

Introduction

The Revival of Letters and the Uses of Palaeography

The present period [1399–1485], though it immediately preceded the revival of learning, was, in Britain, one of the darkest . . . No art or industry could render a long, minute detail of the learning of an illiterate people, in a dark age, instructive or entertaining.¹

In the panoramic sweep of *The History of Great Britain* by the Edinburgh minister, Robert Henry (1718–1790), the fifteenth century was an unlovely low point, an age with a total want of taste. He was not unaware that this was also the time of ‘the first restorers of useful and polite learning in the western world’ but they were in a distant land: ‘that new and better taste in the study of letters, which had so long prevailed in Italy, was little known or regarded in Britain till the beginning of the sixteenth century’.² These tardy apish peoples had not yet roused themselves even to base imitation.

Robert Henry was admired by David Hume but so abused by some reviewers that his fate can even now make an author shudder for fear of the reception their offerings might suffer.³ In those diatribes, however, no issue was taken with Henry’s description of fifteenth-century culture. Moreover, whatever its perceived faults, Henry’s monumental work proved influential.⁴ True, he is rarely cited now but some of the assumptions in the passages just quoted still

¹ R. Henry, *The History of Great Britain*, 6 vols (Edinburgh, 1771–1793), v (1785), p. 402.

² Henry, *History*, p. 403.

³ E. C. Mossner, ‘David Hume as Literary Patron: A Suppressed Review of Robert Henry’s *History of Great Britain*, 1773’, *Modern Philology*, xxxix (1942), pp. 361–382. For an example of an excoriating review of volume V, see *The English Review*, v (1785), pp. 177–182; contrast, however, *The Monthly Review*, lxxii (1785), pp. 412–415.

⁴ For some examples of this, see D. Rundle, ‘Editor’s Introduction’ to Weiss⁴ at pp. xvi–xvii.

The Renaissance Reform of the Book and Britain

popularly pertain. None might speak in terms of darkness or, indeed, of taste; hyperbole about ‘an illiterate age’ is no longer accepted style, and all would refer to what was happening in Italy as Renaissance humanism (two words invented since Henry’s day). Despite those differences, few would query his chronology of British engagement with humanism—but we should. As is made clear in Chapter 1, since at least the 1940s, scholars have been unearthing and interpreting examples of fifteenth-century English interest in the activities of the Italian humanists. This monograph is indebted to that work and builds on it. The remit is not to range across humanism *tout court*; it will prove more than sufficient for one volume to concentrate on a central element of that agenda—their reform of script and of the book. The accumulated evidence which we can marshal is substantial enough to convince that developments in Italy were more than ‘little known’ and that, rather, there was a sustained tradition of involvement in those activities to which the early sixteenth century stood heir.

This monograph, then, takes the words of Robert Henry as a provocation and accepts the challenge to instruct (if not to entertain) by providing the detail which brings to light British engagement in the humanist arts of the book. It will take the tale from the invention of that agenda, c.1400, up to c.1509, with some over-spill into the following decades.⁵ To do so, however, will make insistent questions about how a set of practices concocted by a coterie of secretaries and merchants based in Florence could, within decades, achieve international recognition. This was not the slow spread which has often been assumed to occur, nor can it be explained by a model of cultural dissemination based on the dichotomy of centres and peripheries.⁶ What we will find instead is a bustle of interaction which is marked by its cosmopolitanism. Our cast-list will include not only Britons—the majority will be English but two Scots play important roles—and Italians from an array of city-states, but also those who

⁵ In particular, in Chapter 4, we will survey the whole career of Pieter Meghen (d. 1540) and, in Chapter 6, we will take the tale of italic into the early 1520s.

