Duke Humphrey of Gloucester in the eyes of posterity: Lancastrian rule and Tudor propaganda

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Writing in 1879, the Italian scholar Attilio Hortis thus summarized the personality of Duke Humphrey of Gloucester: “Tra’ principi d’Inghilterra il più dotto e in una il più allegro e il più popolare era certamente Umfredo duca di Gloucester,” adding that “il duca era stato per l’Inghilterra una disgrazia, per il rinascimento della letteratura un beneficio” (642, 643). Thus the Duke continues to present a puzzle to historians, though the puzzle may reside more in the widely divergent effects of his double activity than in his cultural and ideological perspective. The present article examines the survival of Humphrey’s memory in late-fifteenth- and sixteenth-century writers, analysing the role of political or religious propaganda in the representation of his personality and role.

Born in 1390, Humphrey was the youngest son of King Henry IV and the brother of Henry V; he loved to style himself “son, brother and uncle of kings.” In 1422, after Henry V’s death, Humphrey found himself, together with the other surviving brother, John Duke of Bedford, holding the throne of France and England for the new king, then nine months old. In spite of internal dissension and controversy, the King’s Council managed to hold the double reign and hand it intact to the new king, showing a determination that effectively delayed, though it could not avert, the eventual loss of the French possessions. Humphrey’s role, however, was perpetually defining itself against the opposing claims of the Council. The Duke’s temper did not help him in this contingency: hot-headed and impetuous, but often
lacking constancy, he found himself unable to sustain prolonged political or military efforts, or to cultivate long-term projects. On the other hand, there is no doubt about either his loyalty to the young Prince of Wales or his determination to pursue the goals of his kingly brother, especially as concerned England’s foreign policy. His role as Protector ended in 1429, with the King’s coronation: at this point he found himself progressively marginalized, and ever more disillusioned with political life and the affairs of state. As his rivals, particularly Queen Margaret and her powerful counsellor, the Earl of Suffolk, were in the ascendant, and gained more influence with the king, Humphrey retired to his house in Greenwich and there dedicated time and energy to his other great passion, books. His death, in 1447, has never been fully explained: faced with a sudden accusation of high treason and deprived of any support, he died within a few days, giving rise to speculations on the role of the King and acting as a catalyst of the growing dissension against Henry VI.

The century following Humphrey’s death has transmitted to us an image of “the Good Duke” that modern historiography may find misleading, and that certainly does not sort well with the portrait offered by Roberto Weiss in his now classical work on the rise of English humanism. Weiss may be credited with being the first who highlighted the role of Humphrey in Anglo-Italian cultural relations in the early fifteenth century. His Burckhardtian vision of Italian humanism, skewed as it may have been, helped him understand and underline Humphrey’s role as a patron: if Italian humanists “had sedulously fostered a belief that their art and it alone could confer immediate honour and an undying reputation on the patrons in whose service it was employed” (40), then apparently Humphrey was quick in taking up the challenge, not only because of a desire for panegyric, but also “as a result of a very subtle estimate of his political prospects” (41). For the following generations of students of English humanism, Weiss’s portrait of Duke Humphrey has been a scholarly challenge; but from the historian’s point of view, the Duke’s estimate of his prospects cannot have been so subtle. In spite of the opportunity offered by Henry V’s untimely death and by the requirements of the double crown, his political career seems to have been initially chequered and finally disastrous. Weiss keeps the two sides of Humphrey’s personality, the politician and the scholar/patron, carefully separate, conveniently forgetting his public role and, at the same time, offering a surprising overestimate of his role as a patron: while on the same level as Alfonso V of Spain or Federigo da Montefeltro, Humphrey was,
Weiss writes, “alone among his peers in England to encourage learning” (69). The overstatement has had the effect of isolating Humphrey from contemporary English politics, and of projecting him on the European stage, almost separating the Italianate patron from the politician.

