The word ‘ambassador’ (from the Latin ambaxiator or ambasciator, a synonym of ‘envoy’) was in recorded use in northern Italy since the early twelfth century. The functions associated with ‘ambassador’, as in the case of ‘envoy’, were often confounded with the tasks performed by other diplomatic agents appointed with titles derived from classical and medieval diplomatic terminology such as nuntius, orator, procurator, legatus, or missus. The first recorded use in England appears to be in Geoffrey Chaucer’s Troilus and Criseyde, written around 1374 and first printed by William Caxton in 1477: in the fourth book of Chaucer’s poem, there are two stanzas describing the mission of Greek ‘[a]mbassatours’ to Troy.

By the middle of the fifteenth century, the traditional system of ad hoc diplomatic communication and negotiation that predominated in the medieval period began to change. The intensification of European and particularly Italian diplomatic activity instigated the development of new practices and structures of representations that paved the way to the emergence and consolidation of the figure of the resident ambassador. The Duke of Milan Ludovico Sforza’s decision to send a resident ambassador to the court of Henry VII in 1490 increased the growing influence of Italian diplomatic practices and theory in Tudor England. In 1505, Henry VII instructed John Stile, initially appointed as an envoy in a special mission to Spain, to remain there as a resident ambassador. During the 1520s, under the direction of Thomas Wolsey, Henry VIII had resident embassies in France, Venice, and Spain.

2 For the evolution of early modern diplomatic terminology see, for example, Dante Fedele, Naissance de la diplomatie moderne (XIIIe–XVIIe siècles): L’ambassadeur au croisement du droit, de l’éthique et de la politique (Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlag, 2017), pp. 191–280, 527–564.
3 ‘Ambassador, n.’, Oxford English Dictionary; Geoffrey Chaucer, Troilus and Criseyde (Westminster, 1483; STC 5094), unpaginated.
The turbulent years following the Henrician Reformation and the reign of Mary I slowed the formalisation of English diplomacy, until Elizabeth I invested in a gradual professionalisation of her diplomatic corps, appointing individuals as ambassadors and envoys who had reputable experience or expertise in political, diplomatic and administrative affairs. However, the office of the ambassador changed most profoundly under the Stuarts, when James I established permanent embassies in Paris, Madrid, Venice, and the Hague. Notwithstanding the political vicissitudes of the Tudor and Stuart periods, or perhaps because of them, English diplomats, jurists, and scholars were heavily involved in the theoretical and juridical debates surrounding the office of the ambassador. The laws and treatises around ambassadors were also influenced by foreign exiles based in the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, such as the Italian lawyer Alberico Gentili.

The ambassador was a figure caught in between, thrown into the fraught political environments of other regimes while charged with serving the interests of his own monarch. In *De legationibus libri tres* (1585), Gentili defined the ambassador as a diplomatic agent (*legatus*), 'not only appointed by the state, but also in the name of the state, and as the representative of the state' (*Vt legatus is fit qui non modò public, sed public etiam nomine & publica indutus persona*). In other words, ambassadors were true representatives of sovereignty, embodying and acting in the name of a state or a prince. Ambassadors had to develop a specific persona or character which would enable them to act and speak on behalf of their prince without losing their own autonomous self. This function of double representation forced an ambassador to construct a performative self which allowed him to manipulate his two personae according to circumstance. The Oxford graduate and French ambassador Jean Hotman, for example, made an analogy with theatre to explain the limits of the representative function of ambassadorship. An '[a]mbassage and a Comedie are different things' since ambassadors were not able to 'play diverse partes under diverse garments'.

Even though an ambassador facilitated the communication between different princes, he only represented one of them, and his legitimacy and
dignity relied on this close bond between himself and his prince. If an ambassador represented multiple rulers, he would no longer be a representative of sovereignty, but a mere messenger. The career of Robert Sherley, the Englishman employed by Shah Abbas of Persia as his ambassador to the European courts, faced several problems due to the frequent doubts concerning his true political allegiances. Observing his behaviour as he travelled across Portugal, Spain, and the Netherlands, Iberian agents commented on the way Sherley acted on behalf of English interests. At the same time, English authorities were wary of Sherley’s close friendship with Shah Abbas. During his first audience with James I, Sherley asked to be forgiven for being at the service of the shah. Although he was pardoned, James expressed displeasure at seeing one of his subjects dressed as a Safavid courtier and asked Sherley to return to English fashion.8

