

Summus Mathematicus et Omnis Humanitatis Pater

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Anja-Silvia Goeing

Summus Mathematicus et Omnis Humanitatis Pater

The Vitae of Vittorino da Feltre
and the Spirit of Humanism

Transl. Deanna Stewart. Appendix: Sassolo da Prato.

Letter about Vittorino da Feltre.

Transl. from Latin by James Astorga.



Springer

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Erzieherpersonlichkeit im Italien des 15. Jahrhunderts.

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Acknowledgements

This book is the newly revised and expanded English edition of my doctoral thesis, written in the German language, accepted by the philosophical faculty of the Julius-Maximilians-University Würzburg in 1999, and published by Ergon in 1999 in the series *Erziehung-Schule-Gesellschaft*.

When I started thinking about a suitable doctoral topic, I wanted to prove that the reputation of the great Renaissance educator Vittorino da Feltre was a fiction, a creation of fifteenth-century Mantuan campanellismo and the recreation of early nineteenth-century Italian pride, groomed and cared for by later scholars in Switzerland, Germany, France, Britain, and the United States.

Both my doctoral advisers, Prof. Dr. Dr. h.c. Winfried Böhm in History of Education the late Prof. Dr. Dr. Klaus Wittstadt in Church History, and especially my outside reader Prof. Dr. Eckhard Kessler in History of Renaissance Philosophy at the University of Munich encouraged me to think for myself and to carve out my own pathway through the jungle of the literature on Humanism. In this journey, I owe much to the goodwill and patience of the late Prof. Dr. Dr. h.c. Giuseppe Flores d'Arcais in Padua, who had included Vittorino da Feltre in his philosophy of the person. At a much later stage, in Oxford in 2008, I was very happy to participate in Prof. Martin McLaughlin's seminar *Biography and Autobiography in the Italian Renaissance*, which allowed me to enlarge my perspective significantly through learning about biographical writing practices in the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries, from Petrarch to Giorgio Vasari.

My work has required considerable research in Italian libraries and archives. I am deeply indebted to staff at the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, the Biblioteca Nazionale in Florence, the Biblioteca Nazionale in Venice, the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana in Florence, the Biblioteca Comunale in Mantua, and both Max-Planck-Institutes for Art History in Florence and Rome. I am also obliged to Prof. Dr. Rodolfo Signorini, who helped me to find the Mantuan Manuscript of Francesco Prendilacqua's *Dialogue*.

So, did I crush the canon? In hindsight, I would say that it was naive to think in such black-and-white terms. I have come to realize that my project instead occupied shades of grey between straightforward fact and obvious fiction, and between

notions of celebrity and daily routines. Vittorino's legend has been built up by his students, and they shaped the picture of their teacher into what Alison Knowles Frazier calls a "possible life," a believable history.¹

My academic career has led me via Helmut Schmidt-University Hamburg, the University of Zurich, and the California Institute of Technology to Northumbria University, where I am currently Anniversary Fellow in History. For the preparation of this English publication, I am indebted to two great advisers: my translator Deanna Stewart and my editor Audra Wolfe. A critical edition of the *vitae* of Vittorino da Feltre, edited by myself and Prof. Dr. Sabine Schmolinsky from the University of Erfurt, is also in preparation.

As an appendix I am happy to include an English translation of the first account of Vittorino's life and work, a letter by his student Sassolo da Prato to the Florentine humanist Leonardo Dati, written in Vittorino's lifetime, ca. 1443 to 1444. The Pasadena-based Classics scholar James Astorga (Ph.D.) has translated the biographical sketch from the manuscript and from its original language, Latin.

¹Frazier (2005, title).

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, biographies – whether of contemporaries or people of the past, whether written in Latin or the vernacular languages – constituted a significant portion of writings on history. Since Jacob Burckhardt's 1860 volume on *Civilization of the Renaissance*,¹ historians have written extensively about the role of biographies in developing views about individual upbringing, citizenship and ethics. Above all, scholars have pointed to the ways that biographical patterns were adapted from approaches in antiquity, how different modes of celebrating the individual were used, and how vital was the notion and reality of leading the good life.

