

Antonio Castillo, ‘«El Mejor Retrato de Cada Uno»: La Materialidad de la Escritura Epistolar en la Sociedad Hispana de los Siglos XVI y XVII’, *Hispania*, LXV/3, no. 221 (2005), pp. 847-876.

[‘The best portrait of anyone’ – The material characteristics of epistolary writing in 16th and 17th century Hispanic society.]

Editor’s introduction:

Antonio Castillo Gómez is the director and animator of the dynamic research centre on the history of scribal culture at the University of Alcalá, known by its acronym SIECE (Seminario Interdisciplinar de Estudios sobre Cultura Escrita). He is personally a specialist in the history of the Spanish Golden Age - roughly the 16th and the first half of the 17th centuries, the period covered by this article in *Hispania*. Most of his scholarship appears in book chapters, prefaces and journal articles and unfortunately, although he is a leading authority in the field, his work has almost never appeared in English.¹

Antonio Castillo trained with Armando Petrucci, and this article clearly owes a debt to Petrucci’s innovative amalgamation of the skills of paleography with the broader context of social and cultural history. Petrucci believed, and here Castillo demonstrates, that any society can be better understood by examining how the appropriation of literacy skills is socially distributed, and the functions to which writing is put within it. This article is soundly based on archival research in, for example, Simancas, the Archive of the Indies in Seville and sources in Mexico.

Taking as his title a quotation from Vieira – ‘the best portrait of anyone is what they write’ – Castillo criticizes current historiography for concentrating on elites and neglecting the writings of ordinary people. Letter-writing, he argues, should not just be plundered for historical testimony; it should be exploited to analyse the uses of writing itself as a social practice. His article insists on the importance of the material forms of correspondence – the structure and rhetoric of the letter, the layout of the letter on the page and its use of blank spaces, different forms of handwriting and the choice of different languages for different purposes and addressees. He also refers to epistolary manuals to elucidate the models to which writers aspired.

He enumerates the characteristics of the writing of those with little mastery of the technique – divergent spellings, lack of word separation, rarity of punctuation and the hesitant use of capital letters. Above all, this article makes it clear that the formal and material characteristics of correspondence reflect the social relationships of writer and recipient. The material features of letter-writing show different levels of epistolary literacy at different social levels, reflecting inequalities of gender and social status.

1 One exception is his article ‘Ordinary Writing and Scribal Culture in Nineteenth-Century Spain: Memory Books’, *European Legacy*, 16:5, 2011, pp. 615-31, translated by M. Lyons.