
UNIT 8 THE RENAISSANCE

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8.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit is intended to equip the student with a basic knowledge of the Renaissance and its broader ramifications. To this end, the unit will

- Help the student distinguish between the different strands of the Renaissance.
- Acquaint the student with the main features and figures of this phenomenon.
- Acquaint the student with some of the significant social and cultural movements that shaped the Renaissance in England.
- To this end, it will identify the role of the Reformation movement in the Church and of English nationalism, in the shaping of the English Renaissance.
- Indicate the role of changes in the English court in the production and shaping of Renaissance English literature.

8.1 INTRODUCTION

Given that the period we refer to as the Renaissance sits at different times in different countries, and that the English renaissance owes much to its Continental predecessor, the first unit will explore some of the relations between the two. It will focus on trends in learning and the arts, on the evolution of English humanism, and on religious and political movements like the Reformation and their impact on English politics and society. It will also dwell on the literary, cultural and economic developments (the inception of British imperial inclinations, for instance) of the period. These will include issues like the evolution of courtier poetry, the relation of poets and poetry to Elizabethan court politics and the role of a newly emerging English nationalism in shaping the arts of the age.

8.2 THE RENAISSANCE

8.2.1 The Continental and the English Renaissance

The social, political, religious and cultural forces that we refer to as the Renaissance was first evident in continental Europe and began to be felt in England only about the end of the fifteenth century. Perhaps the most important of these forces in the continent and in England was the spread of the new humanist learning and ideology

BRITISH POETRY

MEG 01

II

Renaissance Poets

Undertaking A Study of Spenser

*Music begins to atrophy when it departs too far from the dance
... poetry begins to atrophy when it gets too far from music.*

Ezra Pound



Indira Gandhi National Open University
School of Humanities



Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar
Open University

especially among the upper classes. This learning is first in evidence in Italy. Following the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1493, refugees from that city had brought with them the vast learning and literature – especially of the Greeks – that had been stored in the libraries of the city. This produced the first great Italian humanists like Savonarola, Ficino and Pico della Mirandola, who were subsequently to influence early English humanists like Thomas Linacre (1460-1524), John Colet (1467-1519) and William Lyly (1468-1522) – visitors to Italy who took back to England the new learning. It was highly influential in the designing of the new curricula in schools and universities, especially the work of the great humanist educationist Desiderius Erasmus (1469-1536), but for a long time it remained without impact on the literature and art of England. This was primarily because the English language was as yet immature, socially and politically without power. The language of the courts was still predominantly French, while that of learning remained Latin. There was no real tradition as yet of English theatre, prose or verse, despite the work of Chaucer in the last. Nor was there a major school of art that could be influenced by the new learning, as was the case with Italian artists like Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci. It is no coincidence then that the first full impact of the renaissance in English literature came with the translation of Latin and Italian verse into English by poets like Wyatt and Surrey, and the consequent enrichment of the literature in the English vernacular. This in turn was enabled substantially by the fact that the school and university system had by now produced a generation of writers literate in the ancient languages and literatures of Latin, Greek and Hebrew, and brought to English writings the humanism of those works.

The invention of the printing press also played a role in the emergence of the Renaissance in the continent and in England. It made possible the sudden and immense popularization of the new learning in Italy, and in the other European countries. It also contributed substantially to the development and consolidation of national languages and consequently of national traditions of literature. The classics were translated from the Latin and Greek originals into the vernacular languages of the different countries and published widely, allowing greater access to the new learning. This pattern was true of England too.