The practice of writing biographies was so common in the fifteenth-century manuscript world that it deserves notice of its own accord. But the fifteenth century is also critical from a historical perspective, as the genesis of modern biographical writing and, to a large extent, modern historical writing. The practices of fifteenth-century biography writing usually adopted three particular formats. The first was antiquity's *virī illustres*, based on Plutarch's parallel lives or Suetonius's lives of important Romans. The second used the format of martyr legends, taken from models developed in monasteries, of which Jacobus de Voragine's *Legenda Aurea* (1260)² was the most influential predecessor. The final format followed the lives of people known personally to the authors, usually told in the form of orations and written primarily for friends. The period of the fifteenth century represented a significant break because newly erudite men who taught Latin and Greek texts were discovering and circulating classical works both inside and outside the monasteries.

The most recent interpretations of trends in fifteenth-century biographical writing focus on four developments. A first trend emerging from this literature is an emphasis on the role of biography in the development of the discipline of history as it unfolded in the fifteenth century. Biographies in this view played prominent roles as works of history. Gary Ianziti shows in his recent monograph on the writing of

¹Burckhardt (1860).

²See Sect. 4.1.

history in fifteenth-century Italy (2012) that the Florentine chancellor Leonardo Bruni used biographies as a legitimate format for explaining the past. In 1413, Bruni's vita of Cicero represented his first serious attempt to write history.³ Focusing on Bruni's working methods, Ianziti asked whether Bruni had used other and more critical methods than his medieval predecessors to approach the reading of sources and the writing of histories in their own right, methods that would characterize a new, humanistic, approach to history. As Ianziti shows, Bruni used many more sources in a more critical way than anyone had before him.

Nevertheless, Bruni was not averse to manipulating the large body of his evidence. His narrative of *res gestae* "operates as an instrument for presenting, justifying, and explaining the career of the individual concerned."⁴ Ianziti called the evolving picture of Cicero "uncompromisingly political."⁵ Unlike earlier biographies that were shaped around moralistic statements, Bruni's interpretation of Cicero's life instead took the form of a chronological narrative.

Secondly, scholars have pointed out that fifteenth-century biographies, especially those written by humanists, followed the format of writers from antiquity, foremost Suetonius and Plutarch. In 2007, Marianne Pade provided a valuable analysis of Plutarchian biographies translated between 1400 and 1500 in Italy. In the humanist centers of both Florence and Venice, she found, the many translations of Plutarch's lives and of his *moralia* had a purpose that went beyond school learning of the Greek language, beyond any principles of translation into Latin, and beyond learning about antiquity. For example, she found evidence that authors refurbished the biographical details of Athenians so that they would fit into a model for modern Venice: the authors picked a specific selection of lives for translation and bent or refashioned details as arguments for contemporary political representations.⁶

Thirdly, scholars have shown how biographies were part of Renaissance philosophy in so far as they developed case studies on how to lead a good life. A good life included conduct adapted to the biblical works of charity and according to such virtues as "honor" that were taken over from classical treatises. Christopher Celenza (2013) reminds his readers that treatises on Renaissance ethics were formulated as single case studies and have therefore been omitted from the canon of modern philosophical works. Biographies taught ethics with material that fleshed out what it meant to "lead a good life."⁷ One of the most meaningful genres in this respect was the lives of the saints. In her book *Possible Lives: Authors and Saints in Renaissance Italy* (2004), Alison Knowles Frazier scrutinizes more than 250 different saints' lives in their various manuscript and print formats, all written between 1420 and 1520. She asks, "what happened when an author with training in the *studia humanitatis* undertook to revise the life of a medieval saint?" This revision, in her opinion, had three elements, of which the main component was "a tight knot of

³Ianziti (2012, Kindle Location 583).

⁴Ibid. (Kindle Locations 819–822).

