

THE RENAISSANCE 1440-1660

O England! model to thy inward greatness, Like little body with a mighty heart...
—William Shakespeare

What do you think people living a hundred years from now will call the age we live in today? Will they say we lived in the Space Age, the Age of Computers, the Age of Anxiety, the Age of Violence? We might be given a label we can't even imagine.

Just as we don't know what people of the future will think of us, the people of Europe living in the 1400s, 1500s, and 1600s didn't know that they were living in the Renaissance. Historical periods—the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Romantic period—are historians' inventions, useful labels for complex phenomena. The Middle Ages in England did not end on a certain night in 1485, when King Richard III's naked body, trussed up like a turkey, was thrown in an unmarked grave. And the English Renaissance did not begin the moment a Tudor nobleman was crowned King Henry VII. The changes in people's values, beliefs, and behavior that marked the emerging Renaissance occurred gradually. Much that could be called "medieval" lingered on long after the period known as the Middle Ages was past. Historical periods cannot be rigidly separated from one another, but they can be distinguished.

Beginning in the late 1400s, the English Renaissance marked changes in people's values, beliefs, and behavior.

Rediscovering Ancient Greece and Rome

The term *renaissance* itself is a French word meaning "rebirth." It refers particularly to renewed interest in classical learning, which means the writings of ancient Greece and Rome. In the long period of the Middle Ages, most European scholars had forgotten the Greek language, and they used a form of Latin that was very different from the Latin of ancient Rome. Very few ordinary people could read. Those who could read were encouraged to concentrate on texts promoting Church doctrine. But in the Renaissance, people discovered the marvels hidden away in old Greek and Latin classics—books that had been tucked away on the cobwebbed shelves of monasteries for hundreds of years. Now people learned to read Greek once more and reformed the Latin that they read, wrote, and spoke.

Some people became more curious about themselves and their world than people in general had been in the Middle Ages, so that gradually there was a renewal of the human spirit—of curiosity and creativity. New energy seemed to be available for creating beautiful things and thinking new, even daring, thoughts. Today we still use the term "Renaissance person" for an energetic and productive human being who is interested in science, literature, history, art, and other subjects. (In America, Virginia's Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence, is referred to as a "Renaissance man.")

Fifteenth-century scholars rediscovered the writings of ancient Greece and Rome. At this same time, people became more curious about themselves and their world.

It All Began in Italy: A Flourish of Genius

The new energy and creativity were first observable in Italy, where considerable wealth had been generated from banking and trade with the East. The Renaissance began in Italy in the fourteenth century and lasted into the sixteenth. Thinking about just a few of the extraordinary people who flourished in this period—artists such as Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo, explorers such as Christopher Columbus, or scientists such as Galileo—reminds us how remarkably rich this period was, and how much we owe to it.

Almost everyone in Europe and Britain at this time was Roman Catholic, in name anyway, so the Church was very rich and powerful, even in political affairs—in ways we would probably object to today. Many of the popes were lavish patrons of artists, architects, and scholars. Pope Julius II, for example, commissioned the artist Michelangelo to paint gigantic scenes from the Bible on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, a small church in the pope's "city" that was called, as it is today, the Vatican. Lying on his back on a scaffold, Michelangelo painted the Creation, the fall of Man and Woman, Noah's flood, and other Biblical and mythological subjects. His bright, heroic figures, which are still admired by

thousands of visitors to Rome each year, show individual human beings who are noble and capable of perfection. This optimistic view of human nature was also expressed by many other Renaissance painters and writers.

The Renaissance began in fourteenth-century Italy, where the Catholic Church financed many intellectual and artistic endeavors.

Humanism: Questions About the Good Life

Refreshed by the classics, the new writers and artists were part of an intellectual movement known as **humanism**. The humanists went to the old Latin and Greek classics to discover new answers to such questions as “What is a human being?” “What is a good life?” and “How do I lead a good life?” Of course, Christianity provided complete answers to these questions, answers that the Renaissance humanists accepted as true. Renaissance humanists found no essential conflicts between the teachings of the Church and those of an ancient Roman moralist like Cicero. They sought instead to harmonize these two great sources of wisdom: the Bible and the classics. Their aim was to use the classics to strengthen, not discredit, Christianity.