⁶ The classic discussion of the dichotomy is E. Castelnuovo and C. Ginzburg, ‘Centro e periferia’, in *Storia dell’arte italiana*, 12 vols in 14 (Turin, 1979–83), i, pp. 283–352, translated by E. Bianchini and C. Dorey in *History of Italian Art*, 2 vols (Cambridge, 1994), i, pp. 29–112; the authors reprised their discussion in iid., ‘Domination symbolique et géographie artistique’, *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, xl (1981), pp. 51–72, translated by M. Curie in *Art in Translation*, i (2009), pp. 5–48. See also T. DaCosta Kaufmann, *Toward a Geography of Art* (Chicago, 2004), esp. chs 4–6, P. Burke, *The European Renaissance: Centres and Peripheries* (Oxford, 1998), and S. J. Campbell, ‘Artistic Geographies’, in M. Wyatt ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Italian Renaissance* (Cambridge, 2014), pp. 17–39.

The Revival of Letters and the Uses of Palaeography

described themselves as of the German nation, particularly scribes from the Low Countries, who will be central to the discussion in Chapters 2 and 4. This is not to suggest that humanism was more cosmopolitan at the far end of Europe than it was in Italy. On the contrary, as will be seen in Chapters 3 and 5, English and Scottish visitors to the peninsula were, like those of other nations, implicated in humanist creativity in its homeland. This is not explicable as a reception or a transfer of a fully realised entity, for it was continually in the making and, in that process of construction, non-Italians were co-creators. Italian humanism was, from near its outset, an international enterprise.

On my submission, then, the evidence demands that we rethink our established narratives and conceptual frameworks. You might legitimately ask: what evidence could there be which demands so radical an upheaval? The bedrock of information is not primarily a re-interpretation of literary sources or archival records, though these cannot be ignored. There is a rich vein of material which some have mined but which can continue to offer up precious nuggets of insight: the palaeography and codicology of the surviving manuscripts. It is only by amassing those nuggets that we can accrue the essential capital to invest in a new interpretation.

‘Palaeography [must be] kept in her proper place, as handmaid, and not allowed to give herself the airs of mistress.’⁷ It is perhaps not only classical philologists who have sympathy with the supercilious reaction of A. E. Housman (1859–1936). Palaeography is often considered an ancillary skill, a helpful addition to a scholar’s tool-kit, like the knowledge of Latin requisite for medieval and early modern studies. When it is introduced to graduate students, it is with the promise that it can provide the key to unlocking seemingly impenetrable handwriting. It soon becomes apparent that to read a script requires the ability to recognise its species within the broad genus that constitutes human graphic practice, and so the student early on learns of, say, caroline minuscule and gothic textualis.⁸ With that process of identification comes a realisation of the possibilities of dating and localising

⁷ A. E. Housman, ‘The Application of Thought to Textual Criticism’, in id., *The Classical Papers of A. E. Housman*, ed. J. Diggle and F. R. D. Goodyear, 3 vols (Cambridge, 1972), iii, pp. 1058–1069 at p. 1065.

⁸ It is assumed in the following discussion that the reader is aware of the basic sequence of scripts in Western culture. The best introduction in English remains B. Bischoff, *Latin Palaeography. Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, trans. D. Ó Cróinín and D. Ganz (Cambridge, 1990).

The Renaissance Reform of the Book and Britain

a manuscript. This is true to the spirit of the discipline's founding father, for Jean Mabillon (1632–1707) had realised that the script could be diagnostic of a physical document's origins, and so help differentiate the original from the copy from the forgery.⁹ Those uses come nowhere near to exhausting, however, the full potential of palaeography, taken, in the broad definition used by Leonard Boyle (1923–1999), to relate to all parts of the codex (and so codicology is seen as its subset though, logically, the study of one part is subordinate to the whole, and therefore we should consider the study of script as one element in the wider set of disciplines of codicology).¹⁰ If we see our challenge being to decipher as much of the material evidence as possible—how the animal skin was turned into the folio, why the scribe chose to shape the words in just the way that we see in front of us, who touched the page before us—we can bring back to life the creators and the users of the books and, in so doing, construct an understanding all the more vivid and more vital of the culture we study. If we do this, we let palaeography out from her cubby-hole below stairs and realise she deserves more than the condescension Housman thought should be shown to a handmaid.

