Giacomo Batti to stay one hour in front of the main door of St. Mark's basilica with a candle in his hand, a rope around his neck and a sign confessing that he had sold forbidden books (see Infelise 2014, 191-192). In the case of a crime against the faith, the penitents were taken to the podium where the *auto-da-fé* was held, dressed with the signs of their infamy, and remained so, in view of all, during the whole act, each one bearing the symbols of their crimes and penalties. At the end of the act, the *sanbenitos* of those condemned and reconciled – bearing their names, professions, places of abode, crimes and condemnations inscribed – were to be exhibited in the churches where those people had been residents or parishioners. The *sanbenitos* were to be kept there permanently and in good condition – although that was not always the case – so that the despicable memory of the heretics and their descendants would not fall into oblivion (Castillo Gómez 2008; Peña Díaz 2012).

In line with what I have just mentioned about the board of doctrines, it should also be noted that the bill entitled *Regole di costumi cristiani a voi scolari*, printed in Italy in the 1570s-1580s, was probably also exhibited, along with catechism schools, in churches and other public places as an expression of the zeal of the Church, just after the Council of Trent, in the surveillance of 'each stage of the life of the faithful' (Niccoli 2004, 32-34; Niccoli 2010, 344). In the educational context, the school iconography at the beginning of the modern age includes the use of certain forms of exposed writing for teaching. This is clear from the engravings reproduced on the cover of some editions of the *Exercitium grammaticale puerorum per dietas distributum*, whose

<sup>12</sup> *Constituciones de los Arzobispados de Toledo y Tarragona en los siglos XIV-XV*, Biblioteca Nacional de España, Madrid, MSS/3021, 97r-v. See Castillo Gómez 2016a, 208 ('a nail in an eminent public place where anyone may read them and find out what is contained therein').

<sup>13</sup> Pergamí Gabriel Monclús, Arxiu Històric, *Pergamins Municipals*, S/R, Barcelona. His transcript can be seen in Expósito i Amagat 2016, 36.

first edition was printed in the 1480s in Hagenau (Bas-Rhin), and specifically the editions of Strasbourg in 1502 and 1504 (figure 4) (see Reicke 1979, 17); and likewise in the *Cartilla para mostrar a leer a los moços* (ca. 1526) (Infantes 1998, IV). All of them show some kind of written boards hanging on the wall; in the Latin grammar behind the teacher and in the Spanish primer in the background. The latter shows separate letters that could correspond to the alphabet, while in the German manual some lines of text can also be made out. Both details suggest an object similar to the hornbooks or ABCs used in modern England, personal tablets that included the alphabet, the basic syllables, the Lord's Prayer and the articles of faith, as was typical of a teaching tradition always associated with religious instruction (Lamb 2018, 29-70). In England, at the end of the sixteenth century, John Hart, author of a fast-learning method for the English language, also considered the use of mural alphabets for educational purposes, but not only in schools: 'if the figures with their letters wer drawn on the walles, pillers, and posters, of churches, townes, and houses, they moughte muche helpe and further the ignorant of al letters, to atteine to reade' (Hart 1570, sig. \*ijr; see Fleming 2001, 50).

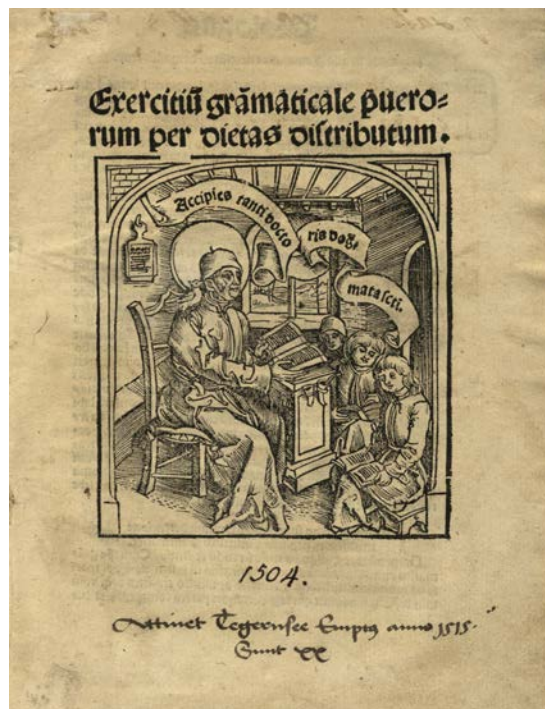


Figure 4 – Mural alphabet to teach reading, *Exercitium grammaticale puerorum per dietas distributum*, [Strasburg, Husner], 1504. Courtesy of Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, München, 870259 4 L.lat. 191

