

CONSVETUDO VETERVM- MOS ITALORUM:



Vos and tu in the Latin letters of early German humanism

By Johann Ramminger

The re-establishment of the private letter as a genre in its own right was one of the most significant achievements of humanist literary culture. As a consequence, the Italian humanists adopted the classical 'tu' instead of the customary (i.e. medieval) 'vos' as the form of address in contexts outside the political sphere, irrespective of social rank. By the time Southern German intellectuals had begun to embrace Italian (i. e. humanist) literary customs in the middle of the Quattrocento, this feature was firmly established in Italy and was vigorously promoted by the leading Italian humanist at the Emperor's court, Enea Silvio Piccolomini. German humanists did not find it easy to adopt the new custom which went against their own and their recipients' social sensibilities. Up until the 1480s, we find them inserting metadiscursive comments into their letters explaining the new 'tu' to their correspondents as the 'way the Italians write' and as the 'custom of the Ancients.'

1. Introduction

The following explores an aspect of the early reception of Italian humanism in Southern Germany. The period on which this study focuses is commonly called Early German Humanism, "Frühhumanismus," and lasts from the late 1440s to the 1480s; some of my observations will extend to the early sixteenth century.¹ My examples will come from (in modern terms) Bavaria, Swabia, Austria and the German-speaking part of Switzerland. At the beginning of this period this area had a highly developed late medieval culture, which slowly morphed into German humanism with the integration of concepts originating in Italy. This process brought about shifts in how some social relations were understood as well as changes in the linguistic form in which they were expressed. My paper studies one particular form of social

¹ Reasons for the periodization are discussed by Bernstein 1978, Worstbrock 1991, among others.

expression: letter writing, the humanist activity *par excellence*.² I will focus on a small, but rather significant detail of letter writing: how to address the recipient of a letter and whether this would be with *vos* or with *tu*.³ Specifically I will discuss the metadiscourse generated by the reception of Italian epistolographic theory, that is, texts explaining how and why the actors in this process perceived themselves to be innovating.⁴

2. Medieval Letter Writing Theory

Medieval letter writing theory, the *ars epistolandi*, developed a unified set of rules covering every imaginable social contact, from pope and emperor to friends and lovers, from self-promotion and admiration to indifference and hostility.⁵ The question of when to use *tu* or *vos* was expressed in a practical formula by Guido Faba in his *Doctrina ad inueniendas incipiendas et formandas materias et ad ea quae circa huiusmodi requiruntur* (On how to find, begin, and formulate content, and what is needed for that, c. 1230).⁶

Et scias quod in plurali numero de se loquentur maiores, eisdem scribetur similiter in plurali.

You should know that persons of higher rank will speak of themselves in the plural: accordingly, they should be addressed in the plural.

Contact with persons higher up the ladders of power or dignity was an exercise not to be undertaken lightly; the offered rule was as simple as it was usable. How it was to be applied is specified, for example, by Walter de

² See the contributions in Worstbrock 1983, which I found inspiring. A copious overview is now in Landtsheer 2014.

³ On the Latin system of pronouns of address within the context of European languages see Mazzon 2010.

⁴ I will use the term *metacomment* for the authorial ‘intrusions’ into the propositional content of the letters that explain the author’s stance towards conspicuous (in our case humanist) features of their or their correspondents’ letters (see Domínguez-Rodríguez & Rodríguez-Álvarez 2015); esp. in the latter case the distinction between propositional content and metadiscourse is – as has often been emphasized in other contexts – not always clear. *Metadiscourse* will be used in the general sense given by the *Oxford English Dictionary*: “[...] a general or universal discourse which sets the parameters within which other discourses are employed” (*OED* Third Edition, December 2001, online); in our case it will be a superordinate term for theorizations of (epistolary) discourse of any length. Cf. den Haan in the introduction to this volume.

⁵ For the earlier development of the use of the pluralis maiestatis see Lohrmann 1968, 291–296 (“Exkurs: Zum Gebrauch des Singulars der 1. Person in den älteren Papstbriefen”); for the use of the second person plural (pluralis reverentiae), *ibid.* 292 n.7. Regarding the medieval development of *tu/vos*, see Ehrismann 1911.

⁶ The quotation is in Ehrismann 1911, 133, from the edition in Rockinger 1863, I, 189. For Faba/Fava see Bausi 1995.

Argentina (Murner) in his *Notabilia de modo scribendi* (Notes on the ways of writing, 1382) for a specific office at the *curia*, the *penitentiarius*.⁷

Item nota quod omnis maior penitentiarius sive regens officium, etiam si non sit prelatus, episcopos et electos confirmatos ecclesiarum cathedralium et illis maiores in suis litteris sibi preponit et illos reverenter vobisat seu pluraliter nominat, aliis vero omnibus prelatis et non prelatis se preponit et illos reveretur, sed tibizat et singulariter nominat.

Also note: every *penitentiarius maior* or the administrator of the office, churchman or not, names cathedral church bishops and those elected and confirmed in that office before naming himself in his letters, as he does with persons of higher rank than those, addressing them respectfully with *vos*, that is, naming them in the plural. All others, members of the Church or not, he names after naming himself and expresses his respect, but addresses them with *tu* and names them in the singular.

It is not necessary for us to enter into the details of this passage, which probably reflects anxiety about the increasing confusion of competing ecclesiastical hierarchies in the *Great Schism* (from 1380). The use of *tu/vos* called for delicate judgements by the writer about the rank of the addressee relative to his own in order to avoid offending those higher up the social scale while preserving his own dignity in relation to those meriting only the *tu*.

Medieval writers were aware of the fact that many letters written in antiquity used social codes different from their own, for instance indiscriminately employing *tu* when addressing the recipient of a letter. A universally known source for this was the letters of the Apostle Paul to individual recipients in the New Testament. However, this mode of address was outdated, as Boncompagno da Signa assures the reader in his *V tabule salutationum* (Five lists of greetings, 1194/1203):⁸

Quod autem Paulus apostolus narrando salutabat non est trahendum ad consequentiam quia ebreorum consuetudinem imitabat [!] et frequentius in secunda persona salutabat quod nos hodie non facimus quia ecclesia romana ipsum in his nullatenus imitatur.

