Chapter 3 : The Northern Renaissance

The influence of the Italian Renaissance gradually spread northward across the Alps to the rest of Western Europe. The Northern Renaissance, as the Renaissance beyond Italy is known, differed from the Italian Renaissance in some respects. In particular, while the growing secular spirit had a powerful impact on the Northern Renaissance, there was a greater effort than had been the case in Italy to reconcile secular and Christian values and attitudes. The Northern Renaissance was thus infused with a more powerful Christian spirit than the Renaissance in Italy, where there had often been an almost open revolt against Christian ideals.

The Renaissance in Germany and the Low Countries

The Development of Printing

One of the most important events in the Renaissance outside of Italy was the development of printing with movable type.

The Printing Press

Johannes Gutenberg (c. 1400-1468) of Mainz in the German Rhineland is generally credited with having set up the first practical printing press using movable metal type. About 1456, Gutenberg produced his superbly printed edition of the Bible.

Spread of Printing

The printing press won rapid acceptance. By 1480, there were over 380 printing presses operating in Western Europe. By 1500 there were more than 1000, and more than 25,000 separate editions had been printed. Books printed before 1501 are known as *incunabula* (literally, cradle works: that is, books printed when printing was still in its infancy).

The printing press had an immense impact on European civilization, enabling the rapid spread of new knowledge and ideas among the educated classes.

Humanism

During the Northern Renaissance, just as in Italy, humanist scholars studied and found inspiration in classical literature. Johann Reuchlin (1455-1522) visited Italy, where he developed a great enthusiasm for humanist studies. Returning to his native Germany, Reuchlin urged that the university curriculum be expanded to include the study of both Greek and Hebrew languages and literature.

Humanism in the Northern Renaissance is frequently referred to as Christian humanism because of the humanists' efforts to unite classical learning with the Christian faith. The Christian humanists rejected what they regarded as medieval Christianity's excessive emphasis on otherworldliness. They sought to achieve a balance of otherworldly and secular concerns and regarded the classics as legitimate guides in that quest. The Christian humanists also desired to bring their knowledge of the classical languages to bear in their effort to attain a deeper knowledge and understanding of the Christian faith.

The Brethren of the Common Life

The work of the Brethren of the Common Life contributed significantly to the development of Christian humanism. Founded by Gerard Groote (1340-1384) in Holland, the Brethren devoted themselves both to education based on classical learning and to inculcating among themselves and their pupils a deep spiritual relationship with Jesus Christ and a love of their fellow human beings.

Thomas à Kempis

Thomas à Kempis (1380-1471), a follower of the of the *devotio moderna*, as the religious and moral teachings of the Brethren were known, wrote *The Imitation of Christ* (c. 1427), one of the greatest of all works of Christian devotional literature.

Erasmus

Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536) was probably the most outstanding of the Christian humanists and in fact, won the title of "Prince of the Humanists." Born in Rotterdam, Holland, he was educated in a school conducted by the Brethren of the Common Life, who introduced him to the Greek and Latin classics. Although he was ordained to the priesthood, Erasmus devoted his life primarily to classical studies.

In his first book, *Adages* (1500),which he wrote in Latin, Erasmus presented a collection of wise sayings from the classical authors, along with his own comments. He subsequently published several expanded editions of the Adages.

In the satirical *Praise of Folly* (1512), his most famous work, Erasmus ridiculed many attitudes of his own time, among them ignorance, superstition, and greed. His satire

was especially sharp when it was directed against churchmen who manifested these qualities.

Erasmus also used his knowledge of the classical languages in an effort to achieve a deeper understanding of the Bible. In 1516, he published an annotated edition of the New Testament in Greek, which revealed several significant errors in the Latin Vulgate, the biblical text authorized by the Roman Catholic Church.

What is termed "Erasmian humanism" is based on Erasmus's belief that the Christian religion offered humanity sound guidelines for its moral conduct and that religion and learning were inextricably bound together. While Erasmus was a critic of abuses in the Roman Catholic Church, he was not a Protestant. Instead, he had a great faith in the ability of human beings to reform their institutions from within. He strongly opposed Martin Luther's Reformation and regarded Luther and other early Protestant reformers as even more doctrinaire and intolerant than the Roman Catholic leadership.

Painting

The greatest painters of the Northern Renaissance were Flemings (from Flanders, in what is today Belgium) and Germans.

The van Eycks

Jan van Eyck (c. 1390-1441) and his brother, Hubert (c. 13701426), worked mainly in the city of Ghent in Flanders. The van Eycks were the first major painters to develop and use oil paints successfully, and Italian artists, such as Leonardo da Vinci, learned about oils from them. The van Eycks' greatest work was *The Adoration of the Lamb*, an altarpiece in St. Bavon's cathedral in Ghent, which Jan van Eyck completed in 1432. Jan van Eyck also painted a number of portraits, including the well-known wedding picture of *Giovanni Arnolfini and His Bride* (1434). The van Eycks' work is marked by their attention to minute detail and their mastery of perspective.

