

Piranesi's Letter to Lord Charlemont and the Public dated 20th June 1757

Silvia Gavuzzo-Stewart

Introduction

There are only two copies known of this manuscript letter, both of which were inserted by Piranesi in two sets of his *Antichità Romane* (1756), one of which is now in the Vatican Library, and the other in the Corsiniana Library in Rome. They are almost identical, written in Italian with a French translation. This indicates that Piranesi, despite the limited circulation of this manuscript, meant it to be read by international readers. The transcription (Appendix 1) and the translation into English (Appendix 2) given here are based on the Corsiniana copy (53 K 19), to which I added paragraphs absent in the original. The letter in the Vatican has been transcribed by Lamberto Donati (Donati 1950).

This letter is almost certainly the last one Piranesi wrote to defend the value of his 'Opera' *Le Antichità Romane*, his honour as an artist and as a 'free man' (*uomo libero*). This open letter from Piranesi to Lord Charlemont and to the 'Public' is dated 20th of June 1757. This is surprising since only one week before Piranesi had received a formal injunction by the governor of Rome. I give here a translation of its Latin text (HMC p. 243).

The 13th of June [1757], I, notary public of the government, by order of the governor of the noble city of Rome, had Giovanni Battista Piranesi summoned to the above mentioned office, to whom I served a formal injunction forbidding him to publish anything printed either in words or in images concerning the person, the decorum or the integrity of the most excellent milord Charlemont, being absent [from Rome]; as also [forbidding him] of either offending or molesting, neither in deeds nor in words, the abbé Peter Grant, and even more to publish anything printed either in words or in images concerning his person, and I imposed on the above mentioned Piranesi all these obligations, under pain of the most grave corporal punishment, even of the galleys, and any other [punishment] to be inflicted at the discretion of the most illustrious and reverend governor of the noble city of Rome in case of contravention etc...

Piranesi had been dragging on a polemic, already started a few years earlier, with the young Lord Charlemont, who had left Rome in 1754, and with his agents, the abbé Peter Grant, Edward Murphy and John Parker. The cause of all this anguished, one sided correspondence by Piranesi, was the difficult

negotiations with Lord Charlemont, and his agents, for the sponsorship of the four volumes of the *Antichità Romane*.

Most of the arguments treated by Piranesi in this manuscript letter had already been introduced by him in his previous letters but the tone here is even more assertive. This could be attributed to the great success obtained in the meantime internationally by the *Antichità Romane*, that resulted in Piranesi's election to the Society of Antiquaries of London of which he was very proud. The volumes of the *Antichità Romane* had been published the 15 may 1756, with grand dedications to the wealthy aristocrat (fig. 1). But after the publications of about seventy sets, Piranesi, doubting that he could rely on Charlemont's support, wrote two letters to him trying to clarify the situation, without receiving any reply, just as he had had no reply to his very first letter, now lost.

As Piranesi explains in this manuscript letter, the only possible reason for a lack of an answer from Charlemont, must have been due to the interception of his letters by Charlemont's agents, something confirmed by the abbé Grant. But the intrigues of the agents, as Piranesi reckoned, could have been nullified by simply making these letters public, and therefore inevitably known also to Charlemont, clearly 'badly informed' about what Piranesi was doing. So Piranesi printed the second letter (August 1756), along with his third one (February 1757), and started to include them in copies of the *Antichità Romane*. In the meantime, while waiting for an answer from Charlemont, which never arrived, Piranesi 'suspended' the dedication by erasing it from the copper plates (fig. 2). A crucial point was: did Charlemont want Piranesi's dedication or not? If not, he was ready, in order not to 'offend' Milord with an unwanted dedication, to remove it completely. Piranesi did not say openly, 'as in an ancient *damnatio memoriae*', but that would have been clear to Charlemont and his agents imbued in classical studies.

Piranesi laments in this manuscript letter postdating the two printed ones, the insulting way he had been treated by Charlemonts' agents, of the threats received, even of being killed, and appeals to the young aristocrat to act as judge in this bitter dispute, after having been acquainted with the details of the case. This explains Piranesi's rather cryptic and irreverent phrase, with classical origins: 'to appeal from Cesar badly informed to Cesar better instructed' (*un'appellare da Cesare male informato a Cesare meglio istruito*). This expression was much more familiar in the past. It seems modelled on the appeal of a woman who, condemned by Philip of Macedon while he was drunk, was absolved, by the same Philip when sober (Valerius Maximus, liber 6, cap. 2).

