

## Destabilising perceptions of early modern literacy: the wall as paratext

Juliet Fleming's discussion of the 'imbrication of word and image'<sup>1</sup> in the landscape of post-Reformation England may be understood in two ways: firstly, in an anti-Catholic, iconophobic sense, as presented by Tessa Watt, whereby Catholic idolatry was pre-empted by the addition of word to image;<sup>2</sup> secondly, within the confluence of word *and* image, or the text *as appreciated* as an image, which would have been the case of that multitude trapped within the convoluted, tenebrous and reductive confines of the term 'literacy'. I wish to consider this semantically loaded imbrication with regards to the physicality and function of a text within its architectural milieu.

The seemingly ubiquitous presence of wall-writings and -postings in 16<sup>th</sup> century England complicates any definitive notion of literacy. Wall-writing and -posting was by no means a uniquely post-Reformation, or post-medieval concept. Indeed, church walls were a site of writing throughout the Tudor and Stuart periods, interrupted by periods of interregnum whitewashing. Ordinances, as well as admonitions (such as the marking of plague doors) represented the reification of governmental authority, while Elizabethan parochial authorities used writing to mark parish boundaries. Wall-writing extended to the domestic sphere, with biblical inscriptions as well as heraldic mottoes and aphorisms being written directly on the wall,<sup>3</sup> upon which ballads, as well as recycled pages printed with designs, were also pasted.

My paper will examine the profusion of the word upon the landscape of early modern England, both within urban and non-urban spaces, and will attempt to link textual exposure with varying degrees of literacy. I will question the extent to which these walled texts had a primarily decorative function, examining the association of a text to its architectonic backdrop.

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<sup>1</sup> Juliet Fleming, *Graffiti and the Writing Arts of Early Modern England* (Guildford, 2001), 61.

<sup>2</sup> Tessa Watt, *Cheap Print and Popular Piety, 1550-1640* (Cambridge, 1991), 131-77.

<sup>3</sup> Fleming, 62.