

Handbook of English Renaissance Literature

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Ingo Berensmeyer
Introduction

Me seemes I heare, when I doo heare sweete musique,
The dreadfull cries of muredred men in forrests.

Sir Philip Sidney, "Ye Goatherd Gods"

1 The English Renaissance in Perspective

The English Renaissance is part of a wider European cultural dynamic, usually considered as marking the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the Modern Age. 'Renaissance' means 'rebirth' in French. What was being reborn or rediscovered, from the fourteenth century onwards, was classical antiquity: ancient Greek and Latin writings, art, philosophy, and literature. Far from backward-looking, this turn towards the pagan and pre-medieval past led to a flourishing of architecture, the visual arts, music, poetry, and drama across Europe. The discovery of the old was midwife to the birth of the new. 'New' here refers to technologies like the printing press and the compass, ideas like the heliocentric world picture and the Reformation, but also to numerous discoveries and inventions such as linear perspective, opera, gunpowder, and double-entry bookkeeping. Together with the expansion of the known world beyond the Atlantic, these developments gradually transformed Europe, ushering in new ways and means of artistic expression, scientific enquiry, political representation, economic growth, and religious belief.

Most importantly, these transformations were accompanied by an awareness of being new or modern. The term *modernus*, used to describe objects or institutions of the present, is a post-classical Latin word introduced to draw a distinction between the old and the new. First attested in a letter of Pope Gelasius in 494/495, it was first used to contrast 'modern' (Christian) from 'ancient' (pagan) ways in the early sixth century. It has since come to designate successive "thresholds of modernisation" that combine technological and scientific innovations with political and social change (Klinger 2002, 125; my translation). For the philosopher Hans Blumenberg, the modern age is the period that discovers the very concept of newness as an acceptable idea, thus including "the concept of an epoch itself as a significant element of the epoch" (Blumenberg 1991, 468; ↗ 3 New Ways of Worldmaking). Renaissance humanists themselves, like Petrarch in the fourteenth century, begin to speak of the "cultural darkness" (in Latin, *tenebrae*) after the decline of Rome (Mommsen 1942, 228) and express hope for a "rebirth" (in Italian, *rinascita*) of classical culture.

However, this view of a linear process of modernisation from the 'Dark Ages' to the light of the Renaissance projects an undue teleology onto various chains of

events. Some of the presumed achievements of modernity can be shown to apply already to the Middle Ages. For example, the ‘birth of the individual’, hailed by nineteenth-century historians like Jules Michelet and Jacob Burckhardt as a hallmark of the Italian Renaissance, has since been claimed for the twelfth century (Bynum 1980) and even for the early medieval period (Siedentop 2015). Similarly, while earlier scholars attested a revolutionary impact to the printing press (Eisenstein 1980), more recent studies argue instead for a gradual process of transition and overlap between manuscript and print culture (cf. McKenzie 2002 [1990]; Love 1993; Marotti and Bristol 2000; Gillespie and Powell 2014). Its many innovations notwithstanding, from the Reformation to the Copernican revolution, the Renaissance may have had more continuities with the Middle Ages than its advocates cared to admit.

If one asks how revolutionary the Renaissance really was, one also needs to address its darker side. The result will be a more complicated picture than the simple view that sees only the dawn of a new era ushering in the glories of modernity and a golden age of art and science. There is certainly much to celebrate in this period, but there are also many troublesome aspects in what is still sometimes referred to, only half-jokingly, as ‘merry old England’: from religious persecution and the oppression of minorities to the beginnings of colonial exploitation. Neither the term ‘Early Modern’ nor the term ‘Renaissance’ thus appear to be a perfect fit for the period (see Wiesner-Hanks 2008). Both are problematic. The forward-looking term ‘Early Modern’ suggests a clean break with the past and posits the beginning of an entirely new epoch (‘modernity’), whereas ‘Renaissance’ posits the revival of the old as the period’s defining feature. Historians appear to prefer the former, literature scholars the latter. In literary studies, the term ‘Renaissance’ has the advantage of a fixed end point, located either at the restoration of the monarchy in 1660 or, as in this handbook, in the publication of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667) (↗ 32 John Milton, *Paradise Lost*). The term is traditional, but it is a convenient and pragmatic period designator. There are similar conceptual problems with the term ‘Romanticism’, but this has not kept scholars from sticking to it for ease of reference (see Casaliggi and Fermanis 2016, Haekel 2017).

When writing about the Renaissance in England, however defined, one has to acknowledge first of all that the British Isles were late to the table. Most of the technological, intellectual, and artistic innovations came from Italy, France, Germany, and the Netherlands. While England had been maintaining close connections with France since the later Middle Ages, including claims to French kingship that led to the Hundred Years’ War (1337–1453), its geographical location on the Western margins of Europe kept it at a distance from the cultural centres of the age – from the Italian city states, from Paris or Amsterdam. The loss of England’s continental possessions in France after the war may have contributed further to a sense of isolation from the mainland. After the civil wars known as the Wars of the Roses (1455–1487), made famous through Shakespeare’s history plays (↗ 20 William Shakespeare, *Richard II*), there is an extended period of dynastic stability under the

Tudor monarchs. The reign of Henry VII (1485–1509) ushers in a number of political and legal transformations that assert the king’s power over local feudal lords, streamline the administration, and increase revenues. As the influence of the old aristocracy is diminished, the gentry and peers take over important functions; conflicting interest groups are brought to heel by a series of political compromises (cf. Elton 1974). A more powerful administration further contributes to making London the political, legal, and economic centre of the Isles. London’s population grows substantially during this period, from some 40,000 inhabitants around 1500 to approximately 200,000 in 1600. As towns gain in size compared to rural areas, the total population of England and Wales doubles from c. 2.5 million in 1500 to five million in 1600. If these estimates are correct, London grows twice as quickly as the rest of the country (Finlay and Shearer 1986, Wrigley 1987).

