A cluster of activities which have at their core an emulation of a classical past. It is not, however, simply another word for classicism. It is marked out by the elements of the classical world that it prized and the determination to provide as a living model a past it believed had been lost and was in need of a rebirth.

The term humanism did not exist until the beginning of the nineteenth century, though ‘humanist’ was in the English lexicon of the sixteenth century, by association with the Renaissance Latin humanista. That word had a specific meaning (beyond connotations of pederasty with which it was sometimes tarred): it was applied to a teacher of a particular range of subjects. Those subjects were grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, and moral philosophy and had a collective Latin name: the studia humanitatis. That phrase, though, denoted something broader. It was used in Cicero in an oration refound only in the fourteenth century and not brought into use until several decades later, to signify a commitment to ‘the studies of what it was to be human’. That vague sense reigned for some decades until it gained curricular specificity.

Humanism was not intended to be a complete education, with no interest shown in law or medicine or theology – all higher faculties in universities which humanist practices came to inform in the sixteenth century. It did not advocate a concentration on the human at the expense of the divine and certainly did not promote a belief in a godless world – that additional meaning of humanism is a yet later development, dating from the mid-nineteenth century. Nor was it a particular philosophy: the studia humanitatis included moral philosophy in the range of subjects to be taught but assumed no commitment to a particular sect. It was, instead, a route to improving humans through a revival of ancient virtues, ones which may have been revered and practised by pagans but which were seen as compatible with Christianity.

The history of the etymology of the term associates it with the period of the Renaissance. The Italian scholars who first promoted the studia humanitatis considered themselves to be pitting their novelty against an outmoded tradition of learning that dominated the universities – a tradition of ‘useless’ education that has come to be termed scholasticism. Some twentieth-century historians, wishing to puncture the Renaissance humanists’ overblown rhetoric, colonised the central term and exported it to their own periods of study. So, for instance, R. W. Southern coined ‘scholastic humanism’ to define and ennoble the activities of some twelfth-century scholars, including John of Salisbury. It is true that John, in his attempt to compose Ciceronian Latin and in his concerns about the dynamics of power shown in his Policraticus, could be said to share affinities with the later humanists. Other scholars would make the case for the ‘humanism’ of Geoffrey Chaucer, since he was acquainted with the authors to whom the fifteenth-century humanists looked back – Dante, Boccaccio and Petrarch – though the humanists also ostentatiously rejected that vernacular tradition for their own style of composition in Latin.
Different scholars use the term ‘humanism’ in their own manner but what its various re-uses cannot do is to deny that a group of Italian literati from the early fifteenth century – led by the Florentines, Leonardo Bruni (1370-1444) and Poggio Bracciolini (1380-1459) – announced themselves to be championing a new approach to learning. What is more, their activities were written with a consciousness of distant England as a potential market and, indeed, a locus of humanist production.

Neither Bruni nor Poggio was himself a school teacher; their definition of the *studia humanitatis* was vaguer than the educational programme with which the term later became synonymous – vaguer and thus more evocative. For them, it was a claim to be reviving ancient eloquence which had been suppressed by ‘barbarous’ or ‘gothic’ (thus, northern European) habits. What was distinctive, then, to their agenda was a cluster of activities, which can be summarised:

- the composition of texts in what was intended to be a ‘pure’ (usually meaning Ciceronian) Latin
- the emulation of classical models in a series of genres – in particular, dialogues, epistles, orations and invectives
- the mastering of the Greek language to replicate ancient Roman bilingualism
- in order to feed their desire for classical inspiration, the hunt for little-known classical and patristic texts in either Latin or Greek
- the determination to reconstruct the original text as accurately as possible – philology
- the adoption of a visual presentation of text on the page to accord with the other elements of this agenda (replacing ‘gothic’ layout and script with an archaising style – eg rejection of the presentation a two columns of text surrounded by commentary)

This agenda was, of course, not unchanging over the fifteenth century and into the sixteenth century; it was transformed by both its own internal mutations and the impact of external developments, particularly the introduction of print[*XREF*]. So, the perception of what constituted ‘pure’ Latin shifted so that, by the generation of Erasmus and Thomas More, the prose of Leonardo Bruni was considered below acceptable standards (though some of his translations from Greek remained popular). At the same time, some scholars, like Pietro Bembo or Niccolò Machiavelli, believed that their own vernacular could have the nobility the *studia humanitatis* had reserved for the languages of the Roman Empire. Thus, when Thomas Wyatt in the 1530s and 1540s was producing his English versions of Petrarch, he was both looking back to a time before the heyday of Renaissance humanism and also engaging with contemporary currents.