⁵Ibid. (Kindle Location 828).

⁶Pade (2007).

⁷Celenza (2013).

style, content, and structure,” with attention to elegance in style and a different tone in the authors’ concerns of *veritas*.⁸

A fourth and final cluster of studies has revealed that some fifteenth-century authors described celebrated contemporaries, discussing their specific role in society. In the fourteenth century, it had been more common to write about the famous people of the past, as had Petrarch and Boccaccio. A series of manuscript vitae written by the humanist author Vespasiano da Bisticci in the second half of the fifteenth century, published for the first time in 1970 by Aulo Greco, serves as an instructive example.⁹ Greco’s edition showed how Vespasiano depicted a whole arsenal of different co-citizens in Florence, men and women, and revealed an unprecedented number of details about their professions and roles in society. After Greco’s edition, these vitae became the basis for significant speculation about the activities of humanists and humanist teachers, and of the idea that people from humble beginnings were able to rise in society, based on their merits.¹⁰

Sabine Schmolinsky’s essay (1995) about the series of lives of famous contemporary men written by Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini in 1446 – the first such series composed in the fifteenth century – points out that the vitae contained non-explicable autobiographical fragments and other very personal features.¹¹ James M. Weiss elaborated this finding into a general argument about fifteenth-century Italian contemporary biographies. In a 1999 article, he points to a significant fight among three famous humanists in the 1450s at the court of Naples that arose because of a biography about the King’s father, Ferdinand of Antequera.¹² The court historian Lorenzo Valla had inserted this biography in his *Gesta Ferdinandi Regis Aragonum*, and, according to his attacker Bartolomeo Facio, he had included indecorous details. Facio’s own *De rebus gestis ab Alphonso primo neapolitano- rum rege*, about Ferdinand’s son, presented his answer: a well-researched narrative containing mostly political events in ten books that avoided personal comments. A third contestant in this debate, Panormita, then wrote a biography in the style of Xenophon and Suetonius with many anecdotes, confining himself to the ruler’s admirable qualities. Weiss concludes that the presence of personal detail is contextual rather than general.

Weiss’s 1999 essay is intended as a criticism of Jakob Burckhardt’s claim about the rise of individualism in biographic writing in Italy, which Burckhardt had seen as “the search for the characteristic traits of significant persons.”¹³ Frazier’s study of hagiographic vitae similarly detects a handful of texts with rhetorical patterns that adopt a personal account. Her work shows that the promoters of personal accounts appear to have been Greeks who came to Italy in the first half of the fifteenth

⁸Frazier (2005, pp. 16, 27).

⁹Vespasiano da Bisticci (1970, 1976).

¹⁰Ijsewijn (1983).

¹¹Schmolinsky (1995).

¹²Weiss (1999, p. 28).

¹³Ibid. (p. 25).

century, for instance, Cardinal Bessarion, who wrote his saint's life around 1425.¹⁴ The manuscript vitae of the humanist teacher Vittorino da Feltre, the subject of this study, all adopt to a greater or lesser extent a personal tone.

In the second half of the fifteenth century, two cultures of distributing biographical texts overlapped: the printed format, with its culture of print shop manufacture, of selling and buying; and the scribal distribution of manuscripts that additionally included more intimate forms of distribution, including the personal letter. Such biographies were being written at a time when book practices were changing – and when a general transition from manuscripts to books was taking place. Those vitae that were among the early prints from the second half of the fifteenth century were frequently reprinted in the sixteenth. But those vitae that were originally distributed in manuscript form were almost never printed, and only recirculated in manuscript form on rare occasions. The vitae on Vittorino da Feltre all belonged to the second category, manuscript culture. Manuscript vitae represented different practices of writing from their printed counterparts. Though some followed formats that were very close to those then being printed, many others included biographies written in an oratorical style that included a strong impression of the author and autobiographical insights into relations between the subject and the author of the vita.