The increase of royal power continues under Henry VIII (1491–1547), whose break with the Roman Church in 1532 makes the English sovereign the supreme head of the Church in England. Following the brief reign of Edward VI, who dies at the age of fifteen in 1553, and the even shorter reign of Jane Grey (the ‘Nine-Day Queen’), Mary I (1516–1558) returns the country to Catholicism. This is reversed five years later by the accession of her half-sister Elizabeth I (1533–1603), the daughter of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn. Elizabeth continues and consolidates the Reformation as well as the administrative reforms initiated under the early Tudors. A decisive victory over the Spanish fleet, the famous Armada, in 1588 secures England’s status as a naval power, opening up possibilities of international trade and colonial exploration. When Elizabeth dies childless in 1603, there is a brief moment of dynastic insecurity that ends with the accession of James VI and I (1566–1625), King of Scotland and England, the first Stuart king on the English throne.

The reign of Elizabeth I has entered popular mythology as a ‘golden age’, and it certainly saw a flourishing of the arts, especially in poetry and drama. But the seeds for this were planted earlier, and its fruits were still being reaped long after her death. There is some political stability during her reign, but this is bought at the price of an oppressive and intrusive interior politics, including a well-managed network of spies and the reintroduction of torture, applied most dramatically to Catholic enemies of the state like the Jesuit Edmund Campion (1540–1581). This coincides with an increasingly harsh stance towards Ireland, which is systematically colonised during her reign and whose rebels are suppressed by military force (an important subtext to the most ambitious literary work of this period, Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* (1590/96; ↗ 17 Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*). This darkening of the Elizabethan age in its later years is epitomized in the Essex rebellion of 1601, a failed coup by Elizabeth’s former favourite, Robert Devereux, the Earl of Essex (1566–1601).

The flowering of the arts can also be recognised in Scotland. For this reason, it might be more justified to speak of a British rather than English Renaissance. The political union of Britain is promoted by King James but not realised until 1707 (see Kerrigan 2008, Shapiro 2015). Even though English influence is felt to be growing

across the Isles in this period, it is not a unified or systematic presence; the period's linguistic and cultural plurality should not be underestimated. There is a wide variety of writing in other vernacular languages such as Welsh, Irish and Scottish Gaelic, as well as in the classical languages: Latin is widely taught and used as the language of international diplomacy as well as learning. Well into the seventeenth century, legal texts are composed in a variety of Anglo-Norman French known as Law French. The cultural centres in this period beside London are the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, both medieval foundations. In the Kingdom of Scotland, the university of St Andrews is founded in 1418, followed by Glasgow (1451), Aberdeen (1495), and Edinburgh (1582). Edinburgh is also a cultural hub in the North, with a vibrant court and the first Scottish printing press in 1507. A number of Scottish poets including Robert Henryson (c. 1430–c. 1505), William Dunbar (c. 1456–c. 1515), Gavin Douglas (c. 1475–1522) and David Lindsay (c. 1486–1555) write in an English dialect known as Middle Scots; their works, while influenced by Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1340–1400), attest to a vibrant literary activity in late medieval and early Renaissance Scotland (see Dunnigan 2013).

Like their English counterparts, these Scottish poets also contributed to literary forms of nation-building, demonstrating through their writings that England and Scotland were able to compete with other European nations in the field of culture, and that they were true heirs of Roman tradition. *Translatio imperii*, the transfer of imperial power and cultural prowess from Roman antiquity to late medieval Britain, is an important cultural programme. Based on a legend introduced by the twelfth-century historian Geoffrey of Monmouth, Britain was first settled by (and took its name from) Brutus, a descendant of Aeneas. This was a convenient way of claiming a common ancient origin myth for Britain and Rome, since Aeneas was said to have settled in Italy after the Trojan War, and his story is the basis of the most important Latin epic poem, Virgil's *Aeneid* (Tudeau-Clayton 2009). It is no surprise then that English and Scottish writers from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century should attempt to translate this highly prestigious work into English and thus to claim this heritage for their emerging nations: Gavin Douglas completes his Middle Scots translation in 1513; a few years later, Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey (1517–1547) is the first English poet to use blank verse in his translation of books II and IV (see Pearsall 1999). This early imperial project culminates in John Dryden's (1631–1700) translation of *The Aeneid* in heroic couplets, printed in 1697.

A sense of competition with other nations is not only visible in the translation of classical texts and the imitation of continental poetic forms like the sonnet and *ottava rima*, the latter introduced by Thomas Wyatt (c. 1503–1542), but also in the production of vernacular literature. One of the greatest achievements of the period is its linguistic creativity, opening up new possibilities for English as a literary language in prose, poetry, and drama. Shakespeare alone is credited with having introduced 1,700 new words to the English language (e.g. *assassination* and *linguist*), about half of which have remained in use (Crystal 2008, 9). This development is

most clearly noticeable in the writing of lyric verse. Here, too, translations of (mostly) Italian and French models are quickly followed by original compositions (↗ 2 Forms of Translation). The project of proving the literary possibilities of English becomes part of demonstrating equality, if not superiority in relation to France or Italy. When Richard Tottel (c. 1528–1593) publishes the first printed collection of English verse in 1557, he does so with the explicit aim to “show abundantly” that poetry could be written in English “as praise worthelye as the rest”, i.e. “Latines, Italians, & other” (“To the reder”, Holton and MacFaul 2011, n.p. [3]; ↗ 13 Richard Tottel, *Songes and Sonettes*; see Müller 2009).

Next to the production of English literature, another project connected with the cultural politics of Renaissance nation-building (cf. Helgerson 1992, Grapes 2001) is the preservation of relics of the past and the construction of a (national) history, including literary history. This project becomes particularly acute during and after the Reformation, which intensifies the cultural and political rivalry between England and the (predominantly Catholic) Continent. As monasteries are dissolved or destroyed, recording and collecting their possessions – including a wealth of books – is a priority. Beginning in the mid-Tudor period, antiquaries like John Leland (c. 1503–1552) and John Stow (1524/25–1605) collect fragments of the past and attempt to preserve them from oblivion (Vine 2010). The English past and its relation to the present is also of great concern to chroniclers, most famously Raphael Holinshed (1529–1580), whose *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* (1577) are a major source for Shakespeare's history plays (↗ 20 William Shakespeare, *Richard II*).