### 3. The Urban Space as a Public Graphosphere

As an instrument of communication in its broadest sense, exposed writing reached its apogee in the cities of the early modern age, which were turned into genuine public graphospheres.<sup>14</sup> The

<sup>14</sup>I borrow this term from Franklin (2011, 531), who has used it to study the same phenomenon in Franklin 2017; 2019, 1-10.

halls of power published their mandates, regulations and other provisions by means of public announcements and, increasingly, by fixing documents in the busiest places of the city, initially as manuscripts and from the mid-sixteenth century mainly in printed formats (Castillo Gómez 2016a, 200-206; Castro Rojas 2016 and 2019; Bruni 2017; Cumby 2017). In the forties, this was a dilemma for the French authorities, suspicious of the trivialisation and falsification that the mass production of this type of documents could involve, against the greater security and control offered by the publication by means of royal criers (Fogel 1989, 105).

The shops, in turn, were identified by signs placed on the doors – as can be seen in engravings by William Hogarth – where lists of products and prices were also put on view (Welch 2005, 137-139). According to the testimonies that have been preserved, writing teachers and theatre companies usually resorted to bills to announce classes and productions: the former, as may seem logical, in manuscript formats (D’Haenens 1983); the latter, also in manuscript formats in the domains of the Spanish monarchy (Reyes Peña 2015), while in Shakespearean London printed single-sheets were used (Stern 2006). Leaving aside catalogues of fairs – such as Leipzig’s – and booksellers, the sale of books was promoted by showing them on the street and announcing them by means of bills such as the one that Giulio Cesare Croce had composed in 1608 with the index of all his works (figure 5). He was not satisfied with just reciting and singing his poems through the streets of Bologna or selling them in opuscles; he also turned to printed advertising in order to broaden the circle of his readers (Zanardi 2009).

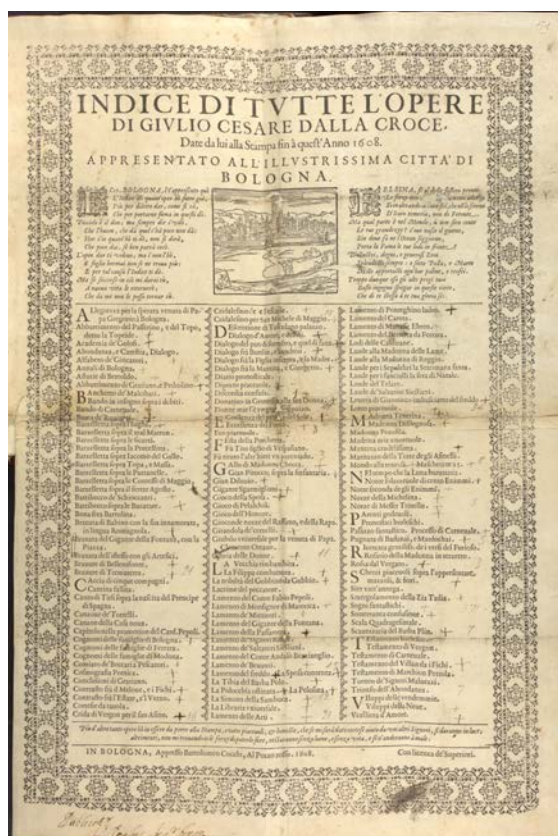


Figure 5 – *Indice di tutte l'opere di Giulio Cesare Dalla Croce*. In Bologna, appresso Bartolomeo Cocchi, 1608. Biblioteca Universitaria di Bologna, MS 3878, c.[51].

Courtesy of Alma Mater Studiorum – Università di Bologna, Biblioteca Universitaria di Bologna