Few of Humphrey’s contemporaries would have recognised the portrait. Indeed, though in the course of his life there were numerous acknowledgements, mainly on the part of the writers, scholars or institutions he benefited, of his learning and patronage, the years immediately following his death saw his image undergo a metamorphosis. His role as a patron, or even as a proto-humanist, seems to have been quickly if temporarily forgotten, while the resonance of his death in political terms made many later scholars overlook his unsuccessful career as a politician. Humphrey’s death and its obscure circumstances had created a major sensation even at the time, and after the fall of the Lancasters they were quickly exploited for propaganda purposes by the York faction. Indeed, Kenneth Vickers may be right in saying that “the death of Humphrey was at the same time the death-blow to the House of Lancaster” (309). At the same time, the contradictions in the personality of the Duke, and his controversial relation with the King and the King’s council created a splintering of his memory into various facets, of which the Good Duke represents only one. His public and private personae were interlaced in public memory; Humphrey haunts Elizabethan drama and Ovidian epistles, appears as an improbable Wycliffite in Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments* and as a wise and elegant man of the world in Thomas More’s *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, and the various images occasionally clash and never seem to coalesce.

Contemporary testimonies describing Humphrey of Gloucester abound, from writers directly connected to him, such as Tito Livio Frulovisi (an Italian humanist and historian who worked as secretary to the Duke for a number of years), to more distant observers such as the Pastons, who mention the Duke in their letters (Davis II.22). His public role, together with the eccentricities of his private life, ensured a constant stream of records of his deeds. His own efforts at building a public persona are evident in the writings of the recipients of his patronage: from Frulovisi himself, who composed his eulogistic *Humfroidos* to celebrate his patron, as well as a *Vita Henrici Quinti* celebrating Humphrey’s brother, to the anonymous translator of Palladius’ *De Re Rustica* (dedicated to Humphrey), to John Lydgate, who worked under his protection and occasionally his direct instructions. In a memorable passage of his “Humanism before the
Tudors,” David Rundle interrogates the idea of Humphrey as a patron of writers who formed an intellectual circle by posing the question, “what [. . .] is a circle if not a figure nought?” (29). Rundle then notes that the Duke “did not stand at the cultural centre, presiding over the production of ‘his’ scholars; his patronage transcended mere details. For him, the political use of appearing a learned patron was the general, magnificent image it created; any particular commission would have limited political impact” (29). On the one hand, the facet of his personality that appears to be forgotten is his role as a proto-humanist and book collector. The dispersal of his library after his death was almost immediate, and so complete that the best record we have today of Humphrey’s intellectual interest is a list, not of the books he possessed, but of the ones he donated to the University of Oxford. In spite of the efforts of a number of scholars, from Alfonso Sammut to David Rundle, very little has been recovered; even our estimate of the size of the library can only be vague, as the most recent assessment notes that no more than 47 codices survive.³ His intention to donate his remaining Latin volumes to Oxford after his death was disregarded by his nephew, King Henry VI, who re-directed the books to his own new foundation, King’s College at Cambridge – though, as Rundle cogently argues, it is by no means certain that the new donation to King’s represented the entirety of the Duke’s library (“Lost Plutarch” online). It may be argued that the immediate seizure and disposal of the books might also have been meant as an effacement of their owner’s memory; the erasure of Humphrey’s ex-libris on some of the surviving manuscripts may be read in this light.

The books were certainly precious and left sometimes a long trail,⁴ occasionally longer than the memory of their association with the Duke. With the death of the major spokesman for Humphrey’s intellectual prominence and the English writer who was probably closest to him, John Lydgate, came also the end of the last generation of Lancastrian writers, and the second half of the fifteenth century would gravitate towards new political figures before the printing revolution came to challenge all previous ideas of patronage. So Humphrey does indeed seem a figure nought, as what may seem today his major role in late medieval English history was quickly forgotten.

On the other hand, his political personality acquired posthumous importance, and he was invested with a significance he did not seem to have in the last years of his life. If we accept this “emptiness” of Humphrey, this may in part explain the easiness with which, shortly after his death,
he was invested with roles that were perhaps alien to him, entering the Tudor literary world in a variety of guises. In part, this was due to events completely outside his control, such as the mysterious and sudden manner of his death, read by many, probably incorrectly, as a political murder. There is little doubt that his death and its circumstances acted as a powerful trigger for anti-Lancastrian sentiments; Humphrey found himself unwitting actor of events that could easily be played against the King, and the reaction was immediate. In one contemporary chronicle, indeed, the indictment of Humphrey is described not as treason against the King, but against the Duke (“A Short English Chronicle” 65). The very sobriquet of Good Duke may be linked to this: an anonymous poem written in the early 1460s uses it in connection with the image of the murder:

The good duc of Gloucestre, in the season  
Of the parlement at Bury beyng,  
Was put to dethe; and ay sithe gret mornyng  
Hathe ben in Ingeland, with many a scharp soure,  
Falshode, myschyef, secret synne upholdyng,  
Which hathe caused in Engeland endelez langoure.  
(“A Political Retrospect,” lines 35-40)

As Bertram Wolffe notes, “even though he was given this title by posterity principally as the opponent of the unsuccessful policies of Henry and his agents, this appellation does suggest qualities hoped for and revered in a prince of the blood, which were so conspicuously lacking in his nephew the king” (131-32). Popular verse defended the Duke’s image, and “in 1455 a petition formally declaring him to have been a loyal subject was presented by the Commons in the parliament which followed the duke of York’s victory at St Albans” (Harriss online).

What these reactions suggest is a construction of an idealized past, a nostalgia, evidently not based on what the Duke had been, but on what he represented: the memory of his brother, Henry V (something he had used to his own advantage in life, as Tito Livio Frulovisi’s writings show), but also the comparatively stable years of Henry VI’s minority (1422-29). In those years the King’s Council had governed not without internal dissension, but with outwardly apparent unity, managing to preserve a double crown that, once Henry VI became de facto king and married a French princess, became more and more precarious. Significantly, the tide of popular opinion, driven by anonymous political verses, veered in Humphrey’s favour in the 1450s,
when the rule of Henry VI encountered increasing criticism in the wake of John Cade’s rebellion, following the loss of Normandy and the return from Ireland of Richard, Duke of York (Watts 198).

The image of endelez langoure used in the passage quoted above expresses a feeling of hopelessness: it is as if the anonymous poet was celebrating the end of the Golden Age, an age of which Humphrey becomes the perfect representative as he becomes a symbol of the link between past and present. Even present-day historiography sometimes appears carried away in favour of the Duke: his indictment has generated comments such as, “it was a mortal blow that his years of loyalty and service were rewarded by such a despicable attack on his honour” (Wolffe 132). Ironically, after his death Humphrey could thus overcome not only his clumsiness in directing popular favour, but also his rigid and violent stance against religious dissenters. There is little doubt that political poems and chronicles tell us more about the age in which they were written and the audience they addressed than about the events they actually describe.

The Duke’s well-known matrimonial vagaries helped popular imagination to reconstruct a more personal, almost domestic vision of the Good Duke, and to bridge the gap between the public role and the private life of Humphrey. He had married Jacqueline of Hainault in 1423, possibly out of misplaced political calculation; Jacqueline had left her second husband, John IV of Brabant, in 1421, and sought refuge at the English court, where she had been made welcome. Her flight had been sanctioned by the Spanish antipope, Benedict XIII, who had declared a divorce. Humphrey may have seen a marriage with her as a means to annex the territories she had inherited at her father’s death – Hainault, Holland and Zealand – thus reinforcing England’s hold on the Continent. Political marriages were nothing new, of course; but in this case the issue was very contentious, and there was a strong possibility that the marriage would not be recognised.

In his poem on the approaching nuptials, therefore, John Lydgate had to exercise all his ingenuity to make this marriage appear inevitable, pre-ordained. The “knotte of allyaunce,” whether it concerns individuals or countries, finds its first cause in the stars (Lydgate, “On Gloucester’s Approaching Marriage,” st. 3); marriage comes from God and is a harbinger of peace, as shown by the marriage of Henry V with Katherine, and a host of classical examples is brought in for further validation. Revealingly, while Jacqueline is described as a lady as meek as Hester, as wise as Judith, as faithful as Dido (surely a dangerous comparison, in view of the
Duke’s subsequent behaviour) and as fair as Helen (again, one may suspect Lydgate of writing tongue-in-cheek here), any praise of the bridegroom focuses, somewhat inappropriately, on his intellectual achievements:

Slouth eschuwing, he dooþe his witt applye
To reede in bookis, wheeche þat beon moral,
In Hooly Writt with þe allegorye,
He him delyteþe to looke in specyal,
In vnderstonding is noone to him egal,
Of his estate expert in poetrye,
With parfounde feeling of phylosofye.
(Lydgate, “On Gloucester’s Approaching Marriage,” st. 21)

