

ITALIAN RENAISSANCE: A HISTORY OF CHANGE AND CONTINUITY

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Abstract

Reading Renaissance Humanism in the context of the previous era poses its own problems: Renaissance did not begin in all the countries of Europe at the same time; the time of its beginning and end is an area of contestation among scholars; and some scholars “contest” the very existence of a Renaissance itself. Is it a general distrust over the arbitrariness of temporal periodization in modern historiography? What appears to be an epistemic break from medieval to Renaissance philosophy is characterized by both change and continuity. This paper attempts to historicize the genesis of Renaissance humanism by reading it in continuity with the late medieval ideas which influenced it. It is a part of the incessant interrogation and reconstruction of periodization of Renaissance humanist thought.

Keywords:- Renaissance, Humanism, contestation, historiography.

“Labels such as Dark Ages or Renaissance, which are affixed to whole periods of European history, while they are convenient for historiographical exposition, may tell only part of the truth about those segments of the past that they purport to characterize. The more we learn about the period following the decline of Rome, the less dark and uncultured it appears; the more we inquire into what was reborn in the fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries, the more we become aware of vital continuities with the past.”

- Nicholas Mann, “The Origins of Humanism”, *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Humanism*

The term “humanism” does not occur in the writings of the Renaissance; it was coined by German scholars in the early nineteenth century. The Renaissance proclaimed its engagement with *studia humanitatis* (humanistic studies) that focused on the study of rhetoric, grammar, poetry, history and moral philosophy. Humanism was not a cohesive philosophical doctrine like the Aristotelian scholastic philosophy or theology but rather an intellectual and cultural phenomenon that binds the humanists together despite the multiplicity of their ideas. The Renaissance began in Italy and its influence spread to the rest of Europe. The Renaissance, which literally means revival or rebirth, is associated with the rediscovery of classical Greek and Latin works. Many Renaissance humanist scholars were employed by the Italian monarchs who claimed to be the likes of Roman emperors. Lorenzo Valla wrote the attack on the donation of

Constantine as a private Latin secretary of Alfonso V of Aragon. Alfonso employed many humanists as his courtiers and advisers to secure their services for his political ends. The Renaissance courtier is believed to have been influenced by the medieval knight and chivalric code of conduct. The medieval iconography of knights sustained in the Renaissance through the figure of the courtier. The tension between the two ways of life - *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa* - was as relevant in the medieval times as it was to the Renaissance courtier.

The self-representation of the Renaissance humanists is an important aspect of the Renaissance cult of selfhood and individuality. The commonplace definition of humanism as a philosophy that places man at the centre of the universe, extols human nature and rejects mystical as well as mythical values has been countered through the examples of various Renaissance humanists who were devout Christians. The religious beliefs of many Renaissance humanists seem to be at odds with the secular ideas that are ascribed to Renaissance thought. The stress on human values and the dignity of man is important for Renaissance humanism but it is not the sole defining criteria.

In his book *Contesting the Renaissance* William Caferro furthers the argument by examining the individualism of not only the Renaissance man but also the Renaissance woman: “The Renaissance portrait of female piety does not go especially far in distinguishing them from their medieval forbearers. Fears of female sexuality, of autonomous or extreme behavior in both the institutional and non-institutional setting, were not new.” (Caferro, 75) Italian humanism was firmly located in the socio-political set-up from which it evolved, that is, the late medieval times. The movement did not grow out of a vacuum or got transposed from classical antiquity with no link to the medieval past. Oratorical skills and the art of letter-writing were the legacies of the medieval past. *Ars Dictaminis* is a late eleventh century prescriptive treatise on the art of composing letters that elaborates the conventions and structures to be followed while writing letters. The Renaissance fixed its attention to the Greek and Latin classical texts at the expense of the medieval which was termed as a “dark” period. The Renaissance humanist scholars referred to their own period as the age of rebirth as they valued and revived the classical norms.

