New Patterns of Renaissance Thought:  *Secularism and Humanism*

The word *Renaissance* means "rebirth." Historically, it refers to a time in Western civilization from about 1400 to 1600 that was characterized by the revival of three things: international commerce, interest in Classical ideas, and a belief in the potential of human achievement. For reasons that are both geographical and social, the Renaissance began in Italy where renewed trade with the East flowed into Europe via the Mediterranean Sea and, therefore, through the Italian peninsula. The Italian Renaissance flowered until, as a result of invasions from France and Great Britain, Renaissance ideals flowed into the rest of Western Europe. The main themes at the heart of the Renaissance, **secularism and humanism**, had significant impacts on Western Civilization.

**Secularism** comes from the word secular, meaning “of this world”. Before the Renaissance, medieval Christian civilization had been largely concerned with faith and salvation in the afterlife. The new economic and political opportunities opening up for Western Europe in the Late Middle Ages encouraged more people to take an interest in life in this world. During the Renaissance, people started to see life on Earth as worth living for its own sake, not just as an ordeal to endure before going to heaven. The art of the period in particular exhibited this secular spirit, showing detailed and accurate scenery, anatomy, and nature. Medieval artists generally ignored such realistic aspects in their paintings which focused only on the glory of God. This is not to say that Renaissance people had lost faith in God. Religion was still the most popular theme for paintings during the Renaissance, but people were finding other things worth living for.

Write the definition of **secularism** in your own words:

**Humanism** is the concept that places human beings, not God or faith, as the center of attention in life. Renaissance art, which portrayed the human body as a thing of beauty in its own right, not like the people in flat 2-D medieval art whose only purpose was to celebrate the glory of God and the church. Along those lines, Renaissance philosophers and writers saw humans as intelligent creatures capable of reason (and questioning authority) rather than mindless pawns helplessly manipulated by God. Even the term for Renaissance philosophers, "humanists", shows how the focus of peoples' attention had shifted from Heaven and God to this world and human beings. These beliefs relate to the idea of **individualism**, a belief that individuals have unique abilities to share and celebrate. This belief led to artists signing their names to painting and even painting themselves into pictures. Humanism also drew its inspiration from ideals of ancient Greek and Roman civilizations.

Write the definition of **humanism** in your own words:
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The Ideal of the Well-Rounded Man by Castiglione

The Greeks believed that a man ought to be “well-rounded” meaning that he should develop every aspect of his personality. Count Baldassare Castiglione, a sixteenth-century Italian diplomat, combined this ideal with new Renaissance ideals in a book called The Courtier. As the title implies, Castiglione was writing for the people in the courts of the nobility, but his ideas did influence the middle class merchants and craftsmen.

For this evening’s game, let us select someone to portray a perfect courtier. He should explain all of the conditions and special qualities that a courtier must have; if he mentions something that is not correct, anyone may correct him…

Since doing the same thing over and over again is tiresome, we must vary out life with different occupations. For this reason, I would have our courtier sometimes take part in quiet and peaceful exercises. If he is to escape envy and appear agreeable to everyone, the courtier should join others in what they are doing. Yet he should always be careful to do those things that are praiseworthy. He must use good judgment to see that he never appears foolish. But let him laugh, joke, banter, frolic, and dance, yet in such a way that he shall always appear genial and discreet. And in whatever he does or says, let him do it with grace.

I would have the courtier know literature, in particular those studies known as the humanities. He should be able to speak not only Latin but Greek, as well. Let him read and know the Roman and Greek poets, orators, and historians. Let him be proficient in writing verse and prose, particularly in our own, vulgar language. Besides gaining enjoyment for himself, the courtier will find that his writings will also entertain the ladies, who are usually found of such things. If the courtier cannot attain perfection in this art, he should be careful to see that no one reads what he writes so that others will not laugh at him. Instead, he should show his writings only to a trusted friend. Even if he does not become perfect in the art of writing verse and prose, he should still practice it so that he will at least be able to judge the work of others.

My lords, you must know that I am not content with the courtier unless he is also a musician. Besides being able to read and understand the music, he must be able to play the different instruments. Music is the best relaxation or medicine for a troubled man. Moreover, it is a most becoming and praiseworthy pastime during leisure hours, especially in the court, where it relieves the boredom and pleases the ladies, whose tender and gentle spirits are affected by the harmony and are failed with sweetness…

I wish to discuss another matter, which I think is very important and should not be overlooked by our courtier. He should know how to draw and paint.