The fact that the Apostle Paul included narrative elements in his greetings is irrelevant, because he followed Hebrew customs and frequently greeted [the addressee] in the second person [singular] –

⁷ Ed. Göller 1907, 78–89.

⁸ Quotation from ed. Voltolina 1990, 11. For Boncompagno see Pini 1963.

this we do not do nowadays, because the Roman Church simply does not follow him in this at all.

Boncompagno's affirmation that the social norms of antiquity were superseded by the new rules extended even to texts which only fictively belonged to antiquity. A striking example is a medieval letter from Penelope to Odysseus. In Ovid, Penelope had without question used *tu* for her husband (*Her.* 1, inc.: *Haec tua Penelope lento tibi mittit, Ulixee*); but in a further letter to Odysseus from the thirteenth century, Penelope addresses her husband as *vos*.⁹

Some criticism of the use of the plural for individuals was articulated already while the *ars epistolandi* was still developing its rules. In the *Policraticus* (c. 1159), John of Salisbury expresses his scorn for the "fawning pandering" (*adulandi lenocinium*) used to "decorate the singular number with the honour of plurality" (*dum singularitatem honore multitudinis decoramus*).¹⁰ The same argument was used more pointedly in reference to communication between churchmen in a letter by Peter of Blois (1178), who apologized for writing "using *tu, tibi, and te*" (*per tu et tibi et te*); he felt that "the plural form, with which we lie in talking to one, is a pandering style of expression far removed from sacred eloquence" (*pluralis [...] locutio, qua uni loquendo mentimur, sermo adulatorius est, longe a sacro eloquio alienus*).¹¹

The unsuitability of the plural form for single individuals will be a recurring topic of all humanist metadiscourse concerning the re-establishment of the classical 'simplicity.' The arguments brought forth will shift significantly, though; the reasoning above had a moral dimension. Italian humanism will talk about coherence of use and the logic of grammar; north of the Alps, the social implications of the shift will be emphasized.

3. Humanism

Looking back over his life, Petrarch took pride in the fact that he had been the first to reintroduce the universal *tu* in epistolary style.¹²

⁹ Cartellieri 1898, 14–15, no. 62 (my italics): "Mansuetum *vos* habui [...] me *vobis* morigeram [...] ad casum Troie *vos* traxit ultro peccatum Paradis." The manuscript was dated by the editor to the early 1280s, probably belonging as a formulary to the chancellery of the Archbishop of Salzburg; the collection itself was dated by the editor to 1178/1187, originating in France.

¹⁰ *Policraticus* 3,10, *PL* 199 col. 496.

¹¹ Petrus Blesensis, *Epistola XV. Ad comitem Rainaldum electum in episcopum Carnotensem*, *PL* 207 col. 58.

¹² For Petrarch and the *ars dictaminis*, see Hausmann 1983 with further literature. While Petrarch in reality has to share this achievement with Cola di Rienzo, certainly he propagated the new style more widely and over a longer period of time than the latter. See Piur

PETRARCA *sen* 16,1, to Luca della Penna (Arqua 1373)¹³

Dabis veniam, insignis Vir, stylo, ut quibusdam fortasse videbitur irreverenti, sed Deum testor minime insolenti: stylo enim alio uti nescio. Singulariter te alloquor, cum sis unus, et in hoc naturam sequor ac maiorum morem, non blanditias modernorum [...] Denique sic Romanum Imperatorem regesque alios, sic Romanos quoque Pontifices alloqui soleo: si aliter facerem, viderer mihi mentiri. Quid ni autem, cum Iesum Christum ipsum Regem regum et Dominum dominantium, ut minores alios longe, licet maximos sileam, non aliter alloquamur. [...] styli huius per Italiam non auctor quidem, sed instaurator ipse mihi videor, quo cum uti inciperem, adolescens a coetaneis irridebar, qui in hoc ipso certatim me postea sunt secuti.

You will excuse, in your excellence, my style which to some might perhaps appear less than respectful, but, by God, it is not impudent: I do not know how to write differently. I speak to you in the singular because you are one; I follow nature and the custom of our forebears, not the flattery of the moderns. [...] Finally, it is thus that I address the Roman emperor, the other kings, thus the Roman popes: If I did otherwise I would seem to myself to lie. Furthermore, when we address Jesus Christ, King of Kings and Lord of Lords, not to mention the lesser, though still highest [the Saints], we do not address them differently. [...] I believe that I have not invented this style in Italy, but restored it. When I began with this, I was young and was laughed at by my contemporaries; later, however, all outdid one another in following me in this.

In Petrarch's disdain for the "flattery of the moderns" (*blanditi[ae] modernorum*) we have an echo of the medieval criticism mentioned above. The problem, however, went deeper than this. Medieval letter writing theory did not distinguish between the public and the private letter. The private prose

1933, 148, who also observes that Petrarch's practice varied, before he consistently inserted the *tu* in his letters when he prepared them for edition (also Hausmann 1983, 69). Rienzo offers a short justification of the new style in a letter to the emperor Charles IV (August, 1350): "Non mireris, domine mi Cesar Auguste, si de singulari divino precepto, quod caritas esse dinoscitur, verbo te alloquar singulari. Nam et regentem <reges> nos singulis atque reges spirituales doctores et Romanos Cesares Romani oratores verbis vtique singularibus perorarunt" (Do not be surprised, my Lord August Emperor, if I – following the divine injunction in the singular concerning love – address you in the singular. For kings have addressed us in my reign in the singular, spiritual teachers have addressed kings, and Roman orators have addressed Roman emperors entirely with words in the singular; Rienzo 1912, no. 58 p. 279).

