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Brian Jeffrey Maxson

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## Introduction

### *A Social Conception of the Humanist Movement*

From limited origins in thirteenth-century Padua the humanist studies of a handful of men and women exploded into a cultural and educational movement that reached across Europe and lasted for centuries. Writers like Petrarch, Bruni, and Erasmus became famous for their unparalleled mastery of the languages and writings of the ancient world. The humanists offered Europe a new focus for study, new approach to problems, and new style in which people could express themselves. But humanist studies and writings did more than change the way a few intellectuals discussed esoteric questions or alter the costume in which they dressed their words. Humanism introduced fundamental changes to the ways people viewed the world and interacted with one another. Humanism reintroduced the texts to the West that made possible the voyages of exploration, the Protestant Reformations, and the scientific revolution. Humanist innovations lie at the foundation of countless modern academic disciplines, including history, for which fifteenth-century humanist historians developed philological and evidentiary techniques that continue to inform historical research.

The humanists' focus on the lives of people in and outside the forum underlay their success. From the most basic perspective, humanists sought to inspire moral virtue in their contemporaries by encouraging the study of ethics, the emulation or avoidance of examples from history – and to a lesser extent literature – and a firm knowledge of the grammatical and rhetorical tools necessary to move others to their opinion of the morally correct point of view. Theoretically, political men and women, teachers, businesspeople, members of the church, and anyone else with the means to acquire humanist training could integrate their learning in their political,

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business, social, and all other dealings with people. Individuals could and were encouraged to raise their status through their learned pursuits. Meanwhile, the study and scrutiny of classical texts shattered the shackles of antiquity and allowed new paradigms to enter European thought and action. Natural scientists, political thinkers, and others used their humanist studies to surpass their classical predecessors and forge new paths across disciplines.

From the thirteenth through the seventeenth centuries, humanists wrote hundreds of treatises in a Latin that strived to be as classical as possible, a style now called “neo-Latin.” They penned these works because the humanists believed classical Latin was the key to better rhetorical persuasion. Only recently have scholars truly turned their attention to editing and translating these texts, a large number of which survive unedited from the European Renaissance. Like the humanist book hunters whom they study, these modern scholars have striven to find, edit, and translate this important body of literature, effectively introducing it to English readers and reintroducing it to Latin ones. This admirable task has dominated the history of humanism for the past decade.

Consequently, scholars of humanism have focused their debates on the nuances and contradictions inherent in these humanist texts, especially the characteristics that distinguish humanism from earlier and later developments in intellectual history. Four major interpretations have proven particularly influential in the historiography. Ronald Witt argued that the style of humanist Latin set humanists apart from previous thinkers and authors. This style gradually moved across literary genres and culminated in changes in oratory in the early fifteenth century.<sup>1</sup> Paul Oskar Kristeller argued that humanists focused on the five subjects of the *studia humanitatis* – history, poetry, grammar, rhetoric, and moral philosophy. He famously contrasted the thought and writings of the humanists with those of more traditional philosophical movements.<sup>2</sup> Hans Baron pointed to the ideal of the active life, particularly in the context of a republic, as the defining aspect of humanist thought.<sup>3</sup> Eugenio Garin focused on the philosophical writings of the humanists and argued that they shared an advocacy for the active life and a rudimentary form of historicism.<sup>4</sup>

Fifteenth-century humanist authors often encompassed aspects of all four of these definitions. Both Witt and Kristeller most closely adhered to the concerns of the humanists themselves. Humanist writers appraised the Latin style of their peers and expected eloquence along classical, often Ciceronian lines. Moreover, most original humanist texts in Latin pertain to the subjects of the *studia humanitatis*. Certainly, Kristeller’s definition,

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or categorization, as Christopher Celenza has argued, may be too stringent.<sup>5</sup> For example, Leonardo Bruni spent much of his career translating philosophical works by Aristotle and Plato that fell well outside the five subjects of the *studia humanitatis*. Yet, Kristeller himself was willing to accept a mixture of interests within a single individual, as shown in his discussion of the metaphysical and theological thought of Marsilio Ficino while also acknowledging his literary and stylistic concerns.<sup>6</sup>