Katherine Kong describes an important strand of continuity between the medieval times and the Renaissance: “medieval letter-writing conventions continued to structure epistolary composition in the sixteenth century. In this way my book reveals an important point of continuity between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and thus reconsiders a more traditional periodization of the two periods” (*Lettering the Self*, 11). Kong further examines the medieval letter-writing tendencies in Michel de Montaigne’s letters as a way of self-representation. The traditional periodization that Kong refers to has long read the era of the Renaissance as an epistemic break from the “Dark Ages”. There are, however, vital links with the medieval past. Apart from letter-writing, the genre of the autobiography also finds its roots in the medieval tradition of religious confession. The humanists’ self-consciousness and the zeal to understand the nature of man finds an expression through the genre of the autobiography. The medieval links of autobiography as a form can be discerned from the religious confessions which were important modes of subjective self-representation in the medieval times. Interiority and self-awareness was not discovered with Renaissance individualism but had been a part of the medieval confessor’s selfhood.

Jacob Burckhardt (1818 – 1897) in *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860) regarded Renaissance Italy as a distinctive epoch in the history of the Western civilization while during the Middle Ages the human consciousness lay “beneath a common veil”. Burckhardtian theories have been contested by many Renaissance scholars as well as medievalists. Some

Renaissance theorists claim that the origins of the movement can be located in the Middle Ages. The “revolt of the medievalists” against the theories of medieval corruptions and barbarism has led to a re-examination of the historical period. The “medievalists” of the 19th century have identified three phases of medieval times as the medieval renaissances: Carolingian Renaissance, Ottonian Renaissance and the renaissance of the twelfth century, to defy the historiography that marks the Middle Ages as “dark”. The “revolt of the medievalists” against the theories of medieval corruptions and barbarism has led to a re-examination of the historical period.

However these ideas are subject to scholarly debate and criticism about the veracity of a comparison between the European Renaissance and the medieval renaissances. Nevertheless, what is important is the refutability of the negative portrayals of the medieval era as dark and obscurantist, and conversely, the revivalist tendencies of the Renaissance have often been enlarged beyond truth or reasonableness. On the one hand, the concepts of individuality, humanity, liberality and reason can be and have been traced back to the medieval times, and on the other, the term “renaissance” itself has been displaced onto other periods of medieval history.

An important scholar of Renaissance humanism, Paul Oskar Kristeller says,

“Renaissance humanism was less important for the originality of its ideas than for the fermenting effect it had upon older patterns of thought. It restated many ancient ideas that had not been seriously considered hitherto and brought to the fore a number of favourite and partly novel problems, and, in doing so, altered profoundly the form and style of philosophical thinking, teaching, and writing.” (*Renaissance Thought and the Arts*, 1)

He employs the metaphor of fermentation to elucidate the impact of classical times upon the Renaissance. During the process of fermentation the ferment undergoes a change while it reproduces the agency of change, thereby ensuring continuity of the process. The classical texts were re-visited and re-produced by Renaissance humanists through the agency of rhetoric, grammar and language. The propagation of these skills ensured a continuity of interest in the classical Greek and Latin texts. The humanists engaged themselves in the art of letters, poetry, oratory, dialogues, history, political tracts and philosophical treatises. Rhetoric dominated the works of the humanists as they propagated classical knowledge and learning. Scholars like H. H. Gray (in “Renaissance Humanism: The Pursuit of Eloquence”) consider rhetorical eloquence as the foremost defining characteristic of Renaissance Humanism. The humanists themselves proclaimed the revival of Greek and Latin classical texts as their prime accomplishment against the presumed darkness of the Middle Ages and call it a rebirth or a renaissance. The rediscovery argument of the Renaissance is the proponents’ self-perception, *their* evaluation of *their* times as they describe their age as one of rediscovery and revival. The Renaissance proclamations of superiority and the labeling of a thousand years of Western civilization as “dark” are pompous and elitist. Many scholars have challenged the cultural and intellectual superiority of the Renaissance.

Kristeller has identified three “medieval antecedents” of the Renaissance culture: formal rhetoric, Latin grammar and classical Greek language and literature, thus, marking the strands of continuity that exist between the two epochs. The medieval rhetoric was based upon religion and the medieval rhetoricians theologically ascertained their value systems. During the Renaissance, however, the humanists primarily employed rhetoric for secular discourse of moral philosophy and history. Nevertheless, the use of rhetoric as a stylistic device provides a vital link between the medieval culture and Renaissance humanism. The Renaissance humanists were influenced by the classical manuals on rhetorical forms more than the medieval rhetoricians and grammarians.