In the first decade of the printing press in Italy, with the single exception of a biography of King Ferdinand I of Antequera printed in Rome in 1472, printed biographies corrected ancient manuscript versions of already known vitae from antiquity, or printed the lives of saints. For example, the first biographies printed in Italy came out in Rome. The Roman press Sweynheym and Pannartz published, only 3 years after its installment in 1467, the *lives* by Suetonius.¹⁵ Ulrich Han, a competing printer in Rome who had a workshop from 1466, published in the same year 1470 the *parallel lives* by Plutarch.¹⁶ In 1479, 10 years after these humble beginnings, the librarian of the Vatican library, Bartolomeo Platina, opened the possibility of printing biographies of celebrated and politically important people of the more recent past by printing a collection of lives of the popes. This tradition was revived later in the sixteenth century.¹⁷

Apart from printed lives and works on church fathers and church teachers like Saint Augustine and St Thomas Aquinas, and a large number of printed saints' lives that reached into contemporary times, there were only a handful of printed biographies of famous figures from any era on the Italian market in the late fifteenth century. The few that did exist were usually sandwiched in a complete edition of

¹⁴Frazier (2005, p. 353): From Greece came Basilios Bessarion. On or close to Jan 30, 1423, he wrote a vita about the Egyptian Anacoret Bessarion, *Oratio de laudibus Bessarionis*, at which point he gave himself the religious name Bessarion. Between 1469 and 1471, the vita was translated into Latin by Niccolo Perotti.

Ibid. (p. 414): In 1451–1452, George of Trebizond (1395–1472/3) translated two vitae from Greek into Latin that were set in the form of oration. The author of both was Gregor of Nazianz. One presented the life of St Athanasius, and the other, the life of St Basilus Magnus.

¹⁵Suetonius (1470).

¹⁶Plutarch (1470).

¹⁷See Bauer (2006, pp. 1–104).

their works. The subjects of fifteenth-century printed biographies included Cicero, Quintilian, Virgil, Terence, and Aristotle, whose works were read in schools; Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio, the founders of Italian literature; and finally, standing alone among the early fifteenth-century humanists, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, whose vita was edited by his nephew Giovanni Francesco Pico della Mirandola in 1496.¹⁸ It is important to notice the selection of works being printed: It seems that the printing presses in Italy had an agenda that might have changed and expanded over the course of 30 years until the end of the century. Vitae of contemporaries known only to a small circle of people, such as humanists, only started to be printed at the end of the fifteenth century, and very rarely.

Like their printed counterparts, some manuscript biographies, such as the vita of San Zeno written by Giovanni Tortelli in 1462,¹⁹ maintained a very distanced tone toward their subjects. This had also been the case for the whole genre of saints' biographies since the twelfth century, when Jacobus de Voragine wrote the *Legenda aurea*. But other manuscript biographies that circulated as letters, such as Francesco Prendilacqua's dialogue on the vita of Vittorino da Feltre, retained the intimate tenor of addressing a friend or future employer directly, despite being written in the age of the printing press (in this case, around 1470). Their tone remained much more autobiographical and personal, in a manner that is to be found in reflections, forewords, necrologues, or oratorial letters to friends, all of which had been circulating since the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries.

This connection between fifteenth-century authors and their biographical subjects represents a unique period in the history of biographies. Manuscript vitae occupy a moment after the emergence of secular biography as a recognizable genre and before the widespread availability of print. While it has generally not been commented upon in the scholarly literature, this connection is critical for understanding the changing relation between the biographer and his subject in a way that starts to make space at the end of the century for what Gregor Misch in the 1940s and later called "autobiographies."²⁰ In their accounts of Vittorino da Feltre, the biographers included sketches of their own school life, remembering the excellence of their teacher and school colleagues. All grow out of a similar education in terms of writing, and all share the same subject. These vitae allow us to examine changing biographical and autobiographical practices in fifteenth-century Italy because some of the influences that might otherwise have driven authors to pursue different approaches have been eliminated.