Hans Baron and Eugenio Garin also focused on important aspects of humanist writings. The “Baron Thesis” argued that the year of crisis in 1402 dramatically shifted the content of literary works in Florence. After that year writers moved away from advocating a contemplative, apolitical life and began urging citizens to active lives dedicated to the defense of republican liberty. Baron’s dating, causation, and arguments about republican sincerity probably are not correct.<sup>7</sup> However, most scholars have continued to accept that many fifteenth-century humanists in Florence advocated the ideal of the active life of a citizen.<sup>8</sup> Margery Ganz, Arthur Field, Mark Jurdjevic, and others have convincingly argued that this ideal of “civic humanism” continued even after many Florentine intellectuals began focusing on metaphysical questions.<sup>9</sup> As Eugenio Garin pointed out, much of the most innovative metaphysical speculation by humanist authors pertained to the place of man in the cosmos. Certainly, many humanists strayed from this line, never advocated it, or focused on religious matters, but Garin’s broader points about historicism and his diachronic approach to intellectual history remain valid.<sup>10</sup> Taken together, these four definitions provide a good sense of the means and focus of cultural expression by fifteenth-century humanist authors.<sup>11</sup> They also shift the focus of humanist studies overwhelmingly to the writings and original ideas of the most exceptional humanists.

The arguments of this book uphold the importance of making humanist texts available to a broader readership even as it pushes all historians to expand the scope of their inquiries to include the learned pursuits of individuals outside the core group of well-known humanists and their works. Even a cursory glance through Paul Oskar Kristeller’s *Iter Italicum*, a massively impressive finding guide to humanist texts, reveals that the “lost continent” of Renaissance Latin literature is enormous, but a deeper analysis reveals something additional.<sup>12</sup> The number of different humanist authors writing original Latin works at any given time was actually quite small. In the end, an exhaustive search would turn up maybe thirty humanist authors in fifteenth-century Florence writing Latin works, and far fewer major writers. A couple dozen authors were a

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drop in the bucket in a city with hundreds of patrician families, each with myriad distinct familial branches, and tens of thousands of other inhabitants. This was the situation in Florence, the city that enjoyed a peninsula-wide reputation as the center of humanist studies. How did so few people launch such a widespread movement? Put another way, if the humanist movement in Florence encompassed so few writers, how could it possibly have had the influence that later scholars have quite rightly attributed to it? Frankly, if so few people actually inhabited the lost continent of literature, why should most historians of Renaissance Italy and Europe bother to study the growing number of handsome editions and thoughtful translations of humanist works?

The answer to all of these questions lies in the thousands of active participants in the humanist movement who studied classical and humanist texts but who themselves were not part of its core members of prolific writers, brilliant classical scholars, and prominent patrons. The humanist movement during the Italian Renaissance included these outstanding individuals, but it also included less prominent patrons, less talented orators, less learned classicists, Latin-illiterate readers of humanist and classical works in vernacular translations, and everything in between. Men and women from across this range of humanist interests and abilities crowded bookshops and participated in discussion groups about classical and humanist texts and ideas. They differed in the degree of their interests and influence, but not in kind from their more learned contemporaries. The men and women outside the core group of humanists served as the primary audience for humanist and classical books. Most of them possessed more social status than the fraction of the movement made up of its most dominant players. In fact, the large group of so-called amateur humanists, scattered as they were across the spectrum of humanist interests and abilities, were often the only individuals in cities like Florence who possessed enough social status to fulfill the common refrain in humanist writings to combine learning with the active citizen life successfully. By the 1420s at the latest, this literary suggestion had turned into a practical necessity because most rituals during the Renaissance, in and outside Florence, required displays of humanist learning from participants.

Traditionally, scholars have focused on the most prolific humanist writers and relied on the terms “amateur” and “professional” whenever they have needed to discuss any other members of the humanist movement. However, such categories are misleading for understanding the primary distinctions among Renaissance humanists. More than fifty years ago, Lauro Martines rightly pointed out the problems with this distinction,

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even declaring that he discussed the matter with no less than Paul Oskar Kristeller.<sup>13</sup> Martines defined professionals and amateurs, stating, “The professional presumably counted on his humanistic culture for his livelihood, the amateur did not.”<sup>14</sup> Martines’s fine study went on to establish the then-novel claim that very few humanists were wandering scholars who used letters for subsistence and languished outside the halls of political power. Rather, humanists were members of wealthy and powerful political groups within Florentine society. Rarely was money the key distinction between admirers of the classics.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, it is problematic to distinguish among them using economic criteria.

