Form and Reform

Gayk, Shannon, Tonry, Kathleen

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Gayk, Shannon and Kathleen Tonry.
Form and Reform: Reading across the Fifteenth Century.
The Ohio State University Press, 2011.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/24267.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/24267
The Style of Humanist Latin Letters at the University of Oxford

On Thomas Chaundler and the *Epistolae Academicae Oxon.* (*Registrum F*)

ANDREW COLE

What was once said of English poetry of the fifteenth century—that it was just so much dull prattle—was also until recently a common description of humanist Latin literature of the same period. One might think of Joseph Ritson’s infamous characterization of Lydgate as that “voluminous, prosaic and driveling monk” when reading scholarly descriptions of humanist writing: a “poetic production . . . [of] . . . little merit” here, “a dreary performance” there, and—most of all—Roberto Weiss’s repeated assertions that “During the first quarter of the fifteenth century there prevailed . . . a taste for writing Latin in an extremely flowery and ‘euphistic’ style. This fashion was more a symptom of decadence than novelty.”¹ While it remains to be seen whether humanist texts will catch on in the way Hoccleve and Lydgate have in the last fifteen years, scholars such as David Rundle and Daniel Wakelin have made real advances in

the study of humanist writing, showing the seriousness, interest, and style of a collection of classicizing works that can no longer be dismissed in the manner of Weiss, who famously raises up humanist writing in England only to knock it back down in disparaging statement after disparaging statement about its paltry quality in comparison to continental examples. For my part, I’ll join the critical conversation about humanism in England by examining a work about which it can be said, by its own editor no less, that “the entire artlessness of the whole production is beyond question.” That work is the letter book, Registrum F, in the Oxford University Archives (shelf mark NEP/supra/Reg F), now known by the title of the modern (though now old) edition, *Epistolae academicae Oxon.* But the purported artlessness of this “whole” gives in turn special prominence to real moments of scribal intelligence and a humanist style of a special, referential, and rhetorical kind.

The letters in Registrum F were entered between the years 1421 and 1498 and record communications and transactions between successive chancellors of Oxford and various heads of state and church—kings, dukes, earls, archbishops and bishops alike. I will look at “letters” in Registrum F in two senses of the term: letterforms as scribal style, and letters or epistles as historical documents with powerful rhetorical and petitionary attributes. The first sort of letter concerns a single epistle written by Thomas Chaundler, an extremely well-connected man with humanist interests and an administrator of considerable influence at the University of Oxford, having served as its chancellor for some years, among other occupations. Written in 1443, and dated 23 October, this letter is said to exhibit a mix of letterforms, an attempt by Chaundler—not entirely wholehearted—to


3. *Epistolae Academicae Oxon.* (Registrum F), 2 vols., ed. Henry Anstey (Oxford: Oxford Historical Society, 1898), 1.xiv. In this essay, I focus mainly on the materials edited in volume one; here, I am only scratching the surface of what’s important and interesting about this item. The epigraph is from *Epistolae,* 1.336. On the flyleaves of Registrum F are several trials of the expression, “Vestri oratores studiosissimi,” which is used in the letters variously (as in 2.361 [signed by the scribe John Farley], and 2.362).

4. Thomas Chaundler graduated New College, Oxford in 1455 as a doctor of theology, after which point he became chancellor of Oxford (1457–61 and 1472–79). He also served two stints as Warden, first of Winchester College (1450) and then New College (1454–75). He was also once chaplain of Edward IV, and had as his patron both the enormously powerful Bishop William Wykeham and Bishop Thomas Bekynton. For more biographical details, see Jeremy Catto’s entry, “Chaundler, Thomas,” in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography,* ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison, 60 vols. (Oxford University Press, 2004), 11.268–69.
include modern continental humanist script within Latin cursive (in which so much fifteenth-century theology was hashed out). I set out to uncover some of Chaundler’s intentions in producing a hybrid script that stands out among other entries in the Register and that, through a conscientious aesthetics of the page, imaginatively relocates or indeed “delivers” the letter to another institutional context across the channel. Here, I construe script as both a mode of address and as a phenomenological practice that invites a certain study of appearances, whereby Chaundler’s aberrant style appears to frame an intention and send a message, directing local attention towards the objects and practices of the institution to which the letter itself is directed and where certain hybrid scribal styles are fostered: the Roman curia. My discussion of this single letter may seem pedantic in its close reading of paleographical and codicological details, but this precision is justified: the letter is something of a canonical text (or canonical hand) within modern scholarly studies of humanism.

The second part of this discussion turns from a literal consideration of letters to letters in the generic and rhetorical sense. Considering the letters in Registrum F in toto, I explore how they express and inform a certain history of humanism (or lack thereof) at the University of Oxford. The letters, that is, all strike a similar chord in complaining about Oxford as overrun with poverty and suffering from a lack of books. Some scholars have viewed these letters as “documents” or historical reportage, from Weiss to current histories of the University of Oxford. I argue here, however, that we must appreciate the petitionary rhetoric of these letters and the great extent to which their authors used this language to give meaning and shape to the humanist interests of their patrons, who were usually willing to donate but needed to hear reasons to do so, including Duke Humphrey, the “humanissimus princeps [the most humane prince].” The letters, written by several chancellors and proctors, are diverse in content but consistent enough in their rhetorical features to limn an “Oxford school” of letter writing—a disciplined and at points repetitious method for communicating with certain influential patrons using humanist terminologies and postures. In fact, as will become clear below, these letters define humanism through their practice, exhibiting the fusion of administrative language with classical references.


This double focus on letters and letterforms allows me to describe some of the achievements of early humanist documents. I conclude with some reflections on the significance of Latin petitions to vernacular verse and Middle English studies more generally, demonstrating that a literary history of the fifteenth century must both account for Latin literary production and for its influence on English poetry.⁸

THOMAS CHAUNDLER:
THE SCRIBAL AESTHETICS OF A LETTER BOOK

On the whole there are sufficient disturbing causes or defective arrangements to fully account for the bad spelling, bad writing, bad grammar, and mutilated documents, which, if they surprise, will not be without amusement to any one who has a taste for this kind of study.⁹

Weiss was right to say that Thomas Chaundler, sometime chancellor of the University of Oxford, was “one of the principal pioneers of early humanism” but he then goes on to say (wrongly) that “his attempts at writing like a classicist met with mediocre success” and that his “literary remains are not very interesting.”¹⁰ Weiss elaborates:

Although his aim was to write like a humanist, he was not able to perceive the fundamental difference between the scholastic and modern outlooks, and his attempts at being “Ciceronian” proved far from successful. His efforts to give a humane character to some of his writings, and his use of neo-classical and ancient texts while pursuing typically scholastic studies, indicate clearly his conception of modern learning merely as a means by which the old learning could be improved.¹¹

After so many critiques of periodization, let alone of Weiss, it would now be facile to pounce on these confident statements about the clear distinction between medieval and modern practices, although some recent work on humanism continues to perpetuate myths about the Middle Ages; for example, one scholar has spoken of “the relapse into medievalism” on the question of the reception of Plato university (see 68–69, 72–74, 78).