Such a precise function stressed the importance of the personal qualities of the holder of an ambassadorial post. Treatises on the office of the ambassador highlighted the importance of appointing virtuous individuals whose physical appearance, intellectual abilities, aristocratic background, and moral integrity could reflect and enhance the reputation of the prince. This rendered the Renaissance concept of civility essential to the political and personal relationships between different cultures. This type contained some parallels with Renaissance discussions of the ideal courtier, often presented as well-educated, politically savvy, gracious, and – more controversially – adept at dissimulation.9 As mediators between different rulers of states, ambassadors were required to have the capacity to operate within different societies and courtly environments. They needed to be able to manipulate languages, bureaucratic systems, and rituals that shaped a range of foreign polities. These transcultural skills highlighted the importance of cross-cultural knowledge and experience. Diplomatic practices and processes became not only a realm for well-read and politically savvy aristocrats, but increasingly required the collaboration of a myriad of agents such as interpreters, secretaries, scholars, or merchants, individuals who had the ability to navigate between different political and cultural systems.10

10 Cross-Confessional Diplomacy and Diplomatic Intermediaries in the Early Modern Mediterranean, special issue, Journal of Early Modern History, ed. by Martje van Gelder and Tijana...
Henry Wotton, who served as English resident ambassador in Venice in three different missions between 1604 and 1623, famously quipped that an ambassador was ‘an honest man sent abroad to lie for the good of his country’.\textsuperscript{11} Wotton’s witticism played both with the extraterritorial dimension of ambassadorship and with the widespread perception of the resident ambassador as an ‘honest (or licensed) spy’, an ambiguous figure responsible for collecting intelligence from his host, interfering in local affairs, and participating in courtly intrigue.\textsuperscript{12} The need for intelligence and news made diplomats essential gatherers of all sorts of information, from court gossip to suspicious military movements.\textsuperscript{13} As Robert Cecil reminded William Trumbull, the English ambassador at Brussels between 1609 and 1625, in a letter from 1610, the main function of an ambassador was to ‘observe and advertise’ so that Cecil could ‘make use for the best of His Majesty’s service of what I receive from you’.\textsuperscript{14} This knowledge-gathering function of ambassadors often blurred the distinction between diplomacy and espionage. The salary of Thomas Edmondes, the English resident ambassador in France (1610–1616), covered, for example, his ‘diet and intelligence’.\textsuperscript{15}

The thin line separating diplomacy from espionage triggered anxieties concerning the activities of foreign ambassadors residing in England. One of the figures who epitomised the dangerous presence of the foreign resident ambassador for Jacobean observers was Diego Sarmiento de Acuña, count

\textsuperscript{11} Henry Wotton, \textit{Reliquiae Wottoniae or a Collection of Lives, Letters, Poems, with Characters of Sundry Personages, and Other Incomparable Pieces of Language and Art} (London, 1651; Wing 3648), sig. C1v.


of Gondomar and Spanish ambassador to England from 1613 to 1622. Indeed, Gondomar regularly complained to Philip IV’s court in Madrid that his duty to obtain valuable information on English politics through all possible means, including bribery and espionage, made ambassadorship ‘a nasty job [...] since one has to be mixed up in business like this’. The emergence of the resident ambassador as an integral part of early modern statecraft at home and abroad led to literary reflections that explored many of the issues raised by diplomatic and legal treatises. The allegorical and satirical character of the Black Knight in Thomas Middleton’s immensely popular and controversial play, _The Game at Chess_ (1624), was largely inspired by Gondomar and explored the anxieties and suspicions raised by the presence of foreign ambassadors.