Two examples reveal Martines’s general problems with the professional and amateur dichotomy. In the 1440s and 1450s, Giannozzo Manetti was the most famed orator on the Italian peninsula. His diplomatic speeches attracted hundreds of people and his works and teachings inspired the thought of a generation. In many ways, he served as a temporal intermediary, carrying the torch of Florentine humanism from Leonardo Bruni, whose works he consciously emulated and shamelessly plagiarized, to Donato Acciaiuoli, the leading student of Giovanni Argyropoulos at the Florentine Academy in the 1450s.<sup>16</sup> By any standard, Giannozzo Manetti was one of the most important humanists in Florence in the latter 1440s and early 1450s. However, by economic standards Manetti was an amateur because most of his income derived from the silk trade.<sup>17</sup>

Meanwhile, Griso Griselli was a professional humanist because his income depended on his humanist studies. Born in 1424, Griselli served as Manetti’s secretary on an important diplomatic mission to Venice in 1448. Griselli left a long and detailed diary of Manetti’s activities in Venice, his interactions with the Venetian government, and his correspondence with Florence. By 1454 Griselli was registering acts as a notary in Florence: Manetti, who was by then in voluntary exile, served as his first client.<sup>18</sup> He corresponded with the learned humanist Donato Acciaiuoli and was one of many participants in a learned discussion with Manetti in Venice in 1448.<sup>19</sup> Griselli procured numerous important notarial positions before he died in 1497.<sup>20</sup> There is no doubt that Griselli pursued humanist studies, particularly in his youth. However, there is also no doubt that he enjoyed far less prominence and influence than his esteemed friend Giannozzo Manetti. The fact that Griselli earned his living with his pen made him, by economic standards, a professional humanist. Yet, to call a person of Manetti’s stature an amateur by comparison with the professional Griselli seems to prioritize the origins of a person’s paycheck falsely over an individual’s impact on the humanist movement. The baggage of

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the word “amateur” insinuates that Manetti, a man whom both his contemporaries and modern scholars point to as one of the most outstanding humanists in the years following Leonardo Bruni’s death, was somehow less serious, less influential, and less learned than his professional contemporaries.

Despite Martines’s reservations, historians have continued to use the terms “professional” and “amateur” whenever less prominent humanists enter a study. In fact, Martines himself retained the categories while changing their meaning for his study. Martines argued that a distinction should be made between individuals who devoted their spare moments to humanist study and those who worked at it more often: The most serious humanists were professionals; the less dedicated were amateurs.<sup>21</sup> In practice, Martines avoided the problem by studying distinctions between social groups rather than differences between individual humanists. He argued that categories like professional and amateur were not useful for his project because he was concerned with the relationship between humanists and Florentine society. Indeed, Martines claimed that “stressing differences between the two [types of humanists] would have blurred the very thing we were after – the connection, if one there was, between humanism and the social groups which enjoyed power and prestige.”<sup>22</sup> Moreover, distinctions between professionals and amateurs “would have produced generalizations about the connections between humanism and *individuals*, even if individuals with different kinds of professional or business interests, and nothing about the connection between humanism and those groups in society which exercise power, determine or direct values, and are hence the chief agencies of change in history.”<sup>23</sup> In short, Martines avoided the question of the efficacy of the terms “amateur” and “professional” because distinguishing between types of humanists was unnecessary to make the type of claims argued in his book.

Over the past fifty years most historians have retained the professional and amateur dichotomy. In general, intellectual historians have avoided the problem by focusing on the original writings of the most prolific humanist writers, men whose key position in the humanist movement can be little doubted and thus for whom the terms are unnecessary. Meanwhile, humanism is so rarely a major topic in the work of other historians that, again, the issue does not usually arise. When it does, “amateur” is applied. The absence of humanism from much Renaissance scholarship is undoubtedly a by-product of the lack of dialogue between intellectual and social historians of the Italian Renaissance more generally.<sup>24</sup> Yet these historiographical trends have also been shaped by the four

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major, current definitions of Renaissance humanism. Each of these current definitions accepts that humanism became a broad cultural movement, but each one also overwhelmingly focuses on common themes across original humanist works in Latin, whether the focus is Latin style, common content, or disciplinary focus.