⁸. I am grateful for my interlocutors. Maura Nolan offered incisive feedback early on, and Andrew Galloway and David Rundle gave it a once-over late in the day. The readers for OSU Press supplied helpful ideas for revision that I was glad to implement, and the fantastic audience at the Cambridge medieval seminar (26 May 2010) helped me with the finishing touches. I thank Daniel Wakelin for the invitation to speak and his generous sharing of ideas. Finally, the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, kindly granted permission to consult their resources and publish a photograph of Registrum F (shelfmark NEP/supra/Reg F).
⁹. Epistolae, xiv.
¹¹. Ibid., 136.
in the fifteenth century. Rather than critiquing Weiss and others, however, I have found it more productive to investigate what in Chaundler’s work gives the impression that he puts modernity in the service of the medieval, the humanistic in the service of the scholastic. Indeed, there is perhaps no better emblem of Chaundler’s purported mix of medieval and modern modes than a certain letter he wrote in 1443 to three men residing at the Papal Curia—Andrew Holes, Richard Caunton, and one W. Symond (about whom I can as yet find no good information). This letter is preserved in Registrum F at fol. 65r, and in it Chaundler urges the recipients to commend to Pope Eugene IV the current chancellor of Oxford, Henry Sever, so that the Pope himself can in turn commend Sever to the English king, Henry VI. The recipients, in essence, are asked to butter up the pope in preparation for his receipt of the commendation itself (fol. 65r–65v)—written by Chaundler on behalf of the congregation (see below). The letter reads very much like a modern letter of recommendation, lauding the “eruditissimo et gra-vissimo viro” in the first, the “clarum et excellentem virum” in the second.

None of this content is particularly relevant to incipient humanism in England—no Ciceronian references or other classical authorities. The humanist relevance, instead, is betrayed in the script of the first letter, which seems to confirm Weiss’ assessment of Chaundler’s “attempts at writing like a classicist;” the Bodleian exhibition catalogue itself, which offers a description and plate of this letter, echoes Weiss in labeling the missive “Thomas Chaundler’s attempts at humanistic script.” The word “attempts,” in both cases, is a gentle way of characterizing Chaundler’s seemingly amateurish and poorly executed humanistic script: heavily inked, stylized letterforms, whereby features of the Latin cursive, especially ascenders and descenders, are exaggerated and the aspect is often deliberately upright (see Fig. 2.1).

To be crudely periodizing about the script of this example, the letter forms for e, a (in some of its accentuated ascenders), o, v, x, g, and p (in its audaciously sloping descender) seem modern, while forms for d, i, h, b, r (“Octobris” [line 20] but not “tempore” [line 10]) are medieval, along with the standard Latin abbreviations for “-n-”/“-m-,” “-us,” “-er,” “-con-,” “-um,” “-que,” which of course are

14. Virginia Davis suggests that Sever “plainly stood high in the king’s favour, for on 11 October 1440, in his charter of incorporation, Henry VI appointed him to be the first provost of the new royal foundation of Eton College, a post he held until 1442. He may have left the king’s service in some disfavour, however”—hence, requiring the letter of commendation, which apparently worked: Sever was made the king’s almoner (*Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 49.818).
15. See *Epistolae*, 1.223 and 225.
found in early modern printed books containing Latin. Yet one man’s modernity is another’s Middle Ages. For the new *littera humanistica* (including all the hands that can go by this name) is not new or even classical; it revives the more legible Carolingian miniscule of the eighth century in which a bibliophilic Italian humanist might have read many classical works, not even realizing they were medieval copies to begin with.¹⁷

To understand the significance of Chaundler’s letter to the history of humanism, however, is to appreciate properly its context and, more generally, the purposes and peculiarities of Registrum F. In other words, I am regarding the “whole” mentioned at the outset so as to get a better idea of the unique instances that merit our attention. To begin with, this register is on parchment, a somewhat unusual medium in view of other Oxford registers from the early- and mid-fifteenth century, such as Register Aa (the Register of Congregations) and Register

---

Aaa (the Registrum Cancellari), both of whose pages are paper. Indeed, these two other registers were both unbound—just stacks of loose sheets contained in a chest—for a significant amount of time until they suffered serious misfortune: in February of 1544, their sheets were torn, trampled upon, or otherwise destroyed during a notorious burglary in the old Congregation house that broke up the university chests containing these and other documents, valuables, and money. The silver lining of this tale can be seen in an analogy. What John Leland is to English monastic books and libraries, Brian Twyne, the seventeenth-century Keeper of the Archives, is to these administrative documents at Oxford: after the burglary, he reassembled the two registers in what must have been a real hermeneutic labor, and they remain in that form today.\(^\text{18}\) Given that Registrum F is on parchment, one could suppose that this book was particularly treasured, considered to be more valuable than these other two items and thus committed to permanence and handled with care. But even a quick glance suggests that this opinion cannot fully hold.

Like the other two registers, Registrum F seems to have started as an unbound item. The earlier folios appear to have first existed as loose sheets or maybe even a booklet that was then cropped to fit the present volume as it was taking shape.\(^\text{19}\) After these earlier pages, the register begins to even out, but not without one oddity, which starts between fols. 11 and 12, and becomes more frequent in the latter half of the register: there are nineteen stubs indicating that pages have been sliced out. That’s verging on an inordinate number. Most of these folios were excised while the book was already bound, but—strangely enough—there is no discernible loss of text, with continuity within an entry preserved across the stubs, across the extraction, sometimes across multiple stubs. Several folios, themselves never removed, bear the wounds or slices from the excision of adjacent pages.\(^\text{20}\)


\(^{19}\) For instance, the letter on 1v (item 5) goes too far into the gutter to have been written in a volume bound with this many folios. Likewise, the text on 21v; see also 4v, 10r, 17v, 22v, 25v, 26v, 27v—after which the entries do not go nearly so far toward the gutter. Possibly, these early loose sheets or booklet pages were made into the first quire for the larger book we now have, as evident from cropping. For example, the letter on folio 2r, dated 1423 (item 6), was cropped, chopping off words at the end of each line, but a medieval hand replaced the cropped letters near the gutter of each subsequent line. Seeing as these additions are in the same hand as the note at the end of the entry, “Nota quod Universitas non consuevit vocare bacallarios Magistros,” which refers to a matter addressed on fol. 39v (item 107) whereby in 1435 bachelors are clamoring to be called masters, we can suppose that this initial cropping and binding transpired at least twelve years later, in the serial gathering of quires or booklets. It is, in other words, a medieval patch job.

\(^{20}\) The stubs are located between the folios listed here; the italics signal a folio that has been damaged by the extractions: fols. 11–12 (one stub), 83–84 (one stub), 136–37 (one stub, belonging to the former bifolium containing 137, only slightly scored); 143–44 (one stub), 161–62 (five stubs), 163–64 (one stub), 169–70 (two stubs), 174–75 (two stubs), 179–80 (one stub), 187–88 (two stubs), 191–92 (two stubs).
Why were these pages removed from a book meant to preserve entries? One possibility is that poorly copied letters were discarded—though that notion begs the question since many entries, as Anstey notes, are sloppily or mistakenly written. It is likely, however, that the folios were removed after the time the loose sheets were collected into a book and joined with booklets of blank pages. Under these conditions, sheets that were blank and farther on in the book were removed for some official purpose, seeing as they were at a safe distance from pages where entries were recorded. That blank extracts were used for other purposes is consistent with the general practice (as seen in the two other registers), in which loose sheets were often preferred for recording business in locales around Oxford where those transactions actually transpired.

Yet what goes out must go back in: some sheets have been added to the register, while others may have been extracted and then reinserted. This process at points perpetrates the codicological folly of setting the hairside of a folio against the flesh side—whatever it took to wedge a document or series of documents into the correct place and sequence. It is indeed strange to think of a formulary or register as a parchment farm, or a book whose boundaries are so permeable that items leave only to return. All of this extraction and insertion runs against the common sense regarding literary book production or booklet assembly for miscellanies, in which repeated and injurious excision simply does not happen because it cannot practically happen during a single scribal stint or production coordinated simultaneously among two or more scribes, except in cases where things go wrong and sheets become disarranged within a booklet, as

21. Folio 112, with ruled margins, is an insertion, glued and wrapped around folios 113–16, with its edge visible on 116v at the gutter (this edge is rough, unlike the cleanly sliced edges instanced in the other stubs in this book). It is blank on the recto side, and on its verso are two entries in their entirety, items 241 and 242, in the hand of John Farley. By way of note, all blank pages in Registrum F are recto sides.