I have quoted the passage in its entirety because it seems to me proof that Humphrey was behind this effort, and dictated the terms of his self-presentation to Lydgate. The tone of the praise does not vary from equally eulogistic passages we find in The Fall of Princes, Lydgate’s most important work, dedicated to Humphrey and often referring to him in the paratextual sections; but it is of particular interest since it shows the attempt on the part of the Duke to construct his image, even making use of what was at the very least a controversial marriage. In so doing, Humphrey proposes a portrait of himself in which the personal and the political are strongly linked. It may be useful at this point to suggest a comparison with the prologue of the anonymous translation of Palladius’ De Re Rustica; a passage alludes to the circle of writers working in the shadow of Humphrey’s patronage:

For clergie, or knyghthod, or husbondrie,
That oratour, poete, or philosophre
Hath tretid, told, or taught, in memorie
Vche lef and lyne hath he, as shette in cofre;
Oon nouelte vnnethe is hym to profre.
Yit Whethamstede, and also Pers de Mounte,
Titus, and Anthony, and y laste ofre
And leest. Our newe is old in hym tacounte
But that his vertu list vs exercise,
And moo as fele as kan in vertu do.
He, sapient, is diligent to wise
Alle ignoraunt, and y am oon of tho.
He taught me metur make, and y soso
Hym counturfete, and hope, aftir my sorow,
In God and hym to glade; and aftir woo,
To ioy, and aftir nyght, to sey good morow.
(Liddell, Prohemium, ll. 97-112)\(^6\)

Here the emphasis is on the domestic gathering of scholars, but once again the representation veers towards the personal: as has been noted, though the acknowledgement of the patron’s intellectual superiority is conventional, the little vignette of Humphrey teaching metrics to his poet appears almost a shared joke (Everest-Phillips 105-06). Once more, it is not necessary to take these lines as a faithful depiction of Humphrey’s behaviour – what is more interesting is the fact that, as in the case of Lydgate’s lines, they suggest a politician interested in blending the image of princely magnificientia with that of the approachable everyday man, happily engrossed in books or pleasantly joking in his library. This might be read as part of Humphrey’s effort to establish with the King’s subjects, and especially with a literate middle class, a special relation that could overcome the shortcomings of his political activity. Even writers less closely connected with the Duke, such as John Capgrave, writing shortly before Humphrey’s death, insisted on the intellectual qualities of the would-be patron: “Quartus filius, qui adhuc superest, dux est Gloverniae, Humfridus; vir quidem inter omnes mundi proceres litteratissimus, cujus laudes ad alia tempora, et ad aliam vocationem ideo differendam puto, quoniam speciale Tractatulm super commendatiuncula ejus quandoque me facturum existimo.”\(^7\) The passage suggests that the image of literary patron and bibliophile Humphrey was so keen to spread went beyond his immediate circle and reached also those who only aspired to his patronage.

Yet events altered Humphrey’s project of self-representation, and the “domestic” image of the Duke that has been transmitted to posterity was sharply modified. Humphrey’s marriage with Jacqueline of Hainault terminated abruptly when the Duke decided to form a new alliance with Eleanor Cobham, one of Jacqueline’s ladies-in-waiting. This required once more a Papal intervention in order to annul the previous marriage, and for some time Jacqueline, temporarily prisoner of the Duke of Burgundy who had re-conquered his lost Flemish territories, appeared the victim of another woman’s machinations, or of her husband’s weakness. From the point of view of his public image, Humphrey’s second marriage was an unwise move, and reactions outside England can be summed up by Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini’s comment: in his view, the Duke of Gloucester was “homo
non tam armis quam plumis et libidinibus aptus magnificis que iactauerat uerbis haudquaquam satisfecit nec tanti famam, quanto uitam duxit.”

The same writer would also describe the Duke, in 1444, in a slightly different tone: “qui studia humanitatis summo studio in regnum vestrum recepit, qui, sicut mihi relatum est, et poetas mirifice colit et oratores magnopere veneratur.” Piccolomini appears to sum very well the perception of the Duke outside England: the martial image never has any place, but, whether the writer is praising or criticizing, the idea of a worldly (and verbal) *magnificentia* is never absent.

