Unit 5 Reading Guide: Renaissance Humanism

We have been reading humanists’ texts and discussing their ideas all semester, but we have approached them as guides to other aspects of Renaissance life and thought. In this unit, we finally focus our attention on humanism as an object of inquiry. We will begin with the Renaissance world view—the set of beliefs and attitudes about the structure of the universe and humans’ place within it that was shared by most educated people. We will then look at Martines’s claim that humanism was largely an ideological expression of the attitudes of Renaissance elites. We then turn to three specific aspects of humanism in order to develop a more complex understanding of the movement: the humanists’ attitude toward the classical past, the ethical discourse of humanism, and the role of fortune in human life.

NOTE: I have reorganized the reading for Nov. 19, 21, and 26, so that you will have less reading to do the week of Nov. 19-21 (especially on Nov. 19, when you have a paper due). Please follow the reading assignments in this handout, not those on the syllabus. There is still a fair amount of reading for Nov. 21, so please plan ahead.

Essential questions for this unit

- What was fame? Why seek it?
- What role did antiquity play in Renaissance culture?
- Why was antiquity so important?
- What did humanists mean by “imitation”? How did they adapt classical models for their own use?
- How did the classical philosophical heritage help humanists deal with the problems of their day?
- Did humanism have a consistent philosophical outlook on life?
- How did humanist thought challenge or change institutions?

Paper topics for this unit

The following paper topics are suggestions; if you would like to define a different paper topic, you are welcome to do so. See the paper guideline handout for more details.

1. Discuss the meaning of the classical past to Renaissance artists and humanists. How did they come to know the past better? How did they adapt elements from the past to serve their own needs and purposes?

2. Cassandra Fedele’s letters were gathered into a letter book (though they were not printed until 1636). The letter book was a common humanist genre. How does Fedele’s letter book, taken as a whole, reflect the ideas and practices of Renaissance humanism? Are there any important omissions? Why would a humanist compile and publish such a book? How do you think Fedele’s book might differ from a male humanist’s letter book?

3. Analyze Poggio Bracciolini’s dialogue “On avarice” as an example of humanist literary production. To whom is it dedicated, and is there a patronage relationship stated or implied between Poggio and his dedicatee? What form does the dialogue take? What are the main ideas? Is the dialogue’s main purpose ideological (in Martines’s sense) or something else?

Tues. 11/12: Renaissance “worldviews”

Read: Burke, 181-208 (ch. 8).

1. What does Peter Burke mean by a “worldview”? What sorts of things were part of the Renaissance worldview?

2. What cosmological beliefs did educated Renaissance men hold? What did they think about the organization of space, time, and the world, and how did God fit in?
3. What place did astrology and the "occult sciences" of alchemy and magic have in Renaissance thought? How are they important for understanding iconography in art and figurative language in literature? How did learned magic differ from witchcraft?

4. In what terms did Renaissance Italians think when dealing with political and social orders? What challenge did the notion of "the state" pose to the traditional view of "the body politic"? In addition to economic notions of class (popolo grasso, minuto), what categories did they have for thinking about the social hierarchy?

5. What is remarkable about the Renaissance sense of the past? Why did studying the past intensively seem to make it less useful as a model (p. 196)? How did Renaissance people resolve their desire to break with the medieval past with their view that "innovation" was generally a bad thing?

6. How does Burke reconcile the importance of family and corporate identities for Renaissance Italians with the importance of the individual in the period? Why were self-assertion and the quest for fame so vital for many Renaissance Italians? What evidence do we have for the importance of individual identity?

7. What is the "organic mentality" of the Renaissance? How does it differ from the way we think about the universe? Do we still think that space and time have a moral dimension—for example, that one direction is better than another?

Thurs. 11/14: Humanism, ideology, and society
Read: Martines, 191-217 (ch. 11); Fedele, 43-62, 154-166 (ch. 3, 7).

1. What were the studia humanitatis? How was the cultivation of each of these disciplines encouraged by the political and social structures of Renaissance city-states?

2. Read Martines, 199-201. What did humanists mean by "eloquence," and how did it differ from the technical study of logic and rhetoric?

3. According to Martines, how is the rise of humanism related to the political and social experience of the medieval communes? If humanism was produced by the experience of the commune, why did the earliest "pre-humanists" (or "proto-humanists") turn to the classics only in the late thirteenth century, and why was the first famous humanist, Petrarch, a fourteenth-century figure?

4. What distinction does Martines make between the "objective" and the "ideological" achievements of humanism? Come up with a couple examples of each, to help clarify the distinction in your mind. Is it a useful distinction? Can you think of parallels in other places or times that you have studied, or in the present?

5. The three branches of classical rhetoric are judicial rhetoric (guilt or innocence before a court of law), deliberative rhetoric (what to do, especially in a political assembly), and epideictic rhetoric (the rhetoric of praise and blame). Into which branch do Cassandra Fedele’s letters to princes fall? Do you think that Fedele believed everything she said to princes? What do you think she expected to get out of her letters?