22. As for these extractions and reinsertions, the clearest case is folios 94 and 95, which were removed and then reglued into place on a scrap with Latin cursive, thus proving that this was done rather contemporaneously. The original attachments or stubs are visible between folios 93 and 94. Could these have been removed to serve as exemplars for another book—removed, so that the entire book would not have to be lent out? Conversely, could they have been removed so that the items could be copied from another source and then set back in? Folios 94 and 95 contain items 215 through to the indenture (“Hec indentura . . . .” which is completed on 96r).

23. Folios 159 and 160 comprise a bifolium that seems to have been inserted—namely because these pages interrupt the intervals of flesh side facing flesh side, hair side facing hair side. There is also stitching between these two pages. The interruption begins after 158v (hair side), where 159r (flesh side) is inserted, then: 159v (hair side), 160r (hair side), 160v (flesh side), 161r (hair side), 161v (flesh side), at which point the proper pattern resumes but with the first of five stubs, the recto of which is the flesh side. This first stub belongs to folio 157.

24. There is also a spell of achronology between folios 110r and 113r, in which the dates jump from 1460 to 1467–71 (110v–112v) back to 1460. It is hard to make heads or tails of the etiology of this disorder, but it can be noted that it all is contained within one quire of five bifolia (fols. 109–119), not counting an inserted loose sheet (fol. 112), as discussed in note 21. For an example of how chronology has to be ignored by scribes seeking pages to record entries, see Register of Congregation, xviii.
in the case of the Trinity Gower (Cambridge, Trinity College MS R.3.2) examined by Doyle and Parkes in their famous article of 1978.  

Registrum F is not only codicologically peculiar but paleographically so, as the epigraph from Anstey avers. Some letters are just better written than others, much more slowly and carefully copied in a competently lineated way. Some material was more hastily or sloppily written than others, and often in available blank spaces (see, for instance, fol. 37r and 62v, the second memorandum). Some letters end abruptly, mid-sentence, and some exhibit corrections and cross outs. Yet even this situation is rather normal for a book that unfolds over time and is used for many purposes. Take, for instance, William Swan’s letterbook—Oxford, Bodleian Library, Arch. Selden B. 23, also paper. Swan’s letterbook is relevant as a contemporary example because the man himself was papal secretary under Pope Gregory VII at the Council of Constance—a council important not only for church reforms but also as a meeting ground for persons with interests in humanism. In view of his job, we should expect great things of his letterbook. Yet what stands out, markedly, upon inspection of this item is that Swan (often in his own


26. On the matter of scribal identification: there is an odd hand on folio 19v (item 57, from 1431) that bends downward as it heads toward the gutter. The text, however, on folio 20r turns downward as well, but toward the edge of the page (not the gutter). The writing in the same hand rights itself on folio 20r, with “Noverint universi.” I believe this to be the wild and heavy hand of Thomas Gascoigne. It sufficiently matches the more judicious script in Oxford, St. John’s College MS 17, fol. 111v [col. b], where he complains about a scribe’s use of ampersand as an abbreviation for “et” (as in “&iam” for “etiam”), and it corresponds (sloping excepted) with his known handwriting in Lincoln College MS Lat. 54, 17v–18r and, more precisely (with the sloping), Oxford Bodleian Library, MS Lat.theo.e.33, fols. 39r–69v. Second, the entries on fol. 19v, 20r, and 41v of Registrum F bear Gascoigne’s signature mark, “jesus: maria” or “jesus: maria: anna: orata” (fols. 20r and 41v), variations of which are in St. John’s MS 17, fols. 95v, 103v, 105r, 109v, 111r–v, 114r and 115r–v, and Lincoln College MS Lat. 54, fols. 15v, 17v, 18r, 55r; MS Lat.theo.e.33, fols. 1r, 3r–6v, 10v, 30v, 34v, 36v–38v, 39v–69v. Cf. this mark in a different hand on fol. 75v of Registrum F (“ihs maria katerina,” from 1446). Also perhaps by Gascoigne are entries on 29r (item 74, from 1433) and 41v (item 111, from 1436). The latter is a testimonial letter for Gascoigne, and that it is potentially by his own hand would not be unusual for a man who wrote his own obituary in a rather senescent looking script, complete with a marginal blank “___” to be filled in after he departs “ab hac vita.” (MS Lat.theo.e.33, fol. 41r; the obit continues on 68v). The letter on 34r (item 91) and 66v (item 167) of Registrum F show a similar swerve but may not be by Gascoigne, as does the letter on 147r (item 319). What we have in Gascoigne is a scribe who does not always follow conventions within the register. On fol. 20r (item 57) and fol. 29r (item 74), he adds, at the end of each letter, descriptive material about the placement of addresses and valedictions in each letter, “infrascriptio littere” and “suprascriptio littere,” guiding the placement of the material (fol. 29r; Anstey takes this scribe’s cue and silently relocates the address from the end to the beginning of the letter; see 1.96–97).

27. Another letterbook of Swan’s is contained in the sundry collection that is London, British Library, MS Cotton Cleopatra C.iv.

hand) corrects many of his own letters. One explanation for his activity is that Swan is fixing letters that were miscopied by the scribe he charged to record his outgoing communications. (Are there never any good copyists around?) But at points this explanation provokes disbelief, as more than a few of these corrections are not the kind with which modern editors are familiar: eye skips, spoonerisms, misspellings, grammatical mistakes, and so forth. Rather, Swan at various points replaces single words with phrases in what seem to be clarifications of expression, along with deletions of superfluous wording (41v–42r, 48v, 49r, 50r), and instances of rewrites (50v). Sometimes, he simply wished to change a verb’s mood from “sit” to “est” (42v). Swan, in these instances at least, uses his formulary to compose letters.

Clearly, letterbooks are not always overly formal entities with strict rules for registering. Indeed, their messiness is what makes them attractive to the student of medieval culture interested in the workings of its institutions and authors. Often untidy productions, these volumes were living, evolving books that testify to cultures in the making and their modes of communication. In this light, it is clear that they are not always formularies in the technical sense of the term. Nor is Registrum F, as it contains only a few, brief examples of model letters (or formae epistolarum); fols. 70r–75v, for instance, contain relatively short models averaging 3–4 per folio side—which seems paltry in view of collections that contain upwards of 925 models. Likewise, because Registrum F has few letters written to the university, it is not a register in the technical sense of recording receipts of documents and providing a full account of all communications with university officials. (The most famous receipts recorded in Registrum F are the donations of books by Duke Humphrey, more on whom below.) At every level, then, Registrum F relieves itself of the obligation to be a stable, artistic object suitable for a museum. In such a book, where provisionality is the rule, Chaundler’s letter can hardly be called a failed “attempt” at anything, much less an attempt to write a full-on littera humanistica. Chaundler, like all the other scribes contributing to Registrum F, knew full well that he was not writing his epistle for presentation as final copy. Whether the letter Chaundler actually sent to these men was written in a similar hand, we may never know, unless the original turns up at the Vatican.


30. Folios 67v, 68r, 68v, are ruled for the list of books given to Oxford, yet the list of donated books on 52r–v, and 53r, is not ruled, and instead hand-drawn (i.e., imperfect) lines connect the title of the books, on the left, to the secundo folio designation on the right. The corresponding entry in the edition is at Epistolae, 1.177–84.