The humanists’ first task was to recover accurate copies of these ancient writings. Their searches through Italian monasteries turned up writers and works whose very existence had been forgotten. Their next task was to share their findings. And so they became teachers, especially of the young men who would become the next generation’s rulers—wise and virtuous rulers, they hoped. From the Greek writer Plutarch, for instance, these humanist teachers would learn that the aim of life is to attain virtue, not success or money or fame, because virtue is the best possible human possession and the only source of true happiness.

An intellectual movement known as humanism began to use the Latin and Greek classics, combined with traditional Christian thought, to teach people how to live and how to rule.

The New Technology: A Flood of Print

The computer has radically transformed how we get information today. Similarly, the printing press transformed the way information was exchanged during the Renaissance. Before this, all books were laboriously written out by hand—you can imagine how difficult and expensive this was and how few books were available.

The inventor of printing with movable type was a German named Johannes Gutenberg (1400?–1468). He printed the first complete book, an immense Latin Bible, at Mainz, Germany, around 1455. From there, the art and craft of printing spread to other cities in Germany, in the Low Countries (the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg), and in northern Italy. By 1500, relatively inexpensive books were available throughout western Europe. In 1476, printing reached England, then regarded as an island remote from the centers of civilization. In that year, William Caxton (1422?–1491), a merchant, diplomat, and writer who had been living in the Low Countries, set up a printing press in Westminster (now part of London). In all, Caxton’s press issued about one hundred different titles, initiating a flood of print in English that is still increasing.

Gutenberg’s printing press helped spread the new knowledge, making more books available to more people than ever before.

Two Friends—Two Humanists

When you hear people speak of humanism, you may hear the name Erasmus. Desiderius Erasmus (1466?–1536) is today perhaps the best known of all the Renaissance humanists. Erasmus was a Dutch monk, but he lived outside the monastery and loved to travel, visiting many of the countries in Europe, including Italy, France, Germany, and England. He belonged, then, to all Europe. Because he wrote in Latin, he could address his many writings to all the educated people of western Europe.

On his visits to England, Erasmus taught Greek at Cambridge University and became friendly with a number of important people, among them a young lawyer named Thomas More (1477?–1535). More and Erasmus had much in common: They

both loved life, laughter, and classical learning, and they both were dedicated churchmen, though they were impatient with some of the Church's corrupt practices at that time.

Like Erasmus, More wrote in Latin—poems, pamphlets, biographies, and his famous treatise on human society, *Utopia* (1516). This book became immediately popular, and it has been repeatedly translated into English and many other languages. Hundreds of writers have imitated or parodied it, and it has given us a useful adjective for describing impractical social schemes: *utopian*. More himself was far from impractical; he held a number of important offices, rose to the very top of his profession, was knighted, and, as Lord Chancellor, became one of the king's chief ministers. More continues to fascinate people today. The play *A Man for All Seasons*, by Robert Bolt, later made into a movie (available on videotape), is about More and his tragic stand-off with King Henry VIII over a matter of law. You might notice that many lawyers and politicians today hang a picture of Thomas More in their offices.

Desiderius Erasmus and Thomas More, humanists and close friends, helped shape European thought and history.

What Was the Renaissance?

Here, reduced to a small list, are the major characteristics of that great era called the Renaissance:

- **People expanded their worlds by reading classical Greek and Roman writers rather than only religious writings that promoted Christian doctrine.**
- **Humanism spread, focusing attention on human life here and now, as well as on eternal life.**
- **A new technology—printing—made books widely available.**
- **A growing merchant class, rich with wealth plundered from the Americas, began to challenge the power of the bishops and the pope.**
- **The spread of scholarly Latin throughout Europe made possible the sharing of ideas.**

The Reformation: Breaking with the Church

While the Renaissance was going on throughout Europe, there occurred in some countries another important series of events called the **Reformation**. In England these two vast movements were closely related, and their forces were felt by all English writers. Although the exact nature of the Reformation varied from country to country, one feature was common to all Reformers: They rejected the authority of the pope and the Italian churchmen. In England, conflicts with the papacy had occurred off and on over the centuries, but adjustments had always been made on both sides. By the 1530s, an open break with the Roman Church could no longer be avoided.