¹³ In the following I will use the sigla of the *Neulateinische Wortliste* (Rammingen 2003–) as far as possible. The editions used are indicated *ibid.*

letter was revived as a distinct category by Italian humanists, beginning with Geri d'Arezzo (imitating Pliny the Younger) and of course Petrarch.¹⁴ For Italian humanists of the subsequent generation, there was no question that the universal *tu* of the letters of Cicero and Pliny was the model to follow, at least in private letters.¹⁵ At a certain point the Chancellor of the Florentine republic, Coluccio Salutati, even dreamt aloud of introducing it into the official correspondence of the city.¹⁶

SALUTATI *ep* 8,11, to Giovanni Conversini (1393)

nec in exemplum adducas velim cancellarie Florentine stilum, quam si licuisset atque liceret arbitrio meo formare, vel cum ad illam ascitus fui vel etiam nunc, et in hoc et in multis aliis correxissem. ambulamus equidem in istis allocutionibus per antecessorum vestigia; et que a maioribus recepta est, licet irrationabilis et corrupta, non auderem consuetudinem immutare.

Just don't mention the style of the Florentine chancellery; if I could have changed it when I assumed the office or change it now in the way I wanted, I would have corrected it in this as in many other ways. In these types of address we walk in the footsteps of our forebears. The custom we have taken over from earlier generations, even if irrational and corrupt, I would not venture to change.

Thus Salutati indicates the cleavage that opened up with the development of the humanist letter between the style of the humanists and the style that Poggio, thirty years later, will call the "public silliness":

¹⁴ See Witt 2000, 226–227.

¹⁵ For the reception see Schmidt 1983.

¹⁶ The style of Salutati's official correspondence is discussed in its context by Witt 2000, 300–314, for the use of *tu* cf. *ibid.* 324–325. Witt proceeded from copious archival studies. Recent editions confirm his observations. Amongst the letters in Salutati 2003a, all dating from 1375, most are addressed to public authorities with a number of members and thus *perforce* use the plural. The others, too, use the plural (to the Pope, members of the Gonzaga, Visconti, and Este families). There is one recipient who has incurred the displeasure of Florence, the chancellor to the *Anziani* of Pistoia, and he is the only one who is addressed as *tu*, as a distinct mark of disfavour (no. XLIII = Nuzzo 2008, no. 4033). Even without implied messages as in this letter, the rule proposed by the *ars dictaminis* seems to remain in force: the government of Florence addresses other governments as *vos*, individuals on a lower echelon of power as *tu*, esp. if the message has a personal colouring, such as the one to Pietro Turchi congratulating him on his appointment as chancellor of Carlo Malatesta of Rimini (Salutati 2003b, no. II = Nuzzo 2008, no. 407). Further examples in Langkabel 1981 (observations on the style *ibid.* 47–54). The incipits and explicits in Nuzzo 2008 are too short to permit any conclusions.

POGGIO *ep* I 47, to Niccolò Niccoli (1424)

Epistola tua mihi fuit gratissima. Unum me offendit, quod me appellas nomine plurali. Quid ego immutatus sum? Aut tu publicas ineptias sequeris? Ego idem ille sum, qui fueram; apage a nobis hic mos loquendi. Scribito more tuo. Facessat a singularitate animi pluralitas verborum. Cave amplius mecum loquaris hoc modo.

I really liked your letter. Just one thing irritated me: that you address me in the plural. Have I changed? Or are you following the public silliness? I am the same I always have been, away with this way of speaking. Write in your own style. Away from the one single mind with this plural of words. Just don't speak to me like that any more.

With these three quotations we have covered most of the arguments for the reintroduction of the universal *tu* used by the Italian humanists:

- logicality: it is natural to use the grammatical singular for one person
- antiquity: it is the *mos maiorum*
- coherence of use: since we address God as *tu* (in the *Pater noster*), people of higher rank than ourselves can be addressed the same way without disrespect

The humanists' use of metacommentary in order to articulate rules of engagement continued a late medieval form of metadiscourse concerning societal norms of address. But whereas the medieval examples I cited offer justifications for individual transgressions of contemporary norms (e.g. to avoid pandering), Italian humanists later than Petrarch's generation no longer felt the need to justify the *vos/tu* shift and related changes in epistolary style. Rather, they promoted its adoption in private correspondence by members of the humanist community lagging behind – an act of norm control intended to ensure coherence within the humanist text community. Salutati's lament over the style of public correspondence – a theme commonly voiced by humanists in public office – was probably intended mainly to emphasize his linguistic identity as a humanist; public correspondence in Florence, as elsewhere, had remained and would continue to remain firmly anchored in late medieval letter writing codes (see also Piccolomini below). The theoretical texts we have discussed do not stand separately, but are inserted into letters. They are not primarily intended to explain a particular transgression of current literary codes, but are much more substantial and wide-ranging than necessary to address a specific problem, and thus pave the way for a comprehensive humanist theory of letter writing to replace the medieval *artes dictaminis*.

4. Southern German Humanism

It should be emphasized that the acceptance of Italian literary codes beyond Italy itself was not the straight and linear *gradus ad Parnassum* that might appear from the following, but rather an uneven process of progression and compromise.¹⁷ The process depended not only on cultural trends absorbed at varying speed, but also on subjective qualities which were thus difficult to measure, such as a particular writer's linguistic competence and receptivity to Italian humanist culture. Before the late fifteenth century, additionally, humanist culture in Europe consisted very much of islands separated from one another by time and space that communicated – if at all – only via Italy. Thus the discussions and arguments that I will present in the following have antecedents (unknown to our writers) half a century earlier in early French humanists such as Jean de Montreuil.¹⁸ An intellectual like Rudolphus Agricola, who spent formative years in Italy, wrote polished humanist Latin without equal amongst the contemporary Latin writers under purview here, but had no discernible influence on the contemporary Southern German literary landscape.¹⁹

The medieval style of letter writing could be learned in schools and from a great number of manuals and collections of form letters, some of which I have mentioned above. In the middle of the fifteenth century, as Italian humanism was spreading to Southern Germany, there were as yet no Italian manuals of the new humanist style. Anyone interested could learn mainly from examples – from the letters both of ancient authors and of contemporaries, the latter a well-documented form of intellectual exchange within the Italian peninsula.