31. Why did Chaundler even make this entry? At the time of composition, he was junior proctor of the
We can, however, turn this problem around and offer a conclusion about how this letter functions *in its place* in Registrum F, how it “presents” itself, how it appears, within a book whose conventions emerge and change over time, through the accretion of entries. To arrive at an understanding of this function is to appreciate the aesthetics of the page in the register, and the governing decorum that often guides some of the scribes in recording entries. These scribes exhibit a great variation of practice, yet there is a prevailing sense that they seek appropriate places to register their texts, wanting not to follow too closely upon a previous entry—in one case, restarting the letter to allow for proper spacing—32—or, as is sometimes the case, refusing to follow immediately after an entry and instead finding a fresh folio so that an entire page can be devoted to an important epistle.33 Included within this aesthetics of the page is an interesting habit, which is seen far more frequently in the first half of the register than in the second, of offering *visually* pleasing salutations and valedictions, complete with skillful geometric patterns breaking off from the otiose strokes of stylized letterforms. Some letters for secular magnates, though by no means all,34 receive a hearty helping of such stylization—which is, we must remember, not absolutely necessary as they are not original versions.35 Here, then, flourish emerges as a kind of thinking about institutions, people, and places, insofar as it is a mode of reference, pointing both to recipients and their status, as well as to the very locations in which letters are read.36 In a larger sense, then, style is an institution in which literary forms are

---

32. See fol. 12r, where a majuscule “S” is drawn but abandoned and restarted, lower and indented, to complete the word, “S[an]c[t]issi[m]o” [item 40], in an address to the pope.

33. See, for example, the spaces between fols. 10v and 11r (items 36 and 37), 38v to 39r (items 105 to 106), and 45v to 46r (items 124 to 125).

34. See fol. 48r (item 130) and 61r (item 153) addressed to the king; and fol. 57v (item 148) to Duke Humphrey.

35. For instance, on fol. 36v, the letter to the Earl of Stafford may be the most elaborately and neatly done in the Registrum, especially the concluding “vestre dominaciones . . . .” which is followed by another letter with an even more grandly styled opening address to the Earl of Warwick, “Illustrissimo principi domino nostro comiti warwici” (fol. 36v). The second letter concludes on folio 37r, and near the bottom of that same folio begins a letter to the Archbishop of York, with a flourished address not matched by any of the other letters to ecclesiasts. These three letters are by the same scribe. On fol. 59v is a letter to Duke Humphrey placed on an entire folio side (item 152; *Epistolae*, 202, which I discuss below). There is a gesture towards stylistic formality, but nothing like the three letters discussed above. Likewise, the letters to Humphrey on fols. 59v and 75v (items 152 and 179) present some formal care. Incidentally, letters to high ecclesiasts do not typically receive these treatments, as in the case of the Archbishop of Canterbury (see fol. 28r [item 71] and 46r–v [item 125]), though letters to lower, albeit important, figures do display such flourishes, as on folio 84v (item 195b) to the Rector of Abchurch, London and, following, the letter to the dean of St. Paul’s (item 196). See also the first English letter in the book to the executors of John Gedney on folio 85r (item 197). This letter sits alone on the page, and is written by the same scribe who had done items 195 and 196.

36. For another example of Chaundler’s indexical or referential scribal habits, see my “Staging Advice in New College MS 288: On Thomas Chaundler and Thomas Bekynton,” *After Arundel*:
scriptable before becoming even legible, writing before reading. Letters are an opportunistically suitable genre with which to exhibit this kind of style, because it raises the idea of epistolary “address” from mere verbal salutation to total visual form.

Such an aesthetic—or indeed, a synaesthetic in its visual and verbal features—seems to inform Chaundler’s own entry, which is visually and stylistically unique in Registrum F. For no other scribe quite succeeds in offering a sustained example of a fere-humanistica corsiva in this register until some fifty years later. The fact that he wrote in this manner seems rather audacious (fitting, I think, Chaundler’s general demeanor) but no less aesthetically interesting because the style of his epistle—again, the hand exhibiting humanist with cursive features—is a mode of address in two ways. First, it speaks to local readers who are beholding in Registrum F an internationally directed letter. In fact, this is one of the few letters in the register, which contains upwards of 527 letters (a total not


37. One possible (but to me unlikely) explanation is that this flourishing was done by a budding copyist intending to practice the art. Oxford, Bodleian Library, Ashmole MS 789, for instance, contains as its first item an interesting booklet of notarial exercises, offering examples of flourishing (see fol. 1r–3r), and sample flourished forms of each letter in the alphabet (fol. 3v–4r). However, the examples in the Ashmole manuscript are far more embellished than anything seen in Registrum F, whose examples seem less “practiced.”

38. Anstey (Epistolae, xvii) notes that the volume becomes more modern in spelling and in Latin expression the more it proceeds, and the “old things” pass away. (He also acknowledges, as I do, that this is not a perfectly chronological volume; there are anachronistic interpolations from time to time.) Likewise, Weiss says that “Italian values” seems to have “brought an improvement in the style of the Epistolae Academicae, the prose of which during this period discloses an endeavour to write better Latin” (Humanism in England, 168; Weiss’s footnote here reads, “Cf. the letters in the second volume of the Epistolae Academicae”).

39. Granted, one can spot humanist influence here and there or, just as well, a simple change of scripts and scribes over the course of time. I cannot in the space here offer a deep study of all the hands in Registrum F, but items that stand out to my eye are: fol. 82r (item 192, dated 1449); 98r (item 220) with textura minimis in places (lines 5–9); 108r (item 236), a clear secretary script that cuts off mid sentence; 111v–113r, 114r, 114v, 115v, all examples by John Farley (note, again, that 110v–112v contains entries chronologically out of order, from 1467–71); 118v, bottom, item 254, in what is likely John Farley’s hand with humanist features; 119v, item 255, which exhibits a humanist aspect before reverting to cursive; 131v, middle item, “Universis sancte matris . . . ,” which looks suspiciously like Chaundler’s hand and falls within his second stint as chancellor; 133v, to Bishop William Wayneflete, with a very upright secretarial duct, also entered during Chaundler’s stint as chancellor; 141v, starts out cursive but then in the last six lines beginning with “impediti ductos” turns quasi humanist, quasi secretary; 175v–176r, which contains three Latin texts and one English one (items 460, 461, 462); 176v (item 465, including the two acquittances); 181v (items 493 and 494 in a distinctive hand by “Burgeys”); 186v (items 512, 513[b] “Tertio . . . ,” and 514, also by “Burgeys”). “Burgeys” does not sign all his entries, and I have not listed them all here, but items 488 (fol. 180v) and 493 (fol. 181v) of his seems to bear almost “italic” tendencies and these are from the years 1497 and 1498 respectively. Generally speaking, the hand changes significantly on fol. 107v (107r is a blank page), picking up with presumably a stint by John Farley, who signs his name “J: ffarley” at the bottom of fol. 111v, followed by a blank page (112r), and then a neat cursive. Farley also signs his name in Greek on fol. 114v, 115v, 116v, among other places.
including testimonials and aquittances), addressed to persons outside of England, almost always the pope. This letter, however, goes to known humanists, especially Holes—an observation that brings us to the second mode of address: the letter’s style suits its recipients, men at the Curia, which under Pope Eugene IV (1431–47) was actively sponsoring a cancellaresca corsiva, a cursive chancery hand that the addressees themselves were expected to adopt in their communications. Chaundler’s script may seem odd now in view of some abstracted notion or pseudo archetype of a “humanist” hand, but it would have signified to a contemporary English audience—perhaps because of its alienness and novelty—the context to which it was directed: the Curia and to persons with demonstrably humanist interests. Like the flourished titles in letters to prominent secular persons in Registrum F, then, this letter stylistically signals its importance, expressing learning, culture, style, and a keen sense of how genre and scribal hand not only suit but represent (as the Hegelian Vorstellung) an institutional context elsewhere. The letter never has to be delivered, never has to leave Registrum F, to get that humanist message across.