History becomes such a pressing concern because the English urgently need to define themselves and their nation in a period of rapid transformations. One of the most pervasive changes is in religion, affecting each individual as well as every local community and the state at large. From 1517 onwards, the Reformation, a process of radical Church reform, spreads across Europe from its origin in the German backwater of Wittenberg. It has profound impacts on all aspects of human life and civilisation: not only on how individual believers think about their Christian faith, but also how they see the relationship between Church and state, between secular and religious power, and how they read and understand the Bible. In England, these changes are largely political rather than doctrinal, as the Reformation is a top-down affair beginning with Henry VIII's break with Rome in 1532. Not only does it place the King's power above that of the Church, it also contributes to a growing sense of England's independence from continental Europe, destroying old loyalties and forging new ones. While there were earlier attempts at Church reform and also earlier translations of the Bible, reading the Scriptures in English is now an important priority. The King James Bible (1611), the result of a collaborative translation project that is officially sanctioned by the king (and duly placed on the index of forbidden books by the Pope), is established as the authorised English version of Scripture; its impact on the development of modern English has often been compared to that of Shakespeare. Few people would doubt that the

King James Bible and the First Folio of Shakespeare's plays (1623) are the most influential books in the history of English (see Crystal 2010); to these should be added the Book of Common Prayer, first printed in 1549, which shaped the language of religious ritual in the English-speaking world and whose words are still spoken on weddings and funerals (Cummings 2011).

While Catholic pockets of resistance (particularly in the Northwest) are suppressed and fears of Catholic acts of terror against England's Protestant monarchs are widespread (and not always unjustified), more radical Protestants – often known as 'puritans' – demand further changes in religious practices. Once under way, the process of Reformation is difficult to stop. Under Elizabeth, there is increased pressure on believers to conform to established Protestant teaching, as laid down in the Thirty-nine Articles of 1563. So-called dissenters or nonconformists are forbidden to hold public office or take university degrees, as are Catholics. Tensions between moderate and radical Protestants continue to rise during the Stuart dynasty and finally erupt in the English Civil War (1642–1651), sometimes now referred to as the Wars of the Three Kingdoms. Religious change is an extremely important part of public and private life in this period; it is a source of controversy not only among and about the clergy, but also about politics, freedom, sexuality and gender. It also affects theatrical entertainment, a frequent target of Puritan criticism and abuse (Barish 1981, Lake and Questier 2002). Religion also leaves its imprint on literary genres such as biography and autobiography, and on many texts discussed in this volume (↗ 7 Literature and Religion, ↗ 5 Life-Writing, ↗ 12 William Baldwin, *Beware the Cat*, ↗ 32 John Milton, *Paradise Lost*; for a historical overview of the Reformation in England, see Duffy 2005, King 2004, Marshall 2012).

As the historian G. R. Elton argued already in the 1950s, the English Renaissance is not "a profound break with the past" but a "general shift of emphasis" (1974, 111), especially in the field of religion. Even before the Reformation, European thinkers question traditional Church doctrine and habits of philosophical disputation known as scholasticism, frequently urging a return to the Church Fathers and the text of the Bible for orientation, but also reading Greek and Latin classics. These so-called humanists, most notably Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466–1536), love to quarrel with each other intellectually across national boundaries, using Latin as their common language. University-educated, these men often take up government positions, like Thomas More (1478–1535), who is raised to the office of lord chancellor under Henry VIII and famously loses his life when the Reformation turns from "carefree playing with ideas" to deadly seriousness (Elton 113; ↗ 11 Thomas More, *Utopia*).

Scholars and intellectuals like More, such as John Colet (1467–1519), William Grocyn (1446–1519), Thomas Linacre (c. 1460–1524), and Thomas Elyot (c. 1490–1546) maintain close contacts with continental humanists and ensure England's place in a scholarly community. Early scientists and other artists also keep in touch with developments abroad, as do many writers whose primary careers are in

politics, warfare or diplomacy, including Sidney (↗ 15 Philip Sidney, *The Two Arcadias*), Donne (↗ 27 John Donne, *Songs and Sonnets*), and Milton (↗ 32 John Milton, *Paradise Lost*). At least for young men from the higher ranks of society, neighbouring nations like Spain, Germany or Italy are not mere abstractions but places they have visited and seen with their own eyes, even though travel is still considered a burden rather than a luxury in this period (see Hadfield 2009). Likewise, Renaissance London is far from ethnically and linguistically homogeneous but harbours many immigrants and is also frequently visited by tourists (Picard 2003, 123–37). Shakespeare, for example, is known to have lived for a while in the London house of a family of Huguenots expelled from France (Nicholl 2007). (↗ 6 England and its Others)

Early modern English interests abroad focus on trade routes. Henry VII sponsors the voyage of John Cabot (c. 1451–c. 1498) to look for a Northwest passage to the Indies, which leads to the discovery of Newfoundland in 1497. However, there is little official support for exploration in England, compared to Spain or Portugal, until the late sixteenth century, when Martin Frobisher (c. 1535–1594) sails to the Americas and Francis Drake (1540–1596) circumnavigates the globe. But the so-called New World and its possibilities were certainly much discussed at the time. More's *Utopia* (1516) presents an early literary response to the expansion of the earth's geography and to the concept of colonisation: the Utopians, who live on an island off the coast of South America, establish colonies in the countries of their neighbours (↗ 11 Thomas More, *Utopia*). In the late sixteenth century, increasing rivalry with Spain makes the Elizabethans more enthusiastic about exploration. Fortune-hunters dream of the unimaginable riches of El Dorado, supposedly hidden by a 'golden king' somewhere in the northern parts of South America. In pursuit of this legend, Walter Raleigh (1554–1618) repeatedly sails to the Americas from 1583 onwards, failing to find anything, and is later executed for his pains. The first English settlement in North America is established in Virginia – named after Elizabeth, the Virgin Queen – a year later. However, this and a subsequent attempt at establishing a colony fail, frustrating English expectations of "their perceived cultural superiority" (Hadfield 2001, 28). Under King James I, the American colony becomes viable after the foundation of Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607; in 1620, it offers the possibility of a new beginning for the group of disgruntled puritans known as the Pilgrim Fathers who set sail for New England on the *Mayflower*.

Early colonialism also leaves its traces in Renaissance literature: for instance, Spenser mentions "diuine Tobacco", a sensational import from the New World that is used as a healing herb in his *Faerie Queene* (3.5.32). He also lists Peru, the Amazon, and Virginia in the proem to book 2, claiming somewhat hyperbolically that, before they were discovered, these amazing territories would have been met with the same disbelief as his fictional setting (↗ 17 Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*). Incipient imperial ambitions are quickly translated into a more domestic and literary agenda, closer to home, sometimes even intimately so: in one of

Donne's elegies, for example, the naked body of a lover is addressed as "Oh my America, my newfound land, /My kingdome, safelyest when with one man man'd" (Donne 2000, ll. 27–28). By means of poetic metaphor, global aspirations can with surprising ease be mapped onto very local, even erotic, exertions. They add pathos and weight to such mundane, perhaps rather trivial concerns as undressing before going to bed, but at the same time they deflate imperial ambitions, adding a dose of irony that targets perhaps both Raleigh-style expeditions to the Amazon and a particular masculine/adolescent attitude to women (↗ 27 John Donne, *Songs and Sonnets*). Taking into account that the name of the best-known Elizabethan playhouse is "The Globe", and that Shakespeare and other dramatists love to pun on the name's implications, one realises that this union of the global and the local, the imperial and the provincial, the intimate and the political may be a key to understanding the thematic scope and the cognitive functions of English Renaissance literature. Poetry, drama, and prose offer new ways of reflecting and shaping a word that is expanding both externally, in the reach of global exploration, and internally, in the world-making activities of minds and texts (↗ 3 New Ways of Worldmaking).

2 Renaissance Literature and Literary Culture

The flourishing of literature and the arts in the English Renaissance is closely connected to the diffusion of humanist ideals of education in the classics, in rhetoric, and in modern languages (see Carroll 1996). Influential new schools founded in the second half of the sixteenth century, such as the Merchant Taylors, Rugby and Harrow provide a secular education that can continue at Oxford or Cambridge, or at London's newly founded Gresham College (1596). Studying law at the Inns of Court is another professional opportunity. The new ideal of the gentleman – in contrast to the priest or the knight – designated an accomplished person who had acquired useful skills in speech and writing, but also in mathematics, law, versifying, and dancing, a person who was well-trained to serve the state in an administrative capacity. This ideal was codified in educational treatises such as Elyot's *The Boke named the Governour* (1531) and Roger Ascham's (1515–1568) *The Scholemaster* (1570). The humanist method of education favours classical learning, frequently turning to examples from Greek and Roman mythology or history to illustrate the virtues needed by rulers and administrators; it strongly promotes the active study of classical rhetoric, first based on Cicero and later, in the early seventeenth century, on Seneca and Tacitus.

Literary composition, from the perspective of students, grows almost naturally out of debating exercises, Latin translation, and the reading of Latin and (more rarely) Greek poetry and historiography. Being trained in such models helps writers of all kinds, from historians to poets and dramatists, because it provides them with

a shared set of basic techniques and stories, giving rise to new works based on familiar models and ideals. It is important to note that the modern category of 'literature' as imaginative writing or *belles lettres* had not been established yet, so there is much fluidity and flexibility in the concept of 'literature' in the English Renaissance. One tends to focus retrospectively on poetry, drama, and prose fiction as the three major kinds of literature, but the actual practices of literary writing are much less strictly confined to these kinds. It makes more sense to treat the word 'literature' in the Renaissance as denoting a practice or skill set rather than a particular body of texts. In his Italian-English dictionary of 1598, John Florio (1553–1625) glosses the Italian word *letteratura* in English as "learning, knowledge in letters, lore, cunning" (Hattaway 2005: 7–8). About thirty years later, Ben Jonson (1572–1637) uses the word "literature" in the sense of education or "familiarity with letters or books" (*OED*, s. v. "literature").¹ Such "knowledge in letters" denotes a basic reading competence but also a familiarity with, or cultivation in, a wide variety of forms and genres.

The introduction of printing into England by William Caxton (c. 1415/20–1491) in 1476 does not considerably change this. It does, however, create a market for printed books and the profession of the publisher, who is often an author and critic at the same time. Caxton and his successor, Wynkyn de Worde (d. 1534/5), run a printing house near London's Westminster Abbey for some twenty years that publishes more than a hundred books. Caxton's activity as a printer-publisher is vital in securing a canon of Middle English poetry by making the works of Chaucer, John Gower (d. 1408), and John Lydgate (c. 1370–c. 1450) more widely available (Gillespie 2006). Next to religious and didactic works, he also prints more entertaining material such as Thomas Malory's (d. 1471) Arthurian narrative *Le Morte Darthur*. Many medieval texts that were only available in a few manuscript copies can now be read for the first time in print by a much wider readership. Chaucer in particular is hailed by sixteenth-century writers as the "English Homer" (Gillespie 2016: 70); without printing, this particular 'renaissance' of Middle English poets would probably not have occurred, and their influence on Spenser, Shakespeare, and others would be much less considerable (see Cooper 2014, Coldiron 2015).

The literary culture of Renaissance England is thus best described not as a "parade of authors" (St Clair 2012, 3) competing with one another at the same time and in the same place but as a complex interaction of writers past and present, characterised by the fluid coexistence of different forms of writing, reading, and publishing in manuscript and print. While the mapping of all of these forms would go beyond the possibilities of this introduction, or indeed this handbook, I will

¹ Jonson, "The Dedication to the Reader", *The New Inn* (1631): "would I had been at the charge of thy better literature" (Jonson 2000: 332). According to the *OED*, the first attested use of the word "literature" in English dates from 1450 and is in this sense; the later sense "result or product of literary activity" enters the language in the early eighteenth century, and the sense "printed matter of any kind" in the mid-nineteenth century.

attempt to provide a brief and somewhat schematic overview here, focusing on genres, varieties of performance, audiences, and institutions.