Undeniably, to do this requires technical skills, and with such specialisation comes the danger of ghettoisation. To make our subject area manageable (and to ease congestion in departmental corridors), we confine our territory but that can do violence to the seamlessness of the evidence. For instance, incunables and manuscripts are often kept separately in libraries, but, as will be seen in Chapters 4 and 6, our subject cannot be written without considering the interaction between script and print. Likewise, as some scholars of fifteenth-century English literature have recently demonstrated, the distinction between archival material and manuscripts divorces products which can come from one pen; re-uniting them will be our especial concern in Chapter 6. I should add that there is one topic related to this study which has been omitted here for reasons of space; that is the history of the development of humanist-style *bianchi girari* (white vine-stem) initials in England. It is a fascinating subject

⁹ J. Mabillon, *De re diplomatica* (Paris, 1681). For recent discussion of this element, see A. Hiatt, *The Making of Medieval Forgeries. False Documents in Fifteenth-Century England* (London, 2004), pp. 181–187.

¹⁰ See the author's preface to L. Boyle, *Medieval Latin Palaeography. A Bibliographical Introduction* (Toronto, 1984), pp. xi–xvi; he follows the footsteps of Ludwig Traube (1861–1907), on whom see J. Brown, 'Latin Palaeography since Traube', in *A Palaeographer's View*, ed. J. Bately et al. (London, 1993), pp. 17–37.

The Revival of Letters and the Uses of Palaeography

in its own right, but it is a history autonomous of that of English engagement with humanist script—the majority of codices we will discuss, when illuminated, are so in a northern European manner. That observation itself raises interesting issues, and they are ones which I hope will be given full consideration elsewhere.¹¹

With technical detail also comes technical terminology, and we have a duty to make that explicable to a non-specialist audience. That is made more complicated and more essential because there are disputes over the precise meaning of some terms, and because there is some variety in usage, with several words being used for the same thing, depending on local tradition or personal preference. Despite continental attempts to defy God and reverse the fall of the Tower of Babel, the English-speaking world has proven curmudgeonly about reaching consensus over a standardised vocabulary.¹² The following paragraphs act as a glossary for this volume, explaining how the basic terms will be employed in the chapters to come.¹³ They do more than that, though: they also express programmatically the value of codicology or ‘integral palaeography’.¹⁴ It is a manifesto for why we should keep our eyes open while we have our heads down, why we should take in the whole book and not solely its text.

Let us begin with some basic truths. A book—any book—speaks to us before we open it. We take messages from its dimensions, its binding, even its smell. Likewise, we read the page before we read the words on it. The MISE-EN-PAGE – that is, the arrangement of the elements, most fundamentally text and blank space, but also including, for instance, running headers and any illustrations—as well as the layout

¹¹ I omit discussion also because I am happy to defer to good people: we look forward to the publications on this topic by Holly James-Maddocks and Kathleen E. Kennedy.

¹² See the *Vocabulaire Codicologique* website which brings together D. Muzerelle’s work of the same title (Paris, 1985) with the Italian and Spanish editions, and with some English suggestions provided by the late (and much missed) Ian Doyle: <http://vocabulaire.irht.cnrs.fr/> (last accessed 1 September 2017).

¹³ This does not pretend to be comprehensive and certainly does not aim to be prescriptive; it is merely an introduction to terms used in this monograph. To assist the reader, each term is placed in small caps at the point it is defined; the book’s index gathers together the references under ‘Palaeography—Definition of Terms’. The section is mainly indebted to the glossary provided by Parkes, *Hands*, pp. 149–155. There is also a useful codicological glossary at R. Clemens and T. Graham, *Introduction to Manuscript Studies* (Ithaca, NY, 2007), pp. 263–271, and readers may find useful Michelle Brown’s *Understanding Illuminated Manuscripts: A Guide to Technical Terms* (London, 1994), now available on the BL’s Illuminated Manuscripts Catalogue website.

¹⁴ The phrase is Boyle’s, *Latin Palaeography*, p. xv.