Vittorino da Feltre (1378?–1446) was one of the first generation of teachers who, it has been argued, used a new focus and style in teaching. He and his cohort have been widely regarded as the founders of the first humanist schools. His vitae represent one very important group of the interpersonal biographies circulated in

¹⁸ Pico della Mirandola and Pico della Mirandola (1496).

¹⁹ Tortelli (<1462>).

²⁰ Misch (1949–). The terminology is discussed in Schmolinsky (2012).

manuscript form. Written between 1443 and 1491, the *vitae* of Vittorino da Feltre contain the testimonies of people who had actually seen Vittorino, worked with him, or had heard about him in orally transmitted testimonies by people who knew him.

Vittorino's importance as a historical figure concerns his relationship to "humanism." From the beginning of the nineteenth century, when the term was first used to interpret an entire period from ca. 1350 to ca. 1650, 'humanism' referred to the emergence of a new notion of education and learning that shaped the intellectual life of Europe. Scholars paired humanism with the search for and correction and transmission of antique texts, but textual transmission was seen as only one part of a broad public movement that started in Italy. Since then, the history of 'humanism' has expanded to include the notion of the good individual life and how it led to a rethinking of ethics; looked at the formation and development of today's disciplines of knowledge; and lastly, investigated new modes for distributing information, political opinion, and reflection, in the form of letters, scribal publications, books, and pamphlets.

Schools were part of this movement insofar as they made it possible for people to participate in the new learning: in them students studied Latin, learned oratorical and epistolary forms of expression, and acquired knowledge in the form of excerpts that alluded to a common canon of beautiful and useful writings. Part of the new Latin grammar curriculum included treatises of history, such as works by the classical historians Tacitus and Livy. Learned circles both inside and out of schools and academies discussed mathematics and new notions of nature, natural philosophy, and medicine. Paul Grendler has pointed out in many publications that the schools, rather than universities and other institutions of higher learning, were the first to adopt the humanist syllabus, in part because their structure lacked the long traditions and formalized canons of the more established institutions.²¹

Nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century scholars identified Vittorino da Feltre, together with Guarino Guarini Veronese and Francesco Filelfo, as the first founders of humanist schools.²² They have revealed that these schools shared a similar focus, intent on developing oratorical skills in their pupils.²³ This training was to be achieved by reading ancient texts as close to the original Latin and Greek voice as possible, by translating Greek texts into Latin, and finally, by comparing and editing texts to arrive at something as close to the imagined original as possible. For example, the pupils' schoolwork included recitations of self-composed poems and others' works in front of an audience. As Remigio Sabbadini and Eugenio Garin have pointed out, Vittorino da Feltre's school at the court of the Gonzaga in Mantua (1423–1446) featured a very broad curriculum. In contrast to, for example, Guarino

²¹ Grendler (1989), compare also Grendler (2002).

²² See especially the work of Remigio Sabbadini (1885, 1891, 1904, 1905–1914, 1924a, b, 1928a, b, 1964).

²³ Compare Kallendorf (2007); Grendler (1989).

Guarini's school at Ferrara, Vittorino included not only a reformed Trivium (grammar, rhetoric, dialectic), but also readings of Euclid's geometry.²⁴

Vittorino's fifteenth-century biographers seem at first to have left us a thorough account of his teachings. A comparison of his different *vitae*, however, shows that these manuscripts were quite interpretative and should not necessarily be considered an accurate historical picture. In thinking about the beginnings of humanism, the discipline of historiography, and humanist schools in general, the biographies of humanists like Vittorino offer a different perspective from textbooks and syllabi: they reveal how the practice of scholarship and a certain form of canonical knowledge fashioned a new elite. The *vitae* contain not only the only surviving testimony on Vittorino da Feltre and his school, but also include lists of Vittorino's students' names, their publications, and the canonical readings that emerged from the school. Even more importantly, they reflected on the doings of a teacher and described how a teacher should teach and behave toward his students. With this, they made available norms for good teaching, clothed in the garb of idealized biographies.