If literature in the Renaissance is understood as a skill set rather than a particular kind of writing, it can exist in a wide variety of forms of social interaction and public life. Being a writer is not yet considered a profession or a way of making a living (this only begins to change in the eighteenth century); publication does not usually entail a financial reward for the author. (Drama is something of an exception to this rule.) Also, there are not yet any professional readers of literature, no critics or literary journals. Non-dramatic authorship, i.e. the writing of history, poetry or narrative fiction is in most cases a matter of prestige rather than profit. Writers may rely on income from other sources; they may have independent means, be a member of the nobility, hold public office or serve in a noble household, or they may hope for a gift from a noble and/or important patron. Literature is thus part of an early modern gift economy, based not on profit but on honour, respect, and mutual benefits (see Fumerton 1991, Scott 2006, Heal 2014) – hence the numerous and often lengthy dedicatory epistles prefixed to many Renaissance publications in which authors heap lavish praise on their patrons (see Fitch Lytle and Orgel 1981).

A more commercial world appears in the sphere of drama, which is part of an early form of ‘entertainment industry’ run on the capitalist principle of making money. The public playhouses in London, built in the late sixteenth century, have to attract large numbers of paying customers instead of pleasing a single patron. In their design, they revive the Greek and Roman amphitheatre, but they are run strictly on business principles.² Professional writers for the stage, most of them university-trained, have to produce successful plays in quick succession. Theatre companies buy plays from their authors for a handsome fee, but authors then no longer own their plays and usually do not receive any performance royalties; this begins to change only later in the seventeenth century (Loewenstein 2002, 7 4 Theatre and Drama).

Generally speaking, copyright is a fairly new concept in this period. It is not designed to secure an income for writers but to secure the rights of printers in their copy. These rights are administered by the printers’ and booksellers’ guild, the Worshipful Company of Stationers, formed in 1403 and incorporated in 1557. The Stationers’ Company (as it is usually known) holds a monopoly on book production, since no book can be officially printed without its permission. The Company keeps a record book in which, for a small fee, booksellers can register their right to publish a text. This register is one of the most important documents for Renaissance literary history, especially drama, because relatively few dramatic texts have

survived, and the Stationers’ Register is often the only source for titles and dates of printed plays (7 4 Theatre and Drama).

Literary culture in the English Renaissance is thus marked by a wide variety of forms of authorship, kinds of writing, and occasions for reading. Whereas drama is primarily written for performance – either in a public playhouse or at court, or both – it can also be enjoyed more privately in print. Poetry and narrative fiction are still circulating in manuscripts, a practice that continues into the eighteenth century, but they are also frequently printed. Modern readers tend to assume that manuscripts are handwritten drafts, a preliminary stage on the way to the printed version, but Renaissance literary manuscripts are often highly finished, beautiful and legible products. The scribal copy has to be considered as a form of publication in its own right. Authorial drafts or notes have usually not been preserved, and a large number of literary manuscripts from the English Renaissance are the product of professional scribes (Love 1993, Marotti 1995). As Henry Woudhuysen notes in his study of Sir Philip Sidney, “the commercial production of manuscripts advanced rapidly in the 1620s” (1996, 8). Furthermore, the direction is not always from manuscript into print, but also from print “back into manuscript” (1996, 25), as is frequently the case with suppressed books or “favourite poems, speeches, or letters [. . .] extracted for private use” (ibid.).

Manuscripts and printed texts can have different audiences and different purposes: manuscripts are less regulated, less subject to official control than the print market, so they allow greater liberties of expression and a more personal taste. When writers circulate their work among a group of friends or peers, they have greater control over their audience and can interact more closely with their readers. Such ‘coterie poetry’, as it is often called (Marotti 1986; Summers/Pebworth 2000, 1), also serves to establish and maintain bonds of friendship and political allegiance. While professional poets prefer print, practices of patronage (writing for, and sometimes to, a patron on a higher rung on the social ladder) and coterie (writing for and to one’s peer group) are more likely to remain in manuscript. Such practices imply more localised functions for poetry (and other texts) and esoteric dimensions of meaning that may not be available for readers outside this particular group or network – meanings that may be difficult to reconstruct. These can range from inside jokes to sensitive and serious personal or political communications. Literary writing can thus be a powerful tool for social and personal interaction. Many poets including Donne and Shakespeare probably wrote their lyrics on folded sheets of paper or bifolia to be included in a letter to their patron (Warkentin 1980; Marotti 1990, 147).

Readers also frequently copy texts, often poems or parts of poems, from manuscripts or printed versions, into personal commonplace books, collections of memorable and quotable phrases, sometimes in collaboration with family members. This practice of ‘social authorship’ (Ezell 1999) survives into the eighteenth century. Some poems thus exist in numerous manuscript versions in several hands with

² Although it is frequently claimed that the term ‘box office’ derives from the early modern playhouse, it is not documented in the *OED* before the late eighteenth century.

many textual variants, and possibly in additional printed versions, making it difficult to establish any final or authorised form. Perhaps the best-known editorial project attempting to transcribe and collate all extant versions of an English Renaissance poet's work is the *Donne Variorum*, a project begun in the 1980s (see digitaldonne.tamu.edu). Donne's poetry circulated in multiple manuscript copies in his lifetime; individual poems by Donne exist in some 4,000 seventeenth-century manuscript copies, only one of which is an autograph (McKenzie 2002, 245).