The Renaissance Reform of the Book and Britain

of the text, the ‘general impression’ made by the writing (this is called the *ASPECT*), the flow of letter-forms (in script, created by the *DUCTUS*: ‘the act of tracing strokes on the writing surface’): all of these influence our expectations of what we are about to read.¹⁵ The page encodes the text or, to put it another way, the page performs the text. The words of an oration are mute until brought to life by the speaker; what the page does is akin to the combined effect of voice-pitch, speed and tone of delivery, gestures and pauses—the page is nothing less than the text’s body language. The page, in other words, corporealises the text, as was highly appropriate in a culture where the main writing surface was the skin of a once-breathing animal.

These fundamentals are relevant to all books but there is added variation in the manuscript world. While the page has illocutionary force, it can do so unintentionally: this happens when a scribe is less than fully conscious of the impact of the decision he or she makes. A text can be written with little attention to its presentability, and more concern simply to have the words on the page. In those circumstances, the person holding the pen is likely to want it to glide across the page, lifting the instrument as infrequently as possible and so often linking the letters together—this is thus called writing in a *CURSIVE* manner, and established patterns of this practice form traditions known as cursive script. Such habits often have their origins in administrative or business milieux, where information needs to be rapidly recorded in documents. A cursive script, though, could be ‘textualised’, that is, through alterations to its ductus that may be only slight, employed for texts to be found in books.¹⁶ Few of the manuscripts we will discuss fall into this category; the majority we will encounter were made with more care and thus, at a slower pace, with more lifts between strokes and consequently fewer links or ligatures.¹⁷ This manner of writing is called *SET*.¹⁸ A script that results from approaching the page with such deliberate skill has a decorum or presentability appropriate to a book

¹⁵ Both quotations are taken from Parkes, *Hands*, pp. 149 and 151.

¹⁶ For the term, see Derolez, *Gothic*, p. 128, with his important overview of the topic at pp. 123–130.

¹⁷ In some parlance, ‘ligature’ has a more restricted meaning than used here and signifies when one or both of the joined letters have undergone modification (such as the combining of ‘e’ and ‘t’ to form the ampersand); see Parkes, *Hands*, p. 152; in this usage, a linking line which does not create modification would be a ‘trait de liaison’ or a ‘transitional stroke’.

¹⁸ Sixteenth-century writers of printed pattern books of script employed ‘set hand’ to describe certain high-grade documentary scripts; in modern scholarship, the term has achieved a wider use, to include bookhands (and is used in this way by Parkes, *Hands*). In our discussion, ‘set hand’ will be reserved for documents written with the attention to presentability which is seen in many books.

The Revival of Letters and the Uses of Palaeography

designed for others to read—and so, in this monograph, we will term it a formal BOOKHAND.¹⁹ The difference has just been expressed as one of ductus but it also is a matter of mise-en-page with the scribe of a bookhand showing a concern to coordinate or articulate the elements so they can have some control of the messages the page provides the reader. The highly attentive scribe will mentally envisage how the completed page will look before pen touches parchment; someone wanting merely to record words will not need or have time for such foresight.

Of course, a scribe may execute a formal bookhand with less than complete success. This takes us into a dangerously subjective area, where assessment can be little better than connoisseurship, but, at the same time, we have to acknowledge there are undeniably different levels of achievement. There is a corollary to this: while a bookhand might be written at more speed or with less care than its design intended, so a cursive script could be ‘upgraded’, given greater ornament, with more concern about the arrangement of the page being shown—and so become a formal CURSIVE BOOKHAND. This, as will become clear, is a very important category in our discussion.

The description just given relates to what, in print culture, is known as lower-case letters (as opposed to upper-case, so called because of the arrangement of the cases on the compositor’s desk). In script, we know it as a MINUSCULE, where the most basic stroke is that of the *i* or one of the three parts of *m*, and is known as a MINIM. The minim could be extended to rise above the HEAD-LINE of the minims as an ASCENDER or move below their BASE-LINE as a DESCENDER—and, indeed, the differentiation between the minim-height and the extenders is one key element in making a script legible. These straight vertical strokes are combined with curved ones, so that a *p*, for instance, is formed of with a descender and a BOWL.²⁰ A complex form like *k* (a letter rarely seen in Latin texts) can be said to be formed with its SHAFT to the left and a small bowl sitting above a diagonal LIMB. The *f*, meanwhile, is constructed with an arched head to its shaft and a CROSS-STROKE. In a bookhand, to assist

¹⁹ This definition of bookhand follows the practice of A. C. de la Mare: see her comment in J. J. G. Alexander and A. C. de la Mare, *The Italian Manuscripts in the Library of Major J. R. Abbey* (London, 1969), p. xxvii. It should be noted that it is narrower than the common usage of ‘book script’ or ‘book hand’, where the fundamental definition is that it is a script which appears in a book.