I would be remiss to conclude this analysis without remarking that Chaundler has a habit of using different hands for different purposes—a practice that is itself important in the history of humanist writing. For instance, immediately after his epistle there are two further entries that I am fairly certain are in his hand, but have yet to be identified as such, perhaps because they are in Latin cursive. Yet Chaundler’s duct—most evident in his curiously written “p” (the lobe with a triangular top, and leftward descender) gives him away. What we find here is one of several cases in which Chaundler writes in different scripts, sometimes within the same manuscript. It is not entirely clear why Chaundler reverts to Latin cursive in Registrum F—though he likely does so to bring attention to his hybrid hand—but we can conclude that his general habit of switching hands is


41. These two letters were also sent across the channel—item 165 (fol. 65r), the commendation to the Pope (discussed above), and the next letter, item 166 (fol. 65v–66r), addressed to “ffrederico, Romanorum regi.” I do not think that the words at the end of Chaundler’s humanist epistle, “Alma mater Universitas Oxoniensis,” included in Anstey (*Epistolae*, 1.224), are in his hand: it is written with a finer pen and is a more studied upright hand resembling the entries by Farley.

42. Chaundler’s Latin glosses contrast markedly with the anglicana script of Walton’s English Boethius in London, British Library, Harley MS 43, fols. 4r–29v; for his various signatures, see fols. 1v, 2r, 17r. Other examples of Chaundler’s hand are London, British Library, Cotton Titus A.xxiv, fols. 2r–10v (with texts in anglicana in praise of Bishop William Wykeham) and 15r–63r (with the collocutiones and one of two allocutiones in anglicana); and fols. 11r–14r (a poem celebrating Bishop William Wykeham in a hybrid hand resembling in some particulars his hand in Registrum F). Chaundler also wrote colophons in clear secretary in Oxford, New College MS 288, according to M. R. James, *The Chaundler MSS* (London: J. B. Nichols and Sons, 1916), 29–30. My hypothesis, which will have to be set out at length elsewhere, is that Chaundler is also responsible for writing the English text of Walton’s Boethius in Harley 43.
similar not only to the practices of contemporary humanists in England, but also to those of later figures whose humanism and modernity are rarely challenged. For example, Sir Thomas More, “in keeping with common practice in this period . . . seems to use secretary for his English writings and correspondence, and italic for Latin,” as Malcolm Parkes observed long ago. More’s habit of using different hands for different circumstances is, as Parkes notes, common in early modern England.

For our purposes in evaluating Chaundler’s significance, it is this habit, rather than individual features of the hand, that enables us to make comparisons between medieval and early modern writing. For we do not find this contrastive style in the practices of the contemporary vernacular and Latin scribes we usually deal with, beyond those aspects of ordinatio that call for capitals, uncials, and half-uncials to distinguish titles, chapters, and so forth. And granted, a scribe’s hand may change on account of fatigue during a stint, or he may, for want of writing space, either produce smaller text or reduce the space between lines so that he need not carry on to another folio or booklet. Paleographers have recently relied on this predictability or conventionality of a scribe’s hand in the attempt to identify scribes and associate them with books previously thought to have been unconnected to them. With Chaundler, however, we have something different, something new—a contrastive practice that tells us, in the end, how uniquely interesting, stylistically humanist, and contextually perceptive he and his contemporaries were. Further study of Chaundler’s hand is in order, but suffice it to say

43. John Farley used distinct hands, as the range of examples show: Registrum F, New College 288 and likely Cambridge, Trinity College MS R.14.5, as well as his entries as university scribe in Registrum Aa, fols. 111v–28r (NEP/supra/Reg.Aa). Robert Flemmyng, nephew of the Bishop Richard Flemmyng (founder of Lincoln College, Oxford), exhibits a similar contrast of hands in Oxford, Lincoln College MS Lat. 43 (Cicero’s De Officiis), writing in fere-humanistica but in secretary on the end pastedown signing his name (and declaring his scribal work on this book); see Duke Humphrey and English Humanism in the Fifteenth Century, 36–37, and plate xiii(a) in the back of the book. Greek glosses in Lincoln College MS Lat. 43 are on folios 18r, 21v, 25v, 32r, 49r (3x), 60v, and 107r, not all by the same hand. Likewise, in Oxford, Lincoln College MS Lat. 84, fols. 12r–59r, Flemmyng writes “partly in fere-humanistica” and “partly in a pointed gothic cursive (fol. 2–11v, 60–89, 249–end), with headings in his early humanistic hand” (ibid., 37) and, I would add, heavy glossing in cursive, fols. 12r–15v, with lighter glossing thereafter. “Fol. 90–240 were written by two Italian scribes in semi-humanistic script” (ibid.) and in double columns (fols. 90–276v).


45. Too much space is also a problem, as fol. 53v (item 143), 55v (final item), or, most strangely, 62v (final item) show, as the script slowly inflates almost after each line in an effort to reach the bottom of the page.

it is hard to imagine how one could ever conclude that he or his imaginatively skilled colleagues wrote from a “rigidly medieval standpoint” and were humanists in deserto among the “medievally minded theologians.”

“ONE CONTINUAL WAIL”; OR, AN OXFORD SCHOOL OF HUMANIST PETITIONS

We cannot feel our way in this darkness, but there is enough light to make us wonder not that the poverty was great, but that it was not even greater than these letters testify in one continual wail.

Registrium F screams of historicity, or at least wails about squalid conditions, if we are to take at face value its editor’s words in this epigraph. Similarly, Roberto Weiss cites Registrium F numerous times in his book, Humanism in England, and regards it as an invaluable historical document—a practice that makes sense, since the edition itself was published by the Oxford Historical Society and bears a subtitle pitched especially to historians: “documents illustrative of academical life and studies at Oxford in the fifteenth century.” Speaking of such “academical life,” Weiss concludes:

As a whole Oxford about 1450–60 was still fundamentally medieval. . . . The outward decadence of the University reflected the state of its learning. Endowment and books were grossly insufficient. Buildings were inadequate while colleges were practically closed corporations more anxious for their own welfare than for that of the University.

Weiss, too, heard the wail. For in a footnote to these words, he references Registrum F, albeit in a cursory fashion “Epistolae Academicae, vols. I, II, passim.” To his credit, he (like Anstey) is indeed reading the content of the letters correctly, insofar as so many of them offer complaints about two things in particular: the scarcity of books and the decrepitude of buildings at Oxford. But he neglects to consider the generic horizons of such letters, their rhetorical purposes—their place at the end of a history of the ars epistolandi and their obvious commitment to the kind of rhetoric Augustine deplored in his Confessions: rhetoric as persuasion, the discursive art of moving the recipient or listener from one place (locus)

47. Weiss, Humanism in England, 134, and 100; see also 136.
48. Anstey, Epistolae, 1.xxiv.
50. Ibid., 133n1 and n4.
to another by means of *amplificatio* and exaggeration.\(^{51}\) A consideration of the rhetorical purposes of these letters, then, would seem to be important, not simply as a corrective to Weiss’ assessments but also as a way of weighing in on both some recent characterizations of Oxford in the fifteenth century\(^{52}\) and the more longstanding critical conversation about the character of fifteenth-century literary culture in England.