How did the new ideas come to be promoted north of the Alps?²⁰ An important conduit would be German students in Italy.²¹ Even if they studied

¹⁷ See below p.76 and n.39. Niklas von Wyle also published conflicting advice concerning the *tu/vos* in the tenth and eighteenth translations at the same time (see p.76 and p.74).

¹⁸ Jean de Montreuil, *letter* 162 (1394) to John of Gaunt: “Volo finem facere, optime princeps, ne ulterius fastidiam tuas aures, [...], iterum obnixè supplicans ut [...] digneris, [...] non moleste ferre quod tibi in singulari numero sum loquutus, quoniam [...] ille modus est oratorum loquendi per ‘tu,’ vel scribendi” (I would like to come to the end, best prince, and not bore your ears any more, just asking again in earnest that you be not offended that I have spoken to you in the singular, because this is the way of [classical] orators speaking or writing; Montreuil 1963, 240–248). The *orator* par excellence for Montreuil was of course Cicero, see e.g. *letter* 38 p. 54.

¹⁹ I would like to thank Marc van der Poel, who first mentioned Agricola in the discussion following my paper in Rome. The oldest letter of Agricola's *familiares* was written in Pavia 1469; neither he nor his correspondents ever seem to have felt the need for an explanation of the *tu/vos* shift. The letters of Agricola are edited in Agricola 2002.

²⁰ The following considerations owe much to Rundle 2012.

²¹ Fundamental for German students in Italy is Sottili 1993.

other subjects, they had a lively interest in the new literary trends; the returnees from Italy brought with them a widened knowledge of classical authors and awareness of the core principles of Italian humanism. The exchange of letters with the more polished Italian humanists, however, seems to have been no more than a theoretical possibility: for most Italians of this period, there is no trace of a sustained exchange of letters with correspondents outside Italy – the gap between the cultures was still too wide.²² Among the letters of Guarino there is not a single one to an addressee outside Italy, and the German pupils – who revered him – nevertheless seem not to have written to him ever again after their return home.²³ Among later humanists there are exceptions, such as Aldus Manutius and Beroaldo the Elder, but they are too late to be of importance for the export of humanist style. With the spread of printing, the letters of the Italian humanists would become easily accessible even without personal connection.²⁴

The promotion of the new cultural ideals could also take place through the agency of Italian humanists travelling or residing outside Italy, and it was one Italian expatriate who came to play an outsized role in the propagation of humanist culture in the area under purview here: Enea Silvio Piccolomini, who was employed in the chancellery of Frederik III (Piccolomini took up residence in Wiener Neustadt in January 1443). His influential position allowed him to ignore or transcend traditional rules of engagement when writing to people who were lower than himself in the hierarchy. And his self-confidence was such that, soon after he took up his position, we find him explaining the rules of humanist style to a young princeling of sixteen, the Duke Sigismund of Tyrol (1427–1496):

PICCOLOMINI *ep* I-1 99, to Duke Sigismund (5 December 1443)

omnes hodie fere, qui scribunt, quamvis unum alloquantur, numero utuntur plurali, tanquam multiplicando personas plus honoris adjiciant reverentioresque videantur. que consuetudo late in Germania patet et apud Italos aliquandiu viguit. [...] hi nunc eos, ad quos scribunt, sin-

²² Petrarch is the remarkable exception; his letters to Charles IV and Johann von Neumarkt promoted the new style of letters as replacement of the *ars dictaminis*. The promotion of *tu* over *vos* – which at one point became a proxy in a tug of war over Petrarch's cancelled plans to visit the court – ultimately failed to give a permanent impetus to the adoption of the new *tu*. See Piur 1933, 148.

²³ The few known non-Italians amongst Guarino's correspondents (Nicola Losicki, Giovanni da Spilimbergo) were all residents in Italy; conversely, amongst the 105 pieces of the correspondence of the early German humanist Hermann Schedel (the nephew of the better known Hartmann) not a single one addresses a non-German.

²⁴ See below p. 78 on the role of printing in the distribution of Perotti's *Rudimenta*.

gulari compellant numero, quia tam Grecos quam Latinos sic locutos fuisse commemorant.

Nearly all who write nowadays use the plural, even when they speak to one person, as if they honoured the persons more and seemed more respectful by multiplying them. This custom is widely diffused in Germany and was once widespread also in Italy. [...] But nowadays [humanists] address those they write to in the singular, because they are aware of the fact that Greek as well as Latin writers used to do so.

This is the beginning of a longish exposé, in which Piccolomini makes the following points:

- Italians imitate the letters of Cicero and Maecenas written “to people of the highest rank” (*ad maximos viros*),²⁵ but also those of Christian writers – Jerome, Augustine, Ambrose, Gregory
- These writers above also address God in the singular, even though they could have used the plural much more elegantly than can we
- It would be reasonable for Sigismund to expect people to write to him in the same way he addresses them, i. e. in the plural (we recognize the rule promoted by Guido Faba).
- Princes and magistrates use the plural from modesty to emphasize that they are acting not alone, but on the counsel of others
- The principle of reciprocity can actually be unworkable (though the pope signs his missives as “servus servorum Dei,” we of course do not address him as “servant of servants,” but as “father of fathers” [pater patrum]).

We note that Piccolomini specifically describes the whole phenomenon as a characteristic of Italian culture (*apud Italos*). The message is: Italian writers imitate the ancients, German letter writers should imitate the Italians. The central point which Piccolomini makes (also by addressing the prince as *tu*) is that according to the new rules of letter writing, people can and should address not only their equals, but also their social betters as *tu*.