Bosch

Hieronymus Bosch (c. 1450-1516), another Flemish painter, was one of the most unusual painters in the history of Western art. Bosch created a fantasy world inhabited by often nightmarish men and monsters. One of his most famous works is the highly symbolic *Garden of Earthly Delight* (c. 1500).

Brueghel

Pieter Brueghel (c. 1525-1569) was a Flemish painter who worked mainly in Antwerp and Brussels. While Brueghel painted both religious subjects and landscapes, he is best known for his earthy and lively paintings of the activities of ordinary people, especially peasants. Among his well-known works is the *Peasant Wedding* (c. 1565).

Dürer

Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528), a native of Nuremberg and one of the major German Renaissance artists, is most highly regarded for his woodcuts and engravings, which portray both religious and classical subjects. These works demonstrate his great technical mastery and power of expression. Dürer's paintings include a number of portraits, among them a noted *Self-portrait*.

Grünewald

Matthias Grünewald (c. 1475-1530) worked in the German Rhineland under the patronage of the powerful archbishop of Mainz. He painted primarily religious works, especially somber and awe-filled crucifixion scenes. The Isenheim altarpiece (c. 1509-1 511) is probably his best-known work.

Holbein the Younger

Hans Holbein the Younger (c. 1497-1543) was the son of an important painter in the Gothic tradition of medieval German art. The younger Holbein may have studied in Italy; his work reveals considerable Italian influence. Particularly renowned as a portrait painter, he did several portraits of Erasmus and spent a number of years in England, where he painted portraits of King Henry VIIX (1540) and his wives, King Edward VI, Mary Tudor, and Thomas More.

The Renaissance in France

Humanism

A number of French scholars studied in Italy, where they became enthusiastic humanists. During the late fifteenth century, Greek began to be studied in France. In 1529, King Francis I (r. 1515-1547) established the College de France in Paris, which encouraged the study of Hebrew, Greek, and Latin.

Vernacular Literature

The sixteenth-century writers François Rabelais (c. 1490-1553) and Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) were among the first major authors to write in French.

Rabelais

Rabelais studied medicine and the classics and was ordained to the priesthood. Above all, however, he was an individualist and a rebel. He wrote *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel*, two satirical fantasies that were first published in 1532. Rabelais recounted the adventures of two giants who lived unrestrained lives, indulging in virtually every conceivable pleasure. Within the context of stories that have been described as coarse and lewd, Rabelais considered serious questions of philosophy, education, and politics, expressing his faith in individuals and their ability to lead good lives.

Montaigne

Montaigne was born into a wealthy family. His father was Catholic, while his mother was of Spanish Jewish descent. He studied law and served for a time as mayor of Bordeaux. Montaigne won fame as an essayist, publishing the first edition of his *Essays* in 1580. The mixed religious background of his parents may have contributed to his skepticism about religious beliefs. In religion and morality, Montaigne was a relativist. Since one could not know with absolute certainty, it was necessary to be tolerant.

Architecture

During the French Renaissance, there were a number of significant achievements in architecture. A number of chateaux were built, especially in the valley of the Loire River south of Paris. Unlike medieval castles, these chateaux were not fortified since the countryside had become more peaceful. The name of King Francis I is connected with a number of these chateaux, including those of Chambord and Blois. Francis I also built a chateau at Fontainebleau, closer to Paris, which served as his hunting lodge.

The Renaissance in England

Vernacular Literature

Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1340-1400) was the fist important figure in the development of literature during the English Renaissance. He was familiar with the works of the major Latin poets, although he was not a classical scholar, and he made at least two trips to Italy. He was clearly influenced by Italian Renaissance literature, and he may have met Boccaccio, the author of the *Decameron*.

Chaucer's most famous work is wholly English in subject as well as language. The *Canterbury Tales* is a collection of stories presented in poetic form, supposedly told by a diverse group of pilgrims journeying to the shrine of St. Thomas h Becket in Canterbury. The stories reveal Chaucer's profound insight into human nature and are strongly secular in spirit. Chaucer took particular delight in revealing the foibles and corruption of members of the clergy.

Humanism

During the fifteenth century, humanism began to take hold in England, and by the early sixteenth century, the study of Greek had been added to the curriculum at Oxford and Cambridge universities.