The medieval Latin writers did not become obsolete but lived on during the Renaissance: “The Latin humanist curriculum first replaced the medieval Latin curriculum at the secondary school level. By about 1450 schools in a majority of northern and north-central Italian towns embraced the *studia humanitatis*... But parts of the medieval Latin curriculum lived on at the elementary school level, as some teachers continued to use medieval syntax and accidence manuals.” (Grendler, *Renaissance Education Between Religion and Politics*, 6)

The medieval accounts of the classics differed from their Renaissance counterparts only in the allegorical moralizing that characterized the medieval readings whereas the Renaissance employed a humanistic tenor. The study of the classical texts in the medieval times problematizes the re-discovery argument of the Renaissance. The classical texts had not lapsed from memory to be “re-discovered” by the humanists; they had not been pursued with an enthusiasm that equaled that of the humanists. In fact, the poetry of Virgil, Lucan, Horace, Ovid and Juvenal was widely read during the medieval period. Many twelfth century medieval writers such as Hildebert of Lavardin and Walter of Chatillon wrote in Latin. A renewed interest in the classical times characterizes the Renaissance as the humanists re-visit the classics from a humanistic point of view. Robert Black in his book *Humanism and Education in Medieval and Renaissance Italy* (2004) analyses the school curriculum of both the historical periods to arrive at the conclusion that there is continuity in the ideas rather than a sudden epistemic break with tradition. James Hankins notes, “Quentin Skinner, who has recently asserted the distinctiveness of Renaissance republicanism, has nevertheless himself done much to undercut that distinctiveness by his researches into medieval republican thought”.¹ (Hankins, 139) The medieval and the early modern do not negate each other, are not mutually exclusive and are characterized by gradual historical change.

The humanists were not pagans; some of them were devout Christians. The humanist thought never defies Christianity but is to be clearly distinguished from medieval ecclesiastical learning and knowledge. The Renaissance encouraged a secular philosophy even as the humanists espoused Christianity. Nicholaus Cusanus (1401 – 1464) was an important thinker of Renaissance Neoplatonism that brought together philosophy and theology. The asymmetrical relationship between God and man is described in terms of the relationship between the finite and the infinite. God is a wholly transcendent unity while man approximates the infinitude of God but can never achieve it. The amalgamation of moral philosophy and theology asserts the continuity of medieval religious thought that the humanists exercised through their engagement with religion and its mystical aspects that cannot be accounted for by purely humanistic values. Ernst Cassirer believed that Cusanus was deeply rooted in the medieval intellectual life.² Similarly Lorenzo Valla (1407 – 1457) attempted to reconcile medieval religion with moral philosophy, underscoring the threads of continuity of the Renaissance with the medieval times. In the attempt to reconcile rationality with faith he produces a discourse upon the philosophy of religion.

The Italian writers Lovato dei Lovati (1241 – 1309) and his pupil Albertino Mussato (1261 – 1329) are often thought to be the earliest Renaissance humanists. Their works clearly reveal an impact of medieval aesthetics and can be seen as the transitional phase from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance period. They have also been called pre-humanists by some scholars.

¹ James Hankins, “Religion and the Modernity of Renaissance Humanism” from *Interpretations of Renaissance Humanism*.

² Ernst Cassirer, *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy*.

“The ‘pre-humanists’ are more ‘medieval’ than Petrarch or Boccaccio because, although they all build on the same medieval grammatical studies they are chronologically prior and correspondingly less appreciative of ‘greater and wiser culture’.” (Ronald G Witt, *In the Footsteps of the Ancients*, 20) The “pre-humanists” form an important point of communion between the two periods.