Where the English renaissance differed substantially from its European counterparts was, firstly, in the kind of impact that the Reformation had on the renaissance in England. We will study this in greater detail in the next section; for now, let us note that the spirit of unbounded humanism associated with the continental renaissance, with its celebration of the human form and intellect, was tempered by the moral vision of a powerful Puritan imagination, which had already established itself in England by the time the renaissance took effect there. Secondly, the renaissance in England was never as profoundly an elitist phenomenon as it was on the continent. Perhaps because of the distance from Italy, perhaps because of the entrenched popular traditions of theatre and folk music and poetry, the emergent high culture that was the renaissance in England had to deal with and assimilate local, popular and mass forms and traditions of literature and culture more than, say, the renaissance in France. Because of the spread of Protestant teachings and of literacy, the English renaissance also had a mass base very different from its continental counterparts. Thirdly, the direction of politics in the age – which led to the political distancing of England from both France and Italy – along with a native resurgence of nationalistic sentiments, and ambitions to rival the Greeks and the Romans in their cultural achievements, led to an involution of the spirit of the renaissance that was specifically English in character, and distinct from its European counterparts. The poetry of Edmund Spenser in many ways typifies this character, as we shall see shortly.

8.2.2 The Renaissance and the Reformation

As we noted above, the English renaissance was crucially influenced by another very important historical phenomenon, which differentiated it substantially from its

continental predecessor: the Reformation. In essence, the 'Reformation' refers to the various and often bloody and violent movements against the Roman Catholic church, that spread over Continental Europe through the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, demanding large scale reforms in its beliefs and ecclesiastical practices. It, too, was in many ways a consequence of the spread of the new humanist learning on the continent, and of the power of the printing press, which permitted the translation and popularization of the Bible from Latin and Greek into the European vernaculars, annulling the laities' dependency on the ecclesiastical orders for the interpretation and mediation of the Bible. It was led by figures like Martin Luther (1483-1546) and John Calvin (1509-64) but was preceded by reformers like St. Francis, Peter Waldo, John Huss, and John Wycliffe who repeatedly critiqued the abuses in ecclesiastical practices from the early thirteenth century onward. They were, however, not inclined to actually break from the Roman Catholic Church, an extremism that later reformers of the sixteenth century adopted, resulting in the many breakaway sects that constitute Protestantism. The conventional date for the beginning of the Reformation then is Oct. 31, 1517, the date that Luther is said to have posted his Ninety-five Theses critiquing the church on the door of the Castle Church, Wittenberg. It is falsely assumed by many that Luther had intended to break from the Catholic church, but the fact is that it was the Catholic church that expelled Luther, against his own desire. Later reformers however, picked up on Luther's principles of dissent and deliberately broke from the Catholic church, plunging much of Europe into religious and civil strife for the next few centuries.

The reformist spirit had already made its way to England by the time of Luther, primarily through the work of John Wycliffe (1330-84), who not only protested against the excessive worldly power of the Catholic church, but was instrumental in first translating the Bible into English. Wycliffe's translation of the New Testament was, however, not very accessible and his followers, the Lollards, did not have much impact on the religious imagination. Wycliffe's work was furthered by William Tindale (1484-1536), who wrote and popularized a much more accessible translation of the Bible. When Henry VIII - who had initially been a strong defender of Catholic orthodoxy - broke from the Roman papacy in 1535, the impetus to the Reformation in England became politically powerful, although tempered by the king's desire to form a Church of England that would lean neither toward Catholicism nor toward the more rigid versions of Protestantism. The more radical varieties of Protestantism however, continued to flourish in England, in the form of sects like the Diggers, the Quakers, the Presbyterians, etc. and remained influential in shaping the directions of politics as well as of society and culture. Their impact is felt especially in the tempering of renaissance humanism and sensualism, through the consistent maintenance of Christian tenets over classical, especially Platonic, ideals. So even while the Italian influence on the emergent English literature of the period is strongly evident, it remains harnessed to an essentially Christian vision, revealing in that literature a tension between a strong fascination for the former and an equally strong moral condemnation of it.

