Julianna Farkas: The Ideal of Man and Behaviour Culture in the Renaissance

Abstract: What were the basic factors that led to the rise of the renaissance? And why did it start in Italy? What were the reasons behind the quick and widespread expansion of the renaissance ideas and ideologies within the borders of Italy? What were the defining moments in the rebirth of European culture? What factors influenced the changes in mentality, behaviour, culture and everyday life? How did the meaning of intimacy transform? What were the new female roles in renaissance societies and what elements came back from antiquity? What really „civilitas" is? These are the main questions being analysed in the study, based on two defining books, written by Baldassare Castiglione „The book of the courtier" and by Erasmus of Rotterdam „A Little Book of Good Manners for Children".

Introduction

"Reverend fathers! I have read in Arabic books about Abdullah the Saracen being asked about what he believed to be the most wonderful of all there is to marvel at on the stage that we call our world. He said 'There is nothing that could be more wonderful than Man'." (Mirandola, 1971., p. 3.)

Although renaissance is mostly considered to be a period between the late 14th and the mid 16th centuries, no exact boundaries in time have been identified to date.

Even if we were to select certain dates of key importance – events or acts associated with key figures whose contribution is believed to be outstanding in the course of history – and regard them as benchmarks separating two époques, these particular points in time may only help us to navigate through the maze of renaissance but in fact, had little to no impact on the perceptions of individuals or the society itself at the time.

Divisions between époques, of course, do exist, even if hard to precisely identify.

These borders did not simply manifest in the context of a particular moment, event or a specific point in time, but rather can be observed as a line of changes over the time. Mostly detectable in the changes of the general mindset, mentality, and values of the people accompanied by some easier to spot differences in everyday life, for example, the way people dressed.

These were not fast-paced, immediate, but gradual changes through the period of renaissance.

One of the reasons why various branches of science might be involved in studying specific historical periods is the complexity of the topic.

An interdisciplinary approach is a must, observing historical facts, the changes in art, mentality, and economy.

Comprehensive use of authentic literary sources is also crucial in order to deeply understand the course history.

In the long line of divisions between historical periods, renaissance and the birth of renaissance is among the most popular subjects to study.

The reasons are various, but one is for certain, the intensity and the influence of the changes made in the renaissance were simply outstanding.

In case of renaissance the changes in the flow of ideas and culture can be determined accurately, both geographically and chronologically, changes that were perceived to be paramount in virtually all aspects of life, including cultural communities and basically every group of the society, irrespective of social status.

Subject

The question arises again though, why Italy of all the places? A glimpse at the map will tell us a lot about the particular nature of Italy, a land of unique character. Italy is a different world, a microcosmos within Europe with highly favourable geographical characteristics. Surrounded by the Alps, the Ionian Sea, the Tyrrhenian Sea, and the Mediterranean Sea, or “mare nostrum” as the old Latin phrase says. All these different parts of Italy are connected by the Apennines. A country with a moderate climate and diversity of landscapes, complete with a full-fledged trading activity enabled by the many navigable rivers. (Friedell, 1953.)

Although Italy was at the time in question, a nation composed of diverse regions with several different political structures (certain towns were republics, elsewhere Grand Duchies and Principalities prevailed). Despite all these differences, Italy had a shared background, including the urban culture and the common language -despite a multitude of dialects-, the country was a unique blend of diversity and uniformity. The most significant among all Italian cities was Rome, “Urbs Aeterna”, the eternal city with its ancient history.

The ideas of Rome started to attract more and more people, as it can be easily seen just by looking at the increasing number of readers of the “Ab Urbe Condita” by Livius, including the likes of Machiavelli, who even made his comments on the work. (Friedell, 1953.) The masterminds or the "spiritus rector" of the social changes in Italy were in fact, merchant families.

Families that became members and thus beneficiaries of a network of trade, both within and outside the borders of the peninsula. They were particularly active in the Levant region, situated in the eastern part of the Mediterranean. The accumulation of wealth and the sudden increase in one’s opportunities to become more affluent than ever before led to a new interpretation of the need for personal possessions. It manifested in changing dressing habits and the emergence of

small objects signifying comfort and finesse, such as toiletries and cosmetics, accessories of blond hair cushions, expensive underwear – goods that eventually ended up being burned, both in a symbolic manner and physically, at the stake by strict preachers like Savonarola, to purge the human soul from the sin of vanity. (Burckhardt, 1990.) Some merchant families, the most famous of whom are the Medicis and Pazzias, constant rivals in Florence – although others like the Peruzzi, Strozzi, Capponi, Pitti, Berdi, Chigi, Rucelli, Vernieri and Altoviti also deserve mentioning– accumulated huge fortunes, they had entire fleets to sail the seas and to extend their influence over new geographical regions. (Friedell, 1953.)