It is quite evident despite the appeal to Cesar/Charlemont, that Piranesi had no hope that Charlemont would act as a judge and condemn his ‘persecutors’. Piranesi then appealed to the people, the ‘Public’. In fact in this manuscript letter addressed to both Charlemont and the ‘Public’, it is clear from its first word: ‘Milord’, that the role of the public is meant by Piranesi, to be that of a witness and of a judge. To the ‘Public’ as his patron, instead of Charlemont, he ultimately dedicated his *Antichità Romane* (fig. 3).

The formal injunction to stop Piranesi publishing the two printed letters to Charlemont referred to earlier, was triggered by the abbé Grant who plays an important role in this present letter. He had badly failed in his ambassadorial mission to appease Piranesi, and had then received from him a ‘most scurrilous’ letter on the 31 May 1757 (HMC p. 241). Abbé Grant’s fear that Piranesi could print also this letter addressed to him, made him act quickly to ask for the intervention of the governor of Rome.

Piranesi though side-stepped the injunction of the 13 June by publishing his letter to Charlemont and the ‘Public’ in manuscript, thus legally obeying the prohibition stated in the Latin word of the injunction *impressum*, i.e. printed. Nevertheless about one year later, following the threat made in this letter, Piranesi had all the letters that he had been forbidden to publish, i.e. the two to Charlemont and the one to the abbé Grant, printed secretly in Florence (Minor 2006) and published in February 1758 with the explanatory title *Lettere di Giustificazione scritte a Milord Charlemont e ai di lui Agenti di Roma dal Signor Piranesi Socio della Real [sic] Società degli Antiquari di Londra intorno alla Dedicà della sua Opera delle Antichità Rom [...] fatta allo stesso Signore ed ultimamente soppressa. In Roma MDCCLVII* (fig. 4).

The booklet contains not only the three above mentioned letters, but also notes intended to clarify and bring up to date the arguments of the never ending lamentations. In addition, it contains satirical vignettes, and illustrations documenting, in a reduced format, the visual changes suffered by the original dedications to Charlemont in the large folio volumes of the *Antichità Romane*. In this way Piranesi had completely dismissed all the orders in the formal injunction.

However, he was then obliged by the governor of Rome to write a public apology, something he did using the same irony as in his satirical vignettes (Gavuzzo-Stewart 2017).

Lettera del Sigr Piranesi a Milord Charlemont, ed al Pubblico.

Milord.

Vi maraviglierete col Pubblico di veder la lettera che vi annetto, e di non aver saputa nuova di me che per una via così straordinaria ch'è questa che ho presa, per informarvi di qualche non mi è riuscito di farvi sapere per altro verso. Se vi formalizzate di non aver veduto mio scritto, e se parrà singolare al Pubblico, che avendo Voi ricevuta la dedica di un'Opera di questa considerazione, neppur mi abbiate dato risposta quando ve la inviai: il vostro stupore non può venire che dall'esservi state intercettate le lettere da me scrittevi; e benchè il Pubblico sia per farmi ragione, è bene di avvertirlo che sinora non ho veduta cosa di vostro, la quale possa farmi sospettare che siate stato capace di un procedere sì poco convenevole con un'uomo che non vi ha commessa la minima mancanza, e che il Pubblico, in vista della di lui lettera e della di lui Opera, giudica degno di essere atteso.

