

EUROPEAN RENAISSANCE: A Backdrop Of Change In European Civilization

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines the European Renaissance taking into consideration the radical changes that characterize the European civilization. The paper examines the factors that supposedly led to the gradual disintegration of the feudal system and Christendom—the two dominant institutions of medieval Europe. The rise of Protestantism threatened the integrity of the Roman Catholic Church and a growing urban class strengthened by ‘money economy’ assumed political and economic power in the society. Thus, the changes that took place in the modern age mark a shifting socio-economic basis. The paper examines varied manifestations of the European Renaissance as reflected in the writings of Jacob Burckhardt, J.A.Symonds, Stephen Greenblatt, and Wallace Ferguson.

INTRODUCTION

In the late years of the fourteenth century there began in Europe the period of awakening which is known as the Renaissance. It began so gradually that at first it was a movement hardly perceptible; but with the fall of Constantinople in 1453 the last vestige of the old world was swept away and Europe was plunged into a new age—an age of expansion, of discovery, of enlarged literary and artistic activity.

The Renaissance was not merely a revival of learning, the discovery of ancient manuscripts, or the finding of new worlds. It was the new spirit of freedom, of intellectual energy, of joy and exultation which began to manifest itself in the peoples of Europe, that was the essence of the new age. It was this spirit which impelled men to make use of the material which they found at hand; it was this new intelligence which prompted the discovery of the physical world and the conquest of the human mind and its potentialities.

It was natural that the new movement should begin in Italy and fitting that it should be built upon the ruins of the greatest of empires. For, at a time when the other nations of Europe

were still in a crude state of advancement, Italy already had one of the oldest and most cultured civilizations of the world. She possessed a language, political freedom, and commercial prosperity, which were buried with the fall of the Roman Empire only to come forth with greater brilliance in the Renaissance.

Europe, in the fourteenth century, was, just emerging from the austerity and gloom of the Middle Ages when the Church had been supreme and man had lived only in expectation of a glorious life to come.

Man lived so enveloped in religion that he did not see the beauty of the world. And the priests of the church spent their lives laboriously copying religious manuscripts, leaving the treasures of ancient Greece and Rome untouched. But with the dawning of the Renaissance, man was inspired with, a new exuberance, a new delight in life. The philosophy of Aristotle was laid aside and Plato became the god of the age.

To mention this new attitude toward life is to call to mind the place where it manifested itself most clearly. In no other city did all the forces of the Renaissance combine so thoroughly as in Florence. There the new intelligence reached its highest peak and learning was not confined to a few of the scholars, but permeated the whole population.

In the Florentines, curiosity, the desire to know, great artistic ability, and a love of beauty were curiously blended with cupidity and a capacity for amassing great wealth. On the one hand, their love of beauty was demonstrated in the monuments and paintings with which they filled their city; on the other hand, the moral decadence was shown in the corrupt lives of the rulers and people and in their cruelty and heartlessness. This was the time of the Medici, who although they were tyrannical rulers, were at the same time the greatest of all patrons of the arts.

Life was gay, religion was almost forgotten, pleasure was carried to excess. In both aspects of life, the Intellectual and the social, Florence was the typical Renaissance city.

Bacon said, "I have taken all knowledge to be my province," and his statement expressed the attitude of the age. Renaissance men were fired with the desire to know, and this desire led them along many paths of endeavour.

It was their new interest in life that pushed them on to the discovery of the world. Spain and Portugal were in the largest measure responsible for the exploration of the ocean and the colonization of the new world. It was the urge to know that made Columbus sail out into an

unknown sea in search of a new trade route--a voyage which led to one of the great achievements of the Renaissance, the discovery of America.

For the same reason Diaz rounded the Cape in 1497, and Vasco da Gama sought a new sea route to India. The love of adventure sent Cortes to Mexico and Pizarro to Peru; it was also responsible for the exploits of the English Drake and Hawkins. The exploration of the mysteries of the universe provided another outlet for the new energy. No longer were accented the medieval legends concerning the origin and function of the world. Man pushed aside his dread of nature and desired to know. Then it was that Copernicus explained the solar system, and Galileo proved that the world is mobile; in England, Francis Bacon became the expositor of modern science. The nature and order of the universe was in some measure understood, and the roots of scientific progress were planted. In these two phases—exploration and scientific discovery--one group of Renaissance men satisfied their longing for the new and untried.

