Chapter 12: Recovery and Rebirth: The Age of the Renaissance

Pages 343-349

**12-4 The Intellectual Renaissance in Italy**

*Individualism* (emphasis on and interest in the unique traits of each person) and *secularism* (the process of becoming more concerned with material, worldly, temporal things and less with spiritual and religious things)—two characteristics of the Italian Renaissance—were most noticeable in the intellectual and artistic realms. Italian culture had matured by the fourteenth century. For the next two centuries, Italy was the cultural leader of Europe. This new Italian culture was primarily the product of a relatively wealthy, urban lay society. The most important literary movement associated with the Renaissance was *humanism* (an intellectual movement based on the study of the Greek and Roman classics written by such authors as Plato, Aristotle, Thucydides, Sophocles, Cicero, Virgil, etc.).

**12-4a Italian Renaissance Humanism**

Renaissance humanism was an intellectual movement based on the study of the classical literary works of Greece and Rome. Humanists examined the *studia humanitatis* ("the studies of humanity")—grammar, *rhetoric* [persuasive writing and speaking], poetry, moral philosophy or ethics, and history—all based on the writings of ancient Greek and Roman authors. These are the subjects we call the humanities.

The central importance of literary preoccupations in Renaissance humanism is evident in the professional status or occupations of the humanists. Some of them were teachers of the humanities in secondary schools and universities, where they either gave occasional lectures or held permanent positions, often as professors of rhetoric. Others served as secretaries in the chancellories of Italian city-states or at the courts of princes or popes. All of these occupations were largely secular, and most humanists were laymen rather than members of the *clergy* [monks, priests, bishops, pope].

**The Emergence of Humanism**

Petrarch (1304–1374) has often been called the father of Italian Renaissance humanism. Petrarch rejected his father’s desire that he become a lawyer and took up a literary career instead. Although he lived in Avignon for a time, most of his last decades were spent in Italy as the guest of various princes and city governments. With his usual lack of modesty, Petrarch once exclaimed, “Some of the greatest kings of our time have loved me and cultivated my friendship. . . . When I was their guest it was more as if they were mine.”

Petrarch did more than any other individual in the fourteenth century to foster the development of Renaissance humanism. He was the first intellectual to characterize the Middle Ages as a period of darkness, promoting the mistaken belief that medieval culture was ignorant of classical antiquity. Petrarch’s interest in the classics led him on a quest for forgotten *Latin* [ancient Roman language] manuscripts and set in motion a ransacking of monastic libraries throughout Europe. In his preoccupation with the classics and their secular content, Petrarch worried at times that he might not be sufficiently attentive to spiritual ideals. His *qualms* [doubts], however, did not prevent him from *inaugurating* [beginning] the humanist emphasis on the use of pure classical Latin, making it fashionable for humanists to use Cicero as a model for prose and Virgil for poetry. As Petrarch said, “Christ is my God; Cicero is the prince of the language.”

**Humanism in Fifteenth-Century Italy**

In Florence, the humanist movement took a new direction at the beginning of the fifteenth century when it became closely tied to Florentine civic spirit and pride, giving rise to what one modern scholar has labeled *civic humanism* (an intellectual movement that saw ancient Roman Cicero, who was both an intellectual and a statesman, as the ideal and held that humanists should be involved in government and use their rhetorical training in the service of the state). Fourteenth-century humanists such as Petrarch had described the intellectual life as one of *solitude* [isolation]. They rejected family and a life of action in the community. In the busy civic world of Florence, however, intellectuals began to take a new view of their role as intellectuals. The classical Roman statesman and intellectual Cicero became their model. Leonardo Bruni (leh-ah-Nahr-doh BROO-nee) (1370–1444), a humanist, Florentine patriot, and chancellor of the city, wrote a biography of Cicero titled *The New Cicero*, in which he waxed enthusiastic about the fusion of political action and literary creation in Cicero’s life. From Bruni’s time on, Cicero served as the inspiration for the Renaissance ideal that intellectuals had a duty to live an active life for their state. An individual only “grows to maturity—both intellectually and morally—through participation” in the life of the state. Civic humanism reflected the values of the urban society of the Italian Renaissance. Humanists came to believe that their study of the humanities should be put to the service of the state. It is no accident that humanists served the state as chancellors, councillors, and advisers.