One of the most important manuscript collections of poems, transcribed by several hands, is the *Devonshire Manuscript* (BL MS Add. 17492) dating from the 1530s and early 1540s. At the Tudor court, a group of men and women contributed to this miscellany containing almost 200 items, most of them love lyrics attributed to Thomas Wyatt. It offers a glimpse of literary production as a form of social interaction and a complex negotiation of public and private interests, since the contributors to this miscellany were male and female members of the early modern aristocracy who communicated about their amorous relationships by the indirect means of transcribing lyric poems (see Siemens et al. 2014). It also has connections to other contemporary manuscripts, most notably *Arundel Harington and Egerton 2711*. When the printer Richard Tottel imitates the form of the verse miscellany in print in 1557, he opens up this courtly pursuit for a wider readership, testing and proving the commercial possibilities of publishing poetry in English (↗ 13 Richard Tottel, *Songes and Sonettes*). This paves the way for an increasing popularity of poetry on the print market, including work by women poets such as Isabella Whitney (fl. 1566–1573) and Aemilia Lanyer (1569–1645) (see Clarke 2000, ↗ 24 Aemilia Lanyer, "The Description of Cooke-ham"), and early bestsellers such as Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* (1593) (see Kesson and Smith 2013).

Older literary histories rarely include women in their discussion of the English Renaissance, leading one critic to ask whether women even 'had a Renaissance' at all (Kelly 1977, cf. Wiesner-Hanks 2008). Fortunately, this has changed, and even though the majority of writing in this period is by men – for historical reasons – there is now a solid basis of research on the diverse roles of women as writers, readers and patrons in the English Renaissance (↗ 5 *Life-Writing* ↗ 8 *Renaissance Englishwomen*, ↗ 24 Aemilia Lanyer, "The Description of Cooke-ham", ↗ 27 Margaret Cavendish, *Poems, and Fancies*).

In manuscript, print, and performance, literature in English emerges as a strong cultural presence in this period, for elite as well as popular audiences. The precise nature and extent of its cultural impact, however, are defined by and in different institutions and social contexts: in private circles, in schools and universities, in legal training, at court, or in the playhouse. This is why the next section will take a closer look at literary genres across different audiences and institutions.

3 Literary Genres, Audiences, and Institutions

The media differences between manuscript and print, as well as between written or printed texts and plays performed on stage, should alert us to the ways in which English Renaissance literature is multiple and mutable, determined by a variety of social, institutional, genre, and media contexts. A traditional focus on a few masterpieces, considered timeless and of universal appeal, streamlines this complexity into a distorted image defined by an orderly "Elizabethan world picture" (Tillyard 1943), predating the "dissociation of sensibility" that T. S. Eliot (1951 [1921]) diagnosed as the malady of modernity. Older histories of English literature (e.g. Bush 1962) usually discuss the historical "background of the age" separately from individual works or genres, and they rarely ever question the concept of literature. As with any period of history, the reality is probably messier and more multifarious. When writing about the Renaissance, it is certainly possible to overemphasize either stability or change. In the 1980s and 1990s, the *New Historicism* and *Cultural Materialism* certainly emphasised the latter when they brought history and political context back to the study and teaching of Renaissance literature, leading to a wide-ranging reappraisal of the period (see Fernie et al. 2005 for a useful overview). Since then, it has become the norm to interpret literary texts in close connection to historical context rather than seeing them as timeless works of universal appeal. More recent approaches offer reconceptualisations that are frequently based on current topical interests ranging – to name but a few – from materialism (de Grazia, Quilligan and Stallybrass 1996) to cognitive literary criticism (Kinney 2006), queer studies (Nardizzi, Guy-Bray and Stockton 2009), and posthumanism (Campana and Maisano 2016). Importantly, scholars have also been reconsidering the material aspects of writing and textuality, and the social significance of "textual engagements" between authors, books and readers (Andersen and Sauer 2002, Saenger 2006). Even the same historical reader's response to the same text can be markedly distinct in different situations over time and for different purposes, as Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine (1990) showed in a much-noted essay on Gabriel Harvey's (1552/3–1631) successive readings of the Roman historian Livy.

It is no surprise, then, to see that Renaissance writers also enjoy some flexibility in applying "the resources of kind" (Colie 1973), frequently demonstrating an open mind in experimenting with different genres, combining and mixing as occasion allows or demands. This is certainly the case with dramatists, who have to please audiences hungry for variety and caring little for genre boundaries or classical rules. The boundaries between comedy and tragedy are notoriously fuzzy in the period, even though the labels are often applied in announcing and advertising plays (as they are in the *First Folio* of Shakespeare in 1623). A hybrid of the two, tragicomedy, is increasingly successful in the first half of the seventeenth century and dominates the stage until the closure of the theatres in 1642.

Even the most prestigious of literary genres, the epic poem, allows for some experiment with both form and content. Epic poets have a choice between blank verse and rhyme; they use pseudo-medieval archaic expressions (Spenser), Latinate syntax (Milton) or the five-act structure of classical drama (William Davenant); they can write about Faeryland as an allegory of Elizabethan England and/or Ireland (Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*), about the history of the early medieval Lombards (Davenant's *Gondibert*), or about the Christian story of creation and the Fall of Man (Milton's *Paradise Lost*; ↗ 17 Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ↗ 32 John Milton, *Paradise Lost*).

New forms are also introduced in lyric poetry: the sonnet, for example, is not part of the classical heritage but a medieval innovation originating in the kingdom of Sicily in the thirteenth century. After a few false starts and a first flourishing at the court of Henry VIII, there was a veritable sonnet mania in England in the late sixteenth century, when the sonnet sequence or cycle came into fashion: Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*, Michael Drayton's *Idea*, Spenser's *Amoretti* all date from the 1580s and 1590s. Once again, it is easy to overemphasize the dependence of Renaissance literature on classical tradition and to neglect its innovative spirit (↗ 22 *Shakespeare's Sonnets*). Another innovation in the lyric is the genre of the country-house poem, a poem that celebrates the country residence of a patron (e.g. Ben Jonson's "To Penshurst"; ↗ 24 Aemilia Lanyer, "The Description of Cookeham"; ↗ 29 Andrew Marvell, *Upon Appleton House*).

