

Writing on the Walls of Ivy

by Anne Fadiman and John Sedgwick

Privy information

Men can't see what women write on bathroom walls. Women can't see what men write on bathroom walls. We think that's a shame. So, as a public service, we've assembled a compendium of omniseual graffiti that will let men and women satisfy—without getting arrested—their curiosity about what the other half scribbles.

Where better to find the ne plus ultra of graffiti than in a Harvard john? With its elite population of jocks, eggheads, feminists and anal compulsives, Harvard-Radcliffe (Harvard, for short) has produced a collection of graffiti that would do any public bathroom proud.

We should announce our bias at the outset. Graffiti is an art form. Wall space is precious. Anybody who writes "John loves Mary" or "Fuck you" should be flushed. But we never realized until now that the humble stall could be a convention center, figuratively speaking, for the scholarly, the misogynistic, the lovelorn and the peculiar. We also discovered that women, traditionally also-rans in the raunch race, have rewritten the writing on the wall, making it a sincere medium of communication.

As the arts have nine muses, the solar system nine planets and the cat nine lives, so Harvard graffiti has nine genres. We have traced origins, isolated themes, analyzed imagery and speculated on the sociobiological aspects of each genre in an effort to establish these litterae humaniores in their proper place as a legitimate branch of comparative glottology.

I. Déjà Lu

These are the phoenixes of the graffiti race. Annually erased, painted over, annihilated by Ajax, they rise again with renewed vigor every September. They are immortal. They are classic. They are the yardsticks with which all young graffiti must be measured.

What gives a graffiti sticking power? It can be the result of an inspired mistake:

I LOVE ~~GRILS~~ GIRLS
—Hey, what about us grils?

It can be fun to write:

JLAW ZIHT BEHIND A M! I! JEH!

And at Harvard, its chances are greatly improved if it includes an esoteric name, preferably foreign, literary and impossible to spell:

KUBLA KHAN; IMMANUEL KANT

EURIPIDES PANTS? EUMENIDES PANTS!

By these criteria, Nietzsche is the all-time winner, having been immortalized in no less than three classic graffiti (the last of these is still soliciting contributions):

NIETZSCHE IS PIETZSCHE

GOD IS DEAD—Nietzsche
NIETZSCHE IS DEAD—God

TO DO IS TO BE—Nietzsche
TO BE IS TO DO—Kant
DO BE DO BE DO—Sinatra
DO BE A DO BEE—Miss Connie of *Romper Room*
DO BE OR NOT DO BE—Hamlet with a cold
WHAT IS DO BE DONE?—Lenin
I WANT DO BE ALONE—Garbo
I AM NOT A DO BE—Nixon
WHAT IS A DO BE?—Ford
BEES WON'T DO—Chevy Chase
DO ME DO ME DO ME!—Linda Lovelace

Anne Fadiman (*Radcliffe '75*) majored in the history and literature of England. John Sedgwick (*Harvard '77*) majored in English.

II. Arse Poetica

Bathroom sentiments are generally best suited to prose, but from time to time the muse of the toilet stall inspires the occupant to cast his thoughts in verse:

She offered her honor,
He honored her offer,
And all night long,
It was honor and offer.

For the most part, however, the poetic urge results not so much in the creation of new poems as in the subversion of old ones:

Roses are red,
Violets are blue,
Turkeys are like raindrops—
Let's fuck.

III. I Don't Give a Damn About Student Apathy

There was a time when Harvard students covered their bathroom walls with political messages as blithely as ordinary people scribbled obscenities. No longer. Now radicals are in a minority and the majority isn't silent about it. On one wall we came across the following meaningful dialogue:

POLITICO: Bomb the Pentagon now. Destroy those murderous imperialists.

APOLITICO: And lock up the cretin that wrote that!

In women's bathrooms, however, one can take a serious stand without being knocked flat. One woman alerted rest-room occupants to the dangers of nitrates, "found in sausages, bacon, sandwich meats, lox and more," which combine with "common foods and beverages" to form "the most potent carcinogenic chemical known to man!" Such messages conclude not with a call to demonstrate, as in days of old, but with a request to "write your Senator or congressman."

These days, political jokes are themselves an endangered species. The survivors adapt to the new climate of apathy by taking a rather cavalier attitude:

SAVE SOVIET JEWS—WIN VALUABLE PRIZES!

But in a few bathrooms, good old-fashioned Sixties political humor still thrives. And Nixon is still the butt of the joke:

Avoid all needle drugs. The only dope worth shooting is Richard Nixon. They call him Tricky Dick, but only Pat knows for sure.

IV. Nasty Cracks

Tiled bathroom stalls have given rise to a special genre of graffiti, the one-liner. Only in the narrow plaster cracks between tiles can the artist find a medium that is safe from the ravages of a janitor's sponge. To the cracked mind, nobody's sacred. Not deities:

Jesus saves—but Esposito scores on the rebound.

Not philosophers:

Confucius say: "Man who go to bed with sex problem wake up with solution in hand."

Not the handicapped:

If Helen Keller is alone in the forest and falls, does she make a sound?

Not transsexual tennis players:

RENEE RICHARDS WINS MIXED SINGLES AT LONGWOOD

Have you read Dr. Richards' new book, *Tennis Without Balls*?

—No, but I hear she's depressed since losing the battle of the sexes with herself.

And certainly not premeds:

Q: Why did the premed chicken cross the road?

A: Because it was required.

Q: How many premeds does it take to change a light bulb?

A: Two. One to stand on a chair and turn the bulb and one to kick the chair out from under him.