Yet, Latin writers were rare in the humanist movement, as this study shows for Florence and as Margaret King pointed out more than twenty-five years ago for Venice.<sup>25</sup> Most participants in the humanist movement were content to read the writings of others, especially classical authors; translate humanist and especially classical works; correspond with friends and acquaintances about their studies; and develop spoken eloquence in both Latin and the vernacular. In fact, scholars have long struggled with individuals who were clearly considered as central humanists in the fifteenth century, but who have left little literary production to merit this distinction. The most famous example is Niccolò Niccoli, who shunned writing original works because he believed he could never equal the ancients. Palla di Nofri Strozzi was another key figure who failed to pen original treatises. Carlo Marsuppini was a university professor and chancellor of Florence after Leonardo Bruni, but his handful of surviving writings was a fraction of the dozens of works by his prolific predecessor. Less learned and less famous men like Piero de' Pazzi, Marco Parenti, and Giuliano Davanzati – none of whom wrote anything in terms of original Latin works – were welcomed into learned discussions, were praised for their learning, and actively pursued books of interests to more well-known humanists. Such men were far more typical of the individuals involved in the humanist movement than their colleagues who were busy penning original works, but a conception of the humanist movement based primarily on original writings in Latin struggles to incorporate them into it.

Additionally, a focus on the original Latin writings of the few prolific humanist writers overshadows other important aspects of the humanist movement. Specific social and political contexts shaped humanist works collectively to a greater extent than most movements in intellectual history. Humanist writers tied their works to specific events or patrons, and the constraints of these contexts or the specific social and political goals of an author frequently overshadowed any desire to create new ideas in the abstract. In short, humanists were usually interested in making practical arguments in a classical way for a present problem rather than creating original metaphysical ideas for posterity. Studying the ideas in these texts through philology or primarily in the context of other texts can offer interesting and important insights into the history of ideas, but it also

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causes the texts to lose much of their original significance, authorial intention, and layers of meaning.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, the vernacular played a far more prominent role in the humanist movement than a focus on original texts in Latin allows. Many humanist writers, such as Leonardo Bruni and Giannozzo Manetti, wrote texts in both the vernacular and Latin. Certainly, they sometimes distinguished between their “light” works in the vernacular and their “serious” works in Latin, but they nevertheless applied their overriding interest in antiquity and classical style to both cases.<sup>27</sup> Angelo Mazzocco has demonstrated that fifteenth-century humanists held a variety of opinions about the validity of Italian as a learned language. Far from holding the vernacular in universal disdain, Italian humanist writers varied in the value they attached to works written in the vernacular.<sup>28</sup>

Finally, a focus on the original Latin writings of the humanists unintentionally downplays the role of the humanist movement in Renaissance society. The humanist movement becomes populated by a handful of elite men and sometimes women who wrote books read by a few like-minded individuals with the desire and/or the ability to read Latin. Yet, this view could not be further from the truth. Humanism and the people interested in it saturated the society of the Renaissance. To cite but a few examples, states exchanged letters in humanist Latin.<sup>29</sup> The rituals that filled Florentine city squares typically featured at least one humanist performance, often at the tensest moments for the city’s diverse onlookers.<sup>30</sup> Humanist studies produced changes in the language of artistic appreciation, effectively altering the way people viewed art and the world around them. This new framework, in turn, shaped the artistic tastes of the men and women responsible for the art that still enables Florence to enjoy a cultural reputation beyond the moderate size of the modern city.<sup>31</sup> Increasingly over the fifteenth century, Florentines presented themselves as versed in the classics in order to maintain and earn capital for themselves, their families, and their city. By the mid-fifteenth century at the latest, large numbers of Florentines had been educated according to humanist-style curricula, were hiring humanist tutors for their children, were learning and imitating classical rhetorical techniques, were copying and reading humanist texts, and were commissioning works of cultural production inspired by their studies.<sup>32</sup> As many as two-thirds of Florentines in 1427 were literate, at least in the vernacular.<sup>33</sup> Certainly, not all of these individuals were capable of or interested in reading an Italian or Latin version of a classical or humanist text. Enough of them were interested, however, to support the hire of the Greeks Manuel Chrysoloras and Giovanni Argyropoulos at the