Vi ho scritte tre lettere, Milord, senz'averne avuta risposta. Nella seconda vi domandavo giustizia de' replicati insulti fattimi a nome vostro e per causa vostra. Gl'insulti son reali, son pubblici e son gravi. Ho opposta per un pezzo la pazienza alla persecuzione, ed ho estesi i miei rispetti per Voi sino a non far provare il mio risentimento a' miei offensori, non per altro, che perchè sono onorati della vostra benevolenza. In essa seconda lettera faccio giudice voi medesimo nella lor causa, e per impedirne l'arresto (com'era credibile che vi fosse stata arrestata la prima, giacchè non me ne deste risposta) credetti di aver ragione di scrivervi con tutta la forza che conviene a un'uomo libero, e insieme con tutto il rispetto dovuto al vostro grado, al vostro carattere, ed alla vostra riputazione. E siccome avevo motivo di temere che la stessa gente che mi aveva insultato non impedisse il corso alle mie lettere, vi chiesi intanto licenza di farle stampare alla testa della mia Opera in caso che mi negaste giustizia; e per prevenirne la soppressione, vi avvertii, che il vostro silenzio sarebbe stato per me un consenso e un'ordine di tor via la dedica.

Il timore che mi avea fatto prendere queste precauzioni è stato giustificato dall'evento. Vi sono state intercettate le mie lettere senz'alcun riguardo alle conseguenze che tal soverchieria potea produrre. Aspettai risposta, ma invano, e dopo cinque mesi d'aspettazione infruttuosa avrei avuta tutta la ragione di prendere un partito; ma il riguardo che vi ho, Milord, mi trattenne dal far cose che vi potessero dispiacere. Per altro essendosi vantato il vostro Agente, cioè a dir l'uomo contro cui vi esponevo i miei lamenti, che gli avevate rimesse lettere senza esservi degnato di leggerle, per l'apparenza benchè poca che vi era che una tal risoluzione venisse da Voi, stimai bene di fare stampare le stesse lettere, ma contenendomi in un giusto temperamento non feci altro che

mandarvele stampate, e intanto sospender la dedica. Questo era un'appellare da Cesare male informato a Cesare meglio istruito.

Mi supponeva, che se le mie lettere vi erano state intercettate com'era ben credibile, e come i miei amici si studiavano di persuadermelo: mi supponeva, dico, che gl'Intercettatori vedendo la cosa sul punto di farsi pubblica, si sarebbero una volta veduti nella necessità di presentarvele. Il termine era già spirato, ed ero pronto a render conto della mia condotta al Pubblico, ch'è il giudice naturale delle azioni degli uomini conosciuti. Ma ecco che viene a trovarmi il Sig^r Grandi: mi minaccia da parte vostra: si avvanza a dirmi che ne va della mia vita: ch'è incaricato egli stesso di far gli ultimi sforzi contro di me. Tali ordini, Milord, non possono mai esser vostri, ne potete mai tenere in sì poco conto il Sig^r Grandi che lo abbiate incaricato di una simil commessione; Cosicchè essendosene egli incaricato da se medesimo fa a se lo stesso affronto che fa a voi col supporre che potesse cadervi in mente un tal disegno. Ma voglio rendere al Sig^r Grandi tutta la giustizia che merita il buon servizio che mi ha fatto benche senza accorgersene.

Si è disdetto, Milord; onde non avete più motivo di risentirvi contro di Lui. Mi ha assicurato che siete ingannato sul fatto mio, e che non vi sono state fatte veder le mie Lettere; ma nel bel mentre ch'ei mi raccontava delle cose che m'illuminavano su tutto quel che non avevo mai potuto capire in questo negozio; mi veniva a porre in un'altro intrigo. Vedrete dalla seguente lettera in quale mi poneva, e vi chiarirete delle mire e de' maneggi della stessa gente di cui mi son lagnato con Voi.

V'è spaccio sì grande della mia opera, e Voi, Milord, avete tanti amici, ch'egli è impossibile che non abbiate a avere avviso della presente in breve. E quando ciò sarà, se vorrete che v'informi, sarò pronto a mandarvi le mie Lettere, ove vedrete se ho avuto ragione di volervi informato. Se poi non lo vorrete, e continueranno a tenervi nell'inganno sul fatto mio, seguirò il partito che avevo preso, ed avendo allora il vostro silenzio tutta l'autenticità possibile, e dall'altro canto non vedendo io alcuna risposta di vostro intorno alla mia dedica, sarò pienamente persuaso, che non la gradite, e la torrò via. Per render poi conto della ragione che avrò avuto di torla, pubblicherò le mie Lettere assolutamente tal'e quali ho avuto l'onore di scrivervele. Faccio conto che quattro mesi saranno tutto il tempo che posso aspettare.

