“THE BEST PORTRAIT OF ANYONE”:
THE MATERIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF EPISTOLARY WRITING
IN 16th AND 17th CENTURY HISPANIC SOCIETY

by

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ABSTRACT: Epistolary writing reached a remarkable diffusion in Hispanic society in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It was one of the most significant forms of writing, and its social extension was also extraordinary. This has been shown in a number of different studies and editions are profuse. However, in many of these works the study of the meanings and functions of epistolary writing is extremely limited. On the basis of some previous reflections on epistolary discourse, I attempt here to analyze the material characteristics of epistolary testimonies, the distinction between letters and short notes (billetes), the formal constitution of both, and the relations between the social status of people and their written production (from the literati to inexpert writers). Finally, I will address the particularities of each act of writing in terms of the dialectic tension between the concrete norms and their appropriation in a certain society.


* Acronyms:

AGN = General National Archive, Mexico
AGI = General Archive of the Americas, Seville
AGS = General Archive of Simancas, Valladolid
AHN = National Historical Archive, Madrid
BFZ = Francisco Zabálburu Library, Madrid
IAN/TT = National Archive Institute/Torre do Tombo, Lisbon
IVDJ = Don Juan Institute of Valencia, Madrid.

AUTHOR’S ACKNOWLEDGEMENT:
Part of the research performed for this article is related to the project entitled Written culture, power and society in the Madrid of the Hapsburgs (Community of Madrid, ref. 06/009003), for which I was responsible. In addition I received a travel grant from the Vice-chancellor of Research of the University of Alcalá for a period of one month in the General National Archive of Mexico (August 2004).

SHARP’S ACKNOWLEDGEMENT:
This article was originally published in Hispania, LXV: 3, no. 221, 2005 (pp. 847-876), and this English version appears with the kind permission of the editors of that journal.

The best portrait of anyone is one that is written.
The paintbrush portrays the body, but the pen portrays the soul.

A. VIEIRA

1. RETURNING TO THE STUDY OF LETTERS

A well known proverb of the golden age - «hablen cartas, callen barbas», «let letters speak, from whiskers not a squeak» - highlights the importance that epistolary writing was attaining as a preferred instrument of written communication. This importance can also be noted in the abundant production of printed manuals and forms intended to teach and guide their readers in how to write letters, especially whenever epistolary rhetoric was obliged to recognize the established social order and make it more explicit. As well as the publishing profits created by this genre we must add the progress made in the organization of correspondence, ranging from the contract signed between Queen Isabella and Francisco de Tassis in 1500, and then his nomination in 1506 as Postmaster (Correo Mayor) of Castile to the subsequent appointment in 1518 of his nephews Juan Bautista, Simon and Mateo de Tassis as «masters of mail and correspondence between our house, court and our other kingdoms and manors»². Similarly, there were the regulations of 1509 concerning correspondence sent to the American colonies and the subsequent creation of the role of Postmaster of the Americas in 1514, rounded off by the appointment of a Postmaster of New Spain in 1580³. By the end of the 16th century, the postal system of the Spanish monarchy embraced all corners of the Empire⁴.

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1. António Vieira, «Sermón de san Ignacio de Loyola, fundador de la Compañía de Jesús, padre y patriarca del autor. Predicado en Lisboa año 1669, cuando aún la Iglesia le cantava el Evangelio, que se cita», in Todos sus sermones y obras diferentes ... Tome tercero. Contiene quarenta y ocho sermones de diferentes santos, Barcelona (María Martí), 1734, p. 9.
2. AGS, Mercedes y Privilegios, leg. 166. Transcribed in María Montáñez Matilla, El correo en la España de los Austrias, Madrid (CSIC), 1963, pp. 188-190.
Even more conclusive is the evidence referring to the volume of private and official written correspondence in these centuries. On one hand we may note the epistolary obsession of some individuals. Without going any further it suffices to mention the not insignificant 6,000 letters that the count of Tendilla wrote in the space of twelve years between 1504 and 1515; many of these letters were of a personal nature and many others emanated from his role as captain general of the Kingdom of Granada. Another example is the 30,000 letters written by the Count of Gondomar that are held in the Royal Library. On the other hand the social spread of epistolary practice is evidenced by its recurring presence in the registers of personal writing. This is the case, amongst others, both in the meticulous notes made in the correspondence of the student Girolamo da Sommaia; as well as in the thirty or so entries referring to letters listed in the «inventory of papers held in the chest» of Don Guillén de Lamporte when he was detained and imprisoned by the Mexican Inquisition in December of 1642.

Armando Petrucci diachronically describes the momentum which written correspondence acquired from the 15th and 16th centuries onwards, not only because of the «revival of Latin humanistic epistolary writing in its classic form», but also because «the social spread of literacy, geographical discoveries, an increase in productive and commercial activities and the greater mobility of the population led to a genuine explosion and epistolary

8 AGN, Inquisición, vol. 1496, Case against Guillén de Lamporte, s. fol. On this singular personality, see the study by Javier Meza González, El laberinto de la mentira. Guillén de Lamporte y la Inquisición, Mexico (Autonomous Metropolitan University, Xochimilco Campus), 2002 (1997).
circulation of vernacular languages in the whole of Europe”. Its spread in Golden-Age Spain occurred in great part due to the advances achieved in the area of literacy, and to the greater need for communication triggered by certain situations in which writing became almost essential, for example wars, emigration to the Americas, the movement of commercial goods and diplomatic relations, despite the numerous difficulties involved in the mail:

No letters from the marquis nor from Don Francisco have arrived in the mail that has come from Italy. I understand that what caused this situation was the absorption of dead water in the boat that was carrying the post. He remains in Villafranca helping to collect the money from the galleys that returned there, and waiting for one in which he can come across.

There is little doubt that these notes allow us to see the importance of epistolary exchanges in Hispanic society in the 16th and 17th centuries. Nevertheless, our understanding of these writing practices contains significant gaps and lacks comparison with developments in French, Anglo-Saxon and Italian historiography. One does not need to enter deeply into the question in order to verify that, for all of us, the main interest in the letters has lain in their value as sources of historical information. They are valuable in as much as their content allows a more thorough understanding of the trajectory of certain personalities as well as of a variety of political, economic, religious or cultural issues. Moreover, in the field of modern diplomacy, despite the existence of a large bibliography focussing on the analysis of administrative rather than private typology, it is no less true to say that a good part of these studies have only penetrated as far as the epidermis of document description. These studies do
not deal with questions and considerations that would allow a more thorough understanding of writing as a social practice\textsuperscript{11}.