6. Two of Fedele’s letters to princes are consolations. How does Fedele attempt to console the recipients? Do you think they would really have felt an alleviation of their grief after reading the letters? Why or why not?

7. In her oration for Bertuccio Lamberti, how does Fedele employ the categories of moral philosophy within the framework of epideictic rhetoric?
8. What are the advantages of eloquence and philosophy, according to Fedele? How do these reflect the ideological orientation of humanism that Martines delineates?

**Tues. 11/19: The question of fortune**

REMANDER: Your second 5-page paper is due no later than today! (Note: this is a change from the syllabus.)

Read: Reader, 164-169, 178-184 (Alberti: selection from The book of the family; Pico: selections from Oration on the dignity of man); Machiavelli, 159-162 (Prince, ch. 25).

1. What did the decline of formerly famous families, both ancient and modern, suggest to Alberti about the power of Fortune in human affairs?

2. What did Alberti conclude about the power of Fortune after reflecting on the reasons why some families declined?

3. What is the balance between Fortune and prudence in determining the fate of the family? Who is responsible when a family suffers misfortune? Does Fortune have any role at all in the family’s fate?

4. Why does Pico della Mirandola think that man is the most fortunate of all creatures? How does his oration echo the optimism of Alberti’s treatise?

5. What two metaphors does Machiavelli use for Fortune? Why do you think he uses them? Do either sound familiar?

6. How much power does Fortune have over human affairs, according to Machiavelli? How does his assessment compare with Alberti’s?

7. How can the prudent man control Fortune to some extent, even when she is raging? What is the point of the river metaphor in this case?

8. Should rulers trust in Fortune, according to Machiavelli? What happens to those who do?

9. How is Fortune like a woman? Is Machiavelli’s use of Fortune (as well as Alberti’s) merely a figure of speech, or does it suggest that Fortune is a real divine or quasi-divine being?

**Thurs. 11/21: The Renaissance and the classical past**

Read: Reader, 382-393 (Vasari: selections from Lives of famous artists); Machiavelli, 66-71, 77-79, 431-479 (letter 5; dedication to the Prince; The mandrake root).

1. What is the origin of art, according to Vasari? How is art related to nature?

2. Vasari thought that the arts reached their perfection in ancient Rome. Why did they then decline? What role did barbarians play in the decline, and what role does Vasari attribute to Christianity?

3. Read the preface to part three (390-392). How do classical examples provide a standard for Renaissance art? Did the artists of the first and second periods (roughly speaking, the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, respectively) attain this standard?

4. Art is based on nature, yet the classical artists attained perfection, and by imitating nature, Michelangelo surpassed the ancients. What does that imply about the relationship between classicism and naturalism, as Vasari saw it?

5. Read Machiavelli, 66-71. How does Machiavelli describe his life in exile? What does he do during the day, and how does he claim that he feels about it? What does he do in the evening? How does he feel about that?
6. Do you think that Machiavelli really put on his best attire to read the ancients? Why or why not? What does his claim reveal about his attitude toward the ancients—or the attitude of his time?

7. Read the first paragraph of Machiavelli’s dedication to *The Prince* (77-78). Where did Machiavelli learn what great men had done? How does he describe the relationship between reading and experience? Is there a difference?

8. Why did I decide to include Machiavelli’s comedy *The mandrake root* in the readings for today? How does the action of the play reveal the social structures and the concerns and fears of the Renaissance in Italy? What is classical about this play?

9. *The mandrake root* is a sterling example of the Renaissance doctrine of imitation. What is the difference between imitation and copying (or “aping,” as a Renaissance thinker might have said)?

**Tues. 11/26: Humanist ethics and sociability**


Question for discussion: Is Poggio’s “On avarice” a legitimation of or a challenge to the mercantile worldview of Renaissance Florentines? Complexify matters (ref. to Alberti’s view of proper use of time, not included in the selection, as well as his remarks on avarice and thrift).

1. Why do the speakers in Poggio’s dialogue criticize the way that contemporary preachers speak? What do they propose in its stead?

2. According to Bartolomeo, what is wrong with avarice? How does it harm the miser? How does it harm society?

3. According to Antonio, what are the benefits of avarice to the individual? to society?

4. How does Andrea respond to Antonio’s arguments?

5. In the end, is Poggio’s “On avarice” a legitimation of or a challenge to the mercantile worldview of Renaissance Florentines?

6. Why might writers like Poggio and Alberti have chosen the dialogue form for writing about subjects like avarice and the family? With what branch of classical rhetoric (see question 5 for 11/14, above) does the dialogue seem most closely allied, and why?

7. How did the mutual exchange of letters help create a sense of community among humanists? What other means might they have had, before the printing press was widely disseminated, for communicating?

8. Read Fedele’s correspondence with Angelo Poliziano (90-93). Why did Fedele reproach Poliziano, and how did he respond? Is his response convincing? What does it suggest about how some male humanists thought about Fedele?