Eleanor Cobham’s own public career terminated in ignominy, when in 1441 she was accused of necromancy and of conspiring against the king’s life (Griffiths 381-99; Carey 138-53; Nolan 7-11). The trial was conducted on very spectacular lines, as evidently the king wanted to turn her into an example for future would-be conspirators; but the very public nature of Eleanor’s punishment (she had to walk, bareheaded and in a humble attitude, to various churches in London for five days, and afterwards remained a prisoner until her death) might perhaps have played against the king’s attention, and turned popular feeling in her favour. As a royal lady, Eleanor was not the first to bear such a charge: an illustrious precedent had been Joan of Navarre, Henry IV’s wife, who had, however, not been brought to trial (Wolffe 127). But Eleanor’s punishment was perceived as excessive: as would be the case with Humphrey’s death, the very public circumstances surrounding the case played in the Duke’s favour. While it was difficult to acquit Eleanor completely, and while later chronicles persisted in considering her, if not a witch, at least a scheming and grasping woman, Humphrey would become even more ennobled by what would be read as an attempt to discredit him – incidentally, the episode helped his rehabilitation after the disastrous conclusion of his first marriage had temporarily tarnished his image (Harker 109-25). Just as the Duchess’s alleged necromancy became the perfect excuse to implicate and humiliate her husband (Nolan 9), her trial and penance reversed popular judgement in the Duke’s favour. In fact, later chroniclers such as Richard Grafton, writing in the 1560s, would explain this trial as a revenge against Gloucester: “Venime will once breake out, and inwarde grudge will sone appere, which was this yere to all men apparaunt: for diuers secret attempts were aduaunced forward this season, agaynst the noble Duke Humfrey of Gloucester, a farre of, which in conclusion came so nere, that they bereft him both of lyfe and lande” (Grafton I.622). It is possible that Humphrey’s
(probably enforced) absence from the political stage after the trial made it easier to connect the two events – Eleanor’s indictment and his own death – in collective memory; though they are far apart in time, they were subsequently read as one factor in the reconstruction of the Duke’s personality.

After the Duke’s death, these various elements seem to coalesce into the construction of a minor myth: Tudor chroniclers picked up the suggestions offered by Yorkist propaganda in their treatment of Duke Humphrey. After the official rehabilitation of Humphrey’s memory in 1455, following the pardon received by his servants (Joannis Lelandi I.2.494), it is difficult to find portraits that would take into account his political shortcomings, his military failure, or even his personal vices. As the memory of the Duke receded, the main events of his life assumed the status of a symbol, or an exemplum. Among the earliest chroniclers, Robert Fabyan (d. 1513) writes: “Of that honourable fame of this man, a longe style I myght make, of the good rule yt he kept this lande in, during ye noue age of the kynge, and of his honourable housholde & lybertie, whiche passyd all other before his tyme, and trewe of his allegeaunce, that no man cowde with ryght accuse, but malycious persones” (Ellis 1811, 619). Memory is already turning into legend: the Duke becomes a good ruler during the King’s minority, while his fame as a humanist quickly wanes. Edward Hall’s Chronicle, written thirty years later, notably amplifies the image of the Duke’s integrity, and completely forgets the patron:

When the rumor of the dukes death, was blowen through the realme, many men wer sodainly appalled and amased for feare: many abhorred and detested ye faict, but all men reputed it an abhominable crueltie, and a shameful tiranny. But the publique wealth of the realme of Englande, by the vnworthy death of this pollitique prince, sustained greate losse, & ran into ruyne, for surely the whole waight and the burden of the realme, rested and depended vpon him, as the experience afterward did declare. (Ellis 1809, 209-10)

Raphaell Holinshed transforms the Duke into a paragon of all princely virtues: “he was an vpright and politike gouernour, bending all his indeuors to the aduancement of the common-wealth, verie louing to the poore commons, and so beloued of them againe; learned, wise, full of courtesie, void of pride and ambition” (211-12). Even more interestingly, at the end of the section dedicated to Henry VI’s reign Holinshed inserts a list of learned men, among whom we find John Lydgate, John Capgrave, Nicholas
Upton, and John Whethamstede, Abbot of St Albans, along with the Duke: “Humfrie duke of Glocester, earle of Pembroke, and lord chamberlaine of England, also protector of the realme, during the minoritie of his nephue king Henrie the sixt, was both a great fauorer of learned men, and also verie well learned himselfe, namelie in astrologie, whereof (beside other things) he wrote a speciall treatise intituled, Tabula directionum” (274). Holinshed therefore appears to sum up a positive image of the Duke that includes what Humphrey was trying to project in popular imagination and a number of elements that were the result of events beyond Humphrey’s control. The Duke becomes a mask of virtues, the model of the self-sacrificing statesman; his learning, his courtesy and his uprightness combine in creating an almost supernatural image.