Piccolomini’s short treatise on the humanist *tu* is put forward as a justification for his own use of the second person singular for the addressee in the initial part of a long letter which discusses the intellectual attainments of an *optimus princeps*. This metacomment explains a point on which the letter

²⁵ It may be that the mention of Maecenas is a reference to his testament. There, Maecenas uses the second person sing. towards Augustus, SVET. *vita Hor.* p. 45,7 “Horati Flacci ut mei esto memor” (if *esto* is in the second person sing.). There is one letter from Augustus to Maecenas, quoted in Macrobius, *Saturnalia* 2,4,12, which uses the *tu*. The mention of Maecenas may be a form of flattery, since it puts Piccolomini in the role of Maecenas versus Sigismund as Augustus.

writer transgresses the societal norms expected by the addressee by referring to the Italians and the Ancients. Thus, it reverts to an earlier typology of metadiscourse, of which we have cited late medieval and early humanist examples (Petrarch). It will be taken up by German humanists after Piccolomini and used in many variations, which I will discuss in the following.

The actual influence of this letter is of course difficult to gauge. That the letter must have circulated is attested by the fact that it was translated into German by the early editor of Piccolomini's letters, Niklas von Wyle, as the tenth piece of his *Translatzen* (Translations).²⁶ In general, Piccolomini did not hesitate to dispense appreciation and encouragement to his German correspondents.²⁷

Piccolomini had drawn no theoretical distinction between the public and the private letter, but in his practice diverged considerably from his theoretical premises. He remained on 'humanist' terms, including the second person singular, with Sigismund, whom only weeks later he provided with an example letter in Latin to express his love to a young lady (*ep* I-1 104). But Thomas Ebendorfer, an imperial official, who at that point in his career acted as an ambassador for King Frederic, was addressed by him in the plural:

PICCOLOMINI *ep* I-1 107, to Thomas Ebendorfer (27. 12. 1443)

Eximie doctor major honorande. litteras, quas ad me nuper misistis ...

Excellent and most honourable doctor. The letter you [*vos*] recently sent me ...

This was obviously a necessity at the time; when Piccolomini revised his collected letters, he carefully 'converted' this and other letters to the second person singular.²⁸

Before we look at how German letter writers articulated the problems posed by the adoption of the universal *tu*, it may be useful to discuss at least briefly the larger context for the usage of *tu* and *vos*.²⁹ As far as the sources

²⁶ Wyle 1861, 199–220. The translation is undated. Since it refers to editorial plans of Wyle which never came to fruition, it may have been written shortly before his death in 1478. For a brief appreciation see Bernstein 1978, 52–53. Wyle's edition of Piccolomini's *Epistole familiares* appeared 'not after 1478,' the printer and the place of printing are not indicated (ISTC ip00716000). The letter to Sigismund is on fol.94r–101r. For Niklas von Wyle's biography see Worstbrock 1987 and 1993.

²⁷ See PICCOLOMINI *ep* III-1 47 to Niklas von Wyle (ca. July 1452), where the *caracteres rotundi* of his handwriting as well as the style of a letter of Niklas are praised. On Piccolomini's "literarische Werbekampagne" (literary publicity campaign) see Weinig 1998, 98–99.

²⁸ See Wolkan in Piccolomini 1909, XIV–XVI.

²⁹ I would like to thank Annet den Haan who alerted me to extant variations in addressing God in European vernaculars.

permit us to say, the preferred mode of address in the oldest Germanic writings we have was the second person singular. Latin writings in the early Middle Ages also oscillated to some degree: *vos* expressing a larger – social as well as geographical – distance, while the *tu* could indicate closer contact, also between social unequals.³⁰ With the codification of rules in the *artes epistolandi*, usage became more fixed, and at the beginning of the period under purview the *tu* seems to have been used only between young people of the same sex in more or less private contexts. Even married couples (see Penelope’s letter mentioned above) and young lovers addressed each other as *vos* in public (also in German).³¹ In other social contacts, in so far as they are put into writing, the *vos* seems to dominate. Niklas von Wyle’s eighteenth translation dating from 1478, with the topic “wie man ain yeden in sinem stande ain gebürlich vberschrift setzen solt” (how to use the correct address for all according to their rank, p. 191), basically upholds the precepts of the *ars epistolandi*.³²

One problem for German letter writers wishing to use the new universal *tu* was the fact that the new trends of style were not yet widely known in the North.³³ Again and again a writer inserted a metacomment to explain why

³⁰ Ehrismann 1901. The social sensibilities involved from the perspective of the nobleman complaining about the lack of the respect he felt was due to him are formulated by Felix Hemmerlin in his *De nobilitate et rusticitate dialogus*, chapter 3 (c. 1444/1450). See Felicis malleoli vulgo hemmerlein [...] *De nobilitate et rusticitate dialogus et alia opuscula*. [Straßburg: Johann Prüss], [c. 1500] (ISTC ih00015000), fol.IX^v–XIII^r. For Hemmerlin see Colberg 1981.

³¹ A splendid example from Nuremberg, 1465, of how young lovers and their friends addressed each other in German in public and private is in the papers of a court case published by Reicke 1908. In short, Barbara Löffelholtz, the young lady at the centre of the affaire, uses the second person plural in the amorous banter with her boyfriend (p. 142 & 143 = p. 166 & 169), second person singular with her female best friend (p. 144 = p. 167) and once the *du* with her boyfriend in a rhyme (p. 162). The papers also quote a formula for concluding the marriage customary in Nuremberg, which uses the second person singular (p. 172).

³² I use the text printed in Wyle 2002, 191–204. The discussion about the social parameters determining the pronoun in the singular or plural is in chapter 5, p. 200 (= Wyle 1861, 360). Wyle’s examples make it clear that he is concerned with official correspondence only. A brief overview is in Bernstein 1978, 59.

³³ Presumably, an explanation was inserted when the recipient might be unaware of the new custom or find it objectionable, not necessarily because it was new *per se*. No such declaration is e.g. known between Hermann Schedel and Sigismund Gossembrot, although SCHEDEL-He *ep* 9 from 1458 (a letter of congratulations to Gossembrot, who had become mayor) shows this was still a matter that needed reflection. In this case Schedel wrote the initial draft using *vos* and only later corrected it to *tu*; see the edition by Worstbrock 2000, 48–52, for *vos/tu* *ibid.* p. 48.

he used *tu* against the expectations of the addressee; in this way we can catch a glimpse of their ‘inner monologue,’ as it were.³⁴

The introduction of the *tu* was probably least risky between friends, as between Hermann Schedel and his (younger) uncle Hartmann.³⁵

SCHEDL-He *ep* 31, to Hartmann Schedel (1460)

Deinde, patre amantissime, ne dedigneris velim, quod singulariter sim te allocutus scribendo, quia zelus intimi amoris plus tibiando quam vobisando meo iudicio ostenditur, quod utique summum, temporibus quoad vixero, fixum in me fore scias.³⁶

Now, my dear uncle, please don't be indignant because I address you in the singular in writing. In my opinion the zeal of intense love is better expressed by ‘tu’ than by ‘vos.’ You can be sure that this [i. e. my affection for you] will be fixed in me in the highest degree in all the time of my life.

The declaration may have been triggered by the promotion of Hartmann to the *magisterium*³⁷ at the university of Leipzig (the letter quoted is a letter of congratulation), since the owner of a university degree according to medieval standards could have expected a more formal address. The same Hermann Schedel encourages another of his correspondents, Wilhelm von Reichenau, to use the new *tu*:

SCHEDL-He *ep* 38, to Wilhelm von Reichenau, vicar of the bishop of Eichstätt³⁸ (1460)

Preterea familiarius amplius mihi tibiando scribas velim, quoniam zelus fraterni ac intimi amoris plus tibiando quam vobisando meo iudicio dinoscitur.

Anyway, henceforth I would like you to address me more familiarly with the ‘tu;’ in my opinion the intensity of close brotherly affection is more visible using ‘tu’ than ‘vos.’

³⁴ Whether there would be a difference between written and oral metacommentary of this type cannot be discussed here, since we lack examples of the latter. The metadiscursive insertions in letters that we are going to discuss are what has been designated *conceptually oral* elements in variationist terminology, as is emphasized by the frequent presence of words like *loqui* and *alloqui* besides *scribere* (see Koch & Oesterreicher 2001 and Dürscheid 2003; about the rich terminology see Mao 1996).

³⁵ For Hartmann Schedel see Hernad & Worstbrock 2011, for the uncle Hermann, Schnell 1992.

³⁶ The recurring phrase “quia zelus intimi amoris ...” appears first in a letter of Gossembrout from 1459 quoted below; Hermann Schedel must have known this or a similar letter.

³⁷ As noted by Hermann 1896, 39.

³⁸ For Wilhelm von Reichenau see Wendehorst 2006, 220–241.

In both passages, the shift to the humanist *tu* is combined with another topos of humanist letter writing, the expression of unlimited affection between sender and recipient. In the latter case the person who might, as a Church official, be higher up the social ladder is invited to use the *tu* by the sender of the letter, who sets the example simply by using it.

Later letters in Schedel's correspondence show that in the 1460s the introduction of the humanist *tu* was still very much under development. Hartmann does not follow Hermann Schedel's example, but addresses his (older) nephew with *vos* (*ep* 44 and 45, both from 1462), as does Hermann himself the young Ulrich Gossembrot (the son of Sigismund; *ep* 50, 1463) and others; he even returns to the *vos* in letters to Hartmann and Valentin Eber, whom he had previously addressed as *tu*.³⁹

Once there was a major social distance between sender and recipient, the shift to the universal *tu* became commensurately more complex, and the operation had to be undertaken with great care. In the following quotation, Sigismund Gossembrot, an Augsburg business man, is writing to Cardinal Peter of Schaumberg, Bishop of Augsburg. The bishop had a certain interest in the new cultural currents and was in fact a sort of patron of intellectuals in the city:⁴⁰

GOSSEMBROT-S *Schedel-H ep* 18, to Cardinal Peter von Schaumberg (1459)

Denique, maior affabilissime, ne dedigneris velim, quod singulariter sim te allocutus. Pater celestis ita sibi affari nos docuit, cui tu magna virtutum et dignitatum excellencia appropinquas, tum zelus intimi amoris plus tibizando quam vobizando meo iudicio ostenditur.

All in all, most courteous of men, please do not be angry because I have addressed you in the singular. The heavenly father whom you approach in your worthy and excellent virtues has taught us to address him thus, and in my opinion one's close affection is better shown by 'tu' than by 'vos.'

Here two reasons are combined: we address God in the singular, and affection is better expressed in the singular. The argument that we address God in the singular in our prayers is not new, but Gossembrot adapts it to

³⁹ To Hartmann Schedel: *ep* 85, which is tentatively dated to 1470. As we have only Hermann's draft we cannot be sure whether and in what form the letter was actually sent. — To Valentin Eber: *tu*: *ep* 37 (1460), 73 (1467); *vos*: *ep* 74 (1467; this letter is a continuation of *ep* 73; thus the shift from *tu* to *vos* is all the more jarring), 75, 76, 77 (all 1467), 81 (1468), 102 (undated). An explanation was offered by Hermann 1896, 39–40. About Valentin Eber see Worstbrock 1980.

⁴⁰ For Gossembrot see Worstbrock 1981, for Peter von Schaumberg Kreuzer 2001.

his own social exigencies by giving it a twist: it is not that what is good enough for God must suffice for human beings, but that the cardinal, being godlike, *deserves* the same address we use for Him. Gossembrot adds an argument that had been a favourite of the Italians, the grammatical illogicality of using the plural for a single entity:

cum de te loquor alijs, non dico: “reverendissimus Cardinalis mihi dixerunt,” set: “dixit,” ubi claret, quod vobisacio litterarum non tanti honoris est.

when I speak of you to others, I do not say: “The most reverend cardinal have said,” but “has said;” here it is clear that the plural in the letters does not indicate that much honour.