Se morirò in questo termine, mia moglie, i miei figli, i miei amici, o chi porrà il mio nome fra quei de' Professori, son tenuti a dar questo ragguaglio al Pubblico a nome mio, perchè ne andrebbe della mia riputazione, non facendolo; e lascerò un legato considerabile a chi s'incaricherà di farlo, perchè credo di non poter mai far troppo per assicurare un'onore che mi preme più della vita, e per far vedere al Pubblico, che non ho mancato mai al profondo rispetto che vi professo, e che adopro pensieri, talento tempo, borsa, insomma tutto lo spirito per attestarvi la riconoscenza che avevo della protezione che vi eravate compiaciuto d'offirmi e che avevo accettata. La stessa protezione vi

domando ora contro chi ardisce far parlare il Sig^r Grandi, e mettergli in bocca delle minacce che fanno passare sotto un nome che dovrebbero rispettare. Sono, Milord, e sarò per sempre col più profondo rispetto. Di Roma 20 Giugno 1757.

Appendix 2

Signor Piranesi's letter to Milord Charlemont and the Public, translated into English.

Milord.

You, along with the Public, will be surprised to see the letter which I include for you, and also of not having had news of me in any other manner than in such an exceptional way as the one I have followed in order to inform you of what I could not succeed in letting you know otherwise. If you are surprised at not having seen anything written from me, and if the Public thinks it odd, that You, having received the dedication of a Work of such importance, did not even reply when I sent it to you: your surprise can only arise from the fact that the letters I wrote to you were intercepted; and although the Public would take my part, it is right to warn it that hitherto I never saw anything from you that would make me suspect you would have been able of such inappropriate behaviour towards a man who has not given You the slightest offence, and that the Public, in consideration of his [Piranesi's] own letter and of his Work, deems worthy to be taken into consideration.

I wrote three letters to you, Milord, without having had any reply. In the second one [25 agosto 1756] I was demanding justice for the repeated insults I received in your name and on your account. The insults are real, they are public, and they are serious. For a long time I opposed to persecution, patience, and I extended my respect for You to the point of not allowing my offenders to feel my resentment, for no other reason than that they are honoured by your benevolence. In this second letter I elected you to be judge in their case, and in order to prevent the letter from being stopped (because it was likely that my first letter had been stopped, since you never replied to it) I believed I was right to write to you forcefully as befits a free man, along with all the respect due to your rank, your character, and your reputation. And since I had reason to fear that the same people who had insulted me would prevent my letters from being delivered, I asked you in the meantime permission to have them printed and put at the beginning of my Work in case you were to deny me justice; and in order to prevent the suppression of the letters I warned

you that your silence would have been for me a consent, indeed an order, to remove my dedication.

The fear which had induced me to take these precautions has been justified by what followed. My letters to you have been intercepted without having any regard for the consequences that such an abuse could cause. I waited for an answer, but in vain, and after having waited fruitlessly for five months I would have had good reasons to take a decision; but the respect I have for you, Milord, prevented me from taking any step that might displease you. On the other hand, since your Agent [John Parker], that is the man about whom I was complaining to you, boasted that you had returned the letters without having deigned to read them, despite the unlikelihood that such a resolution could be attributed to You, I esteemed it appropriate to have these same letters printed, but, limiting myself to rightfully temperate action, I did not do anything but send them to you printed, and in the meantime suspend my dedication. This was to appeal from Cesar badly informed to Cesar better instructed.

I supposed that if my letters to you had been intercepted as it seemed very likely, and as my friends were trying to persuade me, I supposed, I say, that the interceptors seeing the matter on the point of becoming public, would have then felt themselves obliged to show you the letters. The deadline had already expired, and I was ready to give an account of my conduct to the Public, which is the natural judge of men of repute. But then unexpectedly Signor Grandi comes to see me: he threatens me on your behalf: he goes so far as to say that my own life is at stake: that he himself is in charge of making the last efforts to thwart me. Such orders, Milord, could never come from you, neither could you hold Signor Grandi in such little consideration as to charge him with a similar mission. So, since he has assumed this mission on his own account, he is affronting himself as much as he is affronting you by supposing that you could have thought of such a design. But I want to render Signor Grandi all the justice he deserves for the good service he did for me, even without realising it.