Consequently, there is a lack of in-depth understanding of the meanings and functions of epistolary writing, of the material characteristics of such testimony, and of how much it offers us in terms of different levels of competence and textual culture; that is, in the particularities that each comma of the written word implies, as contemplated from the point of view of the dialectical tension between epistolary norms and actual practices. In previous works I have touched upon the content of discourse related to epistolary material with the intention of revealing the role it plays in the panorama of renaissance literary culture\textsuperscript{12}. This time, however, I would like to move beyond these reflections in order to focus more specifically on the materiality of the letters. I wish to focus on their formal graphic make-up, without neglecting their relationship with the «discipline of the gesture» which is inherent in determined cultural manifestations, including the production of writing\textsuperscript{13}.

Before getting to the crux of the question I will proceed to highlight some of the problems that are involved in the study of letters in the early modern period. It is not the lack of documentation that is of concern but in fact quite the opposite. The vast number of conserved documents creates some difficulty when we attempt to establish accurate categories; on the one hand, because it is not easy to outline a fixed typology, and on the other because of

\textsuperscript{11} There is another instance of this in Jérôme Hayez, «"Io non so scrivere a l'amico per siloscismi". Jalons pour une lecture de la lettre marchande toscane de la fin du Moyen Âge», \textit{I Tatti Studies} (Florence), 7 (1997), p. 38.


the biases imposed by different document conservation policies. Thirdly there is the imbalance resulting from the hegemony of certain historiographical traditions. In this regard it suffices to say that many of the letters and examples of epistolary writing that have been rescued and edited, that I have omitted from my account out of necessity, involve governors, courtiers, diplomats, humanists, writers, nobles, illustrious women and businessmen. In contrast less effort has been made, though that is not to say that there has been none at all, with regard to the epistolary activity of common people. I admit that this state of affairs owes much to the multiple circumstances that have intervened in the transmission of written memory. This, however, does not exonerate the level of responsibility attributable to conceptions of history most concerned with the emergence of elite classes, underpinned by the greater access to writing which they enjoyed. To this one must add the deviation taken by numerous scholars of scribal culture, with a number of palaeographers and diplomats in the lead, who have turned a blind eye to historical evidence from the subordinate classes, privileging instead the study of elites and more solemn documents.

2. BETWEEN LETTERS AND NOTES (BILLETES)

Although the typology of epistolary writing allows for as much diversity as the topics that it deals with, in its material constitution there is one basic distinction: that between letters and short notes or \textit{billetes}. In order to discuss this further it is necessary to move away from the meanings attributed to both in contemporary vocabulary. In the \textit{Tesoro de la lengua castellana o española} (Treasury of the Castilian or Spanish Language) (1611) by Sebastián de Covarrubias, the first typology is defined as «the message which is sent in writing in any material to one who is absent». Clearly he is somewhat vague, alluding to the physical
distance involved and to the different aspects of their content, according to whether they were administrative or personal letters, formal missives or family letters, letters of payment, letters of sale or savings, provisions, letters of excommunication or other forms. On the other hand, his definition of a *billete* provides elements of a qualitative nature concerning the time of writing, the immediacy of delivery and the secrecy of communication:

Paper upon which a small amount of information was written and passed between one person and another in the same township. This was a very good invention which allowed for more confidential communication and secrets to be more easily kept, without having to trust either in third parties or servants, who on many occasions would twist the information. Indeed for this reason they were referred to as ruined messages.

Such definitions evoke the distinction which exists between material and content in these epistolary formats. While letters were generally written on folios or bi-folios that were then folded into a rectangle upon which the address was written and the seal applied, *billetes* were written on half-size sheets, fragments and «little pieces» of paper, such as those sent by the prisoner Miguel Martínez to his wife Catalina de Arciniega or the «two small *billetes*» sent by her in the following manner:

Eight days ago I sent you a *billete* in a secure box with it hidden in the floor of the box.

Afterwards I sent you an ordinary pitcher of water that contained another *billete* that was carefully covered. With this I also sent ink, such that you would not have to write your response in blood, and secured all this to a stone that was placed on the bottom of the pitcher.

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15 Covarrubias, *Tesoro*, p. 189. This definition serves as reference for the later *Diccionario de Autoridades* (1726): «small paper folded into different shapes, on which people reciprocally communicate regarding unimportant topics. Mistaken meaning in messages was avoided with their use and they were often used among relatives*, *Diccionario de Autoridades*, vol. 1, Madrid (Gredos), 1984 (facsimile edition), p. 189.

16 AGN, Inquisición, vol. 93, exp. 1, fol. 52v-53r. The husband’s *billetes* are practically illegible as they were written in his own blood, as shown by his comments in one of them: «the ink is my own blood and the pen an eye» (fols. 49-50).
It was also not unusual to use the blank reverse side of letters and other forms of writing. Of course many billetes have nevertheless been found that have the material appearance of a letter, such as messages written on sheets of small dimensions. Amongst these is the example of brother Pedro García to his mother Leonor de la Encarnación, written in octavo and sixteenmo paper but with all the characteristics and overriding particularities of epistolary writing, this being something that billetes usually lack. In terms of the immediacy of these forms of writing, they were used to transmit urgent information and satisfy the need for communication and expression in particularly problematic situations, such as in jails. The weaver Francisco Anguino was tried in 1687 by the Mexican Inquisition for being an ‘Alumbrado’ (i.e. practising the Alumbrado doctrines, a heresy which emerged in Spain in the 16th century). A couple of years previously he had used a number of «little notes» to pass on his reflections and spiritual advice to a merchant by the name of Jose de Villalta [Fig. 1]. According to the latter, Anguino confessed when the three billetes that he had kept were handed in to the inquisitors:

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18 On this point, I refer to my work «Escrito en prisión. Las escritura carcelarias en los siglos XVI y XVII», Peninsula. Revista de Estudos Ibéricos (Oporto), 0 (2003), pp. 147-170; as well as chapter IV of my book Entra la pluma y la pared. Una historia social de la escritura en los Siglos de Oro, Madrid (Akal), 2006.
Furthermore he states that at the time when he was communicating with the said Francisco Anguino, the aforementioned wrote thirteen small notes by his own hand, that were neither dated nor signed, in all of which he speaks of spiritual topics and in some asks for charity\textsuperscript{19}.

In terms of the order of discourse, the structure of the letters was more in line with epistolary rhetoric. This was notably renewed during the humanist movement and particularly as the result of the work entitled \textit{De conscribendis epistolis} (On the Writing of Letters, 1522)\textsuperscript{19}.

\textsuperscript{19} AGN, Inquisición, vol. 1551, part 2, exp. 31, fol. 465r. See the \textit{billetes} on pages 467-477.
by Erasmus, given that in previous manuals what had ended up happening was a «freezing of the epistolary genre by the administrative practice of secretaries»\(^{20}\). According to these manuals, the basic parts of a letter were as follows:

1. **Salutatio.** Comprised of the initial expression of greeting and, where appropriate, preceded by a simple cross.