By then, a number of circumstances made such a break possible. Strong feelings of patriotism and national identity made the English people resent the financial burdens imposed on them by the Vatican—the pope, after all, was a foreign power in far-off Italy. Moreover, new religious ideas were coming into England from the Continent, especially from Germany. There, a monk named Martin Luther (1483–1546) had founded a new kind of Christianity, based not on what the pope said, but on a personal understanding of the Bible. Like any institution that has been around for a long time and that has ignored corruption within its ranks, the Church needed reform. Right at home in England, humanists like More and Erasmus were ridiculing old superstitions, as well as the ignorance and idleness of monks and the loose living and personal wealth of priests and bishops.

Strong feelings of patriotism and new ideas coming from the Continent encouraged people to question the authority of the Catholic Church and to object to the financial burdens imposed on them by the pope in Rome.

King Versus Pope: All for an Heir

The generations-old conflict between the pope and the king of England came to a climax when Henry VIII wanted to get rid of his wife of twenty-four years. Divorce was not allowed, especially for kings (until recently, that was still true in Britain), so Henry needed a loophole. He asked Pope Clement VII to declare that he, Henry, was not properly married to his Spanish wife, Catherine of Aragon, because she had previously been wedded—for all of five months—to his older

brother Arthur, now dead. (It was against Church law to marry a dead sibling's spouse; the Biblical basis for the law is in Leviticus.)

Henry had two motives for wanting to get rid of Catherine. First, although she had borne him a princess, she was too old to give him the male heir that he thought he must have. (Catherine had lost five babies.) What is more, another younger woman had won Henry's dangerous affections: The king now wished to marry Anne Boleyn, who had been his "favorite" for several years. (Henry had earlier seduced Anne's sister.) The pope was not able to grant Henry the annulment of his marriage, even if he had wanted to, because the pope was controlled by Queen Catherine's nephew, the emperor of Spain. And so, upon receiving the pope's refusal in 1533, Henry simply declared himself head of the English Church. He then appointed a new archbishop of Canterbury, who obligingly declared Henry's marriage to Catherine invalid.

With Catherine packed away under house arrest—since she refused to accept the annulment of her marriage—Henry closed all of England's monasteries and sold the rich buildings and lands to his subjects. While the vast majority of his subjects agreed with Henry's changes in the Church, some of them did not. The best known of all those who remained loyal to the pope was Sir Thomas More, now the Lord Chancellor of England. More felt he could not legally recognize his friend Henry as head of the Church. For More's stubbornness, Henry ordered that his Lord Chancellor be beheaded. It wasn't the first—or last—time that Henry executed a friend.

This was the very beginning of Protestantism in England. Many people were dissatisfied with the new church for reasons just the opposite of More's. They felt that it was not reformed enough, that it was merely a copy of Catholicism, as in some respects it was. These dissidents, known as Puritans, Baptists, Presbyterians, Dissenters, and Nonconformists, wanted to get rid of many things they called "popish," such as the bishops, the prayer book, the priest's vestments, and even the church bells and the stained-glass windows. Some of them said that religion was solely a matter between the individual and God. This idea, which is still the foundation of most Protestant churches, is directly traceable to the teachings of those Renaissance humanists who emphasized the freedom of all human beings.

In 1531, refused an annulment by the pope, Henry VIII broke with the Catholic Church in Rome and declared himself head of the English Church. This marked the beginning of the Protestant Reformation in England.