The biographies also showed off the skills of their makers: the authors' writings demonstrated what they had learned in Vittorino's school, praising a certain set of virtues and skills connected with their teacher, while simultaneously showing through example how a biography should have been written, according to rules. And indeed, the *vitae* on Vittorino were not the only biographies that his students produced. In Vittorino's lifetime, Ognibene da Lonigo wrote a life of Camillus, Carlo Gonzaga a life of Agesilaus. Both of them were Plutarchian *vitae*. Mariarosa Cortesi's analysis of these *vitae* shows that the purpose of the exercise was a full-fledged translation of the *vitae* from Greek into Latin.²⁵ Cortesi also found two other pupils of Vittorino who composed biographies later in life. The *vitae* on Vittorino thus were part of broader biographical writing practices among Vittorino's students.

Past writing about the humanist teacher Vittorino da Feltre took it for granted that the four most important surviving accounts of his life presented an exact, factual account of his life and work.²⁶ Focusing on the different individual biographical manuscripts written by Vittorino's students and followers, I ask whether each narrative might have introduced a different Vittorino, and, if so, whether the differences can be set in relation to the background of the writer and the model the writer used to develop his account. The authors tell stories that reveal other truths, beyond the bare facts of the life of Vittorino: stories of kinship and teacher-esteem; an amalgam of the writers' experiences and those imagined from what they read from antiquity; and attempts to replicate the three overwhelmingly present biographical models of Plutarch, Suetonius, and the medieval holy martyrs.

²⁴ See Sabbadini (1928a); Garin (1957, 1958, 1966, 1967). Baxandall (1971, pp. 127–129) summarizes the mathematical skills that Vittorino's students possibly had gained through his school.

²⁵ Cortesi (1997); Pade (2007, pp. 229–230). See also Cortesi (1979) on the Greek studies of another former student of Vittorino who wrote saints' lives, Giovanni Tortelli.

²⁶ Müller (1984), to cite the most recent example.

For this group of author-students, the importance of scholarship was a way of dealing with life. Their attempt to grasp history through the medium of biography is not only an autobiographical instinct, but also a gesture to social and political issues that were pressing at the time. The group formed itself as members of the Vittorino-kinship group. They defined themselves according to a canon of works they had read, and also, according to how they had read those works. In writing biographies of Vittorino, they were attempting to disseminate their own canon.

In writing the life of their teacher, Vittorino's students elevated the role of the teacher to a rank similar to that of other famous men of the period. They placed both Vittorino himself and the humanist teacher within the *republic of letters* as later imagined by Erasmus. In doing so, they also helped perpetuate their own fame. Nevertheless, the early circulation of the vitae was restricted to those who had access to manuscript copies of the lives. Only decades later, with the advent of the printing press, would those same authors encounter a larger audience: those who buy printed books. Vittorino's students edited and printed new editions of Cicero and Quintilian, and also, not coincidentally, major works of biography. But despite the fact that some of the vitae on Vittorino were composed after the advent of the printing press, the authors did not have them printed.

Given this context of individual and group formation, the different angles by which Vittorino is described in the vitae provide a fascinating window into the emergence and spread of Italian humanism. The authors of Vittorino da Feltre's vitae reflect the great interest in writing vitae that was part of Italian intellectual society in the fifteenth century. They demonstrate the focus on oratorical work that Vittorino da Feltre featured in his school curriculum. The authors of the vitae work hard with the material they have, question the veracity of accounts written by others, and express their own story. They are, in short, on the cusp of modernity.

