

Wakelin, Daniel. *Humanism, Reading, & English Literature 1430-1530*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007. xii, 256 pp. Cloth. \$125.00.

Humanism has had its ups and downs. Since the fourteenth century, humanist thought and writing have often been invoked as the driving engines of a “modern” Renaissance, the saviors of *humanitas*, the renewal of classical learning and eloquence as benchmarks for cultural progress, and the intellectual ground for the emergence of the modern subject. Richard Southern borrowed the term “humanism” to characterize some similar intellectual activities in the twelfth century. The glories of Italian humanism and the cultivation of not only classical ideals but also vernacular literature, arts, and perspective were seen to rejuvenate Europe as those ideas and values spread northward, competing with and sometimes supporting the Reformation.

Alternately, humanism’s stock has dipped way down, as humanists’ thought and writing were criticized as hopelessly sycophantic in their search for patronage, as elitist compared with vernacular populism, and as glibly universalist in its elevation of classical, especially Latin, eloquence as the apex of intellectual development. Heidegger rejected Sartre’s recovery of humanism by critiquing the continued Cartesian split between subject and object. Foucault historicized European humanism and the consolidation of a knowing rational subject as the construction of a regime of truth responsible for calculative social order and standardization of money, language, and biological taxonomy. Recently, Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine debunked the self-promoting view that humanist education opened the doors of privileged English institutional power and ruling elites to “new, self-made men.” More recently, James Simpson has critiqued the modern humanities’ canonization of an English sixteenth-century humanist promotional culture which, he claims, narrowed and chastened an earlier fifteenth-century culture which was rhetorically and generically more diverse, risky, and rich. References and allusions to classical texts may not reflect writers’ and readers’ deep reading of classical literature.

In his new book, Daniel Wakelin extends Simpson’s critique of English sixteenth-century humanism by focusing on fifteenth-century literature and book culture. Wakelin’s study is an admirable contribution to book history across the manuscript and printed book divide. Like Simpson, Wakelin take issue with Roberto Weiss’ claim in *Humanism in England During the Fifteenth-Century* (originally published 1941) that English humanism happened in the sixteenth, not the fifteenth century. In a series of chapters presenting essentially case studies, Wakelin discusses varieties of book consciousness, manuscript and print cultures, authorship, reading audiences, language usage, and rhetorical strategies through which writers and not a few readers negotiated for power, voice, and prestige. In

this respect, Wakelin offers a literary history of humanist literacies, including Latin and vernacular discourses in manuscript and print contexts.

After a brief introduction on post-1400 Chaucerian texts and readers, Wakelin discusses the role of Duke Humfrey (d. 1447) in the formation of *studia humanitatis*. Like other patrons and benefactors, Humfrey, Duke of Gloucester (and Henry VI's uncle), was probably less involved with specific books than he has been credited with. But he was a strong supporter of humanist scholarship at the University of Oxford, employed Italian secretaries, collected humanist books, and commissioned a number of English works, especially from John Lydgate. Duke Humfrey's library became the core of the Bodleian Library at Oxford. Lydgate composed *The Fall of Princes* modeled on Boccaccio's *De casibus illustrium virorum* for the Duke, and another poet translated for him *On Husbandrie*, based on Palladius' *De Re rustica*. Working with manuscript and incunabular texts, Wakelin tries to determine the degree to which the vernacular translations and adaptations reflect the writers' close reading and understanding of the source Latin texts and what those relations might tell us about the reading and literary habits of mind of Duke Humfrey and others in his circle. For Wakelin, the criterion for a humanist text is that it reflects the writer's or idealized reading audience's "interest" in, "direct inspiration" from, "fascination with" classical or pagan literary culture, history, or values. In addition, Wakelin teases out the "fascination with fame and power" in *The Fall of Princes* and *On Husbandrie* as indices of the "spirit of much humanist writing during the fifteenth century," and he pays close attention to humanist echoes in word and phrase translations from Latin to English in these texts.