This type of paper ephemera fulfilled an informative function, but in the case of edicts, proclamations and other mandates, the public exposure of the document also contributed to the visibility of power and social order (Petrucci 1996, vi-viii). As a consequence, their design combined readability with propagandistic sense, as simultaneously happened in the typographical bills of literary contests and in the announcements of academic theses.<sup>15</sup> Typography introduced, in all of them, significant improvements in the organisation of the text by distinguishing sections and levels of information; in turn, coats of arms and figures on the header acted as signs of representation of the authority, the institution organising the festivity, the person or saint celebrated, or the sponsors and academic principals. In the bills advertising theses, the employment of Latin suggests a preferentially educated public, despite the fact that they were placed in the university colleges and on occasion on the doors of some churches and other buildings. The bills were initially manuscript, but in the second half of the sixteenth century the printed format prevailed, with the prior authorisation of the rector or another authority: in Germany printed bills are already documented in 1560 (Kirwan 2017); in France, the first appeared in the Protestant universities of Orthez and Lescar, between 1585 and 1592, while in the Sorbonne 127 bills were printed between 1588 and 1660 (Walsby 2017); and with regard to the Hispanic universities, the first remaining bill advertising a thesis is the examination that Pedro Balli took on 26 August 1584, 'hora nona antimeridies', to obtain the degree of doctor in Law at the Royal and Pontifical University of Mexico (Fernández de Zamora 2015, 21-22).

The communication instrumentalised through the different kinds of exposed writings cannot be explained only by consideration of them as texts to be read. It must be taken into account that many texts were published or circulated while interacting with orality: be it edicts, previously proclaimed by the crier; or libels, whose mobilising effect was increased by the wide diffusion through handwritten and printed copies, reading in the street and easy memorisation of many of them, as they were written as dialogues or with accessible rhymes (De Vivo 2007, 200-248; Castillo Gómez 2016b, 121-152). As has been pointed out in relation to the English ballads, street reception was deeply influenced by the relationship that the presenter established with the audience through the use of several strategies: ways of addressing the public, exhortations to promote certain reactions and a colloquial language with frequent insertion of proverbs and sayings (Würzbach 2011, 54-74).

Many of these texts used images as well, sometimes to ridicule the people insulted in defamatory libels; in other cases, to emphasise the criticism formulated in many of the pamphlets distributed in the religious and political conflicts of the early modern age, initially with the Lutheran reform – deeply linked to printed propaganda (Scribner 1994; Pettegree 2017) – then the anticlerical pasquinades of Renaissance Italy (Niccoli 2005), the French wars of religion (Debbagi Baranova 2012), the revolts in different places of the Spanish monarchy in the time of Philip IV (Hugon and Merle 2016) or the English civil war (Peacey 2004). In each of these instances, pamphlets – fixed on the walls or distributed through the streets – were used to intervene in the public opinion of the time, just as was the case with books, sermons and theatre (Briggs and Burke 2009, 61-89). Their effectiveness as instruments of opinion is beyond doubt as revealed – by way of illustration – by the letter that the Bishop of Valence, Jean Monluc, wrote on 8 January 1573 to Charles IX of France

<sup>15</sup> For the bills designed to announce the literary contests organised during the festivities for the proclamation of a king, births and funerals in the royal family or canonisation of saints, among other outstanding events, see Castillo Gómez 2011; Osuna and Infantes 2011.

justifying the use of libels for his duty to defend the reputation of the sovereign, questioned by the intense Protestant propaganda that was disseminated during the wars of religion (see Debbagi Baranova 2012, 337).

Yet, it was in monumental epigraphy that exposed writing best evidenced its meaning as a figurative device. This can be said of the inscriptions painted in the ephemeral constructions erected in public displays, but mainly for those carved in stone. Some had an advertising function because they contained a summary of the mandates of public authorities, such as the ‘lapidi prohibitorie’ used in Italy in the seventeenth century and, especially, in the eighteenth century, to warn of the penalties and sanctions incurred when throwing garbage into the street, playing ball on, or putting a market stall near the wall of a church (Petrucci 1993, 84-85). Within this modality of ‘epigraphic edicts’, in Lisbon a plaque placed in 1686 reported an order of King Peter II regulating the transit of carriages in Salvador Street (figure 6). This street was back then an important communication junction, as it linked the Castle of São Jorge with A Baixa, but its middle stretch was narrow and this fact caused disputes over whether the carriages that went up or those that went down had right of way (Soares, Barreto and Markl 2007, 114).