The one argument which was always present, implicitly or explicitly, was that the universal *tu* was a custom of the ancients. In the examples we have seen so far, the sender – despite all protestations – simply created a *fait accompli* by using the *tu* and apologizing for it or explaining it afterwards. Obviously Ludwig Rad,⁴¹ secretary to Peter of Schaumberg, was less sure of himself, even though he was writing to his cousin, shifting back and forth between *tu* and *vos*:

RAD-L Wyle *ep ed. Wolkan 23*, to Victor Nigri (1462)

Sit uobis gratum, oro, singularis mea allocucio, suaue enim admodum mihi visum est et priscorum normam sapere.

I pray that my address in the singular be welcome to you [*vobis!*]. In my opinion it is very pleasant and expresses the way of writing of the ancients.

The problem probably was that the addressee of the letter, Victor Nigri (Schwarzahns), was abbot of the monastery of Alpirsbach,⁴² thus a person of distinction; four years later, the same Ludwig Rad was still not sure how the recipient would take the use of the *singularis numerus*, although here Rad simply uses it and explains afterwards:

RAD-L Wyle *ep ed. Wolkan 10*, to the same (1466)

Allocutus sum te, obseruantissime pater et suauissime patruelis, singulari numero, non, mihi crede, elata ceruice aut spiritu superbo, sed ut littere antiquitatem saperent, quam plurimum amo.

⁴¹ For Rad see Worstbrock 1989b.

⁴² For Nigri see Weining 1998, 73 n.132. Lehmann 1918, 422.

I have addressed you [*te*], venerable father and sweetest cousin, in the singular, not – believe me – from pride and arrogance, but so that my letter would have a sheen of antiquity, which I love very much.

German humanists adopted the new style because it was the custom of *antiquitas*; this is an argument which Piccolomini had already brought forth (see above), accompanying his second argument, that it was the custom of the country from which the new cultural trends came. Niklas von Wyle,⁴³ the translator and editor of Piccolomini, formulated his admiration for the ‘Italian’ style in the following way:

WYLE *ep* 2, to a Swiss correspondent (c. 1450)

Vale et quod te singulari modo numero appellavi, non egre fert, quia et Italarum morem et omnium veterum haud ignoras consuetudinem.

Farewell, and don’t be offended that I just addressed you in the singular: you know very well the usage of the Italians and the custom of all the ancients.

This is in one sentence the core motivation for much of the reception of Italian humanism in Southern Germany: the reception of the custom of the Italians and, through it, access to the usage of antiquity.

5. New Grammars for New Rules

The ‘usage of the Italians’ was finally presented in a coherent system in the first humanist *ars epistolandi*, Niccolò Perotti’s *De epistolis componendis*, published in Rome in 1473 as part of the *Rudimenta grammatices* (Basics of grammar). Perotti is unequivocal in his disdain for the traditional *vos*:

PEROTTI *rud* 1121

Illud etiam summo studio fugiendum est ne ad unum scribens pluratiuo numero utaris, in quem errorem omnes feré nostrae aetatis homines incurrerunt, putantes se magis honorare eum ad quem scribunt si barbare loquantur. In qua re non tam ignorantiam hominum admiror quam stultitiam. Nam si id honoris causa non faciunt, cur barbare loquuntur? Si uero id honoris causa agunt, cur eo quoque sermone deum non honorant, quem singulari numero affantur? An maior in loquendo reuerentia regi aut pontifici debetur quam deo?

Also to be utterly avoided is the use of the plural when you write to one person. This is an error committed by nearly all in our times, thinking that they honour the person they write to more by expressing themselves barbarously. In this I found people’s stupidity even more

⁴³ For Wyle see above p.73 and n.26.

astounding than their ignorance. If this has to do with respect, why not speak to God in the same way? Him they address in the singular. Or should speech to a king or a pope express more reverence than to God?

And later he categorically declares (*rud* 1122):

In secunda uero persona nemo unquam doctus ad unum dirigens sermonem pluraliter locutus est.

Regarding the second person, no one of any learning has ever used the plural when addressing *one*.

Perotti's grammar was reprinted some fifty times in the first ten years after its initial printing, and especially from Venice easily penetrated the Southern German market. Indeed, Perotti's grammar was everywhere, as the syndicus of Vienna University, Bernhard Perger, observed approvingly. However, according to him it was not ideally suited for German students because it presupposed an unrealistically high level of Latin and because its example sentences were in Italian.⁴⁴

Perger⁴⁵ himself in 1479 therefore wrote a *Grammatica nova* with the subtitle *Artis grammaticae introductorium [...] fere ex Nicolae Peroti grammatici eruditissimi traditionibus [...] translatum* (Introduction to grammar mainly derived from the rules of the most learned grammarian Niccolò Perotti),⁴⁶ which, like Perotti's *Rudimenta*, contained a chapter on letter writing. Perger tried to make his work more useful to the students he expected to study from it. Perotti's rant on the barbarity of not saying *tu* to all is absent and is not even mentioned as an alternative possibility, as discussed by Perger in other cases (e.g. the *salutatio*, where he admits both the tra-

⁴⁴ "Nam et si Nicolai Peroti rudimenta, que passim a librariis venalia circumferuntur adeo [ado *ed.*] docte, adeo plane grammaticae vim atque naturam explicant ut nihil suppletione dignum scriptoribus reliquerit, tamen et ob italicorum linguam vernaculam plerisque in locis insertam et exempla presertim propriorum nominum nostris prorsus incognita, tum ob multa alia que solidiore egent etate, parum vsui eam doctrinam adolescentibus alemanicis obuenire comperimus" (Perotti's *Basics of Grammar* can be bought everywhere in bookstores; they explain the aim and nature of grammar with so much learning and clarity that they seem to leave nothing to add to other authors. However, since they contain Italian vernacular phrases in many spots and examples, especially with proper names which are entirely unknown to readers here and also because they contain much other stuff which requires a more advanced age, we have made the experience that this model of teaching is less than useful for German youngsters; Bernard Perger, *Nova grammatica*, Heidelberg ? ca. 1491, ISTC ip00280300, sig.a2v).