2. **Captatio benevolentiae or expressio malevolentiae.** This formula serves to introduce the text alluding to previous letters or lack thereof. This is to be followed by the expression of hope for the good health of the writer, his correspondent and those close to them.

3. **Narratio.** This is the text proper, containing all arguments and news.

4. **Petitio or captatio benevolentiae.** The final formula by which the sender reiterates his good wishes for the correspondent, family members and friends.

5. **Conclusio.** Containing the date, often without the year, followed by an expression of humility or submission and final signature (subscription).

Once folded into the resulting square the recipient’s name was inscribed – on some occasions it was also written at the foot of the first side – together with the place of residence and eventually other details related to the sender. These included the postal charges, good wishes and even the date of response, when dealing with more organized and regular correspondence\(^{21}\). The following examples evidence the nature of these inscriptions. The

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\(^{21}\) As we see in the letters of Hipòlita Roís and Estefania de Requesens. Cf. *Epistolaris d’Hipòlita Roís de Liori i d’Estefania de Requesens (segle XVI)*, ed. Eulalia de Ahumada Bartlle, Valencia (Universidad de Valencia), 2003, p. 43.
majority adhere to the habitual structure, with some, including the last, being more elaborate and rhetorical:

To the most magnificent lord Luis de Azebedo, my lord, in the estate of señor Chrisóval de Azeuedo, in San Agustín Street, in Yndias, in the city of Mexico\textsuperscript{22}.

To my son Roque de Santa María, in Machuacán; who will give it to Estevan Rato, in Mexico, in San Juan Street, merchant, who will be expected to send it on, in company with Alonso Pérez, his brother\textsuperscript{23}.

To Don Diego Tabira de Toledo, may god keep you, in Mexico\textsuperscript{24}.

To my dear lady Ysabel Álbarez, in Alcalá de Henares, in the Main Street, at the house of Vítor, barber, sealed in blood\textsuperscript{25}.

To my dear gentleman Antón Pérez, barber, in the San Román district, in Seville. From Mexico City, from his son Bartolomé de Morales\textsuperscript{26}.

To my dear lady Ana Martín, in the wide street of San Biçente, at the large mill, in Seville\textsuperscript{27}.

To my mother Leonor de la Encarnación, may god protect her\textsuperscript{28}.

† To my mother Ysabel de San Juan, may god protect her, prioress of San Bernardo; if opened discharge the bearer, such that the response shall be sent in time, as shall be seen inside; and if the said prelate does not open it, it shall be returned with the bearer such that it be delivered to the vicar of said convent\textsuperscript{29}.

Of course, some letters were nevertheless written without such consideration. Indeed,\textit{billetes} were still written with similar material and textual structure to these letters. An

\textsuperscript{22} AGN, Inquisición, vol. 135, exp. 12, fol. 404r.
\textsuperscript{23} AGN, Inquisición, vol. 368 (2), fol. 588. See the letters on pp. 589-590.
\textsuperscript{24} AGN, Inquisición, vol. 360 (1), exp. 7, fol. 107v.
\textsuperscript{25} AHN, Inquisición, leg. 23, exp. 21, s. fol.
\textsuperscript{26} AGI, Indiferente General, leg. 2055, No. 27, 1, fol. 18.
\textsuperscript{27} AGI, Indiferente General, leg. 2054, No. 17, l, fol. 6.
\textsuperscript{28} AGN, Inquisición, vol. 436, fol. 440v.
\textsuperscript{29} AGN, Inquisición, vol. 436, fol. 380.
example of this is provided by the series of billetes belonging to Miguel de Piedrola y Beaumont, in which one can distinguish the different authorship of himself and his secretary, such as for instance the billete that starts «In this billete there are copies of the originals that are held by your honour», signed «Piedrola» and dated 21 August 1587\textsuperscript{30}. Billetes, however, did not typically require this level of textual formality, rather their structure was considerably more simple and lacked some of the intrinsic elements of epistolary discourse. The introduction, when used, consisted of a simple invocation taking the form of a cross, followed by a simple greeting. The subsequent text was almost always brief and precise, and commonly lacked any mention of the date or where it was written. The billete was completed with a signature that was often replaced by initials or some other expression that alluded to the relationship with the correspondent. Diego de Vítores signed his billetes to Lucrecia de León with a V\textsuperscript{31}; while Ana María Lagunas from Zaragoza, the descendant of a low ranking noble family, put «your slave» on some billetes she sent to Diego Jerónimo Montaner, a public notary and her future husband\textsuperscript{32}.

Putting to one side Italy’s decline as noted by Armando Petrucci\textsuperscript{33}, the exploration of the Hispanic environment corroborates the intensity and persistence of this epistolary form throughout the 16th and 17th centuries. In many cases this form was associated with the transmission of messages of love, with women being the principal protagonists. This relationship must have been quite noteworthy given it was one of the main reasons given by

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\item \textsuperscript{30} AHN, Inquisición, Council, leg. 3712\textsuperscript{1} no. 2, 6th piece, no.8, s. fols.
\item \textsuperscript{31} AHN, Inquisición, leg. 1152, exp.4.
\item \textsuperscript{32} Diego Navarro Bonilla, «Los archivos del sentimiento: función y representaciones de billetes y papeles de amor en la Edad Moderna», Pliegos de Bibliofilia (Madrid), 22 (2003), pp. 26-31; and the same author’s Del corazón a la pluma. Archivos y papeles privados femeninos en la Edad Moderna, Salamanca (Universidad de Salamanca), 2004.
\item \textsuperscript{33} As presented in his unpublished lecture Per uno studio grafico e materiale della comunicazione scritta. Esperienze e prospettive, delivered to the seminar on Scrittura e comunicazione. I carteggi pubblici e privati dal Medioevo all’età contemporanea, Prato, 8-13 September 2003, organised by the Istituto di Studi Storici Postali and the Archivio di Stato of Prato.
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Juan de la Cerda for advising against teaching women how to write:

Besides writing being unnecessary, I would not like to see it being used by women; not because that would be wrong in itself, but rather because it affords them the opportunity to write billetes and respond to those sent to them by frivolous men.\(^\text{34}\)

Along with this, its presence in documentary collections of the era constitutes the truest face of a practice thoroughly represented in contemporary literature, especially with regard to the love-related themes of many works. Proof of this is provided by the following dialogue, taken from the play El pregonero de Dios y patriarca de los pobres (God’s preacher and patriarch of the poor, 1684) by Francisco de Acevedo, a work that speaks to the life and work of St. Francis de Assisi which, at the time, was classified by the Inquisition in Mexico as «very repugnant» and «injurious to the seraphic sanctity of the glorious patriarch St. Francis»:

\begin{verbatim}
IRENE: Did you give the paper
LUCRECIA: Yes, my lady
to Don Francisco in his hand
and I told him your brother
was not at home now,
begging him to come
to see you before ten,
without any concern since
the night favours us.\(^\text{35}\)
\end{verbatim}

3. NO CROOKED LINES NOR UNTIDY CHARACTERS

Epistolary manuals and forms recommended the order that letters should adhere to in

\(^{34}\) Juan de la Cerda, Libro intitulado: Vida política de todos los estados de mugeres..., Alcalá de Henares (Juan Gracián), 1599, fol. 12v.