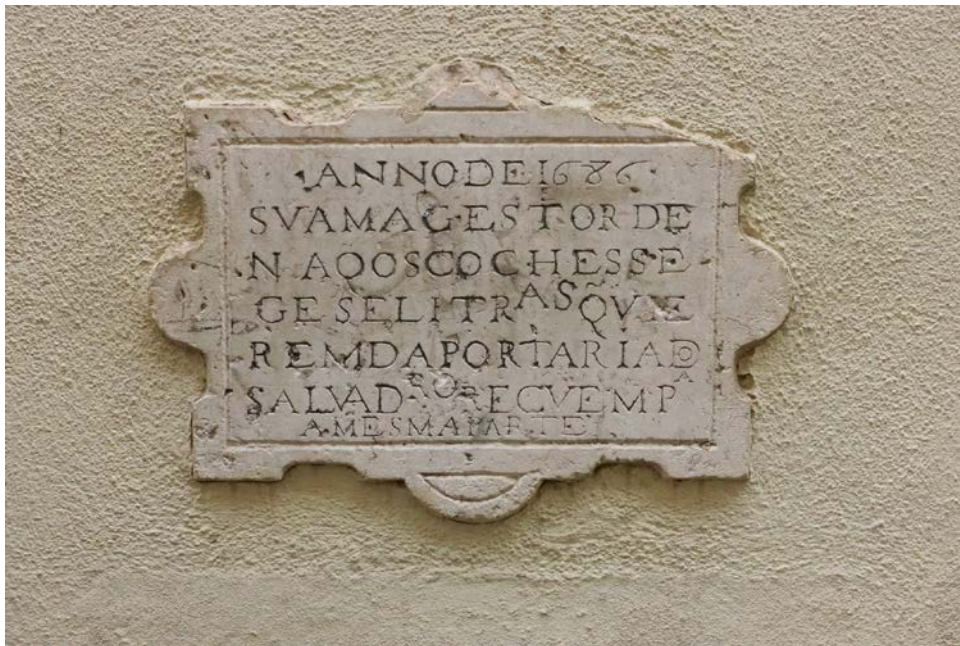


Figure 6 – *Epigraph on the regulation of carriage traffic in Lisbon, 1686,*  
Photo by Ivan Batinic / Alamy Foto de stock.

By permission of the Universidad de Alcalá, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras Alcalá de Henares, Madrid

Other forms of exposed writings had a clear celebratory and propagandistic intention, and were therefore manufactured with a greater care in the epigraphic composition, for the inscription operated as a representation of the authority that had ordered its placement. To see this phenomenon, it is enough to go through sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Rome and its urban transformation, where a large amount of monuments were erected to extol the grandeur of the *caput mundi* and the power of the Popes (figure 7). Everywhere, gates, arches and fountains



were erected, with their accompanying inscriptions in large and elegant humanistic capitals as ‘an important part of the visual power system’, aimed at praising the figure of the promoters of those changes (Paolucci 2016, 9).



Figure 7 – Fontana dell’Acqua Paola, erected in the time of Pope Paul V, Rome, 1612,  
Photo by Antonio Castillo Gómez. Courtesy of the Author

In this kind of materialisation, the written text could be read alphabetically, though it was certainly perceived mainly as a visual product on the whole. Moreover, for a large part of that society, the interpretation of the epigraphs was hindered not only by illiteracy, but also by certain graphic resources used in the epigraphic composition – such as inscribed letters, so characteristic in some epigraphic cultures of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – and by the frequent use of Latin, although its stereotyped and formulaic character could make up for the inexperience that many had in the use of that language. Therefore, limiting the interpretation of epigraphic production and even other exposed writing from the early modern centuries to an alphabetical reading would entail disregarding the symbolic and propagandistic meaning intrinsic to the flamboyant solemnity of a part of that production. This type of inscriptions conveyed a meaning through their letters, but also through their material form, their relation with other discourses – especially the iconographic discourse – and by their position within the monumental ensemble.

Inscribed in the public space, the different kinds of exposed writing showed all their performative capacity as ‘acts of writing’ (Fraenkel 2007). Insofar as they made visible the governing ideology or the criticism thereof, their concurrence created a place of dispute. This happened with the bronze decree that Sophia Alekseyevna, Regent of Russia from 1682 to 1689, had placed in the Red Square in Moscow, legitimising the acts of the nobles who had taken her to power, while Peter the Great, proclaimed Tsar when he was ten, after the death

of his brother Theodore III, and his mother, were removed from the court. At the end of the regency, the decree was destroyed (Franklin 2017, 348; and 2019, 148).