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Florentine university, to enable Leonardo Bruni and other humanist writers to become very wealthy men, and to produce and consume the thousands of surviving copies of orations, original humanist works, books by classical authors, and translations of such authors that still stuff the special collections of European libraries.<sup>34</sup>

In order to examine the full breadth of the humanist movement, this book adopts a new approach to studying the learned interests of the Florentines. At the onset, a version of the broad conception of humanism proposed several years ago by Kenneth Gouwens has been adopted to help define humanism itself. Gouwens suggested that “humanism is best conceived not as the narrowly defined *studia humanitatis* of Kristeller but as the cultural context (or, discursive field) with which exceptionally visible figures such as Petrarch and Raphael operated.”<sup>35</sup> This book breaks somewhat from Gouwens and argues that the term “humanism” should retain its somewhat narrow focus pertaining to the study of a particular Latin style, unique approach to philosophical questions, focus on the application of learning in the active life, and/or specific range of relevant subjects (as Witt, Garin, Baron, and/or Kristeller, respectively, argued). The terms “humanist learning” and “humanism” have been used interchangeably throughout this book with this definition in mind. The term “humanist movement,” by contrast, should describe Gouwens’s broad cultural context that developed around humanism as well as the people operating within this context. Involvement in the humanist movement can be traced through a number of evidentiary sources that link individuals to an interest in the classical world. These “learned connections” are discussed in detail in Chapter 1. This book focuses on the humanist movement rather than on humanism proper. In doing so, the book shifts scholarly focus away from the ideas in humanist texts and the specific characteristics that distinguished them from nonhumanist texts – accepting that such foci and distinctions remain important for other studies – and squarely onto the task of analyzing the individuals who were responsible for the movement’s success: The individuals who made up the vast ranks of the humanist movement in the broader social and political world of fifteenth-century Florence.

This book also offers two essential categories to describe individuals who made up the humanist movement and their vast range of interests, abilities, and influence. People at the core of the humanist movement formed more and stronger connections to other people based on shared humanist interests. They read more classical and humanist books. Almost all of them knew Latin. Usually, but not always, these core humanists were

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also the writers of original humanist texts. Because of this connection to original works, these core humanists are called “literary” humanists throughout this book. Typically, but not always, literary humanists were members of new families and possessed a correspondingly moderate level of political and social status. Leonardo Bruni provides one good example of a literary humanist. Bruni was a parvenu to Florence and possessed hundreds of learned connections, as witnessed through his surviving epistles, evidence from his original works, readers and owners of copies of his works, and other archival sources. Giannozzo Manetti and Marsilio Ficino also serve as standard examples of literary humanists, although Manetti was from an older family than either Bruni or Ficino. In addition to these prolific writers, some literary humanists wrote few if any original works, but their importance to the humanist movement and interest in humanism warrant their place in this category. Niccolò Niccoli, Palla di Nofri Strozzi, and Carlo Marsuppini, mentioned previously, serve as three good examples of literary humanists who produced few original literary compositions. Literary humanists were the people with the deepest humanist learning, and they made up a tiny fraction of the humanist movement. They were unlike other humanists because of their greater role and skill in humanist letters, as witnessed through their original works, patronage, prolific correspondence with others, or occasionally the sheer weight of contemporary opinion on their learning.

All of the remaining individuals who participated in the humanist movement are called “social” humanists in this study. This term derives from the fact that only a few of them wrote original treatises in Latin or the vernacular. Therefore, their participation in the humanist movement must be traced through other means. These individuals formed fewer and weaker learned connections than literary humanists. They read fewer books. They varied from people fluent in Latin to people who could only read the vernacular. They read the works of humanist and classical authors in Latin or the vernacular. Some of them even translated Latin books into other languages. Many social humanists were patricians and thus have left piles of documentation on various aspects of their lives. Usually they carried a degree of social and political status far outweighing their position in the humanist movement. Other social humanists lacked family names and have left little evidence of any aspects of their lives, beyond a note naming them as the owner of a humanist text. The category “social” humanist encompasses individuals from a range of backgrounds with an enormous variation of skill levels, influence, and interest in humanism. Simply put, a social humanist was anybody for whom a convincing