\(^{35}\) AGN, Inquisición, vol. 1508, exp. 8, fols. 169-170.
order to fulfil their social function. This social function depended significantly upon abiding by the rules of the agreement; that is to say, on how well the author adopted a style which, according to Gaspar de Tejeda, showed no trace of affectation\textsuperscript{36}, made the purpose of each message comprehensible and was well-adapted to the social status of the recipient. Antonio de Torquemada provided an insightful summary when he stated that he who began writing a letter must invest all of his knowledge into it, and keep in the forefront of his mind the following questions «Who, to whom, why, what, when, by what means»\textsuperscript{37}. Emanuele Tesauro, another writer of this genre, was also very clear when he set out the terms that letters must use, according to the nature of the addressee:

In regard to the person being written to, it certainly true that one must use different terms when writing to a lord, one’s inferior or peer. Because one writes to a lord in terms of submission, reverence, humility, obedience, supplication and attention.

To an inferior, lordly terms of authority, instruction and imposition are to be used, while showing a willingness to reward them and value their service, diligence and loyalty.

To peers courteous and urbane terms are to be used, expressing cordial affection and one’s eternal willingness to be of assistance, with affectionate offers of service, prayers and the like\textsuperscript{38}.

\textsuperscript{36} Gaspar de Tejeda, \textit{Cosa nueva. Primera libro de cartas mensageras en estilo cortesano para diversos fines y propósitos, con los títulos y cortesías que se usan en todos los estados}, Valladolid (Sebastián Martínez), 1553, fol. 103v.


\textsuperscript{38} Emanuele Tesauro, \textit{Arte de cartas misivas, o método general para reducir al papel quantas materias pide el politico comercio}, Valencia (Jaime de Bordazar), 1696, pp. 17-18. As indicated by Manuel Salamanca López, «La "forma accidental" en el Arte de cartas misivas de Emanuele Tesauro», in Saez & Castillo Gómez, \textit{Correspondencia en la historia}, p. 276, the first known Italian edition of this work was printed in Bologna in 1669, although it is clear from the preliminaries that, despite censorship, a previous version must exist. For different details of this work, see also Maria Luisa Doglio, «Lettera e "arte epistolare". L’Arte delle lettere missive di Emanuele Tesauro», in her book \textit{L’arte delle lettere. Idea e pratica della scrittura epistolare tra Quattro e Seicento}, Bologna (II Mulino), 2000, pp. 217-223.
This respect implied familiarity with a grammar of communication essential to ensure that the text be understood and that it be linked to its sender without any suspicion in this regard. This was especially important given the impersonation of writers that often occurred in diplomatic correspondence. According to Don Luis de Haro, this is what Cardinal Mazarin attempted in the dialogue he pursued with Spain throughout 1659 in order to obtain a peace treaty between Spain and France. In some of his letters Don Luis alludes to tricks used by the French minister and, in particular, his constant pretence to appear as a friend of the Spanish monarchy. He even went so far as to falsify letters to make them appear to be of royal origin:

It is manifestly recognized that all these letters are at the disposition of the Cardinal and minuted in order that there be conformity. Besides all that they make known, in the King’s letters there are many clauses that, judging by their substance and the terms used, as well as some other circumstances, provide proof that considering his age, these letters cannot be from him. The cardinal, in his attempt to make me believe the opposite, usually when reading them mispronounces four or five lines and, in other occasions, leaves entire chapters unread, as he wishes to make it understood that they are regarding private matters that cannot be communicated to me, as they are of an intrinsically confidential nature. In these and many other similar situations the major challenge was not to hear them but to pretend that all is believed (as I do), praising the great favour shown him by the King and the Queen and how justly he deserves it.

Luis de Haro points out that these letters contained many clauses that could not have been Mazarin’s work. Indeed Mazarin was cunning enough to hide this by

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39 Louis XIV was 20 years old.
40 Letter from Don Luis de Haro to Philip IV (Fuenterrabía, 3-VIII-1659), AGS, Estadío, France, K 1623: 65. See Don Luis Méndez de Haro y Guzmán, Letters from the Pyrenees. Don Luis Méndez de Haro’s Correspondence to Philip IV of Spain, July to November 1659, ed. Lynn Williams, Exeter (University of Exeter Press), 2000, p. 53.
omitting the expressions that would have betrayed him. Thus he demonstrated the importance placed upon epistolary «status», because letters were not «all the same, but rather different in accordance with the obvious differences between us and the persons to whom we are writing»\textsuperscript{41}. Both form and style allowed one to identify the origin and purpose of each letter, moreover these were a means to make power and distinction more explicit and visible. Greater formality was to be found in diplomatic correspondence and in epistolary exchanges that were more subject to courtly etiquette\textsuperscript{42}. In these circumstances not just any old style of paper or ink was appropriate nor could one be careless with the handwriting and scrawl «untidy letters». This was evidenced by Antonio de Guevara in his work Epístolas familiares (Familiar Letters) in which he disapproves of the way a gentleman writes his letters:

> Let it be known, Sir, that the conditions of your letter were as follows: the paper was coarse; the ink, white; the lines crooked; the letters untidy and words crossed out; such that either you Sir, must have written it by moonlight, or else it was written by an inexperienced child at school\textsuperscript{43}.

With the letter in such disarray, it appeared not to have been written by him nor could it fulfil the social function inherent in the established conventions of the epistolary manuals. These treatises regulated the language employed to make it as least affected as possible. They also spoke to the relationship between the page and

\textsuperscript{41} Torquemada, Manual de escribientes, p. 135.

\textsuperscript{42} On this point, I refer to the classic work of Norbert Elias, The Court Society, ed. Stephen Mennell, Dublin (University College Dublin Press), 2006. With respect to the sense of distinction sought in epistolary and civility manuals see Roger Chartier, Libros, lecturas y lectores en la Edad Moderna, Madrid (Alianza), 1993, especially chapters 8 & 9.

\textsuperscript{43} Antonio de Guevara, Epístolas familiares, Antwerp (Martín Nucio), [1544], f. 35r. Relating to Guevara’s correspondence, Augustin Redondo, «El arte epistolar de Fray Antonio de Guevara: del Marco Aurelio a las Epístolas familiares» in Fray Antonio de Guevara y la cultura del Renacimiento en Galicia, Lugo (Diputación Provincial), 1993, pp. 93-114.
the text by dictating norms related to the blank spaces, the alignment of the writing, as well as the characters themselves. Antonio de Torquemada said of the characters used that they should «be a good size, neither too big nor too small, beautiful, even, clear to the extent that they can be easily read, separated from each other and in accordance with the time and place that they were written»[44]. These instructions implied that one could not avoid writing a draft prior to the letter itself. Indeed some texts prescribed this such as the Instrucción (Instruction) written by Pietro Gaetano when he was serving the Prince of Parma Alessandro Farnese (c. 1583):

Briefly list the topics that have come to mind or about which you wish to write.