Succeeding chapters take up this search for *humanitas* in texts by Osborn Bokenham (d. c. 1464), William Worcester (d. c. 1483), John Anwykyll (d. 1487), William Caxton (d. 1492), and Henry Medwall (d. 1502). In these chapters Wakelin's argument and the coherence of his textual histories become much better focused than in the chapter on Duke Humfrey's circle. The printer and editor Caxton is the best known of these figures, but Wakelin makes strong arguments for the vicissitudes of humanist reading and writing in many fifteenth-century English writers. His knowledge of manuscript and early book culture and writing or printing practices is exceptional. His close readings engage with theories of reading by de Certeau and others, sometimes reaching a strident note but always returning to consider carefully the language, textual format, and reading formation of a particular book or text. For example, William Worcester was the longtime (more than thirty years), complaining secretary of Sir John Fastolf. In his notebooks and then in his *The Boke of Noblesse*, Worcester constructs an ideal "commonweal reader" which reworks humanist notions of *civitas* and underpins active readers of history who offer advice to kings, notably Edward IV. Wakelin

argues the text reimagines political subjectivity as an ethical imperative: “*The Boke of Noblesse* develops neither the lordly generosity ascribed to Fastolf nor the grievances of the ignored Commons from fierier manifestoes; it is not that the rich give and the poor receive – nor vice versa. It offers a bold but simple idea, that all should *think carefully* about their place in the commonweal and act fittingly – with the humanist quality of decorum” (122). Such political ideas circulated within coterie vernacular reading groups through discussion and book swapping, in Worcester’s case with Fastolf’s circle and his neighbors the Pastons.

In other chapters Wakelin discusses the printing and circulation of humanist textual consciousness and dialogue with classical writing and values in Caxton’s prefaces and editions, English grammar school texts, and aristocratic household drama. In each case Wakelin offers new readings of some familiar texts, including Caxton’s edition of Cato and Medwall’s *Fulgens and Lucrece*. Wakelin follows the argument by Elizabeth Eisenstein and others that printed books expanded the range of humanist writing and constructed new, more diverse audiences for what earlier had been an influential but limited coterie manuscript culture. But he adds many interesting bits and pieces to that narrative, qualifying the “Great Divide” theory popularized by Walter Ong and showing how fifteenth-century humanist manuscript and early print cultures overlapped both in their textual practices and their readerships. With extensive knowledge of primary texts *in situ*, Wakelin reads readers’ marginalia, personalized textual markups, and glosses in manuscripts and books as the traces and indices of early reading and textual communities. He provides interesting models for microhistories of the book and textual practice which give new inflections to macrohistories of writing, reading, and translation in fifteenth-century Europe. For instance, he uncovers provocative affiliations between Magdalen College, Cambridge, the grammar school at Magdalen, the important *Vulgaria* tradition of bilingual literacy education, and humanist predecessors of Colet’s more famous grammar school at St. Paul’s, founded around 1510. His reading of Henry Medwall’s *Fulgens and Lucrece* focuses on how the play builds a rhetorical community rather than represents dramatic conflict. The play was written and performed for the household of John Morton, Archbishop of Canterbury, for whom Medwall worked. Wakelin reads the play as an oral lesson in humanist rhetoric as well as a humanist representation of reason as self-determination. For Wakelin, the play’s speechifying is less than contesting because it reinforces the humanist household circle within which it was composed and performed. Nonetheless, Wakelin’s reading makes *Fulgens and Lucrece* an interesting rhetorical text, albeit in dramatic form.

Wakelin is not interested to explore alternative theories of literacy, reading, or the concept of “interpretive community,” which he alludes to several times in the book. His references to interpretive theory are few and far between. Rather, the

book's strength, and it's a real strength, is Wakelin's extensive familiarity with fifteenth-century manuscript and early printed books, individual editions or versions of particular texts, and his close readings of and sensitivity to the subtle clues and traces of prior readers and writer's imagined audiences. Wakelin can sometimes be a jaundiced reader: "They [humanists like Caxton or Worcester] sought to tell their readers – though they did not always succeed – how to study and imitate antiquity in a manner that was directed, not very free at all. . . . Of course the humanist insistence on how to read sometimes seems silly" (210-11). Nonetheless, Wakelin uses detailed manuscript and incunabula evidence to foreground in each chapter what he regards as the primary value of humanist reading, the promotion of the freedom to think for oneself.

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