Also evident in the humanism of the first half of the fifteenth century was a growing interest in classical Greek civilization. Bruni was one of the first Italian humanists to gain a thorough knowledge of Greek. He became an enthusiastic pupil of the Byzantine scholar Manuel Chrysoloras (man-WEL kris-uh-LAHHR-us), who taught in Florence from 1396 to 1400.
Humanists eagerly perused [read and analyzed] the works of Plato as well as those of Greek poets, dramatists, historians, and orators, such as Euripides, Sophocles, and Thucydides, all of whom had been ignored by the scholastics of the High Middle Ages as irrelevant to the theological questions they were examining.

By the fifteenth century, a consciousness of being humanists had emerged. This was especially evident in the career of Lorenzo Valla (1407–1457). Valla was brought up in Rome and educated in both Latin and Greek. Eventually, he achieved his chief ambition of becoming a papal secretary. Valla’s major work, The Elegances of the Latin Language, was an effort to purify medieval Latin and restore Latin to its proper position over the vernacular (local language or native language, i.e. Italian, French, English, etc.). The treatise examined the proper use of classical Latin and created a new literary standard. Early humanists had tended to take as classical models any author (including Christians) who had written before the seventh century C.E. Valla identified different stages in the development of the Latin language and accepted only the Latin of the last century of the Roman Republic and the first century of the empire.

**Humanism and Philosophy**

In the second half of the fifteenth century, a dramatic upsurge of interest in the works of Plato occurred, especially evident among the members of an informal discussion group known as the Florentine Platonic Academy. Cosimo de’ Medici, the de facto ruler of Florence, encouraged this development by commissioning a translation of Plato’s dialogues by Marsilio Ficino (mar-SIL-yoh fee-CHEE-noh) (1433–1499), one of the academy’s leaders. Ficino dedicated his life to the translation of Plato and the exposition of the Platonic philosophy known as **Neoplatonism**.

In two major works, Ficino undertook the synthesis [combination] of Christianity and Platonism into a single system. His Neoplatonism was based on two primary ideas, the Neoplatonic hierarchy [a system of ranking based on a pyramid where the top is the best] of substances and a theory of spiritual love. The former postulated the idea of a hierarchy of substances, or great chain of being, from the lowest form of physical matter (plants) to the purest spirit (God), in which humans occupied a central or middle position. They were the link between the material world (through the body) and the spiritual world (through the soul), and their highest duty was to ascend toward that union with God that was the true end of human existence. Ficino’s theory of spiritual or Platonic love maintained that just as all people are bound together in their common humanity by love, so too are all parts of the universe held together by bonds of sympathetic love.

**Renaissance Hermeticism**

**Hermeticism** (an intellectual movement that taught that divinity is embodied in all aspects of nature; included works on alchemy and magic as well as theology and philosophy. Named after the Greek god Hermes) was another product of the Florentine intellectual environment of the late fifteenth century. At the request of Cosimo de’ Medici, Ficino translated into Latin a Greek work titled Corpus Hermeticum (KOR-pus hur-MET-i-koom). The Hermetic manuscripts contained two kinds of writings. One type stressed the occult sciences, with an emphasis on astrology, alchemy, and magic; the other focused on theological and philosophical beliefs and speculations. Some Hermetic writings espoused pantheism (a belief that equates God with the universe and all that is in it), seeing divinity embodied in all aspects of nature and in the heavenly bodies as well as in earthly objects. As Giordano Bruno (jor-DAHN-oh BROO-noh), one of the most prominent sixteenth-century Hermeticists, stated, “God as a whole is in all things.”

For Renaissance intellectuals, the Hermetic revival offered a new view of humankind. They believed that human beings had been created as divine beings endowed with divine creative power but had freely chosen to enter the material world (nature). Humans could recover their divinity, however, through a regenerative experience or purification of the soul. Thus regenerated, they became true sages or magi [wise men], as the Renaissance called them, who had knowledge of God and of truth. In regaining their original divinity, they reacquired an intimate knowledge of nature and the ability to employ the powers of nature for beneficial purposes.