Print, meanwhile, might appear to be an ally of a programme of study that wanted to establish the stability of the text, but by some humanists it was seen as a potential enemy: the replication of a text in multiple copies could, they feared, embed error more often than it promoted accuracy. Moreover, the commercial impulse that lay behind the trade in printed books was not necessarily friendly to something as erudite or recherché as the humanist agenda. Indeed, printers like Erasmus’s friend, Aldus Manutius, who did invest in humanist works, were liable to be among those who fell into financial difficulties. No wonder that
England’s first printer, William Caxton had little interest in the *studia humanitatis* – little but not entirely none.

The engagement of the *studia humanitatis* with England was as old as the revived term itself. Two of its early leading lights had English connexions. Poggio Bracciolini (1380-1459) had lived on the South Bank of the Thames for four years, as secretary to Henry Beaufort, bishop of Winchester (arriving in 1419 and leaving late in 1422 or early in 1423); he did not speak warmly of the cold island but his experiences and his reading did inform the dialogues he wrote in later life. Leonardo Bruni (1370-1444) never travelled as far as Poggio had, but he did despatch one of his major works, his translation of Aristotle’s *Politics* to England following its completion in 1436. Its recipient was Humfrey, duke of Gloucester (1390-1447), the prince who delighted in being known as the son, brother and uncle of kings, the Protector of England during the minority of his nephew, Henry VI. This was the first of several works sent to Humfrey by Italian humanists in the later 1430s and early 1440s: to cite one instance, Pier Candido Decembrio of Milan, fancying himself as a rival to Bruni (the acknowledged pre-eminent scholar), dedicated to the duke his translation of Plato’s *Republic*. Other humanists went more than a step further and travelled the distance to England, either to seek employment or because their career demanded it. So, Humfrey employed in quick succession two Italians as his secretary: Tito Livio Frulovisi, who wrote the first humanist life of the duke’s late brother, the *Vita Henrici Quinti* (plagiarised from another anonymous biography written by an Englishman in non-humanist Latin); and Antonio Beccaria, who translated into Latin Greek works by Plutarch and St Athanasius, as well as one tale from Boccaccio’s *volgare Decameron*. At the same time, the papal collector in England, Pietro del Monte, also sought to curry favour with the duke and dedicated to him a dialogue entitled *De vitiorum inter se differentia* (this too was plagiarised, from a work by Poggio Bracciolini).

Humfrey’s engagement with humanism may have been neither very enduring nor very deep but it had a lasting impact because of the duke’s unusual decision to part with over three hundred of his books in his lifetime, presenting them not to a religious house or an educational college but to the University of Oxford itself. Not all the manuscripts he gave had humanist subject matter, but those that did certainly increased substantially the store of new texts available in the university town. The gifts were so substantial that the University decided to build a purpose-built library which eventually opened four decades after the donor’s death, in 1488; the room – though denuded in the mid-sixteenth century and all the books alienated – survives and is known as Duke Humfrey’s Library.

The pattern of activity around Humfrey, with Italian humanists in contact with Englishmen both from a distance and through physical presence, continued later in the century. It was supplemented, moreover, by two further elements. One of these was the travelling to England of Greek scholars. The Byzantine émigré famous for teaching Greek to the earliest humanists, Manuel Chrysoloras (1355-1415), himself briefly visited England as an ambassador of his emperor in 1409. Later, in the mid-century, some of his countrymen followed, including George Hermonymos, who sought the favour of George Neville, Archbishop of York (1432-76). This certainly did not ensure a sustained revival of the study of Greek, as had been mastered by Robert Grosseteste [XREF] two centuries earlier. Indeed, it seems that when
Antonio Beccaria left England, he did so with some of Grosseteste’s own manuscripts in his saddle-bags. By the last quarter of the fifteenth century, however, there were some Englishmen – like William Sellyng (c.1430-1494), the prior of Christ Church, Canterbury – who were showing a keen interest in the humanist fashion for mastering Greek.

Those English scholars were preceded in their interest by a young man, John Free, who is also an example of the other phenomenon central to the history of English humanism – the engagement with the studia humanitatis in its homeland. Free went to Italy as a student (supported by William Gray, bishop of Ely, who had previously been resident there for about a decade); he became, while there, the secretary to John Tiptoft, earl of Worcester – himself a significant patron and book collector; for Tiptoft, he translated a work of Synesius from Greek into Latin, and he presented another translation of the same author to the pope, Paul II; it is said that he was set to become a bishop but his career was cut short by an early death in Rome. Free is unusual in the level of his humanist accomplishments but he was far from unprecedented in his spending time in Italy.

Free himself did not have the chance to return to his homeland brandishing his humanist credentials, though he did send some letters and at least one of his translations demonstrating his polished Latin and elegant humanist handwriting. Others – like his former patron, William Gray – returned to England laden down with manuscripts produced in the humanist style. Some also imported the skills they had learnt on their travels. His contemporaries thought that John Tiptoft’s main debt to Italy was a sadistic streak – hardly a centrepiece of humanist education. He himself considered that his compatriots could benefit from the oratorical ability the humanists prized. There were certainly some in his circle who had studied it and were willing to put it to the use of the English monarchy: the first orations in humanist Latin to be composed by an Englishman were by Tiptoft’s protégé, John Gunthorp, when he was an ambassador for Edward IV in the mid-1470s. Incidentally, Scotland, in this respect, was nearly at pace with developments south of the border, with Archibald Whitelaw delivering a humanist oration to England’s Richard III in 1484.