8.2.3 Social and Political Circumstances of the Renaissance

We have already noted how the permeation of the currents of the renaissance into English culture was both mediated and tempered by the forces of the reformation that had already found root in England. Both forces - of the renaissance and of the reformation - served to substantially reorganize English society. In the 15th century, England had had primarily an agrarian and feudal socio-economic structure, with much of the population living in the rural countryside, many as tenants to country squires and noble lords. However, repeated epidemics of the plague had substantially affected the population, which as a consequence hardly grew in this period. The shortage of labor proved a blessing to many peasants, who managed to sell their labor at a premium, and eventually to rise above their class and form a new class of landed folk called 'yeomen' or small farmers. Many large landholders converted their land into sheep pasture because of the lack of labor, leading to land enclosures and the

abandonment of many villages. This in turn led to the dramatic development of the wool industry. The popularity of the pastoral as a genre and of the figure of the shepherd in renaissance English poetry then, is not entirely because of either classical influences or of Biblical ones, but derived from the English social landscape itself. But the period also saw the growth of London as a commercial and political city, with the new classes and the re-distributed populations seeking employment, commercial gains and political power gradually settling in the city. A part of the new social constituents were guilds of artisans and craftspeople whose services were becoming increasingly important in catering to the needs of the growing populace. The emergence of these mixed social sectors was an early part of the larger process of the dismantling of the feudal economy that was to culminate with the consolidation of industrial capitalism in the nineteenth century. As yet though, they were still constrained by the social and economic parameters of that economy. The migrants to London in this century were thus mainly seeking social and economic uplift as well as acceptability in a feudal socio-economic system that barely recognized them. They became a ready constituency for proselytizing protestant groups who not only converted their beliefs, but through promoting literacy, gave them access to educational possibilities that had remained outside their reach till now. But in doing so, it also spread the sense of tension that we noted above, between the humanist education they had access to and the conservative reformist morality of the new religious movements.

This tension was compounded by monarchical changes and the consequent changes in affiliations – from Henry VIII's Anglicanism to Edward VI's rigid Protestantism to Mary Tudor's Catholicism to Elizabeth I's return to Anglicanism and so on. But these vacillations were substantially defused in their impact on literature and culture primarily because of an emergent English nationalist spirit. This nationalist sentiment held together at the cultural level despite the political tensions that arose out of diverse and changing religious affiliations. It rejected much that was Italianate in the renaissance, promoting an Englishness of vision and ideals that was aimed at positioning English literature and arts as superior to the rest of renaissance Europe. (It is no coincidence that many of the playwrights of the period set their comedies and satires – whether it was Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* or Jonson's *Volpone* – in Italy, implying to their English audiences that the vices and venalities satirized in the plays were the illnesses of a specifically Italianate character.) This ideological rejection permitted the English writers of the period to import forms, genres, styles and themes from the continent but also to experiment with them freely, nativizing them by fusing them with the existing traditions of English literature, subjecting them to the specificities of the rapidly evolving English language, and infusing them with the moral and social vision of English Anglicanism. Nevertheless, several of the main elements of the European renaissance which did not conflict with protestant ideals – or even enhanced them – did find their way into, and become an entrenched part of, the new literature of England. The celebration of the human spirit and intellect was one such element. A related and for us, more pertinent element was a celebration of the arts, especially of skills in writing and rhetoric, the cultivation of which was now considered of signal importance especially to the governing classes, into which Spenser made his way. This was now a part of the education of these classes, and Spenser too, was to avail of it at his grammar school as well as subsequently, at Cambridge University. We will now examine briefly how this skill and knowledge in the arts was an important aspect of court life in renaissance England, and what the consequent relations were of poets to the monarch and the court.

