




RESEARCH ARTICLE

Letters of challenge: displayed writing, urban public space and honour culture in seventeenth-century Madrid

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Abstract

Focusing on seventeenth-century Madrid, this article explores the interplay between urban public space and a specific type of written defamatory statements, the *carteles de desafío* or letters of challenge, with the aim of examining the implications of this interaction. Letters of challenge were primarily conceived as a communication tool between the participants in duels and challenges. Displayed in public spaces, they could take on new meanings and even replace the combat itself, while at the same time perpetuating the values of a male honour culture that encouraged the use of violence among large sectors of society to settle disputes.

Material culture in the form of written texts was ubiquitous in public spaces of the Renaissance and early modern cities. Over the last decades, and largely inspired by Armando Petrucci's ground-breaking works on urban public writing,¹ scholarship dealing with the study of displayed writings in the early modern period has paid particular attention to the political, cultural and social contexts in which these texts were produced; to their forms, functions and uses; as well as to the implications arising from their presence in urban public spaces.² As shown by Antonio Castillo Gómez in his analysis of public writing in the early modern Hispanic world, inscriptions and ephemeral writings were displayed in the streets and squares, on walls, buildings and monuments, playing a paramount role as communication channels within cities and towns.³ The use of public space to make visible and

¹A. Petrucci, *Public Lettering: Script, Power, and Culture*, trans. L. Lappin (Chicago and London, 1993). Originally published as *La scrittura. Ideologia e rappresentazione* (Turin, 1980, 1986).

²A. Castillo Gómez, 'Words on walls: an approach to exposed writing in early modern Europe', *Journal of Early Modern Studies*, 9 (2020), 57–82; and B. Fraenkel, 'Catastrophe writings: in the wake of September 11', in M. Dalbello and M. Shaw (eds.), *Visible Writings: Cultures, Forms, Readings* (New Brunswick, New Jersey and London, 2011), 306.

³A. Castillo Gómez, 'Writings on the streets: ephemeral texts and public space in the early modern Hispanic world', in M. Lyons and R. Marquilhaes (eds.), *Approaches to the History of Written Culture: A World Inscribed* (Cham, 2017), 73–96; A. Castillo Gómez, 'The Alborayque and other street readings in the early

publicize these texts served different purposes and aims that ranged from the purely propagandistic, informative and commercial to the defamatory and moralistic.⁴ Monumental and ceremonial writings, inscribed on stone and other durable media and displayed as symbols of power, co-existed with other forms of written materials of ephemeral nature, such as edicts, proclamations and laws emanating from royal, ecclesiastical and city authorities.⁵ Together with these official texts, it was also common to find on public display other types of ephemeral writings that, on the contrary, challenged the authority of political and religious powers. This was the case of pasquinades as well as libels, which were aimed at all kinds of people, not only authorities.

Infamous libels in verse and prose were widely circulated in public spaces, either orally or through the written word. Anonymous defamatory writings, filled with insults and scornful comments, were pinned to the front doors of houses, churches, taverns and shops, or posted in other public places (from street corners and columns to official buildings), revealing interpersonal conflicts and rivalries, but also exposing the corruption of the authorities.⁶ Libels were equally used as weapons of political and religious contestation, and for this reason they were often displayed in urban public spaces with the aim of reaching larger audiences.⁷ Armando Petrucci defines written

modern Hispanic world', in H.-P. Zimmermann, P.O. Büttner and B. Tschofen (eds.), *Kreuz- und Querzüge. Beiträge zu einer literarischen Anthropologie. Festschrift für Alfred Messerli* (Hannover, 2019), 167–89; and A. Castillo Gómez, 'Written communication in urban spaces: publication, textual materiality and appropriations', in A. Arcangeli, J. Rogge and H. Salmi (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Cultural History in the Western World* (Abingdon and New York, 2020), 310–30.

⁴On commercial and advertising public writing, see T. Stern, "'On each wall and corner poast": playbills, title-pages, and advertising in early modern London', *English Literary Renaissance*, 36 (2006), 57–89; and A. Castillo Gómez, 'Edictos, carteles y pasquines. Papeles efímeros y comunicación urbana en la sociedad hispana de la temprana Edad Moderna', *La Bibliofilia. Rivista di Storia del Libro e di Bibliografia*, 121 (2019), 217–25.

⁵See Petrucci, *Public Lettering*, 1–51 and 62–76; F.M. Gimeno Blay, 'Materiales para el estudio de las escrituras de aparato bajomedieval. La colección epigráfica de Valencia', in W. Koch (ed.), *Epigraphik 1988. Fachtagung für mittelalterliche und neuzeitliche Epigraphik. Graz, 10.–14. Mai 1988. Referate und Round-Table-Gespräche* (Vienna, 1991), 195–215; A. Castillo Gómez, *Entre la pluma y la pared. Una historia social de la escritura en los Siglos de Oro* (Madrid, 2006), 203–24 and 240–50; A. Castillo Gómez, 'A la vista de todos. Usos gráficos de la escritura expuesta en la España altomoderna', *Scripta*, 2 (2009), 73–85; Castillo Gómez, 'Edictos, carteles y pasquines', 207–16; D. Marchesini, 'Una città e i suoi spazi scritti: Parma, secoli XVIII–XIX', *Storia Urbana*, 34 (1986), 43–68; and F. de Vivo, *Information and Communication in Venice: Rethinking Early Modern Politics* (Oxford, 2007), 127–36.

⁶See for example, Petrucci, *Public Lettering*, 92; C. Evangelisti, "'Libelli famosi": processi per scritte infamanti nella Bologna di fine '500', *Annali della Fondazione Luigi Einaudi*, 26 (1992), 181–239; A. Fox, 'Ballads, libels and popular ridicule in Jacobean England', *Past & Present*, 145 (1994), 47–83; V. Terol i Reig, 'Escriptures infamants valencianes. A propòsit d'un cartell del segle XVIII', in F.M. Gimeno Blay and M.L. Mandingorra Llavata (eds.), *Los muros tienen la palabra. Materiales para una historia de los graffiti* (Valencia, 1997), 149–61; A. Castillo Gómez, "'Amanecieron en todas las partes públicas...". Un viaje al país de las denuncias', in A. Castillo Gómez (ed.), *Escribir y leer en el siglo de Cervantes* (Barcelona, 1999), 143–91; Castillo Gómez, *Entre la pluma*, 237–9; Castillo Gómez, 'Edictos, carteles y pasquines', 225–34; and N. Silva Prada, *Pasquines, cartas y enemigos. Cultura del lenguaje infamante en Nueva Granada y otros reinos americanos, siglos XVI y XVII* (Bogotá, 2021).

⁷See, among others, F.M. Gimeno Blay and V.J. Escartí Soriano, 'Los testimonios cronísticos del uso de las escrituras populares-escrituras criminales en la Valencia del siglo XVIII', *Alfabetismo e cultura scritta*, 1 (1988), 23–8; V.J. Escartí Soriano and M. Borràs Barberà, "'Albarans de commoure" a la Valencia del XV. Sobre els usos públics i criminals de l'escriptura', in A. Ferrando and A. Hauf (eds.), *Miscel·lània Joan*

defamatory statements, from libels to graffiti, as ‘criminal writings’ (*scritture criminali*), as they were ‘forbidden by law’ and ‘prosecuted as offences against authority’.⁸ These transgressive writings, regarded by Petrucci and other scholars as genuinely plebeian – or popular – and ‘spontaneous’ forms of expression,⁹ were likewise composed and published by individuals of higher status, thus permeating all social strata.¹⁰

‘Cartels’ and ‘letters of defiance’ – the posters and papers with which one challenged another to a duel – were conceived as defamatory statements, and they shared common traits with libels and pasquinades. Furthermore, they would also fit into the category of criminal writings to which Petrucci refers. After the Council of Trent banned all forms of duelling in 1563, the publication of these letters of challenge increasingly became an unlawful activity, severely punishable in different parts of Europe, including Italy and Spain.¹¹ In the *Diccionario de Autoridades*, the first dictionary published by the Spanish Royal Academy of Language in the eighteenth century, the term *cartel* (‘poster’) is defined as a ‘resemblance’ to ‘defamatory posters and libels’ and ‘the written paper or message, by which one challenges another to quarrel with him and fight body to body in the place he chooses, either alone, or accompanied by seconds’.¹² The Spanish *cartel* is equivalent to the French *cartel*,

Fuster. *Estudios de lengua i literatura*, vol. IV (Barcelona, 1991), 75–96; J.M. Díez Borque, ‘Prosa y poesía en las paredes: pasquines del Siglo de Oro español (I)’, *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, 72 (1995), 365–83; A. Bellany, ‘Libels in action: ritual, subversion and the English literary underground, 1603–42’, in T. Harris (ed.), *The Politics of the Excluded, c. 1500–1850* (Basingstoke, 2001), 99–124; O. Niccoli, *Rinascimento anticlericale. Infamia, propaganda e satira in Italia tra Quattro e Cinquecento* (Rome, 2005); A. Castillo Gómez, ‘Delinquir escribiendo. Escrituras infamantes y represión inquisitorial en los siglos de Oro’, in M. Casado Arboniés, A. Castillo Gómez, P. Numhauser and E. Sola (eds.), *Escrituras silenciadas en la época de Cervantes* (Alcalá de Henares, 2006), 289–303; Castillo Gómez, *Entre la pluma*, 229–37; de Vivo, *Information and Communication*, 136–42; N. Silva Prada, ‘Los sueños de expulsión o extinción de los españoles en conspiraciones, rebeliones, profecías y pasquines de la América Hispánica, siglos XVI al XVIII’, *Chronica Nova*, 38 (2012), 19–57; Silva Prada, *Pasquines, cartas y enemigos*; M. Rospocher and R. Salzberg, ‘An evanescent public sphere. Voices, spaces and publics in Venice during the Italian Wars’, in M. Rospocher (ed.), *Beyond the Public Sphere: Opinions, Publics, Spaces in Early Modern Europe* (Bologna and Berlin, 2012), 97–8; and M. Rospocher and E. Valseriati, ‘“Trento, the last chance for a beer”. Mobility, material culture, and urban space in an early modern transit city’, in F. Nevola, D. Rosenthal and N. Terpstra (eds.), *Hidden Cities: Urban Space, Geolocated Apps and Public History in Early Modern Europe* (Abingdon and New York, 2021), 142–3.

⁸A. Petrucci, ‘Scritture popolari-scritture criminali nell’Archivio di Stato di Roma’, *Alfabetismo e Cultura Scritta. Seminario Permanente. Notizie*, 3 (1981), 23.

⁹See A. Petrucci, *Scrittura e popolo nella Roma barocca, 1585–1721* (Rome, 1982), 9–10; Petrucci, ‘Scritture popolari’, 24–5; Petrucci, *Public Lettering*, 92–3; P. Burke, ‘Insult and blasphemy in early modern Italy’, in P. Burke (ed.), *The Historical Anthropology of Early Modern Italy: Essays on Perception and Communication* (Cambridge, 1987), 95–109; P. Croft, ‘Libels, popular literacy and public opinion in early modern England’, *Historical Research*, 68 (1995), 266; P. Croft, ‘The reputation of Robert Cecil: libels, political opinion and popular awareness in the early seventeenth century’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 1 (1991), 62–3; and R. Chartier, ‘Culture écrite et littérature à l’âge moderne’, *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 56 (2001), 789–90.

¹⁰Fox, ‘Ballads, libels and popular ridicule’, 57; and Castillo Gómez, ‘“Amanecieron en todas las partes públicas...”’, 147.

¹¹J.R. Ruff, *Violence in Early Modern Europe, 1500–1800* (Cambridge, 2001), 79–80. For Italy, see Evangelisti, ‘“Libelli famosi”’, 225.

¹²*Diccionario de Autoridades*, vol. II (1729), 203: ‘Por semejanza, el papel escrito o mensaje, por el qual uno desafia a otro para reñir con él, y batallar cuerpo a cuerpo en el parage o sitio que eligiere, ahora sean solos, o con Padrinos.’

borrowed in the sixteenth century from the Italian *cartello* ('poster', but also 'letter of challenge').¹³ The English word 'cartel', which comes from the French, was originally used for this last meaning as 'a written challenge or letter of defiance' in the beginning of the early modern period.¹⁴

Today, letters of challenge are a valuable source for historical information about such matters as conflicts and behaviours that openly questioned royal justice, notions of shame and honour and the elite's efforts to distinguish themselves from the rest of society. This article looks at letters of challenge (*carteles de desafío*) in seventeenth-century Madrid in order to illustrate how their interaction with urban public spaces was crucial in representing and communicating ideas about honour, social status and private vengeance. In doing so, this article also seeks to shed light on their role in perpetuating values and beliefs associated with the dominant male honour culture of early modern Spanish society. Scholarship dealing with letters of challenge and their public exchange in the late medieval and early modern period has often focused on their role in containing violence and limiting the lethal quality of the duel, as they eventually became a valid means of defending one's honour without the risk of being killed in a physical combat.¹⁵ But little attention has been paid to the spatial context of these ephemeral texts. This article recognizes the importance of exploring the inter-relationship between letters of challenge and public space, as it allows for a deeper understanding of the nature and role of publicly displayed writings as material culture, while providing additional insights into their use and functions in the urban environment of the past.¹⁶

Seventeenth-century Madrid offers an interesting case-study for the analysis of these issues. After becoming the capital of the Spanish monarchy in 1561, Madrid

¹³www.dictionnaire-academie.fr/article/A9C0931, accessed 22 May 2022.

¹⁴*The Merriam-Webster New Book of Word Histories* (Springfield, MA, 1991), 90. See also the English edition of Vincentio Saviolo's fencing manual, published in 1595, which translates Italian *cartelli* as 'cartels' or 'letters of defiance'. V. Saviolo, *Vincentio Saviolo His Practise* (London, 1595). In this article, such 'cartels' or 'letters of defiance' will be referred to most often as letters of challenge, although I will sometimes use the Spanish terms *carteles* or *carteles de desafío*.

¹⁵The relevant literature on this subject will be discussed more extensively in the next sections.

¹⁶On the analysis of written texts as material culture and on the intersection between material culture and public space, see, among others, I. Hodder, 'The interpretation of documents and material culture', in N.K. Denzin and Y.S. Lincoln (eds.), *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials* (Thousand Oaks, 1994), 393–402; S. Enderwitz and R. Sauer, 'Introduction: communication and materiality – communicative strategies of ruling elites from 3000 BCE through 1500 CE', in S. Enderwitz and R. Sauer (eds.), *Communication and Materiality: Written and Unwritten Communication in Pre-Modern Societies* (Berlin and Boston, MA, 2015), 3–6; C. Mauntel, 'Charters, pitchforks, and green seals: written documents between text and materiality in late medieval revolts', in Enderwitz and Sauer (eds.), *Communication and Materiality*, 93–112; A. Gerritsen and G. Riello, 'Introduction: writing material culture history', in A. Gerritsen and G. Riello (eds.), *Writing Material Culture History* (London, 2015), 1–14; C. Richardson, T. Hamling and D. Gaimster, 'Introduction', in C. Richardson, T. Hamling and D. Gaimster (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Material Culture in Early Modern Europe* (Abingdon and New York, 2017), 3–28; A. Gordon, 'Materiality and the streetlife of the early modern city', in Richardson, Hamling and Gaimster (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Material Culture*, 130–40; F. Nevola, *Street Life in Renaissance Italy* (New Haven and London, 2020); I. Gaskell and S.A. Carter, 'Introduction: why history and material culture?', in I. Gaskell and S.A. Carter (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of History and Material Culture* (Oxford, 2020), 1–13; and F.F.J.M. Noij, 'Verba volant, scripta manent. Reconstructing the linguistic landscape of Ostia Antica', in H. Kamermans and L.B. van der Meer (eds.), *Designating Place. Archaeological Perspectives on Built Environments in Ostia and Pompeii* (Leiden, 2020), 201–18.

underwent a significant transformation, attracting new people to the city, from nobles and royal officials to poor migrants in search of employment and a better life. Madrid's population rapidly grew from an estimated 20,000 to 90,000 between 1561 and 1606, reaching more than 130,000 by the end of the seventeenth century.¹⁷ These social and demographic changes were accompanied by increased levels of crime and conflict. Moreover, as Madrid was the capital and seat of the court, the maintenance of law and order was of vital importance for royal and city authorities. This makes Madrid an excellent place to study both the prevalence of duelling among its diverse population and the efforts to suppress it. By focusing on letters of challenge as material culture and examining their spatial location, this article delves deeper into the ways in which these ephemeral texts were circulated throughout the city and contributed to the broad diffusion of the law of honour in urban society.

Duelling, written words and honour in urban society

In the *Cortes* (representative assemblies) held in Toledo in 1480, the Catholic kings passed a law prohibiting the widespread practice in Castile that favoured the use of violence to settle differences which, in so doing, subverted royal justice and authority.¹⁸ According to this law, it was common for Castilians of diverse backgrounds, including 'gentlemen', 'squires' and 'people of lower social status', to challenge each other to fight when they received a 'complaint' from another. In these cases, the aggrieved party also sent a letter, known as a *cartel*, to the offender. This written notice of challenge describing the cause of the offence required a response from the challenged party for the fight to take place, indicating the date and location of the confrontation, the choice of weapons and the number and names of seconds. During the early modern period, these letters of challenge or *carteles* were referred to as *papeles* and *carteles de desafío*, literally, 'papers' and 'placards of challenge'.

Remote origins of this form of ritual violence, commonly known as *desafios privados* or *desafios* (private challenges or challenges), can be traced to the medieval judicial combat, although they differed from each other in substantial ways. Judicial combats or duels were exclusively aristocratic affairs in medieval Spain, permitted by royal authorities, regulated by law and fought in public. In Castile, these single combats, known as *lides*, were always preceded by the so-called *riepto* or *repto*, a formal accusation of treason made by the aggrieved party before the king, who had the prerogative to review the case and, ultimately, to forbid or allow the trial by combat to go forward.¹⁹

The Castilian code of the *Partidas* (thirteenth century) also acknowledged the right of noblemen to break off ties of friendship and loyalty when a knight committed an offence against a fellow noble by causing him or his family 'dishonour, grievance or harm' (*deshonra, tuerto* or *daño*).²⁰ The formal severance of these ties was referred to as *desafiar* (to challenge) and *desafiamiento* or *desafio* (challenge). The *desafio* was

¹⁷M.F. Carbajo Isla, *La población de la villa de Madrid. Desde finales del siglo XVI hasta mediados del siglo XIX* (Madrid, 1987), 133 and 369.

¹⁸*Nueva Recopilación*, book VIII, title 8, law X.

¹⁹*Partidas* VII, titles 3 and 4. *Reito* is the modern form of the Old Spanish *riepto* or *repto* and can be translated as 'challenge'. The term *reto* acquired its current meaning of challenge in the fifteenth century.

²⁰*Partidas* VII, title 11, laws I and II.

performed in a public ceremony, followed by a nine-day period of truce in which the accused could make amends and repair the damage made to the aggrieved party.²¹ Likewise, if attempts at reconciliation failed, this temporary truce would also allow both parties time to ‘protect’ and prepare themselves for a possible armed confrontation or assault.²² It must be noted that the declaration of *desafío* between nobles implied the recognition of the right to attack each other as a means to settle private disputes, without the risk of transgressing the law or incurring criminal penalties once the truce period was over.

During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in Castile and the Crown of Aragon, the traditional ritual of challenge underwent important changes. Nobles began to challenge each other in writing, using letters of challenge known as *carteles de desafío* in Spanish and *cartells de deseiximents* in Catalan. Moreover, the term ‘challenge’ took on a new meaning in this period. The declaration of challenge could now refer to both the formal rupture of friendship and a provocation to fight in a single combat. Eventually, the word *desafío* would become a synonym for single combat or duel.

Letters of challenge written and exchanged by Aragonese, Catalan, Valencian and Castilian knights during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries undoubtedly shaped private duelling in Spain and early modern *carteles de desafío*. Knightly letters of challenge originally served to ensure that judicial combats and challenges were arranged in accordance with legal regulations. Participants in these contests exchanged their *carteles* through the mediation of kings, local authorities and justice officials.²³ During the fifteenth century, however, letters of challenge introduced some of the elements that would later characterize private challenges of the early modern period. On the one hand, they reveal how trials by combat and challenges no longer necessarily responded to causes prescribed by law, which were limited to acts of treachery and certain types of affronts. Beginning in the 1400s, motives for duelling could include offences identical to those triggering private challenges of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.²⁴

On the other hand, scholars have shown how letters of challenge gradually became a means of insulting and publicly discrediting rivals as well as propaganda vehicles, eventually eclipsing the physical combat itself. To meet these ends, letters of challenge were often displayed during the fifteenth century in cities, as was the case in Valencia, posted in ‘crowded’ public sites including ‘street corners, squares and church

²¹*Partidas* VII, title 11, law III and title 12, law I.

²²*Partidas* VII, title 11, law III.

²³On letters of challenge and the regulation of duelling by noblemen and gentlemen during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in the Kingdom of Castile, the Crown of Aragon and the Nasrid Kingdom of Granada, see E. Buceta, ‘Cartel de desafío enviado por D. Diego López de Haro al adelantado de Murcia, Pedro Fajardo, 1480’, *Revue hispanique: recueil consacré à l’étude des langues, des littératures et de l’histoire des pays castillans, catalans et portugais*, 81 (1933), 456–74; S.B. Raulston, ‘*Cartas de batalla*: literature and law in fifteenth-century Spain’, University of California at Berkeley Ph.D. thesis, 1993; M. de Riquer, *Lletres de batalla, cartells de deseiximents i capítols de passos d’armes*, vol. I (Barcelona, 1963); V. Pons Alós (ed.), *Lletres de batalla de la València medieval* (Valencia, 2021); C. Chauchadis, *La loi du duel. Le code du point d’honneur dans l’Espagne des XVIe–XVIIe siècles* (Toulouse, 1997), 71–5; R. del Arco, ‘Notas sobre costumbres altoaragonesas en el siglo XVI’, *Argensola. Revista del Instituto de Estudios Oscenses*, 7 (1951), 257–66; M. Gómez de Valenzuela, ‘Desafíos entre caballeros aragoneses (1449–1536)’, *Emblemata*, 20–1 (2014–15), 633–56; and L. Eguilaz, *Desafío en Granada de D. Diego Fernández de Córdoba y D. Alonso de Aguilar* (Madrid, 1880).

²⁴See de Riquer, *Lletres de batalla*, 35; Raulston, ‘*Cartas de batalla*’, 168–9; and Gómez de Valenzuela, ‘Desafíos entre caballeros’, 636.

doors'.²⁵ These letters were commonly delivered and read out loud by town criers (*trompetas* or *trompeteros*) as well.²⁶ Aware of the impact these verbal disputes could have on wider audiences, knights drew on their writing skills and wit to compose increasingly sophisticated *carteles de desafío* with which they could successfully shame their opponents.²⁷ Letters of challenge were also used as tools of political legitimization and propaganda. For example, in 1475 during the Castilian War of Succession (1474–79), Ferdinand of Aragon challenged Alfonso V of Portugal by exchanging a series of letters of challenge with the intention of supporting his wife Isabella's claims to the throne of Castile.²⁸ The letters were widely disseminated in the Kingdom of Castile and the Crown of Aragon,²⁹ just five years before private duelling was banned in Castile.

At the turn of the fifteenth century, private challenges were established as an alternative to the traditional legal ways of settling quarrels between noblemen in Spain. For example, by 1409 in Castile a royal decree had urged nobles (*hidalgos*) to challenge and fight their opponents only in specific cases permitted by law.³⁰ Behind this demand lay a concern about the emergence of new forms of single combats known as *empresas*, *recuestas* or *desafíos* (challenges). Knights resorted to these armed contests to resolve personal affronts different from those subject to regulated challenges and judicial combats. Over time, as revealed by the banning of private duelling decreed in Castile in 1480, popular classes ended up succumbing to the practice of these clandestine combats, or private challenges, as well.

As the sixteenth century progressed and judicial duels fell into disuse and were finally prohibited, the presence of *carteles de desafío* in urban public space began to wane. Letters of challenge continued to circulate and be exchanged by participants in private challenges, but were no longer displayed in public as before, as they were severely punished by law. A similar pattern has been observed in other parts of Europe. The exchange and public display of letters of challenge, referred to as 'verbal duelling' by Donald Weinstein or 'paper battles' by David Quint, reached the pinnacle of its popularity among the Italian elites during the fifteenth and, most notably, the sixteenth centuries.³¹ The practice of a less public form of 'paper duelling' can be traced in England in the late sixteenth century and early seventeenth century.³² Duelling was formally banned by the Council of Trent (1545–63) under penalties

²⁵De Riquer, *Lletres de batalla*, 30–1 and 120.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 105–8; del Arco, 'Notas sobre costumbres', 260 and 263–5; and Gómez de Valenzuela, 'Desafíos entre caballeros', 636.

²⁷De Riquer, *Lletres de batalla*, 120; and Raulston, '*Cartas de batalla*', 133.

²⁸A.I. Carrasco Manchado, 'Discurso político y propaganda en la corte de los Reyes Católicos: resultados de una primera investigación (1474–1482)', *En la España Medieval*, 25 (2002), 299–379; and A. Sesma Muñoz, 'Carteles de batalla cruzados entre Alfonso V de Portugal y Fernando V de Castilla: (1475)', *Revista Portuguesa de História*, 16 (1976), 277–95.

²⁹Sesma Muñoz, 'Carteles de batalla', 277–82.

³⁰*Nueva Recopilación*, book VIII, title 8, law IX.

³¹D. Weinstein, 'Fighting or flying? Verbal duelling in mid-sixteenth-century Italy', in T. Dean and K.J.P. Lowe (eds.), *Crime, Society, and the Law in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge, 1994), 204–20; and D. Quint, 'Duelling and civility in sixteenth century Italy', *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance*, 7 (1997), 231–78.

³²C.E. Thomas, *If I Lose Mine Honour, I Lose Myself* (Toronto, 2017), 48–51. Moreover, as Robert Shoemaker has shown for London, in the second half of the eighteenth century duellists began to resort more and more to the use of the printing press to settle disputes of honour in writing. R. Shoemaker, 'The taming of the duel: masculinity, honour and ritual violence in London, 1660–1800', *Historical Journal*, 45 (2002), 542–3.

such as excommunication and deprivation of ecclesiastical burial. However, despite this prohibition and the harsh punishments associated with it, in seventeenth-century Castile it was still possible to find *carteles de desafío* that emulated the knightly letters of challenge. They were published and posted in public places in cities and towns with the aim of safeguarding one's honour, but also with defamatory and propagandistic purposes.

At the same time, private duelling continued to be practised by broad segments of Castilian urban society to settle matters of honour.³³ The spread of the Italian duel in Castile during the sixteenth century has been regarded as one of the reasons for the prevalence of private challenges and duels.³⁴ Likewise, criminal court records and chronicles from seventeenth-century Madrid testify to the presence of private challenges in the Spanish capital during this period. As shown by these sources, the reasons that drove two men to fight in a private challenge were indeed diverse, but the question of honour was always central. It was honour that could be tainted by various factors, from the non-observance of strict norms of social etiquette, which acted as status markers, to professional and romantic rivalries.

The challenge would also reveal the existence of unresolved internal tensions, whose final outburst, materialized in a physical combat, could bear dramatic consequences. This is perfectly exemplified in a challenge that occurred in Madrid in 1694 between Don Alejandro Dupoli Carrillo, a former clerk of the *Escribanía de Gracia* (Office of Grace), and Don Bernardo Francisco de Rojas, the wealthy nephew of Carrillo's wife.³⁵ Rojas had moved from Mexico City to Madrid to attend college, staying at his aunt and uncle's home during his formative years at the Spanish capital. According to Carrillo's testimony, the challenge originated from a quarrel between Rojas and his aunt, Doña Beatriz de Mendoza, caused by domestic issues, more precisely by an argument over the ownership of a mattress. Carrillo's angry reaction to this incident prompted Rojas to ask him to 'leave the house'. Doña Beatriz replied saying 'it would be more reasonable for a young man – Rojas – to abandon the house than for married people to do so'. As a result, Rojas immediately left his uncle's house taking his sword and short coat with him. Carrillo had no other choice then but to follow his nephew to a nearby field. As head of the household whose authority had been called into question, Carrillo needed to assert his position and defend his honour. The duel took place in the evening of 6 August, at around 8pm, 'outside the Atocha gate, on the road to the *Huerta de Herrera* (Herrera's Orchard)'. Rojas was seriously injured in the duel, dying soon afterwards in Madrid's general hospital.

Challenges and duels found in criminal records and chronicles from early modern Madrid also show how contestants usually belonged to the same social strata. In fact,

³³T.A. Mantecón Movellán, 'Lances de cuchilladas y justicia en la práctica en la Castilla del siglo XVII', in J.A. Munita Loinaz (ed.), *Conflicto, violencia y criminalidad en Europa y América* (Bilbao, 2004), 197.

³⁴Chauchadis, *La loi du duel*, 37–41. In Castile, single combats began to be referred to as *duelos* (duels) during the sixteenth century. Derived from the Italian *duello*, the word *duelo* (duel) was used together with the term *desafío* (challenge) to describe a combat or fight arranged between two people with the aim of settling points of honour. However, in the judicial records and literary sources examined here the word *desafío* is mentioned to a greater extent than *duelo*. In fact, criminal court records from Madrid's *Sala de Alcaldes de Casa y Corte* in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries only document the use of the term *desafío*. On the semantic evolution of the words *duelo* and *desafío* from the Middle Ages to the early modern period, see *ibid.*, 27–41.

³⁵Archivo Histórico Nacional (AHN), Consejos, Legajo 5610, number 29.

it was not uncommon to reject and denounce the challenge in court when the accused was of a higher social standing than his opponent. But this was not always the case. In 1623, for example, a quarrel broke out during the representation of a play at the *corral de la Cruz*.³⁶ Spectators were not very happy with the performance and started to throw stones at the stage and at the theatre's manager, who unfortunately was injured. When justice officials asked who had injured the manager, a gentleman responded that 'someone from the top gallery' did. A young man, a commoner, replied by shouting back: 'You lie, cheater, as a great cuckold!'. These words could only be interpreted as a clear and direct attack on the gentleman's honour and masculinity and a provocation to fight. Thus, when they met by chance the following day at the *Puerta del Sol*, the gentleman did not hesitate to hit the young man on the head several times with a stick and afterwards drew his sword. The young man did not fight back, and the two parties 'made peace' with each other. However, a few days later the young man changed his mind and issued a formal challenge to the gentleman. Fortunately, as the duel was about to begin on the field, the friends who accompanied both contenders convinced them to stop the combat and end the challenge.

Another interesting aspect of this case is that the young commoner did not initially reply to the gentleman's challenge by not drawing his sword, a symbolic language known to both men. However, the shame of having been hit in public at the *Puerta del Sol* forced him to challenge his opponent in order to preserve his honour. This circumstance reveals how members of the lower classes actively participated in the culture of duelling as a means to restore their reputation and assert their place in society.

This last example inevitably leads to the question of who took part in private challenges in seventeenth-century Madrid. Criminal records from the *Sala de Alcaldes de Casa y Corte* (the Hall of Judges of the Royal House and Court), Madrid's main trial court in the early modern period, indicate that duel participants belonged to both the upper and lower classes. According to the general inventory of the *Sala*, the number of convicts who were tried by this tribunal for duelling in the city of Madrid between 1581 and 1700 totalled 322, around 30 per cent of them (90 men and 5 women) belonged to the more privileged sections of society, mostly members of the upper bourgeoisie and the untitled nobility.³⁷ These estimates were made by counting the number of individuals prosecuted who had noble titles (5 men) or whose name was preceded by the title of 'Don' and 'Doña' (85 men and 5 women). The rest of the defendants, about 70 per cent of the total, came from the popular classes.³⁸ There is even one case from 1684 in which three slaves were prosecuted for duelling and killing a man of African descent named Manuel de Lemus.³⁹ However, it needs to be stressed that in the early modern period, Castilian nobles continued to enjoy judicial privileges that enabled them to avoid ordinary justice to a greater or lesser extent. This fact can explain why Madrid's elites are under-represented in the criminal cases judged by the *Sala* during the seventeenth century.

In any case, it is worth noting that the information provided by the general inventory of criminal cases of the *Sala* challenges traditional interpretations that

³⁶ A. González Palencia (ed.), *Noticias de Madrid (1621–1627)* (Madrid, 1942), 59–60.

³⁷ Women who were prosecuted for duelling were merely accomplices or witnesses, although they sometimes had an indirect role in encouraging such challenges.

³⁸ AHN, Consejos, Books 2783–8.

³⁹ AHN, Consejos, Book 2787, fols. 39v and 40r.

place modern duels in an aristocratic milieu and as markers of an elite status, as has been suggested by V.G. Kiernan.⁴⁰ Kiernan has argued that the modern duel emerged in Italy during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries among the military, transforming the duel into ‘something more informal, flexible, and speedy, needing few of the old tortuous arrangements’.⁴¹ Favoured by the mobility of Italian soldiers who served in foreign armies, this new type of duelling initially spread from the Italian peninsula to Spain and France – where noblemen adopted an aristocratic code of honour – and afterward throughout the rest of Europe.⁴² It must be added that the Madrid case was not an isolated phenomenon. In this regard, Robert Shoemaker has shown how in early modern London members of the non-elite also resorted to duelling to resolve disputes of honour.⁴³ Nevertheless, those who fought duels in London in this period tended to be drawn largely from aristocratic, gentry and military backgrounds, as Shoemaker points out.⁴⁴

Private challenges were not as ceremonious as judicial duels. However, early modern challenges entailed a series of formalities as well, although they were quite flexible in practice. Once the conflict erupted between the parties, the challenger had to invite his opponent to take part in the fight, either verbally or in writing, through the letters of challenge. In seventeenth-century Madrid, these letters were mostly hand-delivered. Only occasionally were *carteles* posted in public throughout the city, albeit with considerable impact, as discussed in the next section.

Private affairs, public visibility

Private duels of the early modern period lacked the public dimension of the medieval judicial duel, as they were fought in secrecy to escape the full weight of the law. In seventeenth-century Madrid, for example, venues for private duels included not only secluded open spaces in the city outskirts, such as the *Prado de San Jerónimo* (Saint Jerome’s Meadow, currently the Prado Promenade) or the fields surrounding Atocha, but also nearby streets such as the *callejón de San Blas* (San Blas’ Alley), all of them located on the eastern side and south-east corner of the Old City of Madrid (see Figure 1).⁴⁵ Both the elite and popular classes took part in private challenges, as previously mentioned. Nonetheless, noblemen, unlike members of the lower class, had the means to practise more sophisticated challenges which tried to recreate old medieval judicial duels. These fights were exceptional. Their protagonists were mainly nobles and members of military orders who invested their time and fortune in financing these expensive and often ruinous endeavours. Costs included considerable travel expenses as well as the printing and dissemination of *carteles* and chronicles of the challenges. It is precisely this effort to publish and print these texts which has enabled some of this material evidence to survive to the present day.

⁴⁰V.G. Kiernan, *The Duel in European History. Honour and the Reign of Aristocracy* (Oxford, 1988), 52–3.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 47.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 47–91.

⁴³Shoemaker, ‘The taming of the duel’, 525–45.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 545.

⁴⁵These sites were situated on what is now Madrid’s museum mile and the area around the Atocha Train Station, near the old *Puerta de Vallecas*, commonly known in the seventeenth century as the *Puerta de Atocha* (Atocha Gate).



Figure 1. Detail of the Prado de San Jerónimo (Saint Jerome's Meadow), Pedro de Teixeira's *Topographia de la Villa de Madrid*, 1656. Facsimile, 1881. Instituto Geográfico Nacional, Madrid.

In seventeenth-century Spain, examples of duels of this nature included the challenge between Don Juan Pardo de Figueroa and Don García de Ávila y Guzmán, both knights of the order of Santiago, and the one between Don Juan de Herrera and the marquis of Águila. News and accounts of the development of these challenges in printed and manuscript copies of their letters of challenge are found in different

Spanish archives and libraries.⁴⁶ Their content was also reproduced in Madrid's chronicles of the seventeenth century. Since judicial duels were prohibited by the Council of Trent, these noblemen were forced to fight outside Spain. These combats were respectively set in the county of Liège, between the Flemish towns of Tongeren and Sint-Truiden,⁴⁷ and in the city of Altdorf in the Swiss canton of Uri.⁴⁸ Although the challenged parties travelled to these foreign lands in the 1630s to participate in these ritual combats, in the end, none of the duels ever took place as they were aborted at the last minute.

Records reveal how both challenges were widely publicized both in Spain and abroad. On 20 November 1631, Don Juan Pardo de Figueroa issued his first letter of challenge addressed to Don García de Ávila, listing the motivations behind the confrontation and depicting Don García's behaviour as 'vile, infamous and cowardly'. In this letter of challenge, Don Juan granted Don García the right to choose the arms, setting the place and date for the combat for Flanders on 1 May 1632, 'from sunrise to sunset'. These posters were published in Brussels and in different Spanish cities and towns including Madrid, Coruña, Seville, Ávila, San Sebastián, Valdemaqueda, Robledo de Chavela and Las Navas del Marqués, where Don García was hiding.⁴⁹ Don García de Ávila replied to this letter some weeks later, accepting the challenge, making the choice of weapons and refuting Don Juan's accusations. The exchange of letters of challenge between both parties continued in the following months with the intention of arranging their encounter, these being published in Brussels and other cities of the Spanish Low Countries.⁵⁰ Likewise, copies of the *cartel* issued by Don Juan de Herrera in February 1637 challenging the marquis of Águila were publicly displayed not only in Madrid, but also in other Spanish and foreign cities, such as 'Seville, Lisbon, Barcelona, Zaragoza, Valencia, Valladolid, Granada, León, Pamplona, Orduña, and the main cities of Italy, Flanders and Germany', with

⁴⁶For example, copies of the *Relacion de lo sucedido entre don Juan Pardo de Figueroa, Cauallero del habito de Santiago, y Don García de Auila y Guzman, Cauallero del mismo habito, desde veinte de Agosto de 33 con toda verdad, y certeza* (n.p., n.d.) can be found at the Spanish National Library (BNE) and the library of the Fundación Lázaro Galdiano in Madrid. In the Spanish National Library there is also a manuscript copy of the *Desafio entre Don Juan Pardo de Figueroa y Don García Dávila* (BNE, MS 10713, fols. 53r–62v). Printed copies of the *Manifiesto de lo sucedido a Don Juan de Herrera, en el duelo, con el marques del Aguila* (Barcelona, 1638) are housed at the Central Library of the University of Oviedo, in northern Spain, the Spanish National Library and the library of the Royal Spanish Academy of Moral and Political Sciences in Madrid. The Historical Archive of the Nobility in Toledo keeps an original manuscript copy of Don Juan de Herrera's account of the challenge from 1637 (*Escrito de Juan de Herrera, caballero de la Orden de Santiago, desafiando a Juan de Silva Ribera, marqués del Águila, a causa de una disputa ocurrida en palacio*, Archivo Histórico de la Nobleza, BAENA, C.452, D.11–14), which probably could have served as the basis for the above-mentioned printed copy of 1638. Likewise, the National Historical Archive of Spain in Madrid holds a manuscript copy in Italian of a certified authorization granted by the governing council of the Swiss canton of Uri ('landtamano et consejo del cantone d'Urania') on 28 Dec. 1636, giving Don Juan de Herrera and the marquis of Águila permission to fight in a duel in the city of Altdorf (AHN, Consejos, 7149, N.1).

⁴⁷*Desafio entre Don*, fols. 53r–55r, 56v and 58v–59v.

⁴⁸*Manifiesto de lo sucedido*, fol. 188v. I thank Carolina Cortés Bárcena for her help in accessing this document held at the Central Library of the University of Oviedo.

⁴⁹Doctor Thebussem, *Desafio ocurrido en 1632, entre don Juan Pardo de Figueroa y don García de Avila, con motivo de la muerte de un venado. Carta dirigida al señor vizconde de Bétera por el Doctor Thebussem* (Madrid, 1883), 8.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 9–11; and *Desafio entre Don*, fols. 54v and 59r.

the aim of giving as much publicity as possible 'so the said Marquis' could not 'pretend ignorance of this challenge'.⁵¹

In essence, letters of challenge were primarily addressed to the participants in duels and challenges. They constituted a form of communication between both the challenger and the challenged. The printing and public dissemination of these texts sought, in the first place, to make the existence of the challenge known and to thereby prevent any lack of awareness on the part of the challenged party, inevitably forcing the accused to confront the challenger in a ritual combat. In this sense, letters of challenge fulfilled an informative function like the normative texts which were posted in urban public space requiring city dwellers to comply with the law. These ephemeral writings were publicly displayed to be read and seen, thus making official rules and regulations accessible and known to everyone in order to refute any claim of ignorance when transgressing the law.⁵² It comes as no surprise that these letters of challenge were placed at specific urban spaces reserved for the public reading and viewing of official texts and legal norms, thereby turning private feuds and conflicts into public affairs.

In the Spanish capital, for example, the first letter of challenge of Don Juan de Herrera was posted on 4 February 1637 at the Royal Palace and the *Puerta de Guadalajara*, both public spaces that were associated with royal and urban authority.⁵³ It was precisely at the Royal Palace that Don Juan de Herrera received the affront that triggered the challenge. Fixing the letter of challenge at Madrid's Royal Palace, the place in which he was defamed, therefore had a symbolic meaning. Furthermore, this somewhat reckless action by Don Juan de Herrera probably allowed news regarding his challenge to spread rapidly through the Spanish capital. It must be noted that one of Madrid's *mentideros*, or gossip corners,⁵⁴ was located at the front of the Royal Palace, the so-called *mentidero* of the Palace Flagstones (*las Losas de Palacio*). This public space served as the gathering point for a large and varied group of people, from street vendors to legal professionals and Madrid's elite, to informally chat about political affairs and the latest rumours of the court (see Figures 2 and 3).⁵⁵

At the heart of the 'hustle and bustle of businessmen',⁵⁶ the *Puerta de Guadalajara* was home to another of Madrid's famous *mentideros*, the *mentidero* of the *Puerta de Guadalajara*, where people from different social backgrounds would often meet and intermingle, not only to discuss politics and literary works, but also to gossip and exchange news.⁵⁷ In *El pasajero* (The Passenger, 1617), the Spanish Golden Age

⁵¹ *Manifiesto de lo sucedido*, fol. 189r.

⁵² Castillo Gómez, *Entre la pluma*, 209.

⁵³ AHN, Consejos, 7149, N.I. Early in the morning of 4 Feb. 1637, the *carteles* were posted in the Royal Palace, the *Puerta de Guadalajara* and other 'public places' of the court.

⁵⁴ The *Diccionario de Autoridades*, vol. IV (1734), 545, defines *mentidero* ('place of lies') as 'the place where idle people gather for conversation' and where 'fables and lies are regularly told'.

⁵⁵ C. Moreno Sánchez, 'Los mentideros de Madrid', *Torre de los Lujanes: Boletín de la Real Sociedad Económica Matritense de Amigos del País*, 18 (1991), 165–6.

⁵⁶ AHN, Consejos, Book 1270, fol. 34r.

⁵⁷ M. de Cervantes Saavedra, *El ingenioso hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha, compuesto por Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra. Nueva edición conforme en todo á la última de la Real Academia Española, y con las notas de D.J.A. Pellicer. Dedicada a la Nación Española*, vol. IV (Barcelona, 1832), 400; M. Herrero, 'Casos cervantinos que tocan a Madrid', *Revista de la Biblioteca, Archivo y Museo*, 61–2 (1951), 52; and R. Schmidt, 'Maps, figures, and canons in the *Viaje del Parnaso*', *Cervantes*, 16 (1996), 36–7.



Figure 2. Detail of the Royal Palace, Puerta de Guadalajara and Plaza Mayor, Pedro de Teixeira's *Topographia de la Villa de Madrid*, 1656. Facsimile, 1881. Instituto Geográfico Nacional, Madrid.

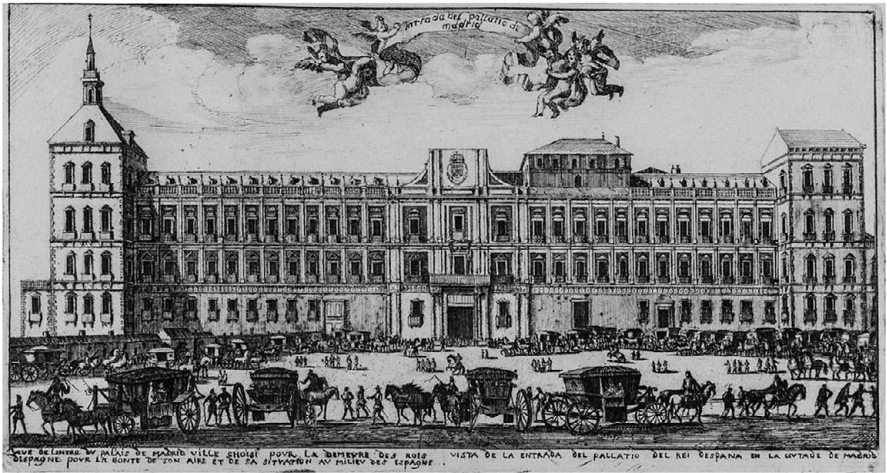


Figure 3. View of the main (south) façade of the Royal Palace of Madrid, Louis Meunier, c. 1665–68. Biblioteca Nacional de España, Madrid.

writer Cristóbal Suárez de Figueroa also notes that visiting the *mentideros* of the Royal Palace and the *Puerta de Guadalajara* was part of the daily routine of Madrid gentlemen.⁵⁸ The *Puerta de Guadalajara* was located on the *Calle Mayor*, or Main Street, close to the Royal Palace and other emblematic and busy public spaces of the

⁵⁸C. Suárez de Figueroa, *El pasajero. Advertencias utilísimas a la vida humana por el doctor Christoval Suarez de Figueroa A la Excelentísima República de Luca*, ed. F. Rodríguez Marín (Madrid, 1913), 329.

Spanish capital, such as the *Plaza Mayor* (Main Square), the *Puerta del Sol* and the *mentidero* of San Felipe (see Figures 2 and 4).

The *mentidero* of the *Gradas de San Felipe* was the most popular gossip corner in Madrid.⁵⁹ The steps and loggia of the church of San Felipe el Real, on the *Calle Mayor* and next to the *Puerta del Sol*, were the meeting place of the *mentidero* of San Felipe. This *mentidero* attracted a very diverse crowd. Due to the large and noisy presence of soldiers, it was also known as the ‘soldiers’ gossip corner’.⁶⁰ As Javier Castro Ibaseta points out, the *Calle Mayor* was the main artery for spreading news in Madrid in the seventeenth century. It connected the Royal Palace and its *mentidero*, at one end, with the *mentidero* of San Felipe, at the other. Soldiers usually went to the Royal Palace early in the morning to get the most recent news. Later, these soldiers circulated and discussed the news and rumours in the *mentidero* of San Felipe, from where they quickly spread to the rest of the city.⁶¹ The location of the *mentideros* in the Madrid urban fabric and the heterogeneous nature of their audience thus allowed for the rapid and widespread diffusion of all kinds of information, news and gossip.

Using the *Puerta de Guadalajara* and the Royal Palace to post Don Juan de Herrera’s letter of challenge had a clear strategic aim to defend his honour and defame the marquis of Águila. With this same goal, pasquinades and libels both defamatory and informative were fixed in Madrid’s corners and other public spaces, such as the *mentideros*.⁶² In addition to enabling the wide dissemination of the challenge, reaching out to different social strata, the act of placing the *cartel* at the



Figure 4. Detail of the *Puerta de Guadalajara*, *Puerta del Sol*, *Plaza Mayor* and *Plazuela de la Provincia*, Pedro de Teixeira’s *Topographia de la Villa de Madrid*, 1656. Facsimile, 1881. Instituto Geográfico Nacional, Madrid.

⁵⁹On the *mentidero* of San Felipe, see Moreno Sánchez, ‘Los mentideros de Madrid’, 161–5; and J. Castro Ibaseta, ‘Mentidero de Madrid: la Corte como comedia’, in A. Castillo Gómez and J. Amelang (dirs.), C. Serrano Sánchez (ed.), *Opinión pública y espacio urbano en la Edad Moderna* (Gijón, 2010), 43–58.

⁶⁰Moreno Sánchez, ‘Los mentideros de Madrid’, 161.

⁶¹Castro Ibaseta, ‘Mentidero de Madrid’, 48.

⁶²‘Cartas de algunos padres de la Compañía de Jesús, sobre los sucesos de la monarquía entre los años 1634 y 1648’, in *Memorial Histórico Español*, vol. XIII (Madrid, 1861), 166.

Royal Palace and the *Puerta de Guadalajara* had other implications as well. In early modern Madrid, edicts and royal decrees were read out loud by the town criers and later fixed in different public sites, including the *Puerta de Guadalajara*, the *Puerta del Sol*, the *Plaza Mayor* and the *Plazuela de la Provincia* (see Figure 4).⁶³ As Isabel Castro Rojas notes, in the second half of the seventeenth century they were usually pinned to the doors of the Royal Palace and to the columns of the courtyard; to the doors of the Court Prison (see Figure 5); and to the pillars of the *Plaza Mayor* and the portals of the *Plazuela de la Provincia*, among other places.⁶⁴ By affixing his letter of challenge to symbolic spaces devoted to the public display of these official texts, Don Juan de Herrera might have also sought to imply legal recognition of the challenge.

Royal authorities immediately ordered Madrid's justice officials to investigate and prosecute those responsible for posting the *carteles* in order to 'punish the offence with all the rigour the case deserved'.⁶⁵ No information has been found to indicate that the offenders were apprehended or punished. Their search must have been a difficult task. The perpetrators carefully placed the letters of challenge at night or at dawn, when few people would be around, to avoid being arrested. Records from the *Sala de Alcaldes de Casa y Corte* tend to corroborate the problems faced by Madrid's authorities when prosecuting this type of crime. The general inventory of the *Sala* contains only two criminal cases in which the accused were tried for the offence of exchanging *papeles de desafío* or letters of challenge in Madrid during the seventeenth century.⁶⁶

As in the case of libels and pasquinades,⁶⁷ justice officials would proceed to remove the letters of challenge as soon as they became aware of their presence in Madrid's public space and noticed that people were reading them. In fact, a copy of one of the *carteles* was handed to the king the same day they were posted in the Spanish capital.⁶⁸ But despite the intervention of Madrid's authorities, news about this challenge spread very fast throughout the city, fuelling vivid debates and discussions on the suitability of this type of duelling between gentlemen of different status, as witnessed by Madrid's chroniclers. Some experts advised the marquis to reject the challenge, given the differences 'in lineage and quality' between both parties, adding that travelling to the Swiss canton was somewhat risky and dangerous.⁶⁹ Carlos Coloma, a Spanish diplomat and military figure, firmly opposed this challenge. Coloma believed the letter of challenge was neither authentic nor attested by the magistrates of Altdorf, casting doubt on the feasibility of arranging a duel in a foreign country and travelling there, taking into account that the marquis needed a passport to do so.⁷⁰ Other knights argued, on the contrary, it was the marquis' duty to confront

⁶³See, for example, AHN, Consejos, Book 1220, fol. 266, Book 1268, fol. 19r, and Book 1270, fol. 34r.

⁶⁴I. Castro Rojas, 'A viva voz y en papel. Formas y espacios de publicación de las disposiciones oficiales en el Madrid de los Austrias', *La Bibliofilia. Rivista di Storia del Libro e di Bibliografia*, 121 (2019), 278–81.

⁶⁵AHN, Consejos, 7149, N.1.

⁶⁶AHN, Consejos, Book 2785, fol. 226r, and Book 2787, fol. 296v. In the same period, the number of cases heard by the tribunal of the *Sala* for libels and pasquinades was 11.

⁶⁷See 'Cartas de algunos padres', vol. XIII (Madrid, 1861), 181.

⁶⁸AHN, Consejos, 7149, N.1.

⁶⁹A. Rodríguez Villa, 'La corte y monarquía de España en los años 1636 y 1637. Colección de cartas inéditas é interesantes, seguidas de un Apéndice con curiosos documentos sobre corridas de toros en los siglos XVII y XVIII', in *Curiosidades de la Historia de España*, vol. II (Madrid, 1886), 87.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 95.



Figure 5. View of the *Plazuela de la Provincia* with the building of the Court Prison of Madrid, Louis Meunier, c. 1665–1668. Biblioteca Nacional de España, Madrid.

Don Juan in the duel in order to defend his honour, given that the challenger was a knight of the military order of Santiago.⁷¹

Being of a lower social rank than his opponent, Don Juan's need to challenge the marquis could equally well have been triggered by a matter of pride. Don Juan was rumoured to be a more skilled fencer. Hence, battling the marquis of Águila in a duel would have allowed Don Juan not only to avenge the affront, but also to compensate his feeling of social inferiority. The marquis of Águila finally decided to defend his honour by accepting Don Juan's challenge in a *cartel* issued in Italy in July 1637.⁷² In the month of September, both parties travelled to the city of Altdorf to participate in the duel. But to Don Juan's misfortune, the combat had to be cancelled when the marquis injured his foot. Altdorf's authorities declared the duel a draw and urged both contenders to reconcile and make amends.⁷³ Don Juan refused to accept the outcome of the challenge and, during the following months, he embarked on a crusade to defend his good name and reputation, this time turning to the pen and the printing press as weapons. He wrote down his own version of the events surrounding the challenge in a pamphlet of four leaves dated in Barcelona on 4 April 1638. As he explains in the introduction, Don Juan was forced to resort to 'words' only after his 'initial' attempts to settle the dispute by force of 'arms' had failed.⁷⁴ Intended for a reading public, the pamphlet contains a detailed account of the challenge, as well as a copy of the first *cartel* with other documents issued by the authorities of the city of Altdorf. Don Juan also encourages 'the reader' to contact him to collate the content of the pamphlet with the original letters and documents in an

⁷¹*Ibid.*, 87.

⁷²*Ibid.*, 193; and 'Cartas de algunos padres', vol. XIV (Madrid, 1862), 156.

⁷³*Manifiesto de lo sucedido*, fols. 187r–189v.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, fol. 186r.

effort to assert the authenticity of his account.⁷⁵ The pamphlet appears to have been relatively widely distributed, especially among elite circles.⁷⁶

In the months following the publication of this printed pamphlet, the count-duke of Olivares – Philip IV’s favourite or *valido* – sent a letter to the king in which he tackled the problem of duelling in Spain, proposing different strategies to contain its impact in society.⁷⁷ Madrid’s chroniclers believed that Olivares had written this paper as a response to the great proliferation of duels among ‘notable people’ that had been taking place for some time.⁷⁸ This group of ‘notable people’ would have certainly included the marquis of Águila and Don Juan de Herrera himself. Moreover, it should be noted that Olivares was no stranger to the vicissitudes of this challenge. Don Juan was Olivares’ steward. For this reason, and given his position as *valido*, Olivares had to distance himself from all things related to the feud. However, as Don Juan mentions in his pamphlet, it seems Olivares favoured a peaceful solution to the challenge.⁷⁹

In seventeenth-century Spain, duelling and the public posting of letters of challenge were forbidden by the law under the threat of severe penalties. This circumstance limited the choices available to nobles and gentlemen to restore their honour with the publicity and fanfare once provided by judicial duels. Private duels of the seventeenth century also lacked some of the performative and oral elements that characterized challenges in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, a period in which letters of challenge were displayed in public and recited by town criers. Therefore, the elites of seventeenth-century Spain had to resort to alternative means that would allow them to widely disseminate their *carteles*. Don Juan de Herrera chose to post his letters of challenge in strategic and symbolic places within the Spanish capital. Madrid’s *mentideros* were busy public spaces and important hubs for gossip, news and debate that played a major role in the wide circulation of Don Juan’s *cartel*. The most relevant news and rumours discussed at the *mentideros* were later reproduced in writing by Madrid’s chroniclers. Don Juan’s challenge was no exception. Indeed, these chronicles provided a detailed account of the development, debates and outcome of the challenge. Madrid’s public space would thus become the stage for an honour-driven verbal confrontation that was witnessed by a large audience, as was the case in the past. It is also true that the public exchange and display of letters of challenge in Madrid during the 1630s would more closely resemble the verbal duels of sixteenth-century Italy depicted by Weinstein and Quint.⁸⁰

The practice of verbal duelling and challenges among Castilian elites in the first half of the seventeenth century prompted authorities to think and reflect on the harmful effects of the law of honour in society.⁸¹ Olivares’ concerns were partially

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, fols. 186r and 189v.

⁷⁶Today, there are five known surviving copies of this printed pamphlet housed in Spanish libraries. See n. 46.

⁷⁷*Discurso en orden a reformar La Ley del Duelo*, BNE, MS 5791, fols. 271r–276v.

⁷⁸*Cartas de algunos padres*, vol. XIV (Madrid, 1862), 408.

⁷⁹*Manifiesto de lo sucedido*, fol. 187v.

⁸⁰Weinstein, ‘Fighting or flyting?’, 204–20; and Quint, ‘Duelling and civility’, 257–66.

⁸¹This practice would become the subject of mockery in a satirical letter of challenge, printed in Portugal in the 1640s with propagandistic intent, in the context of the Portuguese Restoration War (1640–68). *Cartel de desafío y protesta cavalleresca de Don Quixote de la Mancha, Cavallero de la Triste Figura, en defension de sus castellanos* (Lisbon, 1641), BNE, CERVC/1/38.

driven by the need to guarantee peaceful co-existence among the Spanish nobles. But the law of honour had a few other implications related to the maintenance of public order. It must be noted that in most cases challenges did not evolve into physical combats or lethal violence. In seventeenth-century Madrid, for example, the mortality rate of private challenges was relatively low (7.5 per cent). This can be explained by the fact that, very often, the parties involved agreed to fight in a deferred combat. This delay would often allow moods to calm down and justice to intervene, thus preventing the duel from happening. However, if the fight took place immediately after the quarrel, the chances of losing one's life would increase dramatically. It can be assumed that this was one of the reasons why urban authorities sought to eradicate all types of challenges and their various expressions, including the publication and display of letters of challenge. Although less lethal, ceremonious challenges like the ones examined in this article greatly contributed in shaping and perpetuating other forms of private vengeance, such as knife fighting, which were more impulsive and spontaneous and therefore more deadly.⁸²

Conclusion

In the examples discussed in this article, the protagonists – noblemen and members of military orders – challenged their rivals in the fashion of the old medieval duels as a last resort to repair their damaged reputation. Due to the nature of these confrontations, and in the absence of physical combat, letters of challenge, as rhetorical weapons, could become effective means to defend the honour and assert the status of the parties involved. Although not their primary purpose, these more sophisticated and ceremonial duels allowed gentlemen and members of the aristocracy to distance themselves from popular classes who took part in private duels. However, urban settings such as seventeenth-century Madrid enabled the rituals and customs of the elite to filter down to the lower classes. Duelling was not an exception. While challenges and duels among plebeians seemed less formal than those of the aristocracy, their existence and practice, as documented in archival and literary sources, reveal how popular classes were no strangers to the social code of honour and vengeance.

On a practical level, these letters of challenge served informative, communicative and defamatory functions, and could be accessed by a wide audience as well as becoming symbolically charged through their strategic displays in urban public space. Therefore, paying attention to their location and interaction with urban space can help us to better examine and understand the ways and the extent to which the values and practices of the elites were disseminated in society. Even in the many cases where challenges did not evolve into actual fights, it must be noted that the culture of duelling and its manifestations, through the public posting of these letters of challenge, had a major impact on reinforcing the use of private vengeance to settle disputes during the seventeenth century: a practice that encompassed other forms of violent and impulsive acts such as knife fighting which, according to criminal court

⁸²On knife fights and their impact on homicide rates in seventeenth-century Madrid, see B. Llanes Parra, 'Violencia cotidiana y criminalidad en el Madrid de los Austrias (1561–1700)', University of Cantabria Ph.D. thesis, 2017, 159–82.

records, were far more frequent, fatal and one of the factors contributing to Madrid's high homicide rates during this period.

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