By destroying or replacing certain inscriptions and symbols (arms and emblems), people intervened in the memory and in the re-signification of public spaces, as was highlighted in the Neapolitan revolt against Philip IV. Initially, as the revolt was a popular reaction against a rise in taxes on consumption, its leader, the fisherman Masaniello, did not suppress the Habsburg arms, but ordered the placement next to them of a shield crowned with an uppercase P in the centre of the blazon as an expression of the People. Simultaneously, around 11 or 13 July 1647, in the Market Square, began the works of an *epitaph*, on whose walls boards with the clauses of the agreement between the rebels and the viceroy, the Duke of Arcos, were to be placed: ‘Detto Viceré, per dar forma a quello che haveva promesso e dar loco che esso non solo volse sodisfatione per li detti Capitoli, ma ancora aggiungere altri di sua volontà, si diede ordine che si facesse l’epitaffio in mezzo del Mercato per fare scolpire in marmo detti capitoli’ (Fuidoro 1994, 65).<sup>16</sup> The famous architect Cosimo Fanzago was employed to that end, thus highlighting, according to Alain Hugon, the ‘will to magnify the construction of a monument that celebrated the recovered Concord’ (2011, 304).

From the autumn on, the revolt entered a markedly political phase that culminated with the proclamation, for a few months, of the Most Serene Republic of Naples, commanded from November by the Duke of Guise, thus rehabilitating French influence in southern Italy. At the end of January 1648, Neapolitan independence came to an end with the capture of the city by the troops of John Joseph of Austria. During the period that the Republic maintained its independence, Duke Henry of Guise ordered that the arms of Philip IV be removed from the gates and be replaced by his own arms, the acronym SPQN (*Senatus Populusque Neapolitanus*) and the word *Libertas* as an expression of republican power. This dispute on symbols was also manifested in coins, paintings, images and even the calendar of saints’ days (Hugon 2011, 291-326).

As for the mandates of the authority, their public exposure decisively influenced the acts of disobedience held against them. On the one hand, we may recall the judicial proceedings for contempt, such as the one instituted by the Council of the Supreme Inquisition in September 1559, to identify the people who had ‘removed and detached from the said church’ an edict on forbidden books that was to be exposed in the door of the Cathedral of Coria (Cáceres, Spain) for thirty days. Under the jurisdiction of the Republic of Venice, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there were various acts of insubordination towards the edicts, which were broken into pieces and ‘befouled’ amidst public disorder instigated not only by the people, but also by the nobles (De Vivo 2007, 132-133). On the other hand, we find the confrontation between Venice and Rome as a result of a Papal Decree, of April 1606, which excommunicated the Doge and the Senate and banned all religious functions in the Republic. Apart from the subsequent libel war, the Venetian authorities initially prevented the public exhibition of the pontifical proclamation at the entrance of Basilica di San Marco, while the ‘protest’ written by Paolo Sarpi in opposition to the initiative of Paul V, was printed on large bills and fixed on the doors of the churches (De Vivo 2007, 164-167).

<sup>16</sup> ‘This viceroy, in order to shape what he had promised and to show satisfaction for the aforementioned Agreements while contributing of his own accord, ordered that an epitaph be placed amid the Market Square so that said Agreements may be sculpted in marble’.



#### 4. *Between Norm and Transgression*

The existence of a *dominus* that, as pointed out by Petrucci (1986, xxi), determines the use of the spaces used for the placement of the writing and, in some circumstances, also its formal characteristics and means of appropriation, implies the distinction between legitimate or authorised kinds of exposed writings and those that may constitute a subversion of the norm. In Lyon, for example, the municipality intervened in 1651 against the profusion of unauthorised notices fixed on streets and squares, some even on the door of the City Hall (Béroujon 2009, 158). Yet, in Elizabethan England, the spread of graffiti in domestic spaces and churches may indicate a certain permissiveness. It had nothing to do, in the opinion of Juliet Fleming (2001, 40), with the connotation of illegality which it acquired in the mid-nineteenth century.

Historically analysed, the practice of graffiti is more complex, although its distinction from other forms of exposed writing may be understood as referring to ‘any unofficial inscription (or image), drawn freehand on a surface (architectural or otherwise) whose main function differs from that of the supports commonly used for writing or drawing’ (Bucherie 1983, 486). But this ‘unofficial’ character – it might be better to say spontaneous – does not necessarily mean communicative transgression as is inferred from a large part of the legacies from the early modern age. In Italy, the Palazzo Ducale of Urbino – considered by Baltasar Castiglione in *Il Cortegiano* (1528) one of the most beautiful palaces of the Italian Renaissance – is in itself a ‘palazzo da leggere’ (‘a palace to be read’) because of the large number of writings on its walls. Some are monumental inscriptions, such as the one that honours, in Latin and in beautiful humanistic capitals, Federico da Montefeltro, who ordered the construction of the palace. The initials F. C. (Federicus Comes) and FE. DUX (Federicus Dux) are repeated on all doors and in other places, as are the family’s arms, placed there to communicate who held control over those spaces, which does not mean that the owners determined the communicative instrumentation thereof. Other writings are graffiti in different languages – Italian, Latin, French, German and Spanish – that follow one another from the fifteenth century to our day with multiple messages in consonance with the functions that the palace had: residence, theatre and university in the modern age, and, in the nineteenth century, a partial use as a prison (Sarti 2007, 2009 and 2017).