8.2.4 Courtier Poets, Court Politics

Most of the well-known poetry of the period was written by courtiers, or by highly educated gentlemen, and was rarely published. Poetry was written more for a small circle of friends and others of similar rank, addressed to a nobleman usually, following the practice of patronage by the nobility. But it was, as we have noted,

following the practice of patronage by the nobility. But it was, as we have noted, common practice for courtiers of the period to lay claims to being poets. There is some controversy about how important their self-perception as poets was to them, and to the social meanings and implications of this perception. It is probably true that the poets of the Elizabethan period – from Thomas Wyatt (1503-42) to Walter Raleigh (1552-1618) and John Davies (1569-1626) – were first courtiers and then poets. Critics like Richard Helgerson argue that most of these poets, while projecting the craft of poetry as being of 'divine origin and advertising its civilizing effect', and the poet as teacher, afflict d, inspirer, etc., to monarchs, refused to see themselves in these terms (Helgerson: 676). Contrarily, for most of them poetry was merely an indulgence, about which they remained largely defensive. The risk of assuming the garb of Poet, as they envisioned the vocation, was too potentially threatening to their social status, with the possibility of exposing 'its wearer to ridicule and shame' (Helgerson: 676). Thus while acknowledging the importance of the figure notionally, according to Helgerson, most of these poets were unwilling to offer their own work and themselves as worthy of acknowledgement in these terms. They instead invariably offered apologies for their work, blaming it on the passions of love or a lack of suitable employment, often promising never to repeat their 'pretensions' to poetry again. Their complaints however were not against their conceptions of poetry so much as against their actual poetic work, which they felt was likely to be mocked, and in turn, they themselves as poets.

The picture is however more complicated than it appears here. We must also remember that, firstly, self-deprecation was part of the poetic conventions of the time, and need not be taken as seriously as Helgerson wishes to. Very often poets self-reflexively indicated their art as insufficient to its own ambitions, generating a particularly poetic tension that was based on the paradox of the poem achieving its aims precisely by denying itself. This may be made clearer through the following lines from Sidney's Sonnet 34, addressed to his beloved 'Stella':

What idler thing than speak and not be heard?
 What harder thing than smart and not to speak?
 Peace, foolish wit! With wit my wit is marr'd.
 Thus write I, while I doubt to write, and wreak
 My harm in ink's poor loss....

The basic point being made in the poem and specifically in these lines is that there is an overwhelming reason to write – the 'smart' or pain of love, in the 2nd line – which is however hindered by the very passion it seeks to communicate: 'With wit [of passion] my wit [of poetry] is marr'd'. And in expressing the difficulty of communicating the passion, the poem achieves its precise aim, which is to project the measure of the passion as all-consuming.

Once we acknowledge this convention, it becomes clear that the poet's deprecation of his art was often not so much a matter of placing the vocation of the courtier above that of the poet, as a matter of fulfilling a demand of the poetry itself. But in addition to this, we must also remember that such a pose – of expressing an inability to complete, of embarking on a task that is beyond one's powers, of self-deprecation, and so on – was not confined to the poet or the vocation of poetry but was considered the appropriate mode of self-presentation for the ideal courtier, and extended to all of his various roles. This pose was assumed to indicate not so much humility, as moderation and balance on the part of the courtier. It was an Italian ideal, propounded by Baldasare Castiglione in his book, *The Book of The Courtier* (1528), a very influential humanist text on courtiers of the sixteenth century, not least because it opened the question of whether a courtier is born one or anyone from outside the nobility could also become one on the basis of his abilities, accomplishments and learning. It was read by many outside the nobility, especially from the emerging merchant class, who wished to appear cultivated. This is an issue of significance for us because, as we shall see, Spenser was not born into the nobility but nevertheless

education and accomplishments. Castiglione's book suggested not only that the ideal courtier was one who was graceful and educated, but that he be accomplished and many sided in his personality, and yet remain moderate in his presentation of his accomplishments. For the average Elizabethan courtier this was extended in its implications to indicate loyalty and subservience to the monarch; it therefore took the form of self-deprecation and was much practiced, as a means of displaying one's accomplishments even as they were belittled as a sign of inferiority before the queen. Sir Philip Sidney was to become a living ideal of such a courtier; but for an outsider like Spenser, this was to become a problem. We will discuss some of these issues in the next unit, when we discuss the life of Spenser. For now, it should be clear that the writing of poetry, and the practice of self-deprecation were both necessary dimensions to the politics of the Elizabethan court and the self-presentation of the courtier there.