What the letters tell us about Oxford is simultaneously what they tell us about themselves, what their rhetorical qualities reveal. I am now talking about content, and as such, am compelled to read Registrum F as a narrative, to collect impressions about its content, and to identify which of its contents would seem to solicit an historical interpretation. Given that the Registrum is a book of 198 folios, any effort to draw a single conclusion about it would be a hazardous enterprise. Instead, I offer a single observation regarding the supposed decrepitude of Oxford’s physical plant, which will demonstrate that the Registrum’s Latin letters are discursively linked to petitionary rhetoric in general, including the kinds of “begging poems” we find in the work of Chaucer, Hoccleve, and Lydgate. For their part, the chancellors of the university, in speaking for themselves, on behalf of the congregation, or for both parties, write to such notable persons as the Archbishop of Canterbury, Duke Humphrey, the Earl of Warwick, and the Bishop of Winchester; their letters offer stories of material poverty jeopardizing study,\(^{53}\) alongside observations about how a lack of money—resulting from the eradication of lecture fees—detracts from the education of students.\(^{54}\) But no sooner do we conclude that these letters reflect on a dire state of affairs than we discover the chancellors commending Oxford scholars for various lucrative promotions, which are meant to indicate that this university produces the best scholars anyway, worthy of hire.\(^{55}\) And back and forth the letters go, with grandiloquent

---

51. The Latinate practices of letter writing, of course, are an extension of the medieval discipline of rhetoric; epistolography adapts rhetorical practice to a variety of institutional environments both secular and religious; the *ars epistolandi*—a subset of the many arts of speaking, preaching, and writing—prescribes the standard missive forms from greeting to the valediction. For more on the *ars dictaminis*, which includes the *ars epistolandi*, see Martin Camargo, *Ars Dictaminis, Ars Dictandi* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1991).

52. Two opinions are germane here: Nicholas Watson’s essay on censorship (“Censorship and Cultural Change in Late-Medieval England: Vernacular Theology, the Oxford Translation Debate, and Arundel’s Constitutions of 1409,” *Speculum* 70 [1995]: 822–64) shows that Archbishop Thomas Arundel sought to define the limits of orthodox theology at Oxford and settled the so-called “Oxford translation debate” concerning the problems of rendering the Vulgate into English, while Jeremy Catto’s earlier contribution to the *History of Oxford University*, “Theology After Wycliffism,” traces the rise of the supposed theological conservatism at Oxford from the 1430s, after the death of Arundel (J. I. Catto, and Ralph Evans, eds., *The History of the University of Oxford*, vol. 2 [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992], 263–80). Watson’s corollary conclusion is that Arundel’s efforts lead to a narrowing of “vernacular theology” in the fifteenth century—a view that has produced lively debate.

53. See *Epistolae*, 1.74–75; 83–89; also, 1.56–57; 57–58.

54. See ibid., 1.76–78.

commendations followed by letters claiming that there are few students at the university, the streets are empty, and dereliction of infrastructure abounds. All of these examples are rhetorically important and fundamentally petitionary; the logic that bad publicity is good publicity prevails. Cries about the terrible state of the university are prompts for patronage; laments about the lack of books are goads to get more. Even after the receipt of a large number of books, the discourse of impoverished learning continues to be in evidence and serves to show that what the university wants is what a given patron has, in abundance.

Let’s look at some examples more closely to examine how these petitions work. Few persons in fifteenth-century England received more petitions than Duke Humphrey of Gloucester—a not surprising claim given the duke’s role in ensuring the growth of humanism at Oxford. Humphrey’s hand in bringing Italian humanists to England has been well documented, and the correspondence between the duke and those figures, such as Pier Candido Decembrio and Pietro del Monte, is very well known. For their part, however, the writers in Registrum F partake of some of the more expected humanist laudations when speaking to Humphrey, heralding him as a military man of faith who loves learning and protects the university and fashioning him as a classical and classically interested ruler—something of a Caesar but also a Hector, Achilles, and Alexander. This practice is consistent with those more celebrated letters of Pier and Pietro to Duke Humphrey, which associate classical learning with militarism: as Humphrey replies to Decembrio using the royal “we,” “whether we be at home or on a military campaign, never will these books leave our side.”

Indeed if the idea is to compare English with continental examples (always hastily assuming that the lines of influence proceed in one direction), then it is important to note that the Oxford letters are, stylistically, oranges to these oranges, offering easy matches to the more celebrated exchanges with the famed

---

56. See ibid., 1.186–87.
57. See ibid., 1.139 and 1.151; also 1.114–15 in light of 1.115–16.
58. See ibid., 1.61–62; 1.64–65.
59. See ibid., 1.178; 204; see also 1.53–54.
60. See ibid., 1.204. Comparing Humphrey to these persons, the letters thank him for introducing works by Cicero and Demosthenes, among others (1.241), to the university.
61. Such phrasing is characteristic in other humanist epistles. For comparison’s sake: “quippe cum talis Cesar fuerit, tales Augustus, tales multi preclari viri quorum fama est immortalis [Of course such was Caesar at the time, such was Augustus, such were many excellent men whose fame is immortal]” (Alfonso Sammut, Unfredo duca di Gloucester e gli umanisti italiani [Padova: Antenore, 1980], 180). Saygin discusses a certain “Scipio/Caesar controversy between Poggio Bracciolini and Guarino da Verona” that Piero del Monte discussed and summarized in several texts addressed to Duke Humphrey; Caesar here is “portrayed . . . as an ambitious usurper” (Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, 91). While Saygin does not assess the references to Caesar in Registrum F, I do not think that university officials would offer such an overt criticism of their patron.
62. Sammut, Unfredo duca di Gloucester, 187: “seu domi seu milité fuerimus eos nunquam a nostro latere discedere.” All translations are mine; none exist for the items under investigation here.
Italians in their descriptions of the Duke. One letter from 1441 reads:

This university of yours perhaps in the past stood out but in truth there was no learning. Without any growth, learning was unable to be sustained, books were lacking; of which now we have the most cherished in each treasury. And so if the Trojans through perpetual praises make known throughout the world their Hector, the Thessalians their Achilles, Macedonians their Alexander, and the Romans their Caesar, so too we Oxonians must make known our Humphrey through perpetual praises.53

It helps to know that the above remarks, and others like them,64 are often grateful responses to the duke’s generous donations of books to the university. Throughout their responses, the chancellors at Oxford offer highly formalized expressions that give meaning and focus to the duke’s own humanistic interests. Not only do the letter writers make grandiose assertions about the duke in keeping with the humanist emphasis on individual fame65—“No one, however, among Christian princes is considered more celebrated by Greek and Italian authors, none more illustrious, none more renowned by the speech of many”66—but they also suggest that the activities that the duke himself supports at Oxford (namely, study) do the Italians themselves some good: “By means of the aforementioned study and vigilance, not only can others translate from Greek, but also by great contemplation your new works are forged in our language, not for us alone but even those most eloquent and learned men of Italy who toil!”67

Humanist assumptions—the very ones that would later altogether exclude England from some of the narratives of humanism on account of the kingdom’s purported médiévalité—are fully evident in these Anglo-Latin letters. These are assumptions in evidence from Petrarch to Erasmus; the latter famously and nightmarishly finds himself in the world of Scotus before awakening from a dream to a dawning modernity.68 Yet the epistolae offer more than just laments about a

---


64. See ibid., 1.107.


67. Ibid.: “Quantis insuper lugubricacionibus et vigilisas, non modo ut ceteri ex Grecis traducant, sed et contemplacioni magnitudinis vestra nova in nostrum lingum excudant opera, non nostrates solum sed ipsi etiam eloquentissimi et doctissimi de Italia viri insudaverunt!” Might this be a reference to the verse translation (by Thomas Norton?) of Palladius’ *De agricultura*? On this text, see A. C. de la Mare, “Duke Humfrey’s English Palladius (MS. Duke Humfrey d. 2),” *Bodleian Library Record* 12.1 (1985): 39–51.