⁴⁵ See Worstbrock 1989a; for Perger's grammar Simoniti 1975, 214–216.

⁴⁶ The 'subtitle' (in reality the colophon) changes from print to print; this one is quoted from the edition Heidelberg ? ca. 1491, ISTC ip00280300, sig.viii^r (explicit).

ditional and the new/classical form). Clearly Perger did not think this piece of humanist revolution was going to be useful to German letter writers.

It will take twenty years more for this particular facet of the Italian humanist style to enter the manuals of letter writing composed by German humanists, with Heinrich Bebel's *Commentaria epistolarum conficiendarum*, first published in Strassburg 1503. Bebel has a chapter "Ne quemquam vnum in scribendo alloquemur numero plurali et, vt vulgo dicitur, ne vobisemus illum ad quem scribimus" (That we should not address a single person in the plural in writing, and, as one says, 'vosize' [*vobisemus*] the person we write to):

BEBEL *Commentaria epistolarum conficiendarum* fol.XII^v–XIII^r (1503)

Omnium igitur tam graecorum et latinorum quam hebraeorum tam gentilium quam christianorum consensu id approbatum est, vt omnes cuiuscumque conditionis vel dignitatis homines singulari numero alloquemur. qui aliter fecerit sciat se non solum contra omnium maiorum quos tamen honestissimum est sequi consuetudinem fecisse, sed etiam barbarissime se locutum.

There is broad agreement among Greeks, Latins, Hebrews, heathens as well as Christians that we address all persons of whatever standing or dignity in the singular. Anybody doing otherwise should know that he is disregarding the practice of earlier generations whom it is most proper to follow, and he is expressing himself in a most clumsy way.

By this point, this is a fairly well known rule of Italian epistolography. It has been a long time since a letter writer had to explain to a recipient why he was addressing him with the intimate *tu*.⁴⁷

6. Conclusion

In Italian humanism, epistolary theory concerning the use of *tu* was initially propagated by metacomments, that is, explanatory statements inserted into letters. At first these were, as they had been in the late Middle Ages, authorial justifications for transgression of the traditional norm. In the generation after Petrarch these shifted to a more assertive (meta)discourse concerning the adoption of the *tu* within the humanist community and beyond. By the time the first larger theoretical text (Perotti's *De epistolis scribendis*) was written, the innovation was universally accepted and individual metacomments were no longer needed. In an overlapping timeframe, the

⁴⁷ Erasmus' *Libellus de conscribendis epistolis*, completed c. 1499 (but printed only in 1521), uses the *tu* throughout the example sentences given. For date and context see Henderson 2009, 26.

development repeated itself within Early Southern German humanism. The crucial stimulus by Italian humanism was provided by Piccolomini, who at the very beginning of his tenure at the imperial court brought humanist epistolary theory to an environment as yet untouched by, and for some time wary of, Italian intellectual trends. Piccolomini offered his version of the humanist metadiscourse on letter writing as a passage in a letter where he used the *tu* ‘inappropriately’ to address a social superior. For as long as the tenets of the new movement were insufficiently established within the nascent humanist community, it was this form of transgressive meta-comment that was the standard form of explanation of the humanist *tu* used by Southern German letter writers. Every metacomment in a letter contained an illocutionary element and thus – in a *mise en abyme*⁴⁸ – had to apply internally the very rule it offered for the text into which it was inserted. In the Italian examples we have cited, the metacomments followed the same rule internally as the surrounding text. Southern German writers, on the other hand, sometimes explained the *tu* in a letter by a metacomment using *vos*, thus revealing the tension in social sensibility created by the spread of this particular epistolary rule. In the same vein, the back-shifting from *tu* to *vos* that we can occasionally observe in consecutive letters to the same recipient (Hermann Schedel) shows not only that the new cultural paradigm was only being haltingly accepted, but also that the private letter as a category with a distinct code of writing was slow to establish itself (see Piccolomini’s editorial interventions in his own letters). Metacomments in Southern German humanism were mostly authorial: that is to say, they explained the choices of the letter writer concerning his own text. Only rarely do we have a metacomment that exhorts another to adopt the new *tu*. The lengthy metacomments offered by Italian humanists (such as Piccolomini) have no counterpart in Southern German humanism. In the end, as in Italy, metacomments concerning the *tu* were no longer necessary, as the German humanist community had become widely aware of the new Italian paradigm of classical epistolary style, which soon could be learned from new theoretical texts (Bebel’s *Commentaria epistolarum conficiendarum*).

The advent of the new humanist manuals of style opened a new chapter in the reception of Italian humanist epistolography. With the adoption of printing as a means of distributing cultural information, the access to Italian culture became significantly easier. If anything, this increased the tension between the new Italian and the established late medieval style: the ‘pure’

⁴⁸ The definition most useful to me was Wolf 2004/2013.

Italian theory was adapted in various ways so as to accommodate the social needs of transalpine letter writers of the early sixteenth century.⁴⁹

Thus, the achievements of the early German humanists did not lie in their writings; indeed, from a standpoint of pure humanist language use it was all too easy to find points to criticize. What these early adopters of Italian culture developed was a basic understanding of how Italian humanist culture could be integrated into a preexisting social value system: how it could be used to transform an intellectual world substantially different from the one in which humanist culture had originated. The development of a new cultural identity, of which I have presented a small detail, was the achievement upon which successive generations of Latin writers would build.

⁴⁹ I would like to thank the anonymous peer reviewer for pointing out that the question of classical vs. late medieval usage not only was an ongoing concern in the circle of Erasmus and amongst contemporary humanists, but remained alive into the seventeenth century; the reviewer also referred me to Henderson's article (2009) exploring the development in the early sixteenth century.

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