He contradicted himself, Milord; therefore you do not have any further reason to be disappointed in him. He has assured me that you are being deceived regarding me, and that they [the agents] have prevented you from seeing my Letters; but while he was telling me things which were clarifying for me all that which I had never been able to understand in this affair, he was plunging me into another intrigue. You will see from what follows (*la seguente lettera*) in what kind of intrigue he was placing me, and it will become clear to you the aims and the manipulations of the same people of whom I complained to You.

The sales of my work are so extensive, and You, Milord, have so many friends that it is not possible that you fail to have a knowledge of this letter shortly. And when this happens, if you would like me to inform you, I will be ready to send my Letters to you, where you will see if I was right in wanting you to be informed. But if you do not want that, and they continue to deceive you on my account, I will follow the plan which I had devised, and then your silence having become clearly deliberate, and in addition, not seeing any reply from you about my dedication, I shall be fully persuaded that you do not like it, and I will remove it. In order to explain, then, the reason I would have had to remove it, I shall publish my letters exactly as I had the honour to write them to you. I estimate that four months will be as long as I can wait.

If I were to die beforehand, my wife, my children, my friends or those who would want to put my name among the Professors of the Liberal Arts are charged to give this account to the Public in my name, because otherwise my reputation would be damaged; and I shall leave a substantial Legacy to whomever assumes the responsibility of doing it, because I believe I cannot ever do too much to secure my honour, which is more dear to me than life itself, and also in order to demonstrate to the Public that I never lacked the deep respect which I nourish for you, and that I am using thoughts, talent, time, expense, in short all my genius [*spirito*] in order to demonstrate to you the gratitude I had for the protection that you were pleased to offer me and which I had accepted.

The same protection I am now demanding from you against those who dare to send Signor Grandi to speak [to me] and to put menacing words into his mouth which they want to appear to come from a name which they ought to respect. I am, Milord, and shall always be with my deepest respect. From Rome 20th June 1757

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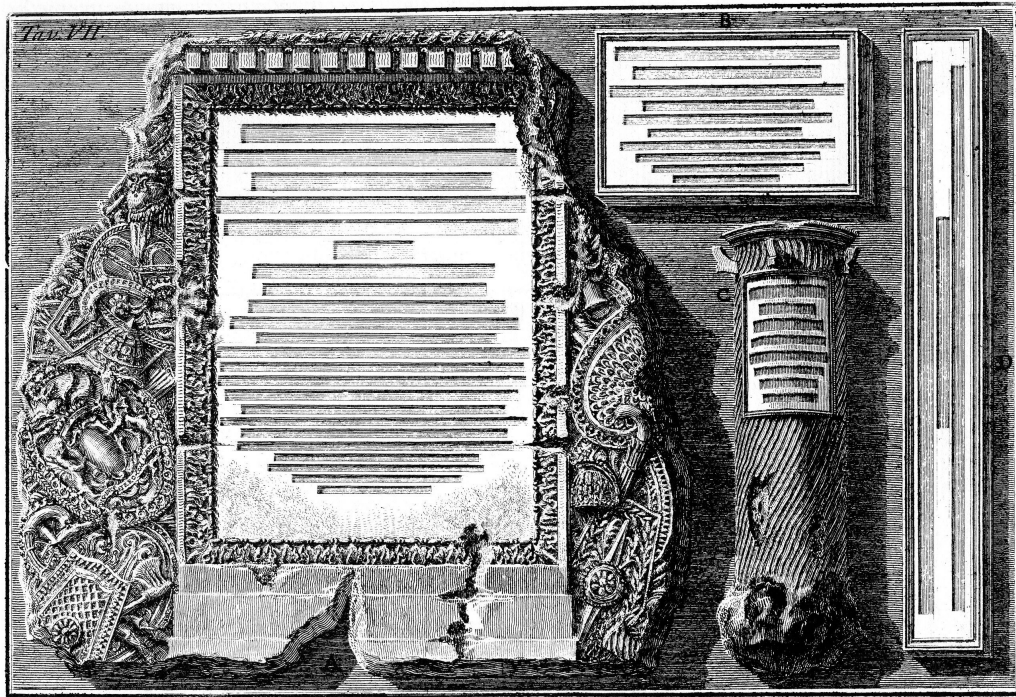
Valerius Maximus

Factorum ac dictorum memorabilium libri IX.