Although women were excluded from formal diplomatic service, ambassadors’ wives often operated as informal agents. As such, they became important nodes in correspondence networks and the gathering of state intelligence. Jean Hotman strongly favoured the appointment of married men to ambassadorial posts and advised ambassadors to bring their wives, not only for the moral virtues associated with marriage, but for the need to have a trustworthy person who could manage the ambassadorial household. Apart from running the logistic and domestic affairs of an embassy, ambassadresses were able to explore local (and predominantly female) sociability networks that allowed them to lobby and cultivate friendships with politically influential women. The involvement with local gendered social networks also made it possible to gather relevant information through channels which were usually restricted to their husbands. In her memoirs, Ann Fanshawe, the wife of Richard Fanshawe, the English ambassador in Madrid between 1664 and 1666, mentioned visits from many ladies of the Spanish court and noted her proximity to Queen Mariana. This privileged access to relevant female figures of the court allowed Lady Fanshawe to pass sensitive diplomatic intelligence to her husband, especially during his

17 Jean Hotman, _The Ambassador_ (London, 1603; STC 13848), sig. D6r.
involvement in the negotiations that would lead to the 1668 peace treaty between Portugal and Spain.

Spouses also played an important role in the performance of diplomatic rituals. The presence of an ambassador’s wife was often used to bypass protocol obstacles, especially those involving gift-exchange practices. The offers of gifts to diplomatic representatives by their hosts were usually perceived as threats that could corrupt or distract an ambassador. However, the ambassador’s wife, since she was not a formal diplomatic agent, was able to receive gifts and to participate in gift-exchange practices that served to facilitate communication and express cordiality.

The high mobility of ambassadors and their close association with their home and host royal courts often made them important introducers of foreign literary works, new cultural tastes, and consumption habits. Henry Wotton and Dudley Carleton, during their time as ambassadors in Venice, were often asked by English art collectors such as Thomas Howard, Earl of Arundel, to obtain Greco-Roman art pieces and inform them of all the novelties of the Italian art scene. If Wotton and Carleton operated as cultural or artistic brokers, other diplomats like Richard Fanshawe, who served as ambassador in Lisbon (1661, 1662–1665) and Madrid (1664–1666), became textual or literary intermediaries. A specialist in Iberian affairs since his time as secretary of the English embassy in Spain (1635–1638), Fanshawe was the author of the first English translations of Luís Vaz de Camões’s sonnets and Os Lusíadas (1572). His translation of Camões’s epic poem, first published in 1655, is considered to have influenced John Milton’s Paradise Lost (1667) and is mentioned by John Dryden. During his stint as English ambassador to the Sublime Porte (1621–1628), Thomas Roe was

actively engaged in gathering rare and curious objects from the Ottoman territories. One of the pieces he acquired and gifted to Charles I, the *Codex Alexandrinus*, was a rare collection of early Christian texts, which instigated a renewed interest in Eastern Christianity and its textual production.24 The fashion for global consumption and gifts, including drinking vessels for drinking chocolate or tea, also meant that the habits that ambassadors and ambassadresses picked up abroad could influence elite tastes in England, as when Edward Montagu, Earl of Sandwich, became an enthusiastic supporter of chocolate-drinking during his time as ambassador in Madrid in 1666.25

While in the sixteenth century there was an emphasis on appointing individuals of the highest social standing to ambassadorial posts, the seventeenth century reflected the increasing bureaucratisation of the early modern state. This served to formalise diplomatic practices, allowing for the emergence of a new professional diplomat. Though many seventeenth-century theorists continued to stress that social status conferred an additional authority and dignity to the office of the ambassador, the emphasis now lay in expertise, merit, and talent. As elsewhere in Europe, the gradual professionalisation of the English diplomatic corps initiated in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries opened the door to the recruitment of well-educated members of the civic and professional classes, who found in diplomatic service an interesting path for social mobility.26

The development of a professional English diplomatic service coincided with the regular presence of English diplomats in places such as Mughal India, the Ottoman Empire, or the Barbary Coast. The geographer Richard Hakluyt considered the English diplomatic activities outside Europe to be a remarkable achievement. In his epistle to *The Principal Navigations* (1589), Hakluyt celebrated the presence of ‘an English Ligier’, or ambassador, ‘in the stately porch of the Grand Signor at Constantinople’.27 Ambassadors sent to the Levant or South Asia, however, faced practical problems regarding their status and functions. While English diplomats in Europe contributed to the development of a professional identity that mixed courtly and bureaucratic elements that granted them a specific political agency and reputation,

diplomatic agents of the English trading companies in the Levant and Asia had a more ambiguous status which limited their functions as representatives of sovereignty.