While writing the letter one should cross each topic off the list as its chapter is written.

One must also write a list of the people to be addressed so that one’s memory does not fail.

In the case of letters that will be shown to others, refrain from referring to business or other matters that one wishes to keep private. Letters that contain different topics are to be written using chapters and not continuous text. Once letters are written, one should avoid sealing them until they are sent via the post, thus one can avoid topics to write about from piling up and instead one can add them to the current letter as they come to mind[45].

The epitome of this model can be found in those letters in which the page and the text combine harmoniously in a graphic solemnity which reinforces the figurative aspect of the writing, something that is valuable in and for itself[46]. Among examples of these are the letter

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reproduced by the graduate Pascal to Carlos I (Reyes, 2-V-1549) [Fig. 2]47; one written by the secretary Francisco de Eraso to Don García de Toledo, viceroy and captain-general in Catalonia (Brussels, 7-IV-1559)-1748; and another from Carlos I to Juan de la Cerda (Ratisbon, 27-II-1541)49. In this example, royal status is expressed in the careful humanistic cursive hand of the secretary, and the holographic signature of the sovereign. It appears, too, in the central alignment of the text and its even spacing, the regularity of the lines and the visibility provided by the harmonious disposition of blank spaces. If we add to this the eventual selection of a truly calligraphic script, it brings out even more clearly the connection between this type of letter and its solemnity in which the visual construction of the document was a means with which to symbolize power and status50. Beyond the graphical element, in these letters one had to take great care with epistolary style, this also being an element allowing for the evocative capacity that António Vieira describes. As Saavedra Fajardo expressed it when referring to secretaries, it was not only a question of «painting the letters», but rather of working more broadly including consultation, provision and perfecting the materials:

47 AHN, Diverse Collections, 23, no. 28.
48 AHN, Diverse Collections, 73-1 (6).
Fig. 2. Letter from graduate Pascal to Carlos I (Reyes 2-V-1549). AHN, Diverse Collections, 23, Num. 28, fol. 1r.
Understanding, not the pen itself, is the role of the secretary. If it were simply a question of writing the letters, then printers would be good secretaries. The secretary’s role is to consult, provide and perfect the topics for discussion. He represents one hand of the prince’s will and is an instrument of his government; a means by which he indicates his decisions [...]

Obviously this *modus operandi* manifested itself differently, according to the situation of the writer, the moment in which they were writing the letter or as a result of its particular typology. In fact, it is quite common for the margins not to respect the extent of blank space recommended in the epistolary manuals, and for the writing to cover the whole of the page. Everything depended upon the specific motives for each letter, so that adapting to the epistolary code was closely connected with the search for a certain distinction or a request for some favour. Petitions and correspondence sent to the most powerful people adhered most closely to the model. To obtain the expected favour the petitioner was forced to assume his own social and judicial inferiority and to make it explicit in the language employed and in the structure of the epistolary discourse. As a result it was not unusual for many letters of petition to be drafted by professional writers.

Holographic writing exalted the relationship between the correspondents by

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52 Amongst numerous examples, I cite one which demonstrates the nature of a few of them, in the official sphere - a letter by Juan de Vega to Philip II (Mesina, 16-VIII-1556; BFZ, Altamira, 154, D2); in the private sphere, another by the *beata* María Bautista to her brother Pedro García, a medical doctor, written from prison (Toledo, 30-V-[1639]; AHN, Inquisición, leg. 102, exp. 2, fol. 67).

53 This can been seen in various petitions from the Dominican Juan Vargas Machuca, accused by the inquisition of Peru in the city of Reyes, to the King and Inquisitor General. AHN, Inquisición, leg. 16471, exp. 6, no. 4. I have also dealt with this epistolary typology in Antonio Castillo Gómez, «Escrito en prisión», pp. 154-157. For fuller information, see the contributions in Cecilia Nubola & Andreas Würgler, (eds.), *Suppliche e «gravamina». Politica, amministrazione, giustizia in Europa (secoli XIV-XVIII)*, Bologna (Il Mulino), 2002; and Paola Repetti, «Scrivere ai potenti. Suppliche e memoriali a Parma (secoli XVI-XVIII)», in Alfred Messerli & Roger Chartier (eds.), *Lesen und Schreiben in Europa 1500-1900. Vergleichende Perspektiven. Perspectives comparées. Perspettive comparate*, Basel (Schwabe), 2000, pp. 401-428.
personalizing each letter. The handwriting represented the person and transmitted the respect, consideration and affection being offered to the recipient. Doña Leonor Maldonado made note of this when identifying letters written by her sister Doña Isabel, an emigrant in Mérida (New Spain), alleging that she «knew her handwriting and signature very well» in as much as she had seen her write and sign in other circumstances.54 Moreover, Philip II was grateful for the holographic nature of a letter from his daughter Doña Catalina because through this he was able to perceive the improvement in her health: «You did very well to write to me, and for the doctors to give you permission to do so, as it alleviated much of my concern, in as much as the handwriting was so good that I could not recognize your poor health in it»55. On the other hand, the opposite might prove to be the case, that is, an inability to recognize handwriting often aroused certain concerns. Ultimately this is what happened to Doña Urraca regarding a letter from her husband Pedro Álvarez de Sotomayor:

My composure was significantly unsettled upon the arrival of the marquis’ errand boy, for he brought me a letter the handwriting of which I did not recognize nor did the signature appear to be yours.56

In this sense holographic writing guaranteed the privacy of epistolary exchanges, which explains the reiterated lack of trust towards scribal mediators. To the famous literary testimony of Teresa Panza, constantly wary of putting her letters in the hands of the errand boy or priest57, can be added more tangible and less imaginary examples.

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Maria de los Reyes from Seville was conscious of these issues in the letters she sent to her husband Francisco Riberos who was a sailor and emigrant in Veracruz: «Given I write as one who knows how to write, I will tell of everything I feel in my soul»\(^58\). Beyond this there is the precise observation in some letters stating that this «letter is by my own hand»\(^59\). This no doubt expresses a degree of satisfaction at having attained some literary competence and therefore not having to rely on intermediaries.