68. See Bert Roest, “Rhetoric of Innovation and Recourse to Tradition in Humanist Pedagogical...
previously darker, “medieval” age or a dreary indigent present; their use of classical references is not just window dressing. A letter from 1435 reads:

Did not the once powerful Rome, while the study of sciences flourished in its senate, victoriously hold the entire globe, subjected to its imperium? Did not Greece, while within that country the study of the philosophers thrives, claim military honor and continuous triumph over their enemies, spreading their domain over the entire earth and every measure of the globe? Accordingly, with studies having been neglected, great decay of honor and glory is immediately known to have transpired here. Therefore on behalf of God the power of so great an invisible prince deigns to take action against new misfortunes of this kind, as that inimical infestation, the common people, is frightened by the power of the prince, just as the tracks of the lion frightens every single animal . . . ; so it is of your serenity, the university [lit., “female supplicant”], defended thus far by your most illustrious ancestor princes, under your protection nurtures in peace her sons in studies and virtues, for the church, the glory of the faith and kingdom, achievement and honor.69

What is of interest here is not simply the issuing of classical analogies in a letter to Humphrey—as if to suggest that the duke enjoys reading such references70—but also the fact that the university is almost indistinguishable from the classical empires the passage describes. Note not only the conflation of learning with empire—in what is a clear linking of the ideas of “studium” and “imperium,” common in the motifs of *translatio studii et imperii*—but also the ease with which sentences about Rome and Greece are followed by those about Oxford. While thus addressing the topics involving the “translation of learning and rule,” the letter itself persuasively enacts them by mapping the flow of cultural capital. After all, from the practical perspective, there is only one way for a duke or prince to live up to all this high talk of cultural *translatio*—namely, by donating or bequeathing books that fit rather exactly the description of “culture” crossing from one place to another, one language to another.

---


70. Indeed, he is not the only one to have read them. See *Epistolae*, 1.81 for similar expressions issued to the Duke of Bedford; and 1.122–23 to the Earl of Stafford.
No wonder, then, that countless letters describe the university as the ideal literate space to receive such cultural transmissions. It is called a “res publica”—a term Daniel Wakelin has discussed in relation to other texts, showing it to be a standard, even if quite polyvalent, humanist locution denoting the total public good or even the state (or realm).\textsuperscript{71} Too numerous to count are the instances of this phrase in Registrum F, which describe, time and again, the university as a classically conceived “res publica” of book collecting and diligent scholarship.\textsuperscript{72} So intense is this scholarship within the so-called “res publica” that it constitutes a local “renaissance” (or \textit{renascencia}), thanks to Duke Humphrey, whose donations foster a “scienciarum renascencia florida [a burgeoning renewal of studies],” which “are reborn now among us by means of your pleasure in study especially, and which return to reason and illustriously revive the vineyard at our university to produce more than the accustomed abundant fruits.”\textsuperscript{73}

With all this talk of “res publica” and renaissance in early fifteenth-century (i.e., “medieval”) Oxford, it should come as no surprise to learn that the \textit{epistolae} often exhibit the characteristic forms of humanist periodization when they promote the interests of the university for the sake of the “now” and the future (\textit{futuris temporibus})—for the pursuit of donations and promises of more. One letter to Humphrey, dated 1439, reads:

However at an earlier time and before your most gracious arrival, which without a shred of doubt proceeds from on high, our university was doubtless like a lifeless corpse, a lamp without light, a spring without water and a world without a sun; and now your most benign inspiration brought the body to life, a lamp with the most bright light, and that radiance at no time can be extinguished, a spring with living water surging toward minds to be consoled in study, and a world with the most splendid sun, which certainly not at any time would suffer an eclipse of studies, illuminating minds.\textsuperscript{74}

\textsuperscript{71} See, for instance, \textit{Epistolae}, 1.12, 149, 151, 247, 253, 263, 277, 288, 292, 296, 300, 324. On the significance of this term as it is used in other humanist works in England, see Wakelin, \textit{Humanism, Reading, and English Literature}, 20–21 (for initial discussion), and many references thereafter, esp. 115–18, 122–23.


\textsuperscript{73} \textit{Epistolae}, 1.152: “nunc apud nos vestri desiderii contemplacione precipue renascuntur, in mentes redeunt et in nostre Universitatis vinea clarissime reviviscunt, producture supra solitum germina fructuosa.”

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 1.178: “Priori enim tempore et ante ipsam graciosisissimam visitacionem vestram, quam haut dubium est ab alto processisse, Universitas nostra sine dubio fuerat velut corpus exanime, lucerna sine lumine, fons sine aqua et mundus sine sole; que jam benignissima inspiracione vestra corpus vitale effecta est, lucerna clarissimo lumine, et quod nunquam extinguetur irridians, fons aquis vivificis ad studencion animos consolandos exhuberans, et mundus splendidissimo sole, qui utique haud unquam patietur eclipsim studiorum, mentes illustrans.” See also 1.309–10.
Here, again, is the material that truly makes Oxford seem stuck in its own “dark ages,” as “lucerna sine lumine” before its own forthcoming enlightenment, “lucerna clarissimo lumine, et quod nunquam extinguetur irradians.” It is a compelling image—the double figuration of the suffusion of light as the infusion of learning—and it reminds us that these medievalizing images are a kind of distinction making that serves the purposes of modernization, in the small “m” sense of the term: maintaining and acquiring resources as a way of preparing for the future of an institution, a future no farther away than tomorrow. The letter writers, then, periodize for the sake of a petition, and in some fundamental sense to petition is to periodize or, at the very least, to point to the passage of institutional time and to mark one’s place in time. In this respect, and ironically perhaps, humanist ideas always contain their opposite—those elements, tendencies, ideas, and authorities that are thought to stand for the old, the archaic, the medieval, the past. It is often the case that in humanist language, the present is not sufficient and is in so many ways experienced as already the past. And from a practical perspective, why should it be otherwise?

Of course, gifts, in that classic formulation by Marcel Mauss, are not only about the recipient, the giver, or the so-called “thought that counts.” Rather, it’s about a relation that goes to the heart of another cliché—to boot, an inverted one: “what’s yours is mine.”

And certainly so many monuments are abandoned, you supply, among us very excellent and expensive volumes destined for future times in perpetuity, and although the tongues of men falter, such monuments never conceal the fame of the glories of the prince. Also whence Julius Caesar, with the world having been conquered would have been seen to have conducted himself exceedingly insufficiently, lest he had a Roman library built; even if the fame of their name and power through the length of time should happen to fall from the minds of men, yet for themselves in books and parchment such fame should always freshly persist.

Oxford, in other words, will make the duke famous by keeping and reading his books. It did. And the fame was certainly mutual.

Understanding these letters as exercises in rhetoric with the clear goal of


76. *Epistolae*, 1.178: “Que sane monumenta relict a sunt tot, supple, preclara ac preciosa volumina apud nos perpetuis temporibus expectare debencia, que etsi lingue hominum defecerunt, tanti tamque gloriosi principis famam nunquam abscondent. Unde et Julius Cesar orbe subacto parum nimis sese egisse visus est, nisi et bibliothecam Rome construeret; ut si nominis viriumque suarum famam per temporis longitudinem ab hominum mentibus labi contingeret, ipsis tamen libris et membraneis recens semper perduret.”
inspiring patronage prevents a fundamental error in the writing of history: believing that everything a medieval text “reports” is literally true or, even better, deciding in advance quite how it is true, what makes it a document or something else. Of course, this is not a new idea and is not meant to be (though there is still a lingering literalism in our field in the reading of chronicles). At any rate, assumptions about Oxford as decrepit and poverty-stricken must be bolstered by further evidence from account books or other financial records. The potentially more interesting historical point involves rhetoric and petition: officials conducted an aggressive campaign to acquire assistance and were not by any means the passive party in the exchanges with Humphrey, eager recipients of any and all attention. Humphrey was a powerful patron, but he was not the only one by any means, and often some of the letters seem to perfect petitionary strategies by first trying them on one secular official before moving to the next. The writers had no qualms about repeating themselves and recycling expressions to stick with what works—a repetition that reveals a disciplined approach to the rhetoric of epistolography, handed down from one chancellor to another to such an extent that one detects what I am calling an “Oxford school” of letter writing—a protocol for communicating with outside authorities that saw little internal deviation and (just as importantly) no significant overlap with any other sorts of administrative letters outside of Oxford I have seen.