Although the first English ambassador to the Ottoman court, William Harborne, was presented as Elizabeth I’s ‘true and undoubted Orator, Messenger, Deputy, and Agent’ at the Ottoman court, the instructions given to English diplomats sent to the Sublime Porte reminded them that ‘the principal part of your employment is to protect our merchants in their lawful trade & to assist them in the orderly government thereof’.28 Appointed by the joint decision of the trading companies and the English Crown, the essential function of these diplomats was to protect and expand English mercantile activities, rather than projecting the authority and power of the English monarch in of itself. Indeed, the use of ‘agent’ in Harborne’s credentials, a term derived from Middle French and Latin to identify the doer of an action, is revealing of how those employed in the joint diplomatic ventures of the English Crown and the trading companies were perceived as someone appointed to perform a set of functions rather than to a specific formal ambassadorial post. Harborne, as well as other company ambassadors, had to carry out a broad range of functions which were more related to the head of a trading factory than to the office of the ambassador. These functions included the supervision of the activities of company factories, the monitoring of English merchants, and the procurement of privileges from the local authorities to English trade, all besides promoting the geopolitical interests of the English Crown.29 As servants of both Crown and Company, the nature and extension of the instructions given to these ambassadors were often unclear or flexible enough to allow them to go beyond their original functions and meddle in trading operations, often causing conflicts and tensions.30 Sir Thomas Roe, for example, annoyed the East India Company factors in India with his constant attempts to interfere in their business strategies regarding the Persia trade.31

30 See, for example, Jason Cameron White, ‘Royal Authority Versus Corporate Sovereignty: The Levant Company and the Ambiguities of Early Stuart Statecraft’, *The Seventeenth Century*, 32:3 (2017), 231–255.
Company ambassadors often found themselves caught between their own nation and their hosts, and between factions at home. The activities of the ambassadors and other diplomatic representatives of the Levant and East India companies (EIC), for instance, had to balance the aims of the corporations and their members alongside those of the English Crown, and the two were not always the same. During the first English Civil War (1642–1646), the Levant Company became embroiled in a communal dispute with their royalist ambassador, Sir Sackville Crowe, who had attempted to assert the authority of the Crown over the English community in the Levant.\[^{32}\] Crowe's regular interferences in the daily life of the company, and his attempt to raise funds for the royalist cause by seizing the property of company merchants, led the General Court of the Levant Company to demand his immediate removal in 1646. The Crown's refusal to recall Crowe forced the company to present a petition to Parliament requesting its intervention.\[^{33}\] Following the defeat of royalist forces in 1646, Parliament finally forced Crowe's removal in January 1647, and Crowe remained imprisoned in the Tower of London between 1648 and 1652. The incidents involving Crowe are a good illustration of how, whenever the interests of trading companies and the Crown collided, ambassadors could be caught in an uneasy position which weakened their diplomatic status and threatened their career prospects overseas and back home.

The dignity surrounding these ambassadors was another issue. The factors of the EIC frequently warned the company's administrators that 'whosoever should go up to the [Mughal] king under the title of a merchant should not be respected'.\[^{34}\] There was a clear preference to appoint individuals who had an 'extraordinary countenance and respect', courtiers such as Sir Thomas Roe, the first English ambassador to the Mughal court (1615 and 1619), whom the EIC presented as 'a gentleman of pregnant understanding,


\[^{34}\] 'A Council held the 15 October, consisting of such persons as are underwritten, 18 October 1614', in *Letters Received by the East India Company, Vol. 2: 1613–1615*, ed. by William Foster (London: Sampson, Low, and Marston, 1897), p. 133.
well spoken, learned, industrious, [and] of a comely personage’. This somewhat complicates the picture of a progression from one ‘type’ of courtly ambassador to a more bureaucratic one in this period, suggesting that company members recognised the courtly attributes that would enhance the prestige of their economic aims.

The problems faced by the diplomatic activities of the Levant and East India companies in many ways reflect the shifting role of the ambassador in the Tudor and Stuart eras. Changing functions of negotiation, mediation, and representation led to the emergence of a new diplomat whose political agency and identity was based less on his proximity to the prince, as advocated by early modern authors, and more on the intellectual, transcultural, and bureaucratic dimensions related to the job. As the seventeenth century closed, diplomacy increasingly became a sphere of formalised actions sustained by a juridical machinery that favoured the development of a cadre of specialists who would shape the so-called ‘state systems’ until the late nineteenth century.

Related keywords: broker, courtier, envoy, host, spy