In the environment of courtly and diplomatic correspondence, holographic writing, whether or not it affected part or all of a letter, «constituted a sign of deference in terms of the care taken with court language. Indeed the number of lines written in the author’s hand allowed one to quantify the esteem the correspondent felt the recipient deserved»\(^60\). One letter from the archbishop of Seville Don Diego de Deza y Tavera to Don Pedro Fernández de Córdoba, first marquis of Priego, written between 1512 and 1515, is noteworthy. In this example one can appreciate the difference between the part written by the secretary, in a transitional gothic-humanistic script, compared to the section written by the prelate, which is in the usual italics\(^61\). Amongst other things the holographic influence is testimony to a form of government closely linked to writing and expression via manuscript annotations. Many

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58 Letter from María de los Reyes to her husband Francisco Riberos (1617). AGN, Inquisición, vol. 325, s. fol. Cf. Rocío Sánchez Rubio & Isabel Testón Núñez, El hilo que une. Las relaciones epistolares en el Viejo y el Nuevo Mundo (Siglos XVI-XVIII), Cáceres (Universidad de Extremadura) and Mérida (Editora regional de Extremadura), 1999, p. 294.
59 Ibíd., p.32.
60 Fernando Bouza, Corre manuscrito. Una historia cultural del Siglo de Oro, Madrid (Marcial Pons), 2001, p. 138.
61 Romero Tallafigo et al, Arte de leer escrituras antiguas, plate 54. This work also contains a reproduction and transcription of a letter in humanist script from Don Gonzalo Fernández de Córdoba, ‘el Gran Capitán’, to his nephew don Pedro (c. 1513), which corroborates the above.
examples of this can be observed in the diplomatic correspondence of Philip II: «everything said here is good», «Çayas already mentioned this to me» are both annotations handwritten by Philip II in the margin of a letter dated 9 March 1579. Added to this is the confidentiality of a significant portion of the political and diplomatic information transmitted via epistolary means. Indeed such correspondence made use of such a complex systems of ciphers that some letters had to be accompanied by a code book and other notes containing keys that were essential to decipher them. One of the most common procedures used consisted of moving and mixing up the characters in the text, according to rules agreed to by the correspondents. Another procedure used was to assign a value to combinations of letters and symbols or to place a numerical value on each letter. Luis de Zapata referred to a variety of these in his work *Miscelánea* (Miscellany, circa 1593):

There are probably as many different methods of encryption as there are fish in the sea.

Some move the vowels; others the consonants and others disrupt everything. Another way is to add nonsensical letters in every third or fourth place simply to make reading unclear and more difficult. Some invent new characters, other ways include writing that can only be read with water, writing with tallow such that it can only be read when put on burnt paper and another in which the lines are read in reverse. Yet more include reading the message on the reverse side of the paper, reading from the bottom to the top or from the top down. Some require lemon or orange juice to be applied, so they cannot be read unless held up to a flame or heated in the sun. Yet more ways include using the first, last, third, fourth

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or fifth letter of each line to spell out a message. Another uses windows in the page in which only the letters that can be seen through the window are to be read. These methods are useful and necessary in correspondence related to war and business. If current insightful letters fall into the hands of the enemy, *non videant, et audientes non intelligent* [the readers do not see and the listeners cannot understand]; it is however necessary that the correspondents have the code book65.

4. LANGUAGES AND WRITING

Leaving encryption to one side, let us ask what the languages of Hispanic epistolary communication in the Golden Age were and what was the relationship between the individual and the practice of writing? Without a doubt the language *par excellence* was Castilian given the significance of this old kingdom in the political and administrative construction of the Empire. Nevertheless, in terms of diplomatic relations the territories in question required the use of Latin as the *lingua franca*. This was explained by Saavedra Fajardo when he listed the capacities that a good secretary needed:

> It would seem that King Alonso wanted his secretary not only to be able to write Latin but also to speak it, given its importance in his dealings with other nations. In these times when the Spanish monarchy has spread into foreign provinces and kingdoms it is very necessary, given the frequency of correspondence in Latin66.

On the other hand, Latin’s linguistic survival occurred especially in specific environments within the church, principally in correspondence addressed to the Papacy and to other high ranking ecclesiastical representatives. This was also the case in the exchanges


within the republic of letters, as can be seen in, amongst others, the correspondence of Francisco de Enzinas and Hernán Núñez de Guzmán. Quite distinct from this is the incidental adoption of Latin in headings and closing formulas or in quotations and proverbs, for the most part of biblical origin, introduced in numerous letters.

Alongside Latin one must consider the use of other languages in relations with the different relevant states of the period. Particular circumstances highlighted the relevant functions performed by differing intermediaries and, especially, translators. This importance has been noted, for example, in the diplomatic correspondence between Spain and Morocco during the last third of the 16th century and the first few years of the 17th century. In this period it was fairly common practice for letters to be written in Castilian with the Sultan validating them in Arabic. People known to him would serve this purpose, as well as at times unknown people such as Jews and Moors who had been either expelled or taken prisoner. In one letter from the Duke of Medina Sidonia to Philip III (1605), the former comments that it is novel that the letters of sheriff (Jerife) Muley Bufres included the translated version:

Alonso Marín from Morocco just arrived having travelled via Safy in an English ship [...] via him I received a response from sheriff Muley Buferes in the form of an original letter. The letter had been translated, which was something new and not commonly used by sheriffs in the correspondence I have had with them.

Other situations of graphical bilingualism emanated from the plurality of the languages spoken and written in the Hispanic world. Indeed some, though not many, letters written in

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Galician are to be found amongst the correspondence of Pedro Álvarez de Sotomayor. The majority were written in Castilian and yet still contain some Galician expressions and grammatical features. For the same reason there were letters circulating in the American dominions that were completely or partially written in indigenous languages, especially in internal correspondence but also in correspondence between local indigenous leaders and the Spanish viceroy or monarch. Along with this one must take account of the idiomatic peculiarities of each place of origin, a reflection of the interaction between written and spoken text in numerous letters, especially private ones. As has been indicated in other documents, in letters from emigrants from Andalusia and in those of the inhabitants of New Spain it is quite common to confuse liquid consonants /l/ and /r/ when one precedes another or to lose the phoneme sound /d/ when in an intervocalic position.

In the study of letters as expressions of the scribal culture of a specific time, it is evident that their materiality offers invaluable testimony about both the literary competency of the writers and their social distribution, as well as the intensity of their letter-writing habits. The growth of literacy and the multiplication of the means of access to writing in the 16th and 17th centuries produced a very varied scribal reality, especially in the area of personal writing. In the majority of cases of personal writing it is difficult to ascribe them to a specific graphic type; on the contrary they afford the clearest reflection of the inherent dynamism of the writing phenomenon and of the consequent limitations of palaeographic nomenclature to describe different levels of appropriation.