English Renaissance literature, thus, is characterised by an admiration of classical tradition *as well as* a love of innovation and experiment. It encompasses a wide range of forms and genres for a wide range of audiences from different social and educational backgrounds: from the cheap printed chapbook to the presentation copy of a manuscript made by a professional scribe; from poems sent in letters and transcribed into commonplace books to printed anthologies; from plays performed on the public stage to plays in print. It is also characterised by a multiplicity of media (manuscript, print, performance) for the creation, production, distribution, and reception of literature, as well as by a wide variety of purposes and functions of writing and reading, from ephemeral entertainment to political advice, from the sheer enjoyment of verbal skills to the propagation of learning and wisdom.

Both print and commercial theatre are 'new media' in the period, propagating social and cultural change as much as reflecting it. The public playhouse is the most exposed of these forms, and therefore the one cultural institution (paradoxically both marginal and central) to come most frequently under attack for allegedly undermining public morality and inciting 'licentious' behaviour (cf. Mullaney 1988, Ruge 2011). Dramatists include this conflict in their plays, making self-styled puritans the butt of bitter jokes to reveal their bigotry, as Shakespeare does with the steward Malvolio in *Twelfth Night* (1601) and Jonson with Zeal-of-the-Land Busy in *Bartholomew Fair* (1614). The puritans, of course, have their sights on such 'immoral' practices as cross-dressing, which they think incites 'sodomy' or homosexuality. But the playwrights

gain the upper hand, not least by their self-deprecating wit, which just as frequently satirises poets as madmen and poetry as a form of lunacy. As Theseus explains in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (c. 1596), "The lunatic, the lover, and the poet / Are of imagination all compact" (5.1.7–8). Similarly, Justice Overdo in *Bartholomew Fair* calls poetry a "terrible taint" and an "idle disease" (3.5.5–6, Jonson 1995, 378) that will ruin a young man's reputation as a citizen.

Such – occasionally provocative, often self-reflexive and ironic – kinds of writing, then as now, need to be defended against the reproach of being a waste of time or, worse, an offence against moral values. The most famous of these defences from the English Renaissance is an essay by the courtier-poet Philip Sidney, alternatively titled *An Apology for Poetry* or *The Defence of Poesy* (c. 1580, printed 1595); like many Renaissance texts, it exists in more than one version. This is not the place to present Sidney's argument in full, but its main point is that imaginative writing offers "delightful teaching" (Alexander 2004, 12), a combination of seriousness or usefulness with pleasure. This idea is yet another revival of the classics, taken from a famous line by the Roman poet Horace (65–8 BCE): "Aut prodesse volunt aut delectare poetae" (Horace n. d., l. 333), translated by Jonson as: "Poets would either profit, or delight, / Or, mixing sweet and fit, teach life the right" (Alexander 2004, 306).³ In accordance with this maxim, Sidney holds that poetry – or rather, fiction more generally, including drama – is both useful and a source of pleasure. It educates readers not in the form of abstract propositions but in the form of concrete examples, by telling stories that offer vivid illustrations of philosophical questions and moral principles (Alexander 2004, 23). Sidney is of course not the only writer of the period to argue along these lines: beside his treatise, there are, among others, George Puttenham's (1529–1590/91) *The Art of English Poesy* (1589), John Harington's (c. 1560–1612) *Brief Apology of Poetry* (1591), Samuel Daniel's (1562/3–1619) *A Defence of Rhyme* (1603). Another text of this kind, William Scott's (d. 1617) *The Model of Poesy* (1599), has recently been rediscovered (2013) (↗ 9 Rhetoric and Literary Theory). At a time when puritans in particular openly attack and revile the theatre as a hotbed of sin and depravity, there is demand for justifications of the morality and usefulness of poetry (including plays), but also for assertions of its pleasure. One possible reading of this assertion of "delight" is to regard it as a strategy to preserve aristocratic privilege against the rising 'new men' in the administration of the state, who are marked by humanistic seriousness (Matz 2000, 17–22; Habib 2005, 260). But similar assertions can also be found on the popular stage: the social climber Malvolio in *Twelfth Night* is castigated for his puritanism by Sir Toby Belch: "Dost thou think because thou art virtuous there shall be no

³ Jonson, the most accomplished classicist among English Renaissance dramatists, also quotes this phrase in the second prologue to *Epicene*: "The ends of all who for the scene do write / Are, or should be, to profit and delight" (Jonson 1995, 122).

more cakes and ale?" (2.3.98–99), implying that there is virtue also in the simple pleasures of life. Indeed, *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue* is the eloquent title of one of Jonson's court masques (1618).⁴

Renaissance drama is usually more than mere entertainment; literary theory more than a merely academic pursuit; and love poetry often about many other things beside love (cf. Marotti 1982). All of these kinds of writing offer concrete forms of "textual engagement" (Saenger 2006) among different social groups and political persuasions. They also have public and social functions, before the emergence of a more unified public sphere in the eighteenth century (Habermas 1962). Their purpose may be to assert the legitimacy and cultural authority of an institution, such as the court, or to praise an individual (e.g. in the mode of panegyric, a poem of praise), or to educate a gentleman or woman⁵; but sometimes it can also be to criticise individuals or groups. Literature in the English Renaissance is often considered offensive, and writers (especially dramatists) are regularly imprisoned, fined, or subjected to torture (Dutton 2000).

Whatever the Elizabethans and Jacobean thought about literature, they did not think of it as "a sharply defined and autonomous realm of written objects that possess an 'aesthetic' character and value" (McKeon 1987, 36). This modern definition of literature is an anachronism. For most writers and readers back then, the aesthetic is not safely cordoned off from other ways of looking at or engaging with the world, but very much in the world and of it. Consequently, an exclusive focus on texts that, in retrospect, are compatible with modern categories and definitions of literature as *belles lettres*, as aesthetic objects or works of fiction, will distort a historical understanding of Renaissance literature. Nevertheless, many Renaissance poems and plays have contributed to the formation of 'literature' in the modern sense and have become canonic examples of it, first and foremost Shakespeare. Any serious discussion has to take into account this duality: between the text as embedded in its original context(s) and the text as part of a longer history of transmission through reading, editing, and teaching, sometimes also translation and adaptation. This handbook seeks a compromise between these positions. While its principal aim is to discuss and explain texts in their original contexts, it combines readings of well-known and frequently studied texts with some that have received far less attention but that serve to offer a more varied and complex picture.