Regarding prisons – a privileged space for graffiti – we know that in France between 1839 and 1972 prisoners had an obligation to keep their cells clean, from which it can be deduced that writing on the walls was sanctioned along with other communications (Sanchez 2018, 66). On the contrary, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with a different penitentiary regime and the cells usually located in dark and unhealthy rooms, it seems that there was a certain tolerance, at least in the inquisitorial prisons (Civale 2017, 265). Meanwhile, the exchange of messages between prisoners and the outside was more seriously controlled – at least by regulation – and probably more so in the prisons of the Holy Office (Silva 2011; Braga 2015, 109-132 and 177-271; Castillo Gómez 2016a, 96-118).<sup>17</sup>

What to say about graffiti in churches and shrines? Their profusion suggests that the faithful and the ecclesiastical authorities tolerated them and even understood them as a form of devotional expression. The aforementioned oratory of San Sebastiano in Arborio constitutes a palimpsest of meanings due to the plurality of the messages that were superimposed on its

<sup>17</sup> Graffiti and prison writings have merited a number of approaches in recent times, among them Candau and Hameau 2004; Sherman and Sheils 2009; Ahnert 2013, 33-42; and Castillo Gómez 2018, which includes a historiographic review. For the rich collection of the Palermo Inquisitorial Prison, see Civale 2017, Fiume 2017a and 2017b, and the recent compilations of Fiume and García-Arenal (2018a and 2018b).

frescoes. Names, dates and devotional writings are likewise present in the walls of two basilicas: San Giulio, on the homonymous islet on Lake Orta and San Zeno in Verona (Plesch 2002 and 2007), as well as in different rural churches of Trentino in Italy, along the valleys of the rivers Cison and Vanoi, bearing devotional graffiti, acronyms and names of people from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries (Antonelli 2006, 87-93). In a different sense but with similar permission, scholars and visitors of the Malatestiana Library in Cesena left their marks there from its opening in 1454 until our time (Errani and Palma 2018). In turn, in modern Rome, artists – some of them relatively well-known – who had settled there in their formative stages, as well as lovers of art, soldiers and tourists alike wrote on the ancient paintings of the Villa Adriana in Tivoli, the frescoes of Rafael in the Vatican or on the Carracci gallery in the Farnese palace as a testimony of their admiration for the painters and their works (Guichard 2014). Lastly, as nowadays, graffiti also attracted the attention of the university world. In the Old Treasury at St. John's College, Cambridge, are several signature inscriptions by former fellows at the college, some of them dated (Underwood 1980, 23-26).<sup>18</sup>

While some graffiti were tolerated and even well regarded, others were rejected and even persecuted for different reasons. For Joseph Hall, author of the dystopian *Fooliana* (1605), it was in bad taste that 'the houses are all passingly well painted within, especially with the names of their ancestry, their guests, and acquaintance, gracefully delineate with coale and candle', which led him to add the marginal note: 'muro bianco carta di matto: A white wall is a foole's book' (Fleming 2001, 49). Likewise, an edict of the rector of the Roman *Studium Urbis*, issued in 1689, severely forbade 'che alcuno non ardisca dipingere e scrivere coi carboni, lapis, gesso et altri instrumenti nelli muri, porte, capitelli, finestre, colonne, cornici, cathedre, ò banhi'.<sup>19</sup> Apart from pointing out the different ways of writing or painting graffiti and the multiplicity of surfaces, the mandate was expressly aimed at 'figure, massime dishoneste, lettere, segni, caratteri, versi, motti, lineamenti, armi, insegne, et in qual si voglia modo imbrattatarli, etiam che si pingessero, o scrivessero cose buone' (cf. Petrucci 1986, 117-118).<sup>20</sup> Beyond the nature of the message, it was thought important to avoid the 'soiling' of spaces that did not have communicative function.<sup>21</sup> For mainly aesthetic reasons, a proclamation of the city of Arezzo prohibited the drawing of 'signs, scribbles or other things with coal or something similar' in the building of Loggia della Misericordia, decorated by Giorgio Vasari (Welch 2005, 121). A more exhaustive tracking of the municipal ordinances is however missing in order to understand how the regulation of the public space set forth in the ordinances of Barcelona in 1302 evolved in the following four centuries: "Que ningú non gosí pintar, ni escriure a les tàpies o partes dels