8.2.5 English Nationalism and the Renaissance

While the nationalist spirit in England is fully in evidence only by around the middle of the seventeenth century, explicitly on display especially in John Milton's epic *Paradise Lost*, the sentiment had been on the rise for more than a century. In some sense a rudimentary nationalistic spirit is evident ever since the beginning of the battles with France in the medieval period. But with the sixteenth century, this sentiment begins to take the shape of a full fledged ideology. We have already hinted at some of the reasons for this development, like the political distancing of the English from Italy and France. This in turn was a consequence of the spread of Protestantism in England, leading to the religious separation from Rome and the establishment of the Anglican Church under Henry VIII. Thus, English nationalism from its very inception had been closely allied to religious sentiments, unlike the subsequent emergence of nationalisms in the European countries, which followed, rather than preceded, the process of secularization of society, and the separation of religion and state. Since the separatist religious agenda of Protestantism in England was intimate to the formation of a separate English national identity (or English nationalism), and since the spread of Protestantism had been primarily through and among the emergent merchant and trading classes, and in the new squirarchy, the nationalism that emerged was itself very middle class in its roots. It was not confined to this class however, and found willing takers in the nobility and aristocracy, especially those who affiliated themselves to the Anglican Church or other protestant sects.

The social origins of this nationalism are of some significance. This was the time that England was growing as a naval and commercial power, and its merchant and trading ships had traveled all over the known world. English merchant ships were bringing back wealth from the distant corners of the globe, including from India and China. Along with the local growth in agriculture, sheep-rearing and the wool and cloth industry, England was growing into an important economic power in the European region. The main beneficiaries of this economic growth as we have noted were the new classes of merchants and traders, and professional artisans. The combination of a specifically English Protestantism, the burgeoning economy and the emergent economic classes led to the promotion of a nationalism that sometimes served as a qualification for social mobility for the emergent classes and professions. It led to the consolidation of a sense of national identity (albeit as yet nascent) that was able to contain, at least in the sixteenth century, the social tensions that were unleashed by such a drastic social change, as well as offer channels for upward mobility to those who proclaimed it. This is evident in Spenser's avowed desire to be a truly English poet. It is then this English nationalism that spurred him as well as other less able poets to attempt the first truly English epic – a task that was ironically fulfilled only when that very nationalist ideology was threatened, in the next century by John Milton. It was the later attempts of the English monarchy to return to the Catholic

8.3 LET'S SUM UP

We have examined some of the main characteristics of the Renaissance as it flowered in England, and of the impact of the Reformation on it. We identified some of the consequences of this in terms of distinguishing the English renaissance from its continental counterparts. This was seen to be as much a matter of the social bases of the English renaissance as of the political upheavals of the age. We noted how the combination of a humanist education and a protestant Christian vocation could turn advantageous to people like Spenser, who sought to use these as means of social and political advancement. We identified some of the processes by which this historical change came about in England, and how some of those processes in turn affected the shape and quality of the renaissance in England. We shall now examine specifically the impact of these issues on the life and work of Edmund Spenser, in Unit II.

8.4 QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

1. What does the term Renaissance mean? Identify some of the key factors responsible for the spread of the Renaissance in Europe.
2. What was the Reformation? What relations can you identify and trace between the Renaissance and the Reformation?
3. Identify some of the socio-cultural factors that shaped the English Renaissance.
4. What was the role of the court in the shaping of English Renaissance literature?
5. Nationalism and the nationalist spirit played an important role in the shaping of the Renaissance imagination. Do you agree?

8.5 ADDITIONAL READING

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7. Loades, D.M., *The Tudor Court* (London: Batsford, 1986)
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