Colet

From 1497 to 1504, John Colet (c. 1467-1519) delivered a series of lectures at Oxford on the letters of St. Paul. While Colet knew little or no Greek, he brought a humanistic point of view to bear in these lectures. In 1505, Colet became dean of St. Paul's cathedral in London. He organized a new school at St. Paul's in 1509, which emphasized the study of Greek and Latin languages and literature. By the late sixteenth century, Greek was taught in many other English schools that prepared students for the universities.

More

Thomas More (1478-1535) was England's greatest humanist. After studying the classics at Oxford, he studied law at the Inns of Court in London. Entering the service of the monarchy, More became lord chancellor in 1529, during the reign of King Henry VIII (r. 1509-1547).

More's most famous work is *Utopia* (1516), which he wrote in Latin. *Utopia* (meaning "nowhere" in Greek) described an imaginary island where an ideal cooperative society flourished. In this society based on reason and tolerance, the citizens practiced a Christianity that was free of ignorance and superstition. There was no private property and no desire for profit, and there was no war, except in self-defense. More contrasted this society with the evils existing in his own society.

Elizabethan Literature

In the mid-sixteenth century, a great period began in the history of English literature. This Elizabethan period took its name from Queen Elizabeth I (r. 1558-1603). This was a time of great optimism and energy in English history, symbolized by the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 (see Chapter 5).

Spenser

Edmund Spenser (c. 1552-1599) was regarded by his contemporaries as the leading poet of the age. The first six books of his unfinished masterpiece, the *Faerie Queen*, were published in 1596. This was a romantic epic, based on an Italian model.

Marlowe

Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593), a skilled playwright and poet, produced a number of outstanding works during his brief career. His major dramas include *Tamburlaine the Great*, *Doctor Faustus*, and *The Jew of Malta*.

Shakespeare

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) wrote lyric poetry but is best known for his dramas, both tragedies and comedies, which were produced on the London stage. Shakespeare's plays, which dealt with the entire range of the human experience, include *The Taming of the Shrew, A Midsummer Night's Dream, The Merchant of Venice, Romeo and Juliet, Julius Caesar, Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth,* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. Of his thirty-eight dramas, thirty-six were printed in the First Folio (1623), the first collected edition of his plays.

Jonson

Ben Jonson (1572-1637), a poet and dramatist, was the last major literary figure of the Elizabethan period. Jonson was a student of classical literature, and his plays remind the reader of Greek drama. *Volpone*, his best known play, was first produced in 1606.

The Spanish Renaissance

Humanism

The role of the Roman Catholic Church remained substantial in Spain. Thus, it is not surprising that the central figure in Spanish humanism was a churchman, Cardinal Francisco Ximénes (or Jiménez) de Cisneros (1436-1517), who became archbishop of Toledo in 1495. While he insisted on religious orthodoxy, Ximénes urged an improvement in the educational level of the Spanish clergy. Toward that end, he established the University of Alcala. He also sponsored the publication of the six-volume *Complutensian Polyglot Bible*, which presented the Hebrew, Greek, and Latin texts in parallel columns. As a Christian humanist, Ximénes believed that religious faith would be strengthened by a greater understanding of the sources of Christian revelation.

Literature

Cervantes

Miguel de Cervantes (1547-1616) was a contemporary of William Shakespeare; both men died in 1616within a few days of one another. *Don Quixote* (Part I, 1605; Part 11, 1615), his major work, is regarded by some literary critics as the greatest novel ever written. In this gentle satire of medieval chivalry, Cervantes told the story of a Spanish nobleman who traveled about the countryside in search of romantic adventures and his groom, Sancho Panza, whose common sense and prudence contrasted with the unrealism of his master. The novel presented characters of all types and classes, providing a good picture of Spanish life in the late sixteenth century, as well as a broader perspective on human nature.

Lope de Vega

Felix Lope de Vega (1562-1635) wrote in virtually every literary form, although he is best known as a dramatist. An extremely prolific playwright, he wrote more than 1,500 dramas, of which some 500 survive.

Painting and Architecture

A Greek, Domenicos Theotocopoulis, better known as El Greco (c. 1541-1614), was the greatest painter of the Spanish Renaissance. He studied in Italy with the Venetian painter Titian and worked in Rome before settling in Toledo in 1576. El Greco's paintings reflected his intense religious mysticism and were characterized by elongated and distorted figures and dramatic lighting effects.
The Escorial, built by King Philip II (r. 1556-1598) as a palace and mausoleum, stands as one of the greatest architectural monuments of the Spanish Renaissance.

The Northern Renaissance produced major achievements in humanistic scholarship, literature, and art. In some cases, scholars, writers, and artists were heavily influenced by the Italian Renaissance. In many other instances, however, they produced truly original works, many of which stand among the greatest of human achievements.
While the Renaissance brought an undeniable intensification of the secular spirit in Western European civilization, religious concerns continued to exert a powerful influence, as the Protestant and Catholic reformations demonstrated.