V. Cogito Ergo Harvardianus Sum

After the thrill of comparing S.A.T. scores wears off, Harvard students must find some new way to prove how smart they are. One way is to pen the most learned graffito in an entire toilet stall.

Writing something in a foreign language is always a good play, since it is bound to make at least one other person feel like an idiot. In Lamont Library, one Harvard classicist inscribed a request in flawless Latin, promising the respondent "*multae pecuniae*" for her labors. Those who are confined to mere English prove they can be equally pretentious:

FREE PROMETHEUS
OEDIPUS WAS A MOTHERFUCKER
CHARYBDIS SUCKS
GABRIEL BLOWS
LUTHER EATS WORMS
SHAKESPEARE EATS BACON
MELVILLE EATS BLUBBER

And from the music building and the Loeb Theater respectively:

BACH IN A FUGUE MINUETS
BACK IN A MINUTE—Godot

But it's in the science laboratories that the graffiti get *really* esoteric:

Q: What's purple and commutes?

A: An Abelian grape.

Now, unless you happen to know that in homological algebra there is such a thing as an Abelian group and that it has commutative properties, you may not think this is very funny. Mathematicians apparently find it a sidesplitter.

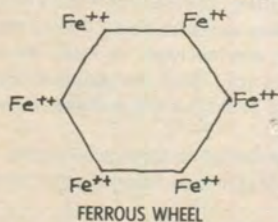
From the physics lab, a slightly more accessible sampling:

PLANCK IS INCONSTANT
HEISENBERG IS UNCERTAIN
NIELS IS BOHRING

And from the chem lab:

If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the precipitate.

The chemists are also fond of usually incomprehensible (to us) puns about chemical bonding. This is one we got:



From these graffiti, one might infer that the minds of Harvard scientists are as lily-white as calcium chlorohydroxide. This is not true. Here's a formula from the realms of lower mathematics:

$$B_4i4q \frac{ru}{18} q\pi\pi?$$

VI. Sour Grapes

To judge from the men's-room walls, the Harrad experiment has flopped: Sex at Radcliffe is like bridge—if you have a good hand, you don't need a partner.

When a Harvard man steps into a water closet, one of the things he's sure to malign is the Radcliffe woman. Nobody has a good word for her. In the lexicon of the pissoir, she's a "Cliffie Bitch" (sometimes a "Radclit"), a sexless commodity, cold and mechanical. As one man wrote:

Ninety-five percent of all co-eds are beautiful. The other five percent go to Radcliffe.

A popular pastime is to compose snide lists to derogate the Bitches:

- What's the difference between a Cliffie and a toilet seat?
- Toilet seats are comfortable to sit on.
- You get used to the looks of a toilet seat.
- Toilet seats are easier to communicate with.
- Toilet seats warm up when you touch them.
- Toilet seats don't have droopy boobs.

VII. Adam Was a Rough Draft

The best defense is a good offense. Closing ranks, the Cliffies counter the thrusts of their horny Harvard classmates with feminist lunges of their own. But it's not Harvard men they're fighting. It's Man.

The strongest anti-male sentiment comes from the gay community. Counseled one woman:

If a man asks you if you're a lesbian, ask him if he's the alternative.

Dignity and decorum are the rule here. There are no propositions, phone numbers, vital statistics or dirty pictures. In fact, the only explicitly lesbian drawing we found was a bold foot-high portrait of two nude amazons with arms intertwined and fists upraised—a far cry from the collection of feebly scrawled genitalia next door.

Heterosexual feminists are no less resolute. Declared one woman who'd had it with Freud:

WAR IS JUST MENSTRUATION ENVY

Another made this incisive observation:

If God had wanted women to give blow jobs, she wouldn't have given them teeth.

VIII. Cram It, Pie Face

When Harvard men get tired of picking on the Cliffies, they pick on one another. It's called one-upmanship. The object, simply put, is to catch somebody being sincere and to slam him:

The unsettling thing about psychology is reading about some character disorder and then realizing you fit the description.

—Yeah, people who write on walls are full of shit.

I need some raw sex.

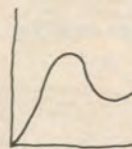
—Try clams.

IX. Gimme Feedback, Sisters

Cliffies, however, take one another seriously. Their bathroom walls are covered with useful information, such as which chemistry courses to avoid and where to get an abortion. Sometimes a woman just wants to share a moment of exuberance:

I'm getting married! To a member of the opposite sex! So reactionary! So passé! So lovingly beautiful!

Or, more playfully:



GRAPH



FEET!

Most interesting (and most revolutionary) are the long exchanges of personal advice that have recently burgeoned on the walls of the science-center women's room. While her mother might have sent off a letter to Ann Landers, today's Cliffie merely takes out her pen, finds a blank space on the bathroom wall and writes:

I am in the process of quitting smoking. 2 days down, ∞ to go. How long does the hell last?

I'm not bi, yet sometimes I have lesbian dreams. Anybody else experience the same thing?

I've come to the conclusion that sex without love is empty and demeaning. What do you think? Gimme feedback, sisters.

All these questions received thoughtful and supportive responses. We found only one case of one-upwomanship:

[In blue ink]: How can I get John to love me?

[In green ink]: Why do you want John to love you?

[In purple ink]: She doesn't—it's part of her thesis.

Now, a Harvard privy is not just any old john. We've heard that elsewhere (Yale, for example) it's hardly worth going to the bathroom. But if you're ever caught in a blank (or boring) stall and you're looking for solace, remember this off-the-wall advice:

When you think the whole world sucks—relax! It's only gravity. #