With the discovery of the physical world came also the discovery of man or the development of his finer nature. This phase of activity found expression in three channels—art, literature, and scholarship. First we may consider the change which took place in the world of art. In whatever else the other nations of Europe may have excelled, Italy was supreme in painting and sculpture. Art, during the Middle Ages, had become definitely associated with the Church, as Browning's *Fra Lippo Lippi* so conclusively shows. Artists busied themselves only with pictures of the saints and were concerned merely with portraying beauty of soul. There was no attempt to give beauty of form and structure to a work of art. But with the coming of the Renaissance, the new spirit extended also to the arts. Painters began to realize that a symbolic meaning was not all a painting might portray.

They came to appreciate the beauty and perfection of the physical form and to try to reproduce it in their work. Thus, the early Renaissance artist combined the religious idea of the Middle Ages with the new conception of beauty and gave his Madonna's a beautiful body as well as a saintly expression. This was the age of Raphael, of Michael Angelo, of da Vinci, and of Velasquez and Murillo in Spain. This was the time also of the great Giotto, the Dante of painting. As time went on, painting gradually lost its religious significance and became entirely separated from the Church. The natural, human, essentially dramatic qualities in art were realized and given an expression which has hardly been achieved since.

In the literary world, the first true light of the Renaissance came with Dante's Divine Comedy, a work written in Italy's own language, and one which dared to express the spirit of the new age and the individuality of the author. With Dante came a group of names famous in Italian literary history. There was Petrarch, a true representative of the age in his passion for the antique and classical. Then, Boccaccio reflected the new feeling in the joy and lightness which pervaded his writing. Villani became famous for his historical work, and Ariosto produced "the most perfect example of renaissance poetry in his *Orlando Furioso*. But this brilliance in literary achievement was not united to Italy; it spread over all Europe. It was, as in other fields, an age of great figures. In France Rabelais was the beacon light: Spain was in the midst of her Golden Age, with such men in the front as Lope de Vega and Calderon.

The foremost figure was Cervantes, who in 1605 gave to the world the first volume of *Don Quixote*, the greatest novel of all time. The movement reached England much later and, even then, the early period was largely one of imitation and assimilation. Wyatt and Surrey introduced the sonnet form from Italy, and Sidney brought the *terzarima*. In drama, Seneca was the model for tragedy and Plautus and Terence for comedy. Spenser's *Faerie Queene* contained all the decorative richness, harmony, and imaginative splendour of the Italian Renaissance. But the real exponent of the English Renaissance was Shakespeare and the Elizabethan drama. The dramatists of the age achieved the trappy combination of the classical and the new. Of course, Shakespeare was the dominant figure. What Ariosto was for Italy, Rabelais for France, Cervantes for Spain, that and more was Shakespeare for England.

Scholarship, which had made little progress during the Middle Ages, flashed out again during the Renaissance. The earliest beginnings were represented in the passionate desire of men like Petrarch and Boccaccio for knowledge and especially for a knowledge of the classics. Then came the age of acquisition when libraries began to be built and manuscripts collected. Such names as Nicholas V and Pog'-io Bracciolini were famous as builders of libraries. But Italy, with her glorious Roman past, was not the only country to attain intellectual prominence. The northern peoples also turned to a study of the classics. German universities ranked with those of Padua, Pisa, or Florence, and the line of German scholars and educators was long. The scholarship of the world reached its zenith in the humanist, Erasmus of Rotterdam. It was he who combined the erudition of the north with the harmony and n-race of Italian composition. But Germany's greatest contribution to the Renaissance,

and one which has affected the entire world, was the Reformation and the work of Martin Luther, the great reformer and purifier of religion.

There remains one phase of Renaissance achievement--the inventions of which manmade use in his search for new freedom. Many of them, had been known for centuries, but Europe had never had need of them. The compass, discovered in 1302, was first made use of in the voyage of Columbus. Copernicus and Galileo, in their experiments, used the telescope, an Instrument which had long been known to the Arabians. About 1320 gun powder came to be used, an invention which revolutionized warfare. But probably the Invention which affected Renaissance life to the greatest extent was the printing press. For with printing in common use, it was possible to preserve the knowledge of the world and to put the best thought into the possession of everyone.

It can easily be seen that the Renaissance included much more than the Revival of Learning. Every phase of life underwent change, and the true cause of change--was the liberation of the spirit from the fetters which had bound it during the Middle Ages.

As Symonds has said in his book, *The Renaissance in Italy*, the Renaissance means "the spirit of mankind recovering consciousness and the power of self-determination, recognizing the beauty of the outer world, and of the body through art, liberating the reason in science and the conscience in religion, restoring culture to the intelligence and establishing the principle of political freedom."

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