Henry VIII: Renaissance Man and Executioner

The five Tudor rulers of England are easy to remember: They consist of a grandfather, a father, and three children. The grandfather was Henry VII (1457–1509), a Welsh nobleman who seized the throne after England was totally exhausted by the long and bloody struggle called the Wars of the Roses. (Both factions involved used a rose as their emblem, one red, one white.) Henry VII was a shrewd, patient, and stingy man who restored peace and order to the kingdom; without these, there could never have been a cultural Renaissance.

His son Henry VIII (r. 1509–1547) had six wives: After Catherine of Aragon and Anne Boleyn, there were Jane Seymour, Anne of Cleves, Catherine Howard, and Catherine Parr. The fates of these unfortunate women are summarized in a jingle:

**Divorced, beheaded, died,
Divorced, beheaded, survived.**

The sexual intrigues of the court trapped several of Henry's wives: The king could play around, but he couldn't tolerate being suspicious of his wives' fidelity. The price paid by two young wives was heavy. Like Thomas More, Anne Boleyn and Catherine Howard lost their heads on the chopping block.

Despite his messy home life, Henry VIII was a very important figure. He created the Royal Navy, which put a stop to foreign invasions of England and provided the means for this island kingdom to spread its political power, language, and literature all over the globe. If we overlook his use of the sword against his enemies (and friends), Henry VIII himself deserves the title "Renaissance man." He wrote poetry and played many different musical instruments well; he was a champion athlete and a hunter; and he patronized the new humanistic learning. But in his old age, Henry was also coarse, dissolute, arrogant, and an unregenerate womanizer. He died without knowing that the child he ignored because she was female would become the greatest ruler England ever had.

Henry VIII's rule was bold and bloody. He increased England's strength and ensured its security by building up the Royal Navy, but those close to the king paid a high price.

The Boy King and Bloody Mary

Henry VIII was survived by three children: Mary, daughter of the Spanish princess, Catherine of Aragon; Elizabeth, daughter of Anne Boleyn, a lady-in-waiting at the court; and Edward, son of noblewoman Jane Seymour, who died twelve days after her son's birth. According to the laws of succession, the son had to be crowned first, and so at age nine the son of Henry and Jane Seymour became Edward VI (r. 1547–1553). An intelligent but sickly boy, he ruled in name only while his relatives wielded the actual power.

When Edward died of tuberculosis, he was followed by his half-Spanish half-sister Mary (r. 1553–1558). Mary was a devout, strong-willed Catholic determined to avenge the wrongs done to her mother. She restored the pope's power in England and ruthlessly hunted down Protestants.

Had she lived longer, and had she exercised better judgment, Mary might have undone all her father's accomplishments. But she made a strategic error when she burned about three hundred of her subjects at the stake. She further lost the support of her people when she married Philip II, king of Spain, a country England was beginning to fear and hate. (Mary was thirty-seven and Philip only twenty-six.) Mary's executions earned her the name "Bloody Mary." When Mary died of a fever, childless, her sister Elizabeth became queen.

Mary Tudor succeeded her father Henry VIII. Immediately, she killed Protestants and reversed her father's policies: She restored the pope's power in England.

Elizabeth: The Virgin Queen

Elizabeth I (r. 1558–1603) was one of the most brilliant and successful monarchs in history. Since she inherited a kingdom torn by fierce religious feuds, her first task was to restore law and order. She reestablished the Church of England and again rejected the pope's authority, and the pope promptly excommunicated her. To keep Spain appeased, she pretended that she just might marry her widowed brother-in-law, King Philip.

Philip was the first of a long procession of noblemen, both foreign and English, who wanted to wed her. But Elizabeth resisted marriage all her life and officially remained "the Virgin Queen" (thereby giving the American colony Virginia its name). She knew that her strength lay in her independence and her ability to play one suitor off against another. "I am your anointed Queen," she told a group from Parliament who urged her to marry. "I will never be by violence constrained to do anything. I thank God I am endued with such qualities that if I were turned out of the realm in my petticoat, I were able to live in any place in Christendom."