In Italy, the most prominent magi in the late fifteenth century were Ficino and his friend and pupil, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (PEE-koh DELL-uh mee-RAN-doh-lah) (1463–1494). Pico produced one of the most famous pieces of writing of the Renaissance, the Oration on the Dignity of Man. Pico combed diligently through the works of many philosophers of different backgrounds for the common “nuggets of universal truth” that he believed were all part of God’s revelation to humanity. In the Oration, Mirandola offered a ringing statement of unlimited human potential: “To him it is granted to have whatever he chooses, to be whatever he wills.” Like Ficino, Pico took an avid interest in Hermetic philosophy, accepting it as the “science of the Divine,” which “embraces the deepest contemplation of the most secret things, and at last the knowledge of all nature.”

The works of Ficino and Pico show that Italian Renaissance humanism was not just a secular movement but also had a strong spiritual component. In the treatises of Ficino and Pico, Renaissance humanism sought to illuminate [focus the spotlight on] the relationship between humans and God and to define humans not only as physical beings but divinely inspired beings as well.
12-4b Education in the Renaissance

The humanist movement had a profound effect on education. Renaissance humanists believed that human beings could be dramatically changed by education. They wrote books on education and developed secondary schools based on their ideas. Most famous was the school founded in 1423 by Vittorino da Feltre at Mantua, where the ruler of that small Italian state, Gian Francesco I Gonzaga, wished to provide a humanist [studying Greek and Roman works focused on grammar, rhetoric [persuasive writing and speaking], poetry, moral philosophy or ethics, and history] education for his children. Vittorino based much of his educational system on the ideas of classical authors, particularly Cicero and Quintilian.

At the core of humanist schools were the “liberal studies.” A treatise on education called Concerning Character by Pietro Paolo Vergerio (PYAY-troh PAH-oh-loh vur-JEER-ee-oh) (1370–1444) especially influenced the Renaissance view of the value of the liberal arts. This work stressed the importance of liberal studies as the key to true freedom, enabling individuals to reach their full potential. According to Vergerio, “We call those studies liberal which are worthy of a free man; those studies by which we attain and practice virtue and wisdom; that education which calls forth, trains, and develops those highest gifts of body and mind which ennoble men.” The liberal studies included history, moral philosophy, eloquence (rhetoric), letters (grammar and logic), poetry, mathematics, astronomy, and music. The purpose of a liberal education was thus to produce individuals who followed a path of virtue and wisdom and possessed the rhetorical skills with which to persuade others to do the same. Following the Greek precept of a sound mind in a sound body, Vittorino’s school at Mantua also stressed physical education. Pupils were taught the skills of javelin throwing, archery, and dancing and encouraged to run, wrestle, hunt, and swim.

Humanist education was thought to be a practical preparation for life. Its aim was not to create great scholars but rather to produce complete citizens who could participate in the civic life of their communities. As Vittorino said, “Not everyone is obliged to excel in philosophy, medicine, or the law, nor are all equally favored by nature; but all are destined to live in society and to practice virtue.” Humanist schools, combining the classics and Christianity, provided the model for the basic education of the European ruling classes until the twentieth century.

Although a small number of children from the lower classes received free educations, humanist schools such as Vittorino’s were primarily geared for the education of an elite, the ruling classes of their communities. Also largely absent from such schools were females. Vittorino’s only female pupils were the two daughters of the Gonzaga ruler of Mantua. Though these few female students studied the classics and were encouraged to know some history and to ride, dance, sing, play the lute, and appreciate poetry, they were discouraged from learning mathematics and rhetoric. In the educational treatises of the time, religion and morals were thought to “hold the first place in the education of a Christian lady.”

Was There a Renaissance for Women?

Historians have disagreed over the benefits of the Renaissance for women. Some maintain that during the Middle Ages upper-class women in particular had greater freedom to satisfy their emotional needs and that upper-class women in the Renaissance experienced a contraction of both social and personal options as they became even more subject to male authority and patterns. Other historians have argued that although conditions remained bleak for most women, some women, especially those in courtly, religious, and intellectual environments, found ways to develop a new sense of themselves as women. This may be especially true of women who were educated in the humanist fashion and went on to establish their own literary careers.