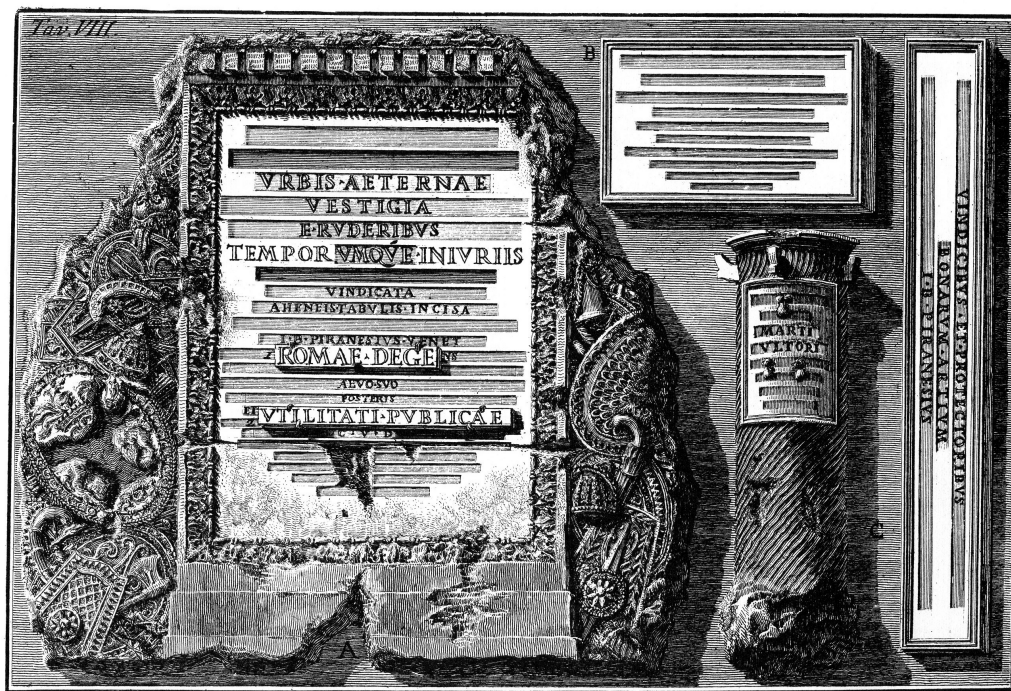
Primo Frontespizio dell'Opera delle Antichità Romane. *Stemma gentilizio di Milord Charlemont, firmato sulla maniera dell'originale datone dagli Agenti di detto Signore, e che si finge in una tavola di marmo incastrata fra i trofei antichi che accompagnano l'Iscrizione

Fig. 1. G. B. Piranesi, *Lettere di Giustificazione*, Plate I shows a reproduction of the original dedication to Lord Charlemont in the *Antichità Romane*.



A. Lapide del primo Frontespizio colle rasure della iscrizione che importano la sospensione della Dedica di Milord. B. Lapide del secondo Frontespizio colle stesse rasure. C. Colonna rostrale del terzo, colle medesime. D. Epistilio del quarto, parimenti con esse.

Fig. 2. G. B. Piranesi, *Lettere di Giustificazione*, Plate VII showing the four different dedications to Lord Charlemont erased.



A. Complimento al Pubblico, sostituito nel primo Frontespizio alla Dedica di Milord, con lettere che si fingono di metallo incastrate nelle scarpellature della stessa Dedica. 2. a. Frammenti della iscrizione di Milord che si fingono tolti dai Canali delle linee II, e VIII della iscrizione medesima per fervire al Complimento. B. Lapide del secondo Frontespizio, che resta anonima. C. Mutazioni delle iscrizioni nei Frontespizi terzo e quarto.

Fig. 3. G. B. Piranesi, *Lettere di Giustificazione*, Plate VIII showing the new dedication of the *Antichità Romane* to his contemporaries, to future generations and to the public good. On the left, one can see the escutcheon of Lord Charlemont reduced to fragments.



Fig. 4. G. B. Piranesi, *Lettere di Giustificazione*, title page.