Despite the uncertainty about the exact moment of historical change, the medieval faith in the Christian God ought to be clearly demarcated from the reinforcement of the individuality of man during the Renaissance. The gradual historical change from a feudal and clerical setup to a humanistic early modern world is characterized by both continuity and change. Scholars have identified the seeds of the Renaissance in the medieval times, and conversely, the Renaissance exhibits the continuity of many medieval ideas. Nevertheless, the change from ecclesiastical learning to *studia humanitatis* is embodied in the spirit of Renaissance humanism and individualism. Ronald G. Witt in his book *In the Footsteps of the Ancients: The Origins of Humanism from Lovato to Bruni* (2000) establishes the turn of the century as the moment of change: “after 1300 there emerged an intellectual movement, Italian humanism, which ultimately established laymen’s lives as equal in moral value to those of clerics and monks” (1).

The emphasis on the lives of the common people has been attributed to deep-seated changes in the consciousness of the Renaissance man. Agnes Heller’s “dynamic” Renaissance man evolved out of a radical restructuring of the medieval concept of man. The development of a “classicizing aesthetic” (Witt, *In the Footsteps of the Ancients*, 36) is significant for its in-between-ness: as the medieval aesthetic gives way to Renaissance classicism. The confrontation between the two historically separated cultures re-iterates the change despite the “medieval antecedents”. About the confrontation of the Renaissance humanist with the classical text, Witt writes,

The experience of confrontation served, on the one hand, to locate the pagan texts at a remote distance in the past, and, on the other, to render the mentality of the ancients to some degree accessible to the imitators. The push and pull between the experience of the text as simultaneously both remote and familiar resulted in a progressive reconstruction of antiquity as a “cultural alternative”, bringing into relief the character of the humanists’ own world and revealing the historically contingent nature of both societies. Imposed upon the past, the resultant historicizing of experience, while enhancing the imitability of the pagan writers by making them more human, also problematized their authority for the same reason.

(Witt, *In the Footsteps of the Ancients*, 22)

Dante Alighieri (1265 – 1321) can be seen as epitome of the shift from the medieval to the Renaissance period, and forms an important marker of the gradual nature of historical change and continuity. He wrote in the vernacular yet upheld the ideals of the Roman classical world. In *De Monarchia* he takes up the issue of the struggle between the Emperor and the Pope, the secular and the religious authority, respectively – a struggle that emblemizes the medieval–Renaissance dialectic. Francesco Petrarch’s “Letter to Posterity” is a perfect example of humanists’ preoccupation with letter-writing. In “The Ascent of Mont Ventoux”, also written in the form of an epistle, Petrarch claims to invest in the Renaissance spirit of individualism by undertaking the ascent out of his desire / wish. He meditates upon his life and his journey and expresses his intention of writing his history modeled on St. Augustine’s *Confessions*. St. Augustine’s *Confessions* is considered to be the first autobiography in the canon of Western

literature and is a precursor to the genre of self-representation as it was evolved by the Renaissance humanists. Petrarch's letter has been read as a marker of the interiorized individualism of the Renaissance man, as well as an allegorical Christian text. At the summit of Mont Ventoux Petrarch is temporally in the middle of his journey: an ascent shall be followed by a descent. The tension between the Christian ideas of St. Augustine and Petrarch's individualism can only be resolved in the continuum of historical change. The continuum has been explored by many scholars from various different perspectives. Margaret M. Smith in the essay "Medieval Roots of the Renaissance Printed Book: An Essay in Design History" examines different aspects of the designs of books printed during the Renaissance, in order to establish a relationship between the medieval and the Renaissance periods. Gilbert Tournoy has examined the various articulations of a classical myth through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

What is now termed Renaissance humanism was *studia humanitatis* during the Renaissance as the humanists engaged themselves in the study of secular, ancient classical Greek and Latin texts. The medieval world had also inherited classical learning from antiquity but the medieval intellectual life is primarily characterized by ecclesiastical influence. Both change and continuity characterize the gradual shift from the medieval to the early modern. The Renaissance man was influenced by both tradition and innovation. As Dante "stands with one foot in the Middle Ages while with the other he salutes the rising star of the Renaissance" (Charles Homer Haskins quotes an anonymous undergraduate student), rather than imposing a break with tradition, it is imperative to read the commonalities beneath the surface of temporal periodizations of historiography. The origins of Renaissance humanism can be located in the stylistic aesthetics of the medieval times, while acknowledging a change in the values systems. Discounting the notions of linear teleological progress within historiography that create cultural epochal divisions, the medieval and the Renaissance periods must be read into each other.

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