Merchants' guilds were organized (e.g. Arte Della Lana) to protect the interests of merchants efficiently. When it comes to defending interests, confrontation is also in the cards, which necessitates the availability of legal expertise. This led to the formation of the "Arte dei Giudici", the lawyers' union. Both individuals and various groups of people were in search of their identity, their set of values and ideals as well as their unique style. In a rapidly changing environment where the individual's readiness to venture and to invest were the defining factors of success rather than prerogatives attached to an individual's family background. "...the nobility of today's perception of talent has defeated the medieval concept of the nobility of birth". (Friedell, 1953., p. 159.) Wealthy individuals started to spend on the patronage of artists. Patronage was not seen as a form of luxury, but as the expression of one's feelings in the context of contemporary life as well as the manifestation of one's interests. The "elder" Cosimo de Medici (1389-1464) was a good example of the notion of Maecenas. He established links with representatives of the upper echelon of financiers at the Council of Constance (1414-1418) and even Pope Pius II, previously well-known under the name of Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini, who entrusted Cosimo with the task of handling the monopoly of the alum mines at Tolfa. Cosimo de Medici –a merchant with a fortune– became one of the most affluent people of his age as the owner of several bank branches all over Europe. (Fodor, A. Ágnes, 2001.)

Following a brief period of political battles and some time spent in exile, he returned to Florence, the land of Renaissance ideals, where he was appointed as "gonfaloniere", carrier of banner, i.e. the holder of the highest communal post in the Republic. Medici spent vast amounts of money on the support of artists like Donatello, Fra Angelico or Gozzoli and established the famous "Laurenziana" (which was to bear the name of Lorenzo il Medici, also known as Il Magnifico, "Lorenzo the Magnificent"), a unique collection of old manuscripts, etches and paintings. His good deeds earned him quite a reputation among the citizens of Florence. On his last journey a huge crowd of people paid their respects, and the following words were engraved onto his tombstone: "pater patriae", father of the homeland. (Fodor, A. Ágnes, 2001.)

Philosophers and artists – who, in the context of contemporary life, expressed the feelings of a new social stratum – used antiquity, Greek and Roman times, as an instrument of cultural reference. This was the "Rinascimento", the rebirth: remembering the past with its characteristic features, remembering the glorious times. Rather than recalling the era of Imperium Romanum, the concept was more about the huge, all-inclusive knowledge and culture paramount in nearly all aspects of life during the age of antiquity. The focal point of the rebirth was literature with the likes of Plato and Aristotle, Plutarch, Sophocles, Cicero, Vergilius and Livius, Quintilianus, Plinius and Plautus – to name a few among the figures with the strongest influence. (Friedell, 1953.) There was renewed interest in medieval values, ideals and artistic monuments but not purely as an interest in antiquity. The enthusiasm pointed towards an interest in contemporary life, present and future alike. A particular form, in which personal feelings and thoughts could be best expressed.

Collecting manuscripts and books became a kind of hobby. The largest collections of books of the age -besides the collection of Cosimo de Medici- was owned by Federico de Montrefeltro, Duke of Urbino, and the papal libraries. (Burckhardt, 1990.) Societies of scholars and various academies were established: places where scholars studied original texts from ancient times. Annotation and review became important disciplines in the world of scholarly scrutiny. Jacques Le Goff's Intellectuals in the Middle Ages throws light on the initial phase of the process in which original texts from ancient times disappeared from Europe, leading to the eventual re-emergence of these works via Arabic translators. The works were then translated back to Greek or Latin, and finally they made their way back to the mainstream European thinking. (Le Goff, 1993.)

Letter-writing became a popular genre for humanists, to maintain contact in a spiritual community, in many cases the members never even met in person. History writing and rhetoric flourished, eloquentia – the art of oratory – was almost compulsory, a subject to be taught at universities, in the entourage of dukes and the papal court as well as in palaces. A common characteristic of these scholarly subjects and works of art was that they meant to depict "Man" and the characteristics of the individual. The age of anonymity, characterised by the initials "M.S.", was already a thing of the past. Humanist authors were proud to take credit for their works by using their real names, a phenomenon, a reminiscent of antiquity. The revival of the spirit of ancient times was nothing but fashion for some, considering it as some sort of routine used exclusively to revel in the topical richness of antiquity.

At the same time for others the revival was a genuine manifestation of a new thinking with an inspiring effect on Italian culture. This was a rebirth in all spheres of life, not only in philosophy, politics and arts but also in the context of everyday life. The focus of interest gradually shifted towards privacy, family, man-woman relationship and the education of children. Agnolo Pandolfini's Governo della Famiglia underscores the significance of the conscientious shaping of one's private life; Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam draws attention to the importance of education by presenting a variety of cases in Colloquia Familiaria, his collection of conversational situations, while Leon Battista Alberti in his work entitled "Libri della Famiglia", wrote about a multitude of problems affecting people's everyday life, including topics such as the way to run a manor house, the considerations behind selecting a bride or ways to use money set aside for the running of a household, etc. (Vajda, 1984.)

The role of women was an issue to which more and more attention was paid, including various aspects ranging from the situation of married women to courtesans (Pietro Aretino: La cortigiana, Dialoghi, Baldassare Castiