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Article

# The voice inside the wall: *A muyto devota oração da empardeada* as a confession of enclosure

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**Abstract** In 1992, a secret library of eleven books was discovered in the wall of an old house in the small town of Barcarrota, near the border between the Spanish province of Badajoz and Portugal. Of all the books, I will focus on a small Portuguese prayer printed in the first half of the sixteenth century titled *A muyto devota oração da empardeada. Em lingoagem portugues* [*The very devoted prayer of the walled-in woman. In Portuguese language*]. The *emparedada* of the title is a devoted woman who lives inside a wall. In the Iberian middle ages and early modern period, the *emparedadas* were women who opted to live enclosed in small chambers inside both city walls and the walls of churches, as a form of penance and reclusion. However, this penance is theorized by the *emparedada* herself as both a form of self-inflicted isolation – extricating the body from the commodification of sex and caretaking labor – as the embrace of a new kind of social agency. It is a social agency through which women inscribe their own bodies into public monuments while hiding them from plain sight, that is also a spiritual agency insofar as it enables them to beg pardon for their own souls and the souls of others. I argue that this is a confession that can only be articulated from behind walls and requires a certain form of self-enclosure to fulfill its actualizing and redeeming promise.

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In 1992, the renovation of an old house in the small town of Barcarrota, in the south of the Spanish region of Extremadura, resulted in the extraordinary discovery of a library of eleven books sealed in a hidden chamber, inside a wall. We cannot say with certainty who was the proprietor of these books, although given the subject matter treated it seems they had good reason to keep them hidden.<sup>1</sup> Of the eleven titles included in this library, known today as the Biblioteca de Barcarrota, some treated censored topics like the erotic and magical arts, while others were featured on a list of forbidden books compiled and circulated by the Spanish Inquisition as a consequence of King Philip II's fear of the spread of Protestant ideas in the Iberian Peninsula.<sup>2</sup> Oddly enough, one of these hidden books, titled *A muyto devota oraçãõ da empardeada*, is very much about residing in the space between walls.

An *emparedada*<sup>3</sup> ['walled-in woman'] was a woman who committed to live in a small cell inside a stone wall, often with some proximity to a convent or parish to which she was affiliated in some way. Mentions of them can be found in Castilian texts from about the thirteenth century onwards, although there may have been *emparedadas* as early as the eleventh century.<sup>4</sup> These walled-in women can be seen as part of a long history of Christian eremitic practices. Crucially, these practices did not always involve a rejection of urban settings or the possibility of an ongoing association with a community. Historians of religious practices in the Middle Ages have seen these figures as akin to other emerging manifestations of lay religiosity such as the *fraticelli*, the *beguines* of the Crown of Aragon, or even Tertiary Franciscans themselves (Miura Andrades, 1991). Central to the way of life of these women was their refusal to live under strict monastic rule. Even if, in many cases, these walled-in women needed permission from the ecclesiastical authorities to continue their worship (Barbeito, 2002, 187), their decision to live within a wall, to imprison themselves, came with a strange sort of religious independence.

*A muyto devota oraçãõ da empardeada* is a tiny printed prayer measuring approximately 3.7 by 2.7 inches. A small fragment of liturgical parchment covers the actual print and the image in its frontispiece, which depicts a woman praying inside a cell. As the parchment conceals the image that might otherwise help the reader to situate her- or himself with regard to the content of the text, it seems plausible that the fragment of parchment was meant to hide said content. Textually, this is a prayer to be recited, likely sold among affordable, loose copies of ballads and small dramatic texts. The printing contains spelling mistakes and is clearly a cheap and rushed job. The prayer even came to have a talismanic appeal insofar as it was not rare for illiterate people to buy it and feel that just having it (in combination with their own prayers) would have the same effect as reading the prayer aloud.<sup>5</sup> The instructions that accompany the prayer promised, among other things, to deliver from Purgatory fifteen souls from the reader's kin: 'Eu lhe outorgo que em fim do ano lhe sejam livradas das penas do purgatorio quinze almas da sua gerança e linhagem as que elle quiser e me pedir'

1 The house where the books were found seems to have been property of *converso* physician Francisco de Peñaranda, who abandoned it abruptly in 1557 to seek refuge at the *Casa de Misericordia* in the small town of Olivença, a charity hospital and shelter, then across the border in the kingdom of Portugal. Whatever led this obscure character to flee home and country in such a rush remains a mystery. For arguments and documentation in favor of the owner of the house being the owner of the books see Serrano Mangas (2007) and (2010). Francisco Rico (2003, 222–6) has argued that the lack of any thematic coherence among the books meant that their owner was an ignorant bookseller who wanted to hide these books from the inquisition, going as far as calling Barcarrota a *libreria* ['bookshop'] as opposed to a private *biblioteca* ['library']. Giles (2017, 156) decidedly favors the latter hypothesis over the former.

- 2 Academic, churchman, and Spanish General Inquisitor Fernando de Valdés y Salas compiled it under the title *Catalogus Librorum, qui prohibentur mandato Illustrissimi & Reverendissimi D.D. Ferdinandi de Valdes Hispalensis*. It was printed by Sebastián Martínez in the town of Valladolid in 1559.
- 3 The many errors in the Portuguese early modern prayer have led many to point out that it is, in fact, a translation of a Castilian late medieval one (Carrasco González and García de Entrerria, 1997, XI). I have substituted the rare Portuguese *emparedada* of the title for the much more used Spanish *emparedada*, just a metathesis away, when referring to the devotional tradition of the walled-in women. For the translation of the term itself, I follow Anne J. Cruz (2014) and use the term ‘walled-in.’ Ryan Giles (2017) has opted for the elegant ‘immured’ as a translation for the term. Recently, Caveró Domínguez (2020) has translated it as ‘walled-up.’

[‘I grant to {whomever reads this prayer} that by the end of the year I will deliver from the punishment of purgatory fifteen souls of their heredity and lineage, whichever ones they wish and ask me for’] (2r).<sup>6</sup> This was as an extravagant reward for such a small prayer. In fact, the lack of correspondence between effort and reward was partially what qualified the prayer as ‘superstitious’ and therefore worthy of censorship.

The list of forbidden books published in 1559 includes ten prayers, among which the *Oração da emparedada* was certainly the most popular. No specific reasons are given for this inclusion, and we can deduce that the prayer was not seen as constituting a competing doctrinal discourse. The question is why a prayer inspired by the Passion of Christ would be censored. The answer might have something to do with in-betweenness as a point of enunciation, the idea that enclosure provides a certain exceptionality, a privileged access to the divine, both for the walled-in text and for the walled-in woman. The walled-in woman lived a life of devotion but also of a strange freedom, without having to commit to a specific monastic rule – close to a community, but at the same time, independent from it. As such, she became something of a self-appointed negotiator with the divine, able to secure rewards that appeared in excess of what a prayer of this kind should be able to promise. Among these rewards was forgiveness for readers who were living in mortal sin and had not confessed in many, many years. This in and of itself was a highly problematic assertion from the perspective of the Church authorities.

The prayer is framed by two tales that take place in the same unnamed location. This framing serves as an additional layer of enclosure, beyond the parchment wrapping and the stone walls themselves. The first tale opens with the *emparedada* praying to know how many wounds Christ bore on his body during the Passion. Christ himself then reveals the true number of wounds (6676) and goes on to offer the prayer that occupies most of the small volume. It ends with the tale of a miracle granted to the nuns of an abbey that serves as a narrative demonstration of the efficacy of these ritual words. In the tale of the miracle, a hermit has a vision of the nuns reading the prayer in a paradisiacal *locus amoenus*: ‘[...] hum hermoso câmpo de flores: polo qual vinha hum rio muy deleitavel et hermoso em o qual rio avia tâ graciosas arvores et floridas ervas que nã ay pessoa que o dizer podesse’ [‘a beautiful field of flowers through which ran a delightful and beautiful river where there were such graceful, flowery trees and grass that there is nobody who could describe it’] (14r.). The nuns who recited this prayer with full devotion appear at the center of this vision, those with doubt appear a little further away, and those who prayed only to obey the command of their Mother Superior appear the furthest. The message here is clear: the prayer works for everyone, lettered or not, even for those who recite it in a rote and unbelieving fashion.

What allows for the deliverance of these fifteen souls from Purgatory is a connection between the walled-in woman and Christ, a privileged access made



possible by her enhanced devotion and singular contemplation upon the physical agonies of the Passion. I contend that it is this state of *emparedamiento* ['being walled-in'] that is the condition of possibility of prayer, revelation, and deliverance. After the prayer is over, we do not know any more about the life of the woman than we knew before we opened it, yet it is this suspension of the biographical, the extreme in-betweenness that she has chosen to occupy in the world, that provides the prayer with surplus ritual power. She has managed to physically extricate herself from society and from the usual forms of sexual and reproductive commodification imposed on women. By inscribing herself in a semi-public place, she enacts an alternative form of sociability (Cavero Domínguez, 2010, 131). In imprisoning herself, she is no longer exposed to the contingencies of social life in urban space, the infinite small interactions that define who she is with regard to others. She becomes a different kind of social actor whose role is strictly codified and highly symbolic; her individual personhood is subsumed by her role as an *emparedada*. By virtue of these choices, she has acquired a paradoxical freedom, and the prayer could only be conceived from this position. Her biographical details become immaterial in the face of her current condition. The walls do not merely keep her largely isolated from the flows of urban life; she sheds her past, her personal history is subordinated to her walled-in state and the devotion it facilitates. Therefore, this is an impersonal confession, not a revelation of the singular memories, instances, or wrongdoings of an individual life. These are only relevant insofar as personhood is a kind of singularity that takes shape in the context of the social. For these reasons, I call this prayer a confession of enclosure.<sup>7</sup> While it is not an autobiographical tale, the living and worshipping condition of enclosure, the position of the walled-in woman's articulation of discourse, makes possible the performativity of the prayer.

One of the main reasons for the perceived excess of the prayer's promise is the fact that it claims not only to deliver fifteen souls from Purgatory but also to save the souls of those who recite it, even if they have not complied with the sacrament of confession and they are living in mortal sin: 'Outrosi qualquer pessoa que estiver em pecado mortal ainda que aja trinta annos que se nã aja confessado et se confessar cõ amarga cõtriçam et esta oração comprir lhe perdoarey todos seus pecados' ['Furthermore, anybody who would be in mortal sin, even if they have not confessed in thirty years and confessed with bitter repentance and pray this prayer, I will forgive all their sins'] (3r–3v). Being, as I stated, a confession of enclosure, the *Oração da empardeada* grants forgiveness to the unconfessed, a near substitute for confession itself as a mandate of the Church. The prayer itself states that its promise holds for all occasions, regardless of the circumstances, and, crucially, for any mode of reading – including those who do not accompany their reading with faith in its power. Even if the prayer does not completely invest itself with the power to take the

- 4 Castilian poet Gonzalo de Berceo (c. 1197–ante 1264) refers to Santa Oria (1043–1070) as a walled-in woman in his poem about her life, based on an eleventh-century chronicler and confessor identified as Munno: 'Emparedada era, yacia entre paredes. / Había vida lazada qual entender podedes. / Si su vida leyerdes así lo probaredes.' ['She was walled-in, she lay between walls. / She had a wounded life as you can understand. / If you read her life, you will confirm it.'] (Lappin, 2000, v. 24, translation by the author).
- 5 For a study of the use of the prayer as an amulet and the ramifications of this use in the picaresque tradition see Giles (2017, 156–73).
- 6 All citations of the prayer are to Carrasco González's facsimile edition (1997); English translations are the author's.
- 7 I am here indebted to the way in which Anne J. Cruz has pointed to 'physical enclosure and social isolation' (2014, 356) as the defining characteristics of the *emparedada*.

place of confession and to deliver absolution, it sells the reader a clean slate for fairly cheap.

The prayer of Barcarrota has as its main textual source a well-known anonymous Latin text produced in the fourteenth century known as *Quindecim Orationes* [‘Fifteen Prayers’], attributed to St. Bridget of Sweden and translated into many vernaculars. Bridget was not a walled-in woman, yet her prayer needed to adapt to many different contexts of devotion, including that of the Iberian Peninsula where her figure morphed into an *emparedada*. In the Latin source there is a similar correspondence between prayer and reward. A sixteenth-century printed book of hours, qualified these rewards as ‘vanities,’ pointing both at the excessive reward that prayers like the *Oração da emparedada* grant but also at their overall lack of religious legitimacy:

These xv prayers following, called commonly the xv. oos are set forth in divers Latin prymer, with goodly painted prefaces, promising to the sayers thereof many things both foolish and false, as the deliverance of xv souls out of Purgatory, with other like vanities, yet are they prayers self-right good and virtuous, if they be said without any such superstitious trust or blind confidence. (Askins, 2007, 246)

The general consideration that such rewards were vain and excessive reveals that there is an implicit system of equivalence whereby the specific value of different prayers and sacraments could only be administered by clerics. Like walled-in women, this walled-in prayer traffics in recognizable forms of devotion but crucially stays outside the space of ecclesiastic authority. Authority is falsified at the end of the prayer when an apocryphal source attributed to Pope Nicholas V is cited as guaranteeing the efficacy of the prayer (Londoño Rendón, 2013, 149).

Even though Valdés’s list of forbidden books did not provide any doctrinal reasons for including the prayer, it pointed to ‘cosas vanas, curiosas y supersticiosas’ [‘vane, curious, and superstitious things’]<sup>8</sup> that circulated in prayers and books of hours as an extra-institutional form of religiosity that the Inquisition was determined to mark as unorthodox under the heading of ‘superstition.’

Part of what is deemed superstitious about this poem is the strange link that is formed between the walled-in condition of the *emparedada* and the Passion of the Christ, between the asceticism and bodily discipline of the former and the suffering and sacrifice of the latter. In contemplating this suffering in all its graphic (and numerical) detail, the prayer of the *emparedada* attempts to provide something of a vicarious experience of Christ’s self-sacrifice and therefore of the salvation that said sacrifice made possible. It also contributes to the idea that in both cases there is a transaction taking place, an exchange of bodily suffering for the cleansing of accumulated moral debt. The walled-in woman’s exchange happens on a very small scale, a miniature of Christ’s much larger transcendental one. In this sense, more than threatening a sense of

8 Quoted by Martínez de Bujanda (1984, 488).



equivalence between prayer and spiritual reward, the walled-in woman disrupts a social order based on established forms of circulation. She is offering a clean slate outside of institutional channels, which the convenient availability of this pocket-size printed prayer makes easier. However, institutions, such as the Inquisition, that sought to control forms of worship, very much attentive to the dangers of the printed word, were soon alerted to its circulation and created the conditions under which such a popular text had to be tucked away behind a fake wall.

To conclude, I wonder about the meaning that this inquiry into the past might have if examined against the many horrors of 2020 – i.e., ecological catastrophe, mass migration, the implosion of democratic institutions, the unapologetic resurfacing of white supremacy in public discourse, and, of course, the large-scale isolation – enclosure – required by the Covid-19 pandemic. What is left of academic research if the status of academic labor is being dramatically undermined, with increasingly precarious conditions? And, more importantly, who is that research for? One could easily answer that the always diminished place of research in such times is like that of the Biblioteca de Barcarrota itself, hidden in a chamber and isolated until the times allow for better conditions of production, circulation, or at least of discussion. Nevertheless, there is no escaping the present. Research as a part of academic labor cannot avoid reflecting the circumstances of its own production, whether we want it to or not. If the library teaches us one lesson it would be that it is possible to formulate and ultimately preserve a snapshot of knowledge-exchange, sociability, and inquiry in adverse times (including the knowledge that we do not *yet* recognize as relevant to our present) as if to prepare the conditions of knowledge of a better future.

To think about and for such a future is to reflect on the kinds of enclosures that characterize the current health crisis, from the inconvenient but ultimately non-precarious quarantine experienced by privileged members of the professional classes like myself to the involuntary and dehumanizing forms of enclosure that predate the crisis like mass incarceration and migrant detention centers in the United States. At the beginning of May 2020, as I write this, enclosure makes us more dependent on monopolies of communication and large digital platforms in order to build networks of solidarity. Even as the social distancing rules give way to a partial reopening, cautious circulation in public spaces, and a rebound in commercial activity, many of the transformations that have come with enclosure are here to stay. To some of these forms of enclosure, such as the ones produced by powerful technological monopolies, we will have willingly surrendered ourselves. The prayer of the walled-in woman, censored for selling the surplus of salvation too cheap, and the mysterious owner of the walled-in library, maybe fearful about having collected the wrong books, represent forms of historical enclosure where the boundaries between power and resistance are blurry, rather than clear. They tell us about a past where

persecution cohabitated with the sharing and discussion of private forms of knowledge and devotion. What will future historians consider private in our modern age of nonstop surveillance? Only the endless thread of people's imaginative practices in the present can answer this question, yet the past has always some advice hiding behind the walls.

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Noel Blanco Mourelle is Assistant Professor in the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures at the University of Chicago. His research and teaching focus on theories of religious conversion and universalism, political theology, and histories of the book. His current book project examines medieval and early modern pedagogical innovations associated with material archives and book technology (E-mail: nblancomourelle@uchicago.edu).

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