A truly heroic person, Elizabeth survived many plots against her life. Several of these plots were initiated by her cousin, another Mary—Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots. As Elizabeth had no children, Mary was heir to England's throne because she, too, was a direct descendant of Henry VII. But Mary, a Catholic, was eventually deposed from her throne in Protestant Scotland. Put under house arrest, she lived as a royal exile in England, carefully watched by her cousin Elizabeth. Elizabeth endured Mary and her plots for twenty years and then, a true daughter of her father, sent her Scottish cousin to the chopping block.

Like her father, Elizabeth quickly and efficiently settled disorder both in her kingdom and in her own household. She once again rejected the pope and reestablished the Church of England. Elizabeth's intelligence and independence made her reign one of the most successful in England's history.

The Spanish Armada Sinks: A Turning Point in History

King Philip of Spain, ever watchful for an excuse to hammer at England, used Mary's execution as an excuse to invade England. He assembled a vast fleet of warships for that purpose: the famous Spanish Armada. In 1588, England's Royal Navy, assisted greatly by nasty weather in the Irish Sea, destroyed the Armada. This victory assured England's and all of

northern Europe's independence from the powerful Catholic countries of the Mediterranean. It was a great turning point in history and Elizabeth's finest moment. If Spain had prevailed, history would have been quite different: All of North America, like most of South America, might be speaking Spanish instead of English.

In 1588, the English Royal Navy defeated the Spanish Armada. This stunning sea victory assured England's independence from the powerful Catholic countries of the Mediterranean.

A Flood of Literature

What is the connection between these political events and English literature? With their own religious and national identity firmly established, the English started writing as never before. After the defeat of the Armada, Elizabeth became a beloved symbol of peace, security, and prosperity to her subjects, and she provided inspiration to scores of English authors. They represented her mythologically in poetry, drama, and fiction—as Gloriana, Diana, the Faerie Queene, and Cynthia. Literary works that did not directly represent her were dedicated to her because authors knew she was a connoisseur of literature and a person of remarkably wide learning.

Elizabeth encouraged and inspired many writers. With the era of peace and prosperity that followed the defeat of the Spanish Armada, the English started writing as never before.

Decline of the Renaissance: A Dull Man Succeeds a Witty Woman

Elizabeth died childless, so her second cousin, James VI of Scotland, was her successor. James was the son of Elizabeth's cousin Mary whom Elizabeth had beheaded years before. As James I of England (r. 1603–1625), he lacked Elizabeth's ability to resolve (or postpone) critical issues, especially religious and economic ones. James was a spendthrift where Elizabeth had been thrifty; he was thick-tongued and goggle-eyed where she had been glamorous and witty; he was essentially a foreigner where she had been a complete Englishwoman.

James I tried hard. He wrote learned books in favor of the divine right of kings and against tobacco, he patronized Shakespeare, he sponsored a new translation of the Bible, and he was in many respects an admirable man and a benevolent, peaceful ruler. Yet his relationship with many of his subjects, especially with pious, puritanically minded merchants, went from bad to worse.

The difficulties of James's reign became the impossibilities of his son's. Charles I (r. 1625–1649) turned out to be remote, autocratic, and self-destructive. Some of his most powerful subjects had him beheaded in 1649. For the next eleven years, England was ruled by Parliament and the Puritan dictator Oliver Cromwell, not by an anointed king. When Charles's self-indulgent son returned to power eleven years later, in 1660, England had changed in many important ways.

Of course the Renaissance did not end in 1660 as Charles II returned from exile in France, just as it had not begun at any specific date. Renaissance values, which were primarily moral and religious, gradually eroded, and Renaissance energies gradually gave out. The last great writer of the English Renaissance was John Milton, who lived on into an age in which educated people were becoming more worldly in their outlook. Scientific truths were soon to challenge long-accepted religious beliefs.

The English Renaissance was over.

The political climate in England began to change after Elizabeth's death. The end of the English Renaissance is usually marked by the return of the exiled king in 1660. By this time, more political and secular values were beginning to challenge the accepted doctrines of religion.