⁴ The masque is an elaborate and costly theatrical performance in a noble household or at court, involving members of the court or family as performers (↗ 28 Thomas Carew and Inigo Jones, *Coelum Britannicum*).

⁵ For example, Spenser states in his letter to Raleigh that the overall purpose of *The Faerie Queene* "is to fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline" (2013, 714). Many of Shakespeare's sonnets to the young man also strike a didactic note. Aemilla Lanier addresses "all virtuous Ladies and Gentlewomen of this kingdome" (*Salve Deus Rex Iudæorum* [1611], "To the Vertuous Reader", Clarke 2000, 228).

A final note on Shakespeare: unlike any earlier or later period in English studies, the Renaissance is dominated in both research and teaching by this towering figure. This is both boon and bane: his global presence secures an enduring interest in the field, but the attention paid to him also tends to eclipse most, if not all, other writers of the period. It would be foolish to speak about the English Renaissance without Shakespeare, but it would be equally wrong to centre this period exclusively around him, as 'the age of Shakespeare.' Students and teachers are very well served by entire shelves of excellent specialised Shakespeare handbooks, which this one cannot and does not wish to replace. Therefore, while not ignoring him, the focus of this book expands far beyond him in an attempt to capture the rich variety of English Renaissance literature, to introduce current perspectives of research, and to open up possibilities of further enquiry for all students and readers interested in this exciting period.

4 Useful Resources

For scholars and students of English Renaissance literature, there is a large number of introductions and guides for research, both in print and online; many new studies are published each year. Many university libraries also provide access to a wealth of digital resources on the period that are regularly updated. Knowing that this list will be quickly superseded, I would nevertheless like to recommend a few books and essential websites.

General

There are a number of handbooks (beside this one) that may be useful: *The Oxford Handbook of Tudor Literature*, ed. Mike Pincombe and Cathy Shrank (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009) covers the earlier part of the period, but there is no companion piece for Stuart literature (at the time of writing). *The Renaissance Literature Handbook* by Susan Bruce and Rebecca Steinberger (London/New York: Continuum, 2009) is oriented more towards teaching, with useful chapters on 'key critical concepts and topics' and 'key theoretical and critical texts.' Michael Hebron's *Key Concepts in Renaissance Literature* (Houndmills/New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) has short entries on many of these. Michael Hattaway's *New Companion to English Renaissance Literature and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2010) has a wider scope and ambition. As an introductory monograph, I would recommend Andrew Hadfield's *The English Renaissance 1500–1620* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001).

Early English Books Online (www.eebo.chadwyck.com) is a searchable collection of digital facsimiles of (almost) all works printed in England between 1473 and

1700. *British Literary Manuscripts Online, Medieval and Renaissance* (www.gale.com) offers a selection of facsimiles otherwise only accessible in research libraries and archives. Next to the British Library and the Bodleian Library at Oxford, the most important research libraries for English Renaissance literature are the Huntington Library in San Marino, California, and the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D. C.

Biographies

The *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* has many detailed entries on English writers and other historical figures, written by specialists and regularly updated. This information is more detailed and reliable than Wikipedia. Online: oxforddnb.com

Drama

There are a couple of good anthologies offering plays by Shakespeare's contemporaries: *English Renaissance Drama*, ed. David Bevington (New York: Norton, 2002) and *Renaissance Drama: An Anthology of Plays and Entertainments*, ed. Arthur F. Kinney (2nd ed. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005). The richly annotated *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson* (2012) shows the full scope of Jonson's achievement.

Poetry

The Penguin Book of Renaissance Verse 1509–1659, by David Norbrook and H. R. Woudhuysen (1993, reissued 2005) is by far the best selection of lyric poems from the period. Most of the major and some of the minor poets are available in critical scholarly editions. The most challenging of these editions is *The Donne Variorum*; see digitaldonne.tamu.edu. One of the most interesting digital humanities projects in the field is Ray Siemens's 'social edition' of the Devonshire Manuscript: en.wikibooks.org/wiki/The_Devonshire_Manuscript.

Prose

Andrew Hadfield's *Oxford Handbook of English Prose 1500–1640* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013) should satisfy most requirements in this area. There are representative collections of Elizabethan and seventeenth-century prose fiction in the Oxford World's Classics series.

Shakespeare

Andrew Dickson's *Globe Guide to Shakespeare* (London: Profile Books, 2016) is among the best recent catch-all reference books. The *Norton Shakespeare* (New York: Norton, 2015) offers the complete works in an affordable annotated edition, now in its third incarnation. The current state of textual scholarship is represented in the *New Oxford Shakespeare* (2016–17). Unless otherwise stated, all quotations from Shakespeare's plays in this handbook are keyed to this edition, including references to the chronology of the plays, but preserving act and scene divisions in those cases where the *New Oxford Shakespeare* opts for scene divisions only. For Shakespeare's poetry, I recommend *The Complete Sonnets and Poems*, edited by Colin Burrow (Oxford: World's Classics, 2002). Russ McDonald's *Bedford Companion to Shakespeare: An Introduction with Documents* (2nd ed. Boston/New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001) offers many extracts from historical documents that are useful for gaining a deeper understanding of the English Renaissance.

Textual editing and manuscript studies

David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery: *An Introduction to Book History* (Routledge, 2012) and *The Book History Reader* (2nd ed. Routledge, 2006) are useful starting points. The standard textbook is still D. C. Greetham, *Textual Scholarship: An Introduction* (New York/London: Garland, 1994). More specialised is Michael Hunter, *Editing Early Modern Texts: An Introduction to Principles and Practice* (Houndmills/New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). (↗ 1 Editing English Renaissance Texts)

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