Who writes within this school? Who are Thomas Chase (1426), Gilbert Kymer (1431), Thomas Bouchier (1433), John Norton (1439), William Grey (1440), Richard Rodeham (1440), Henry Sever (1442), and Thomas Chaundler (1457, 1472)? They were the various chancellors of the university, but they were also humanists and can be dignified with the name, were we to accept a persuasive and well-known definition of humanism put forth by James Haskins: “Unlike modern political scientists or medieval scholastic philosophers, Renaissance humanists were not occupied with political theory as such. Professionally, humanists acted as teachers, diplomats, political propagandists, courtiers and bureaucrats.” Not all of these criteria apply to the chancellors of Oxford, certainly not the title of courtier—though, as I have discussed elsewhere, Chaundler exhibits a courtly sensibility in his other works—but they are definitely “teachers” and “bureaucrats” and “rhetors” of sorts. The point to make here for what is literally a “working definition” of humanism is that these figures do not fit the usual mold whereby there is a distinction between, on the

---


one hand, “professional” activities as this or that bureaucrat and, on the other hand, humanist endeavors enjoyed away from the job when there’s enough *otium* to look for books previously lost to time or write *belles lettres*—what Weiss has called “learned leisure.” For much of what I have discussed here is included in the very job description of chancellor.

**LETTERS FROM THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY**

I would like to make three points, in conclusion. First, any history of Anglo-Latin literature should be pushed much later into the fifteenth century and beyond the bracket of time considered in A. G. Rigg’s indispensable study, *A History of Anglo-Latin Literature 1066–1422*, which stops right when humanism in England seems to be gaining momentum. This essay is obviously not an attempt to offer such a thorough study as Rigg’s, but it can be remarked that the supposed break between medieval and humanist Latin (or neo-Latin) that Rigg accepts in his history follows quite closely Weiss’s assessments about fifteenth-century humanism. For instance, authors such as John Seward and Thomas Walsingham “start a trend towards classicism which remained unbroken until ‘humanism’ and ‘Neo-Latin’ came into its own. Latin was becoming an object of study rather than a casually used tool; this signals the beginning of its retreat into the schoolroom.” But it also signals, I suggest, the advance of Latin literature into classicizing forms of expression and instrumental applications unseen just a few decades before.

As for a kind of literary historical approach that is desirable, I suggest that these letters can be situated in the local history of humanist letter writing in England but not in a way that either fixates on one particular correspondence as the primary exhibit, such as that between Decembrio and Duke Humphrey, or assumes that the letters of any given visitor to England are the most influential, even if we know that (for instance) the letters of Poggio Bracciolini were collected in formularies, what is now London, British Library, Cotton Tiberius B.VI and Cambridge, Jesus College MS 63; similarly, it is often observed that letters  

---

80. See *Humanism in England*, 33; see also 74.
82. Rigg, *A History of Anglo-Latin Literature*, 302. Rigg also rightly identifies epistolography, as well as prose in general, as an important site of investigation; see 310. On his reluctant exclusion of letters, see 7. Even though Rigg did not undertake to discuss humanist Anglo-Latin literature, one can find discussion of some important items in his fine book, such as Bishop Thomas Bekynton’s anthology, Oxford, Bodleian Library, Additional A.44, which is chock full of the genres of Latin literature (see 152–53). For a necessary reappraisal of Walsingham, see James G. Clark, *A Monastic Renaissance at St. Albans: Thomas Walsingham and His Circle, c. 1350–1440* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004).
by Decembrio were collected by Thomas Bekynton in his formulary *cum* diary, Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 789. It is likely that these exchanges, viewed together with Registrum F, will tell us more about epistolography at Oxford and the emergence of new conventions than, arguably, looking at how certain rhetorical and epistolary texts new to England such as *De Inventione*, *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, or *De Oratore* influenced the Oxford style, as exhibited in the Register. We may well find, in other words, that such conventions emerge out of the practicalities of letter writing and communicating with other authors over an extended exchange, rather than from the prescriptive texts in the classical and medieval traditions (which assumes a unidirectional model of literary influence, from the Ciceronian greats to the medieval examples).

Second, an investigation of these letters has implications for our understanding of the relationship between vernacular and Latin literary practices. These letters assume postures of dullness to an extent greater than the fifteenth-century vernacular poets studied by David Lawton in his landmark essay on the period.83 Lawton showed how English poets, using their own particular language of petition, called themselves dull, poor, and wretched, and critics from Ritson to Lewis took that language of dullness at face value and reiterated it as a value judgment about fifteenth-century poetry. The same, I would say, goes for these letters, and other kinds of humanist writing (largely in Latin): we would want, in other words, to hear the “one continuous wail” as it was meant to be heard—which sounds like an unfashionable claim but when dealing with rhetoric and certain kinds of formalized prose in petitionary circumstances, it may emerge as an acceptable position.

Third, and finally, there are questions about language and its institutional setting. These letters give us some insight into what is fully possible with petitionary rhetoric, enabling us to see that its expressions are not circumscribed only by parliamentary address or even by libels shaped by the legal apparatus.84 The horizons of vernacular petitions themselves, what is sayable and not sayable in that language, and for what possible reasons, are indeed broad. But are the horizons of expectation for vernacular petitions limited by institutional settings in the same way Latin petitions usually are?85 Is the voice of a vernacular petition

---


85. It cannot be forgotten that there are vernacular letters in Registrum F addressed to various secular
that of an epistle, rather than a plea or complaint? Are vernacular petitions a form of self-fashioning (of author and patron) or something else? Such questions can be posed knowing that, for the most part, the practice of petition is a Latin (and Anglo-French) phenomenon, and that the English versions we witness offer testimony to some form of institutionalization of vernacular verse, a sense of institutional place imagined within English poetry: in order to become a petitioner, one must first imagine oneself as part of an institution. In other words, even though petitioners construct themselves as humble outsiders, their petitions are grounded upon a presumption of institutional legitimacy and insider status. True outsiders cannot speak to power. Only those who can speak from positions of institutional legibility can address figures of authority and expect to achieve their goals. English petitions—and most English verse—depend upon forms of institutional authority in the fifteenth century, and it is the recognition of that dependence that will provide answers to many of our questions about humanism and the origins of certain English literary traditions. Such a recognition will also point the way forward to the sixteenth century and forge important links between medieval and Renaissance poetry, illuminating continuities where we would not think to find any.

persons (Epistola, 1.259, 260–62, 319–20, 322, 323–24, 326–27, 336, 338) and even parliament (see ibid., 1.184, 293), and even one of the Latin letters, cited above, refers to vernacular literary production ("your new works are forged in our language").

86. My question here goes in the other direction from Scase’s suggestion that petitionary complaint represents an ars dictaminis unto itself (see Literature and Complaint, 172), which seems true by Scase’s persuasive account. I only mean to draw attention to the strong epistolary features of petitionary discourse and advance letters as a viable genre in which such discourse is expressed.