²⁰ I follow here the usage of A. C. de la Mare in, for instance, her *Handwriting*. Malcolm Parkes preferred ‘lobe’ for this curved stroke: see his, *English Cursive Book Hands 1250–1500* (Oxford, 1969), p. xxvi, while others use ‘bow’: see, for instance, Ó Cróinín and Ganz’s translation of Bischoff, *Latin Palaeography*.

The Renaissance Reform of the Book and Britain

the clear definition of the form and to add ornamentation, the foot of a minim or a descender, or the top of an ascender, may be furnished with a small horizontal or diagonal stroke—a **SERIF**. Other refinements might be added: we will come across examples of hair-line strokes, of tongues and of horns.

The distinction between round and straight strokes, and between short and long letters, are all essential elements of the basic legibility of a script. The necessity that the words should be readable also placed other requirements on a copyist. A text, particularly a lengthy one, was likely to be designed to assist the reader in following its flow by being divided into sections, and those producing a transcription of the work had to respect or highlight those separations. There were several strategies to achieve this, and they were not mutually incompatible: a gap of one or more lines could be introduced; the scribe could arrange the page so that there was space for an illuminated initial, which could be provided by their own hand or by a colleague specifically responsible for such interventions; the title or the opening of a section could be written in a different colour (usually red, thus **RUBRICATION**), and—either as an alternative or an additional signifier of importance—in a different graphic style, providing a **DISPLAY SCRIPT**.²¹ One way to achieve this is simply by writing the letters larger (they are then called *litterae notabiliores*), a technique akin to an increase in font-size in a printed book. Another method is equivalent to print's 'upper case': the provision of words in **MAJUSCULES**. The comparative inherent in that term might logically be taken to imply a difference of degree from minuscules but, by long-accepted usage, it refers to a more fundamental division. A minuscule alphabet has its letters framed within an imaginary set of four lines (top of ascender, top of minim, foot of minim, foot of descender), and so it is sometimes called a quadrilinear script, in contrast to the bilinear script of a majuscule alphabet, where the letters are confined between two lines, as is any set of capitals. Indeed, the earliest examples of handwriting we have from ancient Rome are in capitals, imitative of monumental inscriptions: majuscles come before minuscules.

This describes, in brief span, the arsenal of tactics available to the scribe in making the page expressive. The choices made, in terms of ductus, aspect and mise-en-page, all assist us in the essential palaeographical process of achieving specificity—it is this ability to pinpoint when and where a book was produced which makes the discipline so useful to broader cultural studies. It is important,

²¹ For a full definition, see Parkes, *Hands*, p. 151.

The Revival of Letters and the Uses of Palaeography

then, that we never over-promise: sometimes the evidence is too exiguous or too ambivalent to allow a close localisation. On the other hand, there are occasions where we can identify with certainty the scribe responsible, moving out from codices that have been signed or recorded as by a person to those unsigned but which provide sufficient parallels and idiosyncracies to be attributed to the same hand. Examples of this will be found in the chapters that follow, as will also some acknowledgement of the difficulties: in particular, in the period we are studying, it was not unusual for one hand to be able to produce several scripts, and this complicates any attempt at identification.²² When precision is beyond our grasp (and we should never pretend to a certainty which may impress but which has no firm foundation in evidence), it may still be possible to localise to an approximate date and place of production. That is because the choices made by a scribe are not simply personal ones: they are necessarily responses to existing cultural codes and are, most often, intended to demonstrate participation in an aesthetic prized in the culture or community—physical or imagined—which the scribe inhabits. Sometimes, what was on the page could help constitute a community, and this was the case with the humanists. One route they took to constructing their shared identity was by giving it a graphic reality; as we shall see in Chapter 1, they campaigned to reform script as a rejection of the dominant style, which they called ‘modern’ or ‘gothic’. They promoted a different perception of what makes a page decorous. As their agenda remains with us in the design of most printed pages, it is the gothic approach that is perhaps more difficult for us to appreciate, so let us spend a moment considering it.²³

