



RENAISSANCE HUMANISM

The society. Medieval society was organized in a strict hierarchical order: the Pope and the Emperor were the greatest authorities, and every man had a definite place in it. Religion had a prominent role: medieval knowledge was contained in the «Holy Scriptures» and in the «Scholastic philosophy», and the most authoritative guide to Christians were the Gospel and the Bible.

In that kind of society, thought and free activity were checked and confined to the boundaries of dogma and institutions. This inevitably caused interior conflicts and contrasts which became more evident in the last stage of the Middle Ages, when a series of forces and factors contributed to alter the old balance. The expansion of trade and the growth of the towns destroyed the feudal economy and deeply affected the social and political institutions. Other relevant factors were scientific progress and geographical discoveries, such as the voyage of Christopher Columbus to America in 1492. These events changed the ways of life and altered the view of the universe as well as man's position in it.

The language. 16th century English was much more modern than Medieval English, though its grammar and vocabulary still retained archaisms. The great development of prose, above all the translation of the Bible into English in a simple and popular language, avoiding both Latin and French words, greatly contributed in giving a modern form to English and spreading it among the people.

POETRY

The revival of poetry was largely influenced by Humanism, especially by the Italian Renaissance. Two courtier poets, Wyatt (1503-1542) and Surrey (1517-1547), during the reign of Henry VIII undertook the task of adapting Italian models to English poetry.

Sir Thomas Wyatt travelled to France and Italy; he deeply felt the influence of the Renaissance and introduced the «Petrarchan sonnet» into England. Wyatt gave the sonnet the form of an octave and a sestet separated by a pause and, by degree, he obtained fluency and sweetness. His sonnets were rich in metaphorical and subtle images; the themes were generally hopeless love and jealousy.

Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, was a victim of Henry VIII; accused with his father, the Duke of Norfolk, of high treason, he was committed to prison and executed. Surrey gave the sonnet its purely English form, less elaborate than the «Italian sonnet». His sonnet consisted in three quatrains with different rhyme, followed by a couplet. But Surrey's greatest merit was the introduction of the blank verse in his translation of Book II and IV of Virgil's Aeneid. By temperament Surrey was a man of the Middle Ages, still attached to chivalric and courtly love traditions; the lines he wrote during his imprisonment, in which he recalled his life, evoke a lively picture of the life of a young noble.

The works of Wyatt and Surrey were issued in 1557, in the collection Tottel's Miscellany by a publisher called Richard Tottel. But their influence was not immediate: it took a whole generation before their initiative began to be followed.

The literature of the period did not produce outstanding works; it was more remarkable for the new trends that it expressed. The only poet who left memorable verses, between Surrey and the advent of Spenser (→ Chapter 6, Great Writers), was Thomas Sackville (1536-1608), the author of Induction, the introductory poem and most famous part of The Mirror for Magistrates (1563). It was originally a collection of nineteen tales, which in the course of successive editions was brought to ninety-one. Each tale relates the life of some great figures in English history. In comparison with similar work, for example Lydgate's Fall of Princes, Sackville's characters are above all English and they testify the increasing English patriotism. The most interesting part of the poem is that containing the description of a Dantesque journey to hell. Moreover, Sackville is the author, with Thomas Norton (1532-1584) and others, of Gorboduc (1561), a drama in «blank verse», generally considered the earliest English tragedy.

PROSE

Between the years 1490 and 1520, English scholars became interested in Humanism; a group of them visited Italy to learn Greek from Byzantine exiles. The most famous were William Grocyn (c. 1446-1519), Thomas Linacre (c. 1460-1524) and John Colet (c. 1467-1519); on their return to England they established a school to teach Greek at Oxford, and the Dutch scholar Erasmus (1466-1536) came from the continent to learn from them.

Erasmus, born in Rotterdam, was the most famous European humanist. In 1509 he wrote in Latin the Encomium Moriae (Praise of Folly), a satire on the society of the time depicting the cruelty of kings, the greedy and ignorance of the clergy, and the foolish standard of education.





The most outstanding figure of English Humanism was Thomas More (1478-1535). He studied at Oxford University and at Lincoln's Inn in London; he became a brilliant lawyer, but was also devoted to literature and philosophy. His reputation attracted the attention of Henry VIII, who in 1529, after the fall of Cardinal Wolsey, appointed him Lord Chancellor. But, at the time of Henry's divorce from Catherine of Aragon, More, who could not agree with Henry's position, resigned his office. In 1534 he was called to take an oath of allegiance to the king, and after his refusal, he was committed to the Tower of London and executed. Thomas More was canonized four hundred years after his death as a martyr of the Roman Catholic Church.

His best known work is *Utopia* (1516), written in Latin and modelled on Plato's *Repubblica*; the title is a Greek word meaning «nowhere». It is about an imaginary island, where the natural goodness and wisdom of men triumph over the evils of the society of the time. *Utopia* stands for an ideal world of justice, peace and learning. Communism is the law of the land; the inhabitants are neither unemployed nor overworked, they hate war and soldiers, enjoy complete religious tolerance and lead a pleasant life. In this work More rejected all medieval beliefs and summed up the values of the Renaissance.

The author wrote in English *The History of King Richard III* (1514), giving the tyrant the lively picture which later inspired Shakespeare.

Educationists

Together with the humanists, a group of writers developed: they drew inspiration from the classical world, but they wrote in English and were called «Educationists».

Sir Thomas Elyot (c. 1490-1546) wrote *The Boke named the Governour* (1531), dedicated to King Henry VIII, the first educational treatise in English, addressed to the future rulers of England.

Roger Ascham (1515-1568), a Protestant who hated the Rome of his days but admired the writers of ancient Greece and Rome, is the most popular among Educationists. He wrote *Toxophilus* (1545), a treatise about archery, to keep the tradition of the English national weapon alive. In his work *The Schoolmaster* (published in 1570), Ascham expressed his view on the teaching of Latin and Greek.

Thomas Wilson (1524-1581) in his work *The Art of Rhetoric* (1553, 1560) recommended the use of a pure language and simple forms and derided those of his contemporaries who affected complicated forms and archaic words.

The English prose received a great impulse from the translation of the Bible. In 1525 William Tyndale (c. 1494-1536) published a translation of the New Testament at Cologne. It was followed by Miles Coverdale's (1488-1568) translation of the Old Testament and, in 1549, by the compilation of *The Book of Common Prayer*.