Do not be surprised that I believe the courtier should know this art, which today seems to be practiced only by artisans and not by gentlemen. I remember having read that the ancients, especially in Greece, had the boys of noble birth study painting in school. They believed it was an honorable and necessary thing, and it was recognized as the first of the liberal arts. At the same time they forbade the slaves to practice the art. Among the Romans too, it was held in the highest honor…

And truly one who does not honor this art seems unreasonable to me. This universe that we see—the vast heaven so richly adorned with shining stars, the earth circled by seas, varied with mountains, valleys and rivers and decorated with so many different trees, beautiful flowers and grasses—is a great and noble picture painted by the hand of nature and of God. Whoever is capable of copying these pictures in his own paintings seems to me to deserve great respect and notice.

For Discussion: How do Castiglione’s ideas of the “Renaissance Man” connect to Humanism and Secularism?
The Prince by Machiavelli

The Medici Family ruled Florence for most of the fifteenth century, until 1494 when they were overthrown. Four years later, a republican government was set up, and Niccolo Machiavelli served the Florentine republic as a diplomat. Then, in 1512, the Medici returned to power, and Machiavelli was exiled to his farm outside Florence. Based on these experiences, he wrote The Prince, an essay on the nature of political power which he hoped might help a strong ruler to unify Italy and to repel invasion. Machiavelli’s work became a handbook for many future aspiring political leaders.

It is a good thing for a prince to be considered generous. But if generosity is concealed, no one will ever hear about it. Unless he advertises his generosity, the prince will become known as a miser. To earn a reputation as a generous prince, therefore, many men finance lavish displays and put on costly shows. But if a prince does this, he will spend most of his money on displays. If he is to continue to appear generous, he will have to impose heavy taxes and do everything possible to obtain more funds. This course of action will make his subjects begin to hate him; they will not even respect him because he will be poor. His generosity will have injured many and benefitted only a few...For those reasons a prince must not worry if he becomes a miser...

Is it better for a prince to be loved more than feared? Or is it better to be feared more than loved? Ideally, a prince ought to be both feared and loved, but it is difficult for subjects to hold both sentiments toward their ruler. If one of the two must be sacrificed, it is much safer for a prince to be feared rather than loved. In general, men are ungrateful, dishonest, cowardly, and covetous. As long as you help them, they will do what you want them to do. They will offer you their blood, their goods, their lives, and their children when it appears that you will not need to take them up on their word. If a prince has relied solely on the good faith of others, he will be ruined. Men are less afraid to offend a prince the love than one they fear...

I conclude, therefore, that men have control of their love for a prince, but the prince, himself, controls their fear of him. The wise prince will rely on what he can control and not what others control. He must be careful, however, not to make men hate him.

Everyone knows that it is good a thing for a prince to keep his word and live a faithful life. The history of our times shows, however, that those princes who have done great things have not worried about keeping their word. A successful prince must imitate both the lion and the fox. In imitating the lion, the prince protects himself from wolves. In imitating the fox, he protects himself from against his best interests...If all men were good, this rule would not be a sound one. But because they are bad, and do not honor their word to the prince, he is not bound to keep his word...

It is not necessary for a prince to have all the good qualities that I have named, but it is necessary that he seem to have them. I will even go so far as to say that to actually have these qualities and to be guided by them always is dangerous. But to appear to have them is useful. It is well, therefore, to seem merciful, faithful, sincere, religious, and also to be so. But a prince must be always ready to have the opposite qualities if need be. New princes, particularly, fail when they have these good qualities. In order to maintain their power they often must act against faith, against charity, against humanity, and against religion. A prince must be ready to shift with the wind as the ups and downs of fortune require. He should not go against what is good if he can avoid it, but he should be ready and able to do evil when necessary.

I conclude, then, that if fortune continues to vary and men remain basically the same, princes will be successful so long as their ways fit the circumstances. But when times call for other tactics, they will fail unless they follow a new course. I certainly think it is better to act impetuously than to act cautiously, for fortune is a woman, and if the prince wishes to master her, he must conquer her by force. She is overcome by the cold rather by those who proceed coldly. And, therefore, like a woman, she is always a friend to the young because they are less cautious, more fierce, and master her with greater audacity (daring).

For discussion: How do Machiavelli’s ideas about a Renaissance ruler connect to the ideas of Humanism and Secularism?