In his portrait, Holinshed refers the readers to John Foxe’s Acts and Monuments, which in fact devotes considerable space to the Duke. The bias of this particular text is made evident by the full title with which it first appeared in 1583: Actes and monuments of matters most speciall and memorable, happenyng in the Church with an vniuersall history of the same, wherein is set forth at large the whole race and course of the Church, from the primitiue age to these latter tymes of ours, with the bloudy times, horrible troubles, and great persecutions agaynst the true martyrs of Christ, sought and wrought as well by heathen emperours, as nowe lately practised by Romish prelates, especially in this realme of England and Scotland. It might therefore seem odd to have Humphrey included in this calendar of Protestant martyrs, yet Foxe expatiates on his learning and on his activity as a patron, and mentions the accounts of his intellectual interests written by humanists such as Pietro del Monte and Zeno da Castiglione. What emerges is a gentle and wise man:

Of manners he seemed meeke and gentle, louing the common wealth, a supporter of the poore commons, of wit & wisdome discreet and studious, well affected to religion, and a friend to veritie, & no les enemy to pride & ambition, especially in hauty prelates, which was his undoing in this present euil world: And, which is seldome & rare in such princes of that calling, he was both learned himself: & no lesse geuen to study, as also a singular fauourer & patron to them which were studious and learned. And that my commendation of him may haue the more credite, I wil produce the testimony of learned writers, who liuing in hys time, not only do commend his famous knowledge, and ripenes of learning in him: but also commit and submit their works to his iudgement to be examined. (704)
A number of elements are interesting here. The allusion to “hauty prelates” may be read as a reference to Henry Beaufort, Cardinal of Winchester, but is also part of Foxe’s ongoing polemic against a corrupt Church that has lost the path of truth. Foxe also seems particularly interested in blending spiritual wisdom (Humphrey as a supporter of the oppressed, and “affected to religion”) with the keen intellectual: his being “a friend to veritie” may be read in both a religious and a lay context, and it is perhaps significant that in speaking of the writers who may prove Humphrey’s status as a learned patron he uses a scripturally charged word such as testimony.

The portrait in Actes and Monuments takes into account even the spurious episode of the beggar mentioned in Thomas More’s A Dialogue Concerning Heresies, in which Humphrey is shown as shrewdly uncovering fraud (the scene will reappear in Shakespeare’s 2 Henry VI, II, 1, 60-156). The episode is pointedly commented upon by Foxe, “to the intent to see and note, not only the craftye working of false miracles in the clergye, but also [...] the prudent discretion of this high and mighty prince” (705); once again, wisdom serves the interest of truth against the machinations of hypocrisy. The epithet of “Good Duke,” reiterated in these pages, vindicates the perfection of his image, and Foxe conveniently does not highlight the contradiction inherent in the episode: a man of such sagacity as to uncover petty deceptions who would yet be apparently blind to the conspiracy against himself and the welfare of the state.

There are omissions and half-truths in this portrait. No mention is made of Humphrey’s military campaigns, and, less surprisingly, no mention is made of his activity against heretics. Yet these are traits on which the writers close to the Duke tended to insist: Lydgate speaks of the Duke’s “heghe prowess, In daring-doo and deedes marcyal” (“On Gloucester’s Approaching Marriage” st. 19), and Thomas Hoccleve in his Dialogue alludes to his feat of arms at Cherbourg as proof of his valour and knightly qualities (ll. 561-67), while both the prologue to the translation of Palladius’s De Agricultura (ll. 50-53) and Lydgate’s Fall of Princes make it clear that the Duke’s energy has transformed England into a land in which “no Lollard dar abide” (Bergen I.12). Although evidently familiar with much fifteenth-century writing, and especially with Lydgate, Foxe ignores these allusions completely. He is not completely blind to the Duke’s shortcomings, especially in marital matters, but quickly glosses them over: the downfall of the Duke is presented as something that takes place not
only against Humphrey’s will, but independently of his conduct, and is even cast in a sinisterly supernatural light: “this good Duke of Glocester, albeit being both this kinges sole uncle, & hauing so many well willers thorough the whol realme, yet lacked not hys Sathan: lacked not his secret maligners” (705). Henry Beaufort and William de la Pole are given the role of emissaries of Satan, together with Henry VI’s wife, Queen Margaret, jealous of Humphrey’s influence over the King’s weaker personality. Beaufort’s and de la Pole’s deaths, quickly following Humphrey’s own, are therefore seen as God’s judgement on the wicked.