Isotta Nogarola (ee-ZAHT-uh NOH-guh-roll-uh), born to a noble family in Verona, mastered Latin and wrote numerous letters and treatises that brought her praise from male Italian intellectuals. Cassandra Fedele (FAY-duh-lee) of Venice, who learned both Latin and Greek from humanist tutors hired by her family, became well known in Venice for her public recitations of orations. Laura Cereta (say-REE-tuh) was educated in Latin by her father, a physician from Brescia. Laura defended the ability of women to pursue scholarly pursuits.

12-4c Humanism and History

Humanism had a strong impact on the writing of history. Influenced by Roman and Greek historians, the humanists approached the writing of history differently from the chroniclers of the Middle Ages. The humanists’ belief that classical civilization had been followed by an age of barbarism (the Middle Ages), which had in turn been succeeded by their own age, with its rebirth of the study of the classics, enabled them to think in terms of the passage of time, of the past as past. Their division of the past into ancient world, dark ages, and their own age provided a new sense of chronology or periodization in history.

The humanists were also responsible for secularizing the writing of history. Humanist historians reduced or eliminated the role of miracles in historical interpretation, not because they were anti-Christian but because they took a new approach to sources. They wanted to use documents and exercised their newly developed critical skills in examining
them. Greater attention was paid to the political events and forces that affected their city-states or larger territorial units. Thus, Leonardo Bruni wrote the History of the Florentine People. The new emphasis on secularization was also evident in the humanists’ conception of causation in history. Medieval historical literature often portrayed historical events as being caused by God’s active involvement in human affairs. Humanists de-emphasized divine intervention in favor of human motives, stressing political forces or the role of individuals in history.

Guicciardini

The high point of Renaissance historiography [the study of history with a critical eye to help us understand what biases may have shaped the historical written record] was achieved at the beginning of the sixteenth century in the works of Francesco Guicciardini (frahn-CHESS-koh gwee-char-DEE-nee) (1483–1540). To many historians, his History of Italy and History of Florence represent the beginning of “modern analytical historiography.” To Guicciardini, the purpose of writing history was to teach lessons, but he was so impressed by the complexity of historical events that he felt those lessons were not always obvious. From his extensive background in government and diplomatic affairs, he developed the skills that enabled him to analyze political situations precisely and critically. Emphasizing political and military history, his works relied heavily on personal examples and documentary sources.

12-4d The Impact of Printing

The Renaissance witnessed the invention of printing, one of the most important technological innovations of Western civilization. The art of printing made an immediate impact on European intellectual life and thought. Printing from hand-carved wooden blocks had been done in the West since the twelfth century and in China even before that. What was new to Europe in the fifteenth century was multiple printing with movable metal type. The development of printing from movable type was a gradual process that culminated between 1445 and 1450; Johannes Gutenberg (yoh-HAH-nuss GOOT-ten-bayrk) of Mainz played an important role in bringing the process to completion. Gutenberg’s Bible, completed in 1455 or 1456, was the first true book in the West produced from movable type.

The new printing spread rapidly throughout Europe in the second half of the fifteenth century. Printing presses were established throughout the Holy Roman Empire in the 1460s and within ten years had spread to both western and eastern Europe. Especially well known as a printing center was Venice, home by 1500 to almost one hundred printers who had produced almost 2 million volumes.

By 1500, there were more than a thousand printers in Europe who had published almost 40,000 titles (between 8 million and 10 million copies). Probably 50 percent of these books were religious—Bibles and biblical commentaries, books of devotion, and sermons. Next in importance were the Latin and Greek classics, medieval grammars, legal handbooks, works on philosophy, and an ever-growing number of popular romances.

Printing became one of the largest industries in Europe, and its effects were soon felt in many areas of European life. The printing of books encouraged the development of scholarly research and the desire to attain knowledge. Moreover, printing facilitated cooperation among scholars and helped produce standardized and definitive texts. Printing also stimulated the development of an ever-expanding lay reading public, a development that had an enormous impact on European society. Indeed, without the printing press, the new religious ideas of the Reformation would never have spread as rapidly as they did in the sixteenth century.