<sup>18</sup> Likewise, in several windows on the ground floor of the Colegio Mayor de San Ildefonso in Alcalá de Henares, a number of incised graffiti have been recovered bearing the symbol of the 'victor', names and unfinished scribbles as *probatio penna*, among which several students and chaplains from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries have been identified (Serrano Pozuelo 2008). Their execution and location differentiates them from other 'victors' painted on the walls for clearly celebratory purposes, though not only for academic merits. For a discussion on these, see Rodríguez-San Pedro Bezares and Weruaga Prieto 2011. In Italy, university celebrations were materialised by the placement of coats of arms, as can be seen in the Archiginnasio and in the vaults of the cloister of the Collegio di Spagna, both in Bologna, and in the Palazzo Bo, the historical seat of the University of Padua since 1539. See Rossetti and Dalla Francesca 1987, Benucci 2007 and Brizzi 2011.

<sup>19</sup> 'Anyone to paint and write with charcoal, pencil, chalk or other instruments on walls, doors, chapters, windows, columns, cornices, chairs or benches'.

<sup>20</sup> 'Any figure, dishonest expression, letters, signs, characters, verses, mottos, portraits, arms, emblems, or to soil them in any way, even when agreeable things are painted on written' (Petrucci 1993, 92-93).

<sup>21</sup> The misappropriation of the space, the use of non-canonical writings and the content of the messages form the three levels of communicative transgression applied to graffiti, especially in more recent versions (Gimeno Blay 1997, 14-21).

carrers o camins, i que tot el que tingui pintades o escrits en les seves parets o tàpies que les faci treure' (Batlle i Gallart and Vinyoles i Vidal 2002, 17).<sup>22</sup>

What happens when the graffiti or any other kind of exposed writing openly questions the power relations, the moral system or the normal development of an activity? In situations like this, complacency was much rarer. In 1591 the attacks of the students of Padua against the Jesuits by means of mural writings provoked a crisis that ended with the closing of the Company's school (De Vivo 2007, 141). A clear ideological motivation was also put forward by the Jesuit Jerónimo López against the graffiti that he found in Valencia and Salamanca when he went there to preach, in 1651 and 1653 respectively. As soon as he stepped in both cities, he warned that the 'walls, doors and hallways of many houses, streets and squares' were defaced with obscene and blasphemous messages. Outraged, he devoted the occasional sermon to the subject, and from the pulpit he harangued the people to erase them. He even threatened to do so himself 'going through the streets with a pot of lime, mixed with water, erasing these abominable and ugly things with a brush'. But it did not go beyond that. The faithful obeyed and immediately a group of people, led by nobles and priests, got down to work (Naja 1678, 276-277, 299). In those years there was also a notable scandal in Lyon due to insolent writings and graffiti figures on the walls of the Hôtel de Ville and other locations in its quarter in 1652. In response, the municipal authorities approved a salary of 600 pounds a year and lodging in the Hôtel de Ville for a guard to make sure that those events did not happen again (Béroujon 2009, 159). Finally, in February 1664, the governor of Rome and Vice Camerlengo, Monsignor Giovanni Nicola Conti, published a proclamation, periodically repeated, sanctioning those who disturbed the development of classes in the Jesuit College, including especially those who wrote or drew, with 'inchiostro, carbone, lapis, gesso, ò altra materia, ò pur con ferri, ò altri instrumenti' (Archivio di Stato di Roma, Bandi, vol. 410),<sup>23</sup> on the 'mura, pilastri, porte, finestre, pavimenti, libri e carte di detto Collegio' (cf. Petrucci 1982, 43).<sup>24</sup>

More conspicuously, the permissiveness in the case of libels and pasquinades was inversely proportional to the degree to which they questioned authority and moral order. It should be kept in mind that in Rome the festival of Pasquino was funded by the popes, who in fact were quite indulgent with the publication of pasquinades until the Council of Trent. From then on, the situation changed in the Catholic countries. This became evident after the censorship of the literary genre of the pasquinades decreed by Paul IV and Pius V (Niccoli 2005, 128-157; Fragnito 2006). In the same vein, the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* published in 1583 by Inquisitor Gaspar de Quiroga condemned the writing and dissemination of pasquinades, libels or songs with messages that were heretical or critical towards the religious authorities:

Item se prohiben todos los pasquines o libelos infamatorios y famosos, debaxo de cualquier titulo y nombre salgan o se escriban e intitulen, en los cuales con autoridades y palabras de la Sagrada Escritura se dicen y tratan cosas y materia profanas. Y lo mismo se entienda de todas las canciones, coplas, sonetos, prosas, versos y rimas, en cualquier lengua compuestas, que traten cosas de la Sagrada Escritura, interpretándola contra su debida reverencia y respeto, profanamente y a otros propósitos contra lo que común y ordinariamente la santra madre Iglesia romana admite y usa. (Martínez de Bujanda 2016, 60)<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> 'It is forbidden to paint or write on the enclosures or walls of the streets or roads, and anyone who has painted or written on their walls or enclosures is to erase all of them'.

<sup>23</sup> 'ink, coal, pencil, chalk or any other matter, even with irons or other instruments'.

<sup>24</sup> 'walls, pilasters, doors, windows, pavements, books and documents'.

<sup>25</sup> 'All pasquinades as well as defamatory or reputable libels are prohibited, regardless of the title or name under which they are published or written and entitled, wherein using authorities and words from the Holy Scripture, profane things and matters are said and discussed. And the same prohibition is to apply to all songs, ballads, sonnets, prose, verses and rhymes, composed in any language, which discuss things from the Holy Scripture, interpreting it without due reverence and respect, profanely or with other purposes, against the uses ordinarily admitted by the Holy Mother Roman Church'.

A common consequence was moral condemnation, in the form of the penalty of excommunication, decreed both against the authors or inspirers of libels and against those who, having seen them on the wall, did not detach, break and denounce them. Such a consequence is alluded to by the edicts promulgated for the persecution of libels, pastoral visits, collections of sermons, manuals of confessors and, to be sure, synodal provisions (Castillo Gómez 2013, 313-317).

In conclusion, this approach to the functions and uses of exposed writing has tried to show the scope and richness of the field, pointing out some of the spaces where inscriptions were made and some of their functions. Existing from the very origins of writing, it is undeniable that in the early modern age these writings experienced a golden age stimulated by the development of literacy, the diffusion of the printing press and, in general, by the importance of writing within the social organisation, albeit that the dissemination of exposed writing was far from homogeneous. A more detailed study would provide a basis for clarifying the chronology of the phenomenon while highlighting the particularities of each cultural, political and religious context. However, with some peculiarities derived from the different degree of literacy as well as political and religious differences, a common feature in Europe at that time, at least in its western part, was the massive presence of exposed writing in domestic spaces, interiors with different functions and, above all, the public space. It was frequently advised that the texts should be made using clear and visible letters but, of course, there are exceptions that prove the rule. Many graffiti clearly violated this norm both because of their location and because of graphic inexperience, due to the semi-literacy of the writer or the difficulties derived from some walls. Likewise, defamatory bills were often written by disguising the writing, i.e. with a clumsy layout (figure 8), often mixing upper case and lower case, in order to better ensure that the offence would remain anonymous (Evangelisti 2018, 13-87).



Figure 8 – Notarial reproduction of the defamatory libel against two friars published in Faenza. Courtesy of Ministero dei beni e delle attività culturali - Archivio di Stato di Bologna, Tribunale del Torrione, reg. 1648, c. 198v.

Solemn inscriptions make power and social stratification visible in many buildings or funeral monuments. The institutions of power, ranging from the king to the municipality and including the ecclesiastical authorities among others, made use of more ephemeral instruments, both manuscript and printed, to display their authority and publish mandates that should be known by the entire population. But since the public space was not only at the service of power, political contestation, religious dissidence, social tension or personal confrontation were also visible there, mainly through libels and pasquinades, but on occasion also by means of graffiti. The latter were particularly common in private homes, churches, taverns, universities, prisons and libraries, among other places, with very varied purposes: ranging from a willingness to leave testimony of one's presence at that place to devotion or affirmation of identity, as can be seen in other graffiti. Furthermore, with the emergence of a pre-capitalist economic structure, the first signs of commercial advertising made their entrance in the streets and squares.

There are obvious differences between monumental inscriptions, commercial advertisements, libels and graffiti. Likewise, their placement in a street where everyone could see them or in a church, a prison or a domestic space entailed different functions. Depending on the place of exposure and the type of writing, they were used to question their contemporary society in one way or another; the questions that arise today, when we study the presence of these types of writing during that period, are just as manifold.

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