As noted above, what is known of Humphrey’s political and personal history makes his collocation within Foxe’s procession of martyrs rather incongruous; the writer had to misrepresent his sources in order to fit the Duke into his scheme. In part, the result simply follows the model offered by late fifteenth-century chronicles such as The Brut, which see in the Duke’s sudden and possibly treacherous death the sign of the moral collapse of a whole world; in part, the fame of Humphrey as a learned clerk could be associated with tales of popular wisdom, as in the case of the anecdote of the beggar. At the same time, Foxe may have focussed on Humphrey of Gloucester as the medieval embodiment of an ideal he was pursuing with the grandiose project of his book. It is a curious coincidence that the story of Humphrey’s downfall and alleged martyrdom is followed, in Foxe’s narrative, by a celebration of the year 1450 “famous and memorable, for the divine and miraculous invention of printing.” Foxe describes the first efforts of Gutenberg and his associates and then soars into celebration:

what man soeuer was the instrument, without all doubt God himselfe was the ordayner and disposer thereof, no otherwise, then he was of the gifte of tongues, and that for a singuler purpose. And well may this gift of printing be resembled to the gift of tongues: for like as God then spake with many tongues, and yet all that would not turne the Jewes, so now, when the holy ghost speaketh to the adversaries in innumerable sorts of bookes, yet they will not be conuerted: not turne to the Gospell. (707)

This gives him the opportunity of setting the almost miraculous appearance of printing in the context of God’s design for man’s salvation. Gutenberg’s invention follows a dark time for the truly faithful, as the Pope and all Catholic prelates have come down with a heavy hand on alleged heretics, such as Jan Hus, “notwithstanding they were no hereticikes” (707), trying to subjugate all the Christian world to their will. The Catholic
repression had such overwhelming force that, Foxe desolately concludes, “the matter now was past not only the power of al men, but the hope also of any man to be recouered” (707). In this desperate landscape, printing is the sign of God’s might: “not with sword and tergate to subdue his exalted aduersary, but with Printing, writing, and reading to conuince darkenes by light, errour by truth, ignorance by learning” (707). The tone is inspired, even messianic, and it might not be far-fetched to see the juxtaposition of the two episodes – the innocent Duke Humphrey betrayed by the forces of evil, printing vindicating overtrodden humanity – in this light, as if the Duke was cast in the role of a minor precursor and helpless harbinger of a truth that, momentarily defeated, is destined to triumph.

In this perspective, his role as a humanist acquires special significance: as Andrew Hiscock has noted, in his *Actes and Monuments* Foxe reclaims the pre-reformation past, inscribing it in the truth he recognizes as upheld by the medieval martyrs: he “may be seen as wanting to fashion the potentially still lively memories of the Tudor martyrs amongst sections of his early Elizabethan readership into a newly minted collective memory, a supplementary sacred space of collective commemoration” (72). This is, in fact, the meaning of his *monuments*: things “meet to be recorded [rather than] buried under the darkness of Obliution” (VIr). Hiscock further observes how Foxe stresses the intellectual achievements of his martyrs, as if this trait could further uphold the Protestant cause by suggesting a connection with “a humanist emphasis on the crucial importance of learning and mental industry in the pursuit of human perfectibility” (74). In this sense, too, Humphrey can be seen as a spiritual progenitor of Archbishop Cranmer; given his intellectual ability, his spiritual attitude, and his tragic death, he can transcend Lancastrian politics and become a progenitor of a new order. In part, this is also the portrait Shakespeare will re-propose in his *2 Henry VI*.15

In compiling his work, Foxe continues a tradition that goes back to Catholic hagiography, one of his models being the still popular *Legenda Aurea*, in its many versions (Hiscock 77).14 There is, however, a closer English analogue. If the *Mirror for Magistrates*, in which Humphrey is once again described as an unfortunate, if vainglorious, patron of writers (Campbell 444-59), was early conceived as a Tudor offshoot from the *Fall of Princes* (Hadfield 85; Thompson 181-209), there is little doubt that Foxe’s monumental enterprise was also indebted to Lydgate’s *magnum opus*. The appropriation of the Lancastrian poem in Reformation England
went hand in hand with the reinvention of its patron and begetter; one may detect in Foxe’s description of Humphrey as a man who would “disserne and disseuer trueth from forged and fayned hipocrisie, but study also and dilligence lykewise, was in him, to reforme that which was amisse” (705) a faint, distorted echo of Lydgate’s lines, in its insistence on study as a road to moral improvement:

His corage neuer doth appalled
To studie in bookis off antiquite,
Therin he hath so gret felicite
Vertuously hymsilff to ocupie,
Off vicious slouthe to haue the maistrie.
And with his prudence and with his manheed,
Trouthe to susteene he fauour set a-side,
And hooli chir[ch][e] meyntenyng in deed,
That in this land no Lollard dar abide.
(Bergen I.395-403)

For both writers, the Duke is a defender of truth – only, of a different truth. Recently, Jennifer Summit has read in Humphrey’s cultural activity two interrelated library projects: his own book collection and Lydgate’s *Fall of Princes*, seen as manifestations of political power, monuments, once more, to Humphrey’s defence of religious orthodoxy (Summit 27-52). As Lydgate’s own poem proves, the Duke progressively tired of the *Fall of Princes* project; after his death, his own library was condemned to dispersal and almost to oblivion. Yet, the mirror through which posterity saw him may be said to be very much of his own devising.
“Among the princes of England, Humphrey duke of Gloucester certainly was the most learned, and at the same time the merriest;” “the duke was a catastrophe for England, a blessing for the renaissance of literature.” Translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

A full account of Humphrey’s life and political career can be found in Vickers. On his role as a patron and bibliophile, see Petrina, Cultural Politics.


See what Elizabeth Leedham-Green writes on the attention enjoyed by some of Humphrey’s volumes: “It was not until the middle of the fifteenth century that substantial numbers of true humanist texts started to arrive in college libraries: William Gray, who entered Balliol College, Oxford, in 1431 had copies made, in 1442, of books from the library of Duke Humfrey – Valerius Maximus and a volume of Latin panegyrics which contained also works by Bruni and by Giannozzo Manetti – the first humanist text, perhaps, to be copied in Oxford” (321).

See Kristine Johanson’s definition of nostalgia in early modern English Literature: “embedded within the idealizing fantasy is an elision of history, a degree of false memory which enables the romanticization of various pasts” (212).

A full discussion of this point is to be found in Petrina, “The Middle English Translation.”

“The fourth, still surviving son is the Duke of Gloucester, Humphrey; the most literate of great men, whose praises I shall postpone to another time and work, as I believe I shall be writing a short volume in his praise” (Hingeston 109).

“A man whom plumes and pleasures suited, rather than arms, who boasted of himself but whose conduct in life was not equal to his fame” (van Heck 535).

“He who has welcomed humanist studies in your country with the greatest interest, and, as I have been told, greatly reveres poets and orators” (Wolkan 325). For an interesting comment on Piccolomini’s praise, see Rundle, “Humanism before the Tudors.”

“Here may men mark what his world is! this Duke was A noble man and A gret clerk” (Brie II.513).

With wry humour, Shakespeare, in his 1 Henry VI, inserts this episode immediately before the news of Eleanor Cobham’s indictment, turning it into a reflection on the Duke’s only partial sagacity.

Commenting on Shakespeare’s representation of the Duke, Michael Manheim notes that “as humanist and scholar Humfrey would be quickly identified with that considerable group of humanists and scholars who were so important in the political life of Henry VIII’s reign: men who followed Erasmus in relating the new spirit of intellectual self-reliance to traditional Christian theology and values” (254).

In its English version, the Legenda Aurea was still being printed by Wynkyn de Worde in 1527.
Opere citate, Œuvres citées,
Zitierte Literatur, Works Cited

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