Across the variety of gothic bookhands we know as *textualis* (or *textura*), there was a shared emphasis on making the text-block of the page look uniform. The primary method for achieving this was by emphasising the minim-high body of the letters by reducing ascenders and descenders, sometimes to mere stubs (two examples: **d** often had a slight diagonal ‘ascender’ rather than having a tall straight back; final **s**, which in caroline minuscule could be a tall letter,

²² My usage here and below moves away from the distinction drawn by Parkes, *English Cursive*, p. xxvi, by which ‘script’ is taken to mean model and ‘hand’ is ‘what he [sc. the scribe] actually puts down on the page’. For the polygraphic community that we will meet, the result of following Parkes’s terminology would be that several scribes would each have several writing hands.

²³ For what follows in the next paragraph, see Derolez, *Gothic*, pp. 72–118 and Parkes, *Hands*, pp. 103–125.

The Renaissance Reform of the Book and Britain

rising to the height of an ascender, becomes insistently short). A related technique was, when providing a serif, to draw it not as a horizontal foot but as a diagonal lower stroke to the body of the letter. The appearance of uniformity was further enhanced by compressing letters together, creating a ‘graphic chain’, in which the word, not the letter, was taken to be the basic unit of comprehension.²⁴ To achieve this, short thin strokes linked together minims, while between two bowls sitting next to each other (as in, say, **po**), there would be either KISSING, where the bowls touch, or more frequently, BITING, where the left side of the second letter is swallowed up by the preceding bowl. A concern to avoid, where possible, an upright stroke following a curved one meant that **r**, when following **o** or **b**, was made to arch around the line of the preceding bowl and so appears to us to be ‘z-shaped’. In northern Europe, the general tendency in designing letters was to make them angular, and not only through the provision of diagonal serifs; the **o**, for instance, was drawn not as a circle but as a lozenge, with frequent turns of the pen so that there was differentiation between thick and thin strokes. In later manuscripts, this contrast was increased by adding, as an ornament, hair-line (that is, very thin) strokes. The repeated combination of straight and angled strokes within a text designed to appear as an uninterrupted flow served to create a sense of a uniform whole. A different approach was taken in southern Europe, where *textualis* was less angular and more rounded, but there was still an emphasis on the distinction between thick and thin strokes and on the linking together of letters into a continuous stream.²⁵ Both strategies shared a goal: the pursuit of ordered harmony. It was achieved aware that the text formed just one part of the page, and that the illumination around it could enhance it—or subvert it.²⁶

This simplified description, while capturing some of the essence of gothic bookhands, necessarily understates their variety: it was not a single script but a system. This is best reflected in the few surviving specimen sheets provided by commercial scribes to advertise the range of their ability.²⁷ The copyists

²⁴ The phrase is used by Derolez, *Gothic*, p. 79.

²⁵ The contrasts are well described by Derolez, *Gothic*, pp. 72–101 and pp. 102–122.

²⁶ I touch on the issues raised by M. Camille, *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art* (London, 1992) in my chapter in J. Raven ed., *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Book* (Oxford, forthcoming).

²⁷ S. H. Steinberg, ‘A Hand-list of Specimens of Medieval Writing-Masters’, *The Library*, 4th ser., xxiii (1942), pp. 191–194, and M. Steinmann, ‘Textualis formata’, *Archiv für Diplomatik*, xxv (1980), pp. 301–327 at pp. 302–303; see also Derolez, *Gothic*, pp. 17–19 (with bibliography). Examples are reproduced as Bischoff, *Latin Palaeography*, pl. 18 and Derolez,