If we firstly consider the letters written by some humanists and men of letters, they

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70 Rolf Eberenz, & Mariela de la Torre, *Conversaciones estrechamente vigiladas. Interacción coloquial y español oral en las actas inquisitoriales de los siglos XV a XVII*, Zaragoza (Pòrtico), 2003, pp. 113-114.
frequently adopt a \textit{mise en page} distributed in three areas which correspond to the three parts of the epistolary order: the proem, the discourse and the end or, as Tesauro describes it, the head, the body and the tail or finishing point\textsuperscript{71}. The writing utilized is normally described as humanistic cursive, in some testimonies with distinct gothic influences, either courtly at the beginning of the 16th century or notarial at a later stage. If we take into consideration letters sent by Arias Montano to the graduate Juan de Grial, dated respectively 5 February 1581 and 1\textsuperscript{st} December 1583 [Fig. 3]\textsuperscript{72}, or others by the musicians Francisco Guerrero and Tomás Luis de Victoria to the dean and chapter of the cathedral of Jaén\textsuperscript{73}, the following aspects become clear: on one hand, the script used corresponds to a compressed chancery type of humanistic cursive, inclined to the right and with close ligatures, and on the other, the regularity and balance of the \textit{mise en texte}. In regard to other linguistic details one must highlight the various forms of punctuation, whether this be to indicate abbreviations (av. \textit{s°}, a vuestro señor [to our lord]), final full stop or the marking of oral or breathing pauses. Other forms of punctuation include the regular use of abbreviations for contraction (\textit{Fran}, Francisco; \textit{por q}, por que [because]), superscript (\textit{s°}, señor [lord]); the use of enclitics (\textit{suplicolos}) and of proclitics (\textit{lesirva}), the use of capital letters for proper names and to phonetically distinguish the rolled \textit{/r/} (as in \textit{Recopilado, Racionero, Reciba}). Similarly, letters from Luis Vives, the ultimate in humanistic elegance, show repeated use of punctuation marks and abbreviations, dexterity in the graphic features, connections and ligatures between characters and recourse to capitals as means of structuring the discourse\textsuperscript{74}. In summary there are a series of aspects that are common

\textsuperscript{71} Tesauro, \textit{Arte de cartas misivas}, pp. 12-15 & 20.
\textsuperscript{72} IAN/TT, Casa Cadaval, liv. 18, fols. 27-30.
\textsuperscript{74} As one example, his letter dated Antwerp, 6 September 1535, reproduced and commented on in Ángel Riesco Terrero, Elisa Ruiz García, Jésus Domínguez Aparicio & Ana Belén Sánchez Prieto, \textit{Aproximación a la cultura escrita. Material de apoyo}, Madrid (Playor), 1995, pp. 81 (photo) & 191-192 (paleographic and diplomatic commentary).
to writing by people of similar social condition that also appear in the various letters from the future bishop of Osuna Sebastián Pérez to the graduate Juan Grial dated at different times in 1582. Here scriptural competence is manifested in the general composition of the text, as well as in the linguistic sufficiency indicated by the separation of the words and optimal use of different orthographic resources.\(^75\)

At the opposite pole from these testimonies, others reveal the inexperience of the writer and his lack of continuous writing practice. Such letters correspond to an inexpert level and are characterized by their exaggerated characters, to such an extent that they sometimes appear to be more like drawings than writing.\(^76\) In these examples there is constant interaction with colloquial language, limited use of orthographic signs and few other abbreviations except of the conjugation *que* (that, abbreviated as q with a line above it). The syllabic word separation and their irregular ligatures are unequivocal signs of the oral genesis of the written text and its dictation. Also the uncertain use of capitals is very common, which could be taken as a mark of pronunciation and not merely an example of literary incompetence, and so is the displacement of some phonemes, especially the liquid consonants /l/ and /r/. If we are to consider, for example, the letters from Andrés de Cepeda Negrete to his first wife Isabel Álvarez, the painful writing experience is glimpsed in the inclined script and in the inability to keep a straight line.

\(^{75}\) IAN(IT, Casa Cadaval, liv. 18, fols. 103-108.

Fig. 3. Letter from Benito Arias Montano to the graduate Juan de Grial (La Peña de Aracena, l-XII-1583). IAN/IT, Casa Cadaval, liv. 18, fol. 29.
Beyond this we see other examples; the substitution of the phoneme /q/ for /c/ (esqrebir), the irregular word separation, the numerous mistakes in the joining and hyphenation of words (Madrid, ma-nil), the continuity of the text without any hierarchy of topics or information and the absence of any element that contributes to its internal organization [fig. 4]. These particularities are similar to those that we can observe in a letter from Lázaro García to Manuel Becerra, dated July 1645, in which the writing suggests that the practice is unfamiliar and fatiguing for the writer, something that was often the case in sections of society with lower rates of literacy. In this letter one can note the lack of punctuation as well as the abnormal separation of words, as well as phonetic alterations. Regarding this one should also take note of substitution of the phoneme /q/ for /c/ (gonosi or quriistobal) as well as the displacement of the /r/ in a postvocalic position (Gaspra for Gaspar) [Fig. 5].

77 AHN, Inquisición, leg. 23, file.1, s. fols. The file includes two letters, one dated in Granada on 16 June 1570 and the other with no date but written around the same time.

78 AGN, Inquisición, vol. 463, file 3, fol. 43r. According to Marquillas, Faculdade das Letras, pp. 245-248, the same phenomenon can be observed in Portuguese testimonies.
4. Letter from Andrés de Cepeda Negrete to his first wife [Granada, after the 16-06-1570]. AHN, Inquisition, leg. 23, file 1, s. fol.
Fig. 5. Letter from Lázaro García to Manuel Becerra (July 1645). AGN, Inquisition, vol. 463, file. 3, fol. 43r.
Beyond the concrete difficulties derived from physical limitations, the features listed above may indicate deficiencies in the process of learning to write or the inhabitual practice of this skill. Perhaps the author had never internalized the need to write, because other circumstances intervened or because the person had a secretary at their disposal. Similarly one can understand the differing degrees of writing competence evident in letters and billetes from Miguel de Piedrola y Beaumont dependent upon whether it was he or his secretary that was writing:

The secretary is studying in the Teatinos College and for that reason I write a copy of the letter, which was not taught me by ordinary teachers, as you can see this grace is owed to God as I have never ever had anyone teach me words, through simply knowing ordinary letters it was through the fire in my heart that I was persuaded to write, in this matter I speak no less truth than your honour would expect.79

Evidence that invalidates any temptation to associate levels of scribal capacity with social status is provided by a letter from Carlos II to Don Juan Francisco de la Cerda Enríquez de la Ribera, eighth duke of Medinaceli (Madrid, 21-II-1678). In this letter, the exaggerated characters, their complete separation, the irregular breakup of words (prime-r, line 6; mandado, line 10) and some orthographic errors (forgetting the phoneme /l/ in the article el, line 3) unequivocally indicate scribal inexperience on the part of a king known for his mental incapacity, a king who at nine years of age still could not read or write80.