England did not have to come to rely solely on its own to provide continuing humanist stimulation. The tradition of Italian visitors continued, with the longest resident being Pietro Carmeliano (1451-1527), who arrived in England in the early 1480s and was to become a secretary to Henry VII and to Henry VIII; in that role, he was instrumental in introducing the italic bookhand invented in north-east Italy in the mid-century into English royal correspondence. Carmeliano also engaged with the new medium of print, editing six ‘most elegant’ letters of Sixtus IV for publication by William Caxton (1484). Another – more itinerant – traveller was Stefano Surigone (fl. 1450s-1480s), who was also known to Caxton, who printed the epitaph Surigone composed for the long-dead English poet, Geoffrey Chaucer. It is a striking example of English acknowledgement of the significance of the new fashions from Italy for even their own parochial identity – striking, in part, because it is rare. It can lead us to wonder what impact an overwhelmingly Latinate agenda had on the local vernacular.
The *studia humanitatis* is sometimes characterised as a virus and, in that metaphor, its primary victims were Italian Latinists. Clearly, some fifteenth-century Englishmen also succumbed but the significant question is whether humanism could achieve the linguistic equivalent of jumping the species barrier: how successfully could its cluster of practices be transferred into a less Latinate tongue? We cannot take knowledge of the already ‘standard’ classical texts by Roman authors as sufficient evidence; what is required is engagement with the specific strand of classicism promoted by Bruni and others. So, when English translations of Cicero’s *De amicitia* and *De senectute* were produced, this might seem to speak of humanist affiliations, particularly as they were attributed by Caxton to John Tiptoft, a known aficionado of the new intellectual habits. Yet, these were works which had long been known in western Europe, and were not among the refound texts on which the humanist lavished the most attention. These translations, then, may not speak of an intention to ‘humanise’ English. Likewise, the few examples of rendering Petrarch’s Latin works into English in the fifteenth century took as their focus texts which, in the environs where they had been originally produced, were by this time passé.

There are, though, other signs of attempts to imitate or adapt or acknowledge the humanist agenda in English writings. So, for instance, the translation of the *De re rustica* of Palladius produced in the circle of Humfrey, duke of Gloucester in the late 1430s or early 1440s, while taking a work that was hardly recherché did so with a care for the mise-en-page of the text that might suggest a consciousness of the humanist reform of the book. Similarly, later in the century, the notebooks of the proto-antiquary, William Worcestre (1415-1480/5), show him interested in humanist writings and may have informed the classical references of his own composition, the *Boke of Noblesse*, even if explicit allusions are rare. The list could be lengthened but it would hardly be extensive and we should conclude that, while for us humanism may appear to have been the future, for Englishmen present at the time it was simply one among a set of alternatives from which they could select. It was not even the only fashionable form of Latin available – the biography of Henry V which we have mentioned Frulovisi plundering for his own *Vita* was in an indigenous florid style that found favour in certain English circles in the first half of the fifteenth century.

We have seen the various routes by which the *studia humanitatis* became an element of the intellectual life of some coteries in university, ecclesiastical and courtly contexts. The term itself, though, is often associated with the development of a specific educational programme and we should end by asking what happened to that in the English context. Stefano Surigone appears to have been the first Italian who, in the mid-1450s, taught undergraduates: he was active in Oxford but played no part in the formal curriculum of the university. Similarly, the books that Humfrey had donated to the same institution did not shift the structures of learning but gave individuals the opportunity to investigate beyond their core studies. Just as in Italy a humanist education only slowly came to be seen as a prerequisite of the cultured citizen, so in England, the first school in which pupils were to be taught following some of the precepts of humanist Latin education was established in the early 1480s: it was the school attached to Magdalen College, Oxford and its master was John Anwykyl (d. 1487). His techniques are recorded in his *Compendium totius grammatice* – a work that appeared, with laudatory verses
by Pietro Carmeliano, in print, with one edition published on the continent, at Deventer, in 1489. This provides a fitting conclusion: the introduction of print, unrevolutionary in so many ways, was transformative of the availability of texts – Anwykyl’s own work was dependent on imported grammars. At the same time, that his compendium found a printer on the mainland of Europe reminds us that, despite any emphasis on an insular identity expressed in a local language, the borders of English cultural identity were necessarily porous. The established structures of diplomatic, mercantile and religious exchange across Christendom provided the conduits through which humanist contacts flowed and were further enhanced by the introduction of print – at least, in these decades before Martin Luther.

Further Reading


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