

Humanism: An Introduction

by Nicolaa de Bracton of Leicester

The intellectual and social movement which historians call humanism is what lies at the base of the period we call the Renaissance. Humanism and its ideals came to pervade the art, literature, learning, law, and civic life, first in Italy, then in all of Europe. But what is humanism? Scholars are still debating this issue, but there is a consensus on a basic definition. Simply put, humanism is a rediscovery and re-evaluation of the aspects of classical civilization (ancient Greece and Rome) and the application of these aspects to intellectual and social culture. It is also in many ways a reaction against scholasticism, the dominant intellectual school of the Middle Ages. Scholasticism, while a vital and dynamic method in its early days in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, had, in the eyes of its detractors, by the fourteenth century become little more than organized quibbling over minor points of philosophy and theology. You may recall the famous question over how many angels could dance on the head of a pin; such questions were actually fairly regularly debated by the later scholasticists.

In contrast, the early humanists espoused a return to study of the original texts, rather than a reliance on the glosses and commentaries produced by the scholasticists. This break was by no means clear--many of the later humanists continued to admire and make use of the works of scholastic scholars, while forging ahead with their own examination of the sources.

Why Italy? I noted a moment ago that humanism's roots were in a rediscovery of classical antiquity. For the early pioneers of humanism, this meant the Latin language. Italy, unlike so much of Europe, had never completely lost Latin literacy. Latin was still taught in the schools and universities, most significantly to laymen in training to become notaries. Thus, Latin literacy was not confined mainly to churchmen as it was elsewhere in Europe. In the schools, potential notaries learned the specialized legal language of law, known as the *ars dictaminis*. This was indirectly based on the rhetorical works of Cicero, though it had become rather rigid and rule-bound over the years. However, it meant that potential notaries were exposed to certain of Cicero's works. Gradually, people began to reexamine these works.

Who was the first humanist? Most scholars would say that Petrarch, an Italian poet and writer of the Trecento (1300's), would best fit this label. His influence continued to be felt throughout the entire humanistic movement, and his successors called him their spiritual father. Petrarch was a great admirer of Cicero, and rediscovered and translated much of his correspondence. He strove to learn from Cicero and use his style in his own Latin writing. Petrarch also wrote in the vernacular-- a style which would finally gain acceptance among scholars in the Renaissance. We also remember him as the first man since antiquity to be awarded a laurel crown for his poetry. But Petrarch himself was a bit of an enigma; a man with one foot in the future and one in the past. It had always been believed that Cicero had throughout his career been highly involved in politics; Petrarch's examination of Cicero's writings had found a different man-- one who increasingly turned to solitude and retirement in later life. This fit the "*medieval*" model of the scholar-- a monkish figure who retired from the world with his books-- rather than Petrarch's earlier belief in an active use of scholarship in civic life. Petrarch gradually retired from life as well, and in fact became more and more "*medieval*" in his outlook--though he never abandoned his reliance on classical sources as a model for writing; he turned more and more to traditional forms of scholarship, such as biblical commentary, in later life.

It would be this earlier picture, however, which would provide the model for a new civic spirit in Italy, particularly in Florence. It is quite significant that Petrarch was a Florentine, though in

actuality he spent most of his life elsewhere. Florence was one of two Italian republics (Venice was the other) and felt threatened by neighboring Italian states run by despots with designs on Florentine territory. Inspired by Petrarch, the intellectuals of Florence carried on his work and expanded it. Florence's past was to be extolled in literature, art, and architecture, and the link with the Roman Republic was to be emphasized in all things. Petrarch's successors were not only scholars, but leading men of their community who felt it their duty as Florentine citizens to serve their Republic as the Roman citizens had served Rome. Unfortunately, Florence, too, fell under despotic rule, but not before several generations of Florentines had produced a wide variety of works which extolled the city. Humanism had its religious aspects as well. Though new appreciation was gained for the "*pagan*" classics of antiquity, humanists were quick to apply their methods to biblical scholarship.

One of the ways in which the spirit of humanism was expressed was in a rise in appreciation for the artifacts of the past. Indeed, the early humanists were the ones who invented the terms "*Middle Ages*" and "*Renaissance*." Before this time, history was seen as a continuum. No distinction was drawn between the civilization of Greece and Rome and that of the medieval period. The idea of a "*fall of the Roman Empire*" had no meaning. To a twelfth century person, Charlemagne was as much a Roman and a Roman Empire as Augustus had been, and there was no line drawn between classical and Medieval Latin. The humanists were the first to draw the distinction, seeing classical antiquity as something which was long past, but to be admired and revived--hence the term "*Renaissance*". Artifacts were visible symbols of this past, and were thus to be cherished and collected. Not only were coins and artworks unearthed and collected, but attempts were made to map out and draw many of the Roman ruins one could see in Italy before they disappeared. (The ruins were a popular source of building materials; the Papacy was particularly fond of the Colosseum for this purpose). A few sites were eventually saved from destruction in this way.

Likewise, we may also note an increased interest in manuscripts, particularly those recording the works of the writers of antiquity. Many of the humanists undertook large journeys, wandering from monastery to monastery and finding works forgotten for centuries. New editions and translations of these works were produced and disseminated. The fall of Constantinople in 1453 brought an influx of expatriate Greek scholars to Italy, and from that point on, studies of ancient Greek gained tremendous ground. Likewise, the humanists also became interested in Hebrew as they attempted to produce an accurate translation of the Bible. What made these editions special was the introduction of what we would today call "*critical*" scholarship. Manuscripts were compared and words analyzed in an attempt to produce the most accurate edition possible.

All of this was aided by the invention of the printing press, which meant that for the first time, men and women of moderate means could acquire their own books and that both the classics and new works could circulate widely. Venice by the late fifteenth century was known as the printing capital of Europe. Publishers there not only printed the books, but they actively sponsored new editions and continuing scholarship.

It took longer, however, for the new scholarship to spread beyond a certain intellectual elite. Even a century after Petrarch, the universities--even in Italy--were still dominated by thinkers of the older schools. However, patronage by Italian princes and popes insured that the new thinking eventually came to dominate the universities. Humanism eventually spread outwards from Italy. Germany in particular was greatly affected by the new methods, particularly in the area of Biblical scholarship. (It was this sort of thinking that led Martin Luther to question the traditions of the Catholic Church). Eventually, the printing houses of Germany rivaled those of Italy. England was perhaps the last to be touched, for it was not until the latter half of the reign of Henry VIII that Oxford and Cambridge became dominated by humanist scholarship.