In summary, letters reflect the scribal variations inherent in different levels of

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79 AHN, Inquisición, Council, leg. 37123 No.2, 6a piece, no.8, s. fol.
80 See a reproduction of the letter in Romero Tallafígo et al, Arte de leer escrituras antiguas, plate 77, where it is classified as humanist cursive script. Personally, I believe that it is better considered as inexpert writing, this being the typical level of a semi-literate person. Handwriting that is just as careless can be seen in the epistolary testimonies from Prince Don Carlos, one example being his letter to the high commander Luis de Requesens, Ambassador in Rome (Madrid, 18-II-1567), IVDJ, E. 38, doc. 40. I owe this reference to the kindness of Santiago Martínez Hernández.
appropriation and the written interpretations developed by each individual. This circumstance
is manifested especially in the variety of common writing styles and the impossibility of
slotting them into rigid categories. Examples of this can be found in many epistolary
testimonies of emigrants to the Americas. Amongst others we may cite the letters of
Bartolomé Flórez, Pedro Martín, Diego Martín and Doña María de Esquivel y Castañeda, even
though in the latter case there is a substantial difference between the handwritten signature and
the rest, written by another hand. This however does not mean that we should overlook the
repercussions of social status in the access to writing and, in the end, in the character of the
written testimonies. The reiteration of some orthographic, morpho-syntactic and lexical
features in the epistolary documents of common people, as well as the «apparently untidy
succession of information and juxtaposed communicative expressions », are the clearest
demonstration of how foreign the habit of writing was and how unequal the acquisition of
literacy. These, in summary, were affected by class and gender discrimination.

Regarding letters written by women, it is not a question of suggesting that all observed
the same scribal characteristics, as this would be tantamount to thinking there existed a
feminine style of writing that ignored the social class to which one belonged and the
inequalities therein contained. In fact female literacies could differ quite markedly and they
developed in different situations. The repercussions of this were indisputable and certainly
explain why, in the eyes of their contemporaries, the writing of women was classified in
different terms. Doña Mariana de Morguiz declared, in a letter to her father Juan Rodríguez,
that women were less «practiced when it comes to writing» compared to men (Mexico, 26-IV-
1562). Similarly, Pedro de Mayorzo was contemptuous in his classification of women’s

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81 AGI, Indiferente, 2050, no. 18; 2054, no. 17; 2050, no. 21, and 2065, no. 84.
82 Petrucci, La ciencia de la escritura, p. 92.
83 Enrique Otte, Cartas privadas de emigrantes a Indias, 1540-1616, Jerez-Cádiz (Junta de Andalucía,
writing when he asked his wife, Isabel de Herrera, resident in Triana, to advise if she wished to
go with him, by means of a letter that should be «well written, not by a woman, so that it can
be understood» (San Juan de Ulúa, 9-II-1594)⁸⁴. For their part Juana Rodríguez Barroso and
Francisca de Vergara apologized for their poor calligraphy adding that they could not remedy
it due to the lack of scribes: «Another letter I write to your worship that has been delivered by
my lady Doña Mençia de Ayala, forgive my writing your worship there are not often scribes at
hand to write»⁸⁵. At any rate, her writing did not differ greatly from the notarial script
employed by many of her male contemporaries.

The scribal features shown by these women who lacked writing familiarity were quite
similar to those we commented on when referring to inexpert writing. These features include
the exaggerated size of characters, inappropriate word separation, the uninterrupted discourse,
the orthographic incompetence and the lack of knowledge regarding the «grammar of
legibility», these being understood as the necessary procedures to ensure a text is understood.
Such characteristics can be observed in the letters of María de Bazán and Catalina de Jesús⁸⁶,
as well as in letters by Francisca de Vergara⁸⁷ and in billetes from Doña Mariana de Vera⁸⁸. If
we focus in more detail on a letter from Francisca de Vergara to her husband Roque de Santa
María (Seville, 7-IV- [1604]) it is worth noting the complete lack of connection between
characters, as well as their size and a lack of graphic expertise bordering on drawing [Fig. 6].

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Fig. 6  Letter from Francisca de Vergara to her husband Roque de Santa María (Seville 7-IV-

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⁸⁴ Ibid., no. 199, p. 179.
⁸⁵ AGN, Inquisición, vol. 368 (2), fol. 589-591. The letter from Juana Rodriguez Barroso is in AGN,
Inquisición, vol. 184, exp. 11, fol. 254.
⁸⁶ I refer to my work «Del tratado a la práctica», pp. 96-100.
⁸⁸ AGN, Inquisición, vol. 486 (part 1a), fols. 3-4 & 29.
Even though her execution is more fluid, the syllabic division is also a noteworthy feature in a letter from the marquise of Mondéjar to the archbishop of Granada Don Pedro Vaca de Castro (Madrid, 17-IV-1595). Undoubtedly, other testimonies written by women – such as Hipòlita Rois, Estefania de Requesens or the Empress María of Austria – provide evidence of more regular practice. Features would include the speed of the handwriting, correct humanistic letter formation and knowledge of current abbreviations, as well as other orthographic, morpho-syntactic and discursive competencies featured in letters of superior quality.

Having said this, it is also not unexpected that private letters reflect multiple authorship that in turn reflects the different people who have intervened in them. In fact in correspondence between relatives there are many examples of testimonies containing the hands of a number of different children and parents. These letters confront us with the graphic pluralism of a specific period, and especially with a practice that was understood to be based in the family or the community. Then there are letters written by a number of hands that lent themselves to a shared readership and to being read aloud, thus constructing a certain scribal community. These links were reinforced by messages and communiqués as well as subsequent reading by different correspondents:

I am writing this to my lord Vallserà; it stays open so that you can read it, you should also show it to my lord Camós and then, as usual, wait for him to read it and observe his reaction, and I hope that, however he may try to conceal it, he will say or reveal something [...]..

In its role as carrier of news and family messages, ambassador of ideas and political messenger, the letter took on its importance when it reached the hands of its recipient. In that

89 IAN/TT, Casa Cadaval, liv.18, fols. 224-225.
moment the materiality of that letter operated as an important foundation upon which to portray or represent the sender. To make oneself visible through epistolary writing required that one safeguard the protocol pursued in the art of letter writing. Respect for this art affected the interior of the letter, that is to say the «style, topic, reasons, concepts, modes, terms, titles and compliments», given to the person «to whom the letter is written, to he who wrote it and to the matter discussed»\(^{92}\). It also affected the «exterior»\(^{93}\), that is to say, the format of the letter, the type of script and paper used, the relationship between the text and the page, the organisation of the writing and even the way in which it was folded and sealed. In summary, it affected everything transmitted by its material constitution and this was linked to the social status and graphic education of the writer.

\(^{92}\) Tesauro, *Arte de cartas misivas*, p. 18.