In 1423, Vittorino da Feltre, a scholar in his mid-1400s, founded an educational establishment at the court of Mantua at the behest of the Marquis of Mantua, Gianfrancesco I Gonzaga, which he directed until 1446.²⁷ Since the publication of works by Eugenio Garin, Paul Oskar Kristeller, and August Buck,²⁸ the existence of this "Casa Giocosa" has been regarded as historically proven; this institution's curriculum was based on early humanistic ideas of education. We will critically reexamine the sources that have led to this conclusion, focusing on the sources' properties as the literary works of later authors, an aspect previously overlooked in scholarship on the topic. Even Gregor Müller's recent extensive study of Vittorino da Feltre²⁹ assumed that these sources alone reflected the historical reality of Vittorino and his school. This assumption is revealed in such remarks as: "When we look at the pedagogical work of Vittorino ... we are interested first and foremost in

²⁷ Woodward (1970, pp. 22, 30–34, 90).

²⁸ The following publications are the classic basis for the research questions developed in this book: Kristeller (1974, 1976); Garin (1966); Buck (1991).

²⁹ Müller (1984).

his school.”³⁰ Later he states: “To these factors we can add, as the most critical factor of all, the extraordinary person of Vittorino, who authentically embodied and radiated the ideal of humanistic education ...”³¹ In both cases, Müller passes over the fact that this “radiating” is a creation of the next generation, pieced together from literary and artistic – i.e., aestheticizing – sources. Nor did Vittorino embody “the” ideal of humanistic education; rather, he represents one possible ideal of specific thoughts on education, which, however, were not homogeneously regarded as binding for the various intellectual groups of the period.

My approach shifts the focus of analysis from the historical facts to their echo in literature, placing the spotlight on the tension between reality and fiction’s function in reality. Closely related to this is the question of the function of this idealized representation of Vittorino in the context of theories of education. The methodological approach to the topic is hermeneutical, i.e., the criteria for analysis and ultimately the intrinsic value of the sources will be determined from the sources themselves.

I have tried to confine the discussion to a narrow set of topics in order to impose a meaningful structure on this work and to avoid being sidetracked by the century-old debates on Vittorino as standard-bearer for educators of this period. Instead, the volume will both span and be constrained by the meanings of “humanism,” particularly “Renaissance humanism,” and pedagogy.³² The central question is whether, and to what extent, the *vitae* reflect Vittorino’s concept of how to teach and the ethical and pedagogical background for his approach. I will address these issues both in general and in the context of fifteenth-century Italy, in which the school had a particular importance as a social institution.

Without going into too much detail, it should be mentioned here that the current difficulties with the semantic diversity of the term “humanism” stem from its dual epistemological roots, grounded in the work of Friedrich Immanuel Niethammer (1808)³³; the various meanings have resolved themselves over the course of the history of this field of research into two divergent strands that are nonetheless interdependent. One strand takes an ahistorical approach, more or less *a priori*, to a particular view of human nature,³⁴ while the other ties the term to historical thinking and has come to characterize an entire epoch.³⁵ This latter approach, owing to the discovery of new sources, is constantly in danger of losing the unitary principle it was originally thought to have.³⁶ Paul Oskar Kristeller was the first to construe the term “Renaissance humanism” only formally.³⁷ His use of the term is the one that is

³⁰ Ibid. (p. 123).

³¹ Ibid. (p. 123).

³² Tenorth (1992, p. 12ff).

³³ Used reprint: Niethammer (1968).

³⁴ An overview of developments in more recent times (until 1954) is provided in Rüegg (1977).

³⁵ Paulsen (1885).

³⁶ For the destruction of the concept of Renaissance humanism as an epoch see Müller (1969).

³⁷ Kristeller (1974, pp. 11–29).

in general use today,³⁸ although one could ask whether a more neutral designation encompassing the time and place under consideration (here, fifteenth-century Italy) would be more accurate.

I will begin with a critical reexamination of the available sources on Vittorino in order to set the historical stage. In particular, I will discuss the scholastic tradition in which Vittorino's Casa Giocosa was integrated; this tradition is the only empirical fact that can be gleaned from the existing documents. After looking at the critical reception of the school and the *vitae*, I will evaluate their positions within the research history, as an introduction to this study.³⁹ I will then select my sources, based on their value as source material, and examine separately those that are particularly rich in terms of content. Because Vittorino left behind no writings of his own, his desires and achievements can only be accessed through secondary sources. In this case, as the selection of texts will show, these sources are those Lives of Vittorino that were authored by his former students and contemporaries. My analysis represents the first time that these sources will be discussed in terms of their literary background and the circumstances in which they were created. This approach should give us a deeper historical and hermeneutical understanding of the literary texts.

I will begin, in chronological order, with the letters exchanged between Sassolo da Prato and Leonardo Dati, followed by the texts written when Vittorino was already dead – the Lives of Bishop Antoninus of Florence and Vittorino da Feltre written by Francesco da Castiglione, Bartolomeo Platina's commentary on the life and achievements of Vittorino, and Francesco Prendilacqua's dialogue.⁴⁰ For various reasons that will be explained later, the Life by Vespasiano da Bisticci is not considered one of the canonical Lives and therefore does not receive a separate treatment here; rather, it will be interwoven into the discussion in various places. The different biographical portrayals of Vittorino were created between 1443 (Sassolo's letter) to 1470 (Prendilacqua's dialogue). The school, however, only existed from 1423 to 1446, the year of Vittorino's death (it was continued for a few years later by his students). The only text created during Vittorino's lifetime is Sassolo's letter.

The individual lives exhibit certain thematic differences. Sassolo primarily discussed the rationale for the quadrivium within the framework of the tradition of the *studia humanitatis*, which he associated closely with *humanitas*, in the Christian sense of works of charity. Aside from its content, the method of communication played a large role in his discussions. His letter had a certain rhetorical form and an

³⁸ Schmitt (1988, pp. 113–137).

³⁹ The most important publications about Vittorino da Feltre are Rosmini (1801, 1845); Woodward (1970), a reprint of the 1st ed. New York 1897; *Vittorino da Feltre. Nel V Centenario della sua morte MCDXLVI–MCMXLVI* (1946); *Vittorino da Feltre. Pubblicazione commemorativa del V centenario della morte* (1947); Giannetto (1981); Müller (1984).

⁴⁰ Without including Dati's letters, or the vita on bishop Antoninus, Garin (1958, pp. 500–718), presents an edition of all the *vitae* on Vittorino da Feltre, using old publications. Dati (1943) is a reprint of 1743. Epistles 7 and 12 are addressed to Sassolo da Prato. Francesco da Castiglione (1680a, b) present the first two printed vita of Antoninus.

instructive purpose, allowing us to assume that the letter was also intended to serve as a model for didactic discourse. Sassolo would have understood the difference between playing and practicing in pedagogy and the appropriateness of each depending on the age of the student, a realization that acknowledged the intrinsic worth of the child. Francesco da Castiglione, in contrast, discussed the relationship between religious and worldly life under the banner of *vita activa*. He gave the Casa Giocosa the new title of a Platonic academy, probably borrowing the idea from the founding of a new “Accademia Platonica” in Florence. In his content, he adhered rather strictly to moral concepts from the Dominican tradition. Bartolomeo Platina’s account attempted to synthesize the writings on education from that century, emphasizing the successes of Vittorino’s former students within society. Francesco Prendilacqua’s dialogue was concerned with determining the place of education within the framework of the goings-on at court. For him, the focus was on individual education, but unlike the others, he did not hold Vittorino up unconditionally as a model. This approach – considering the Lives separately and contrasting them – leads to results that demonstrate a new way to understand the ideas communicated within the domain of the Casa Giocosa.

Quotations from the biographies written by Sassolo da Prato, Francesco Castiglione, Platina and Francesco Prendilacqua were taken usually from the primary manuscripts cited in the bibliography. The orthography is rendered as literal as possible to the manuscripts. If the date of the manuscript is only my estimate, I have written it in angle brackets “< . . . >”. If not noted otherwise, the translations from the Latin in chapters 1 to 5 were produced in collaboration of Anja-Silvia Goeing with Deanna Stewart; the translation of Sassolo’s letter in the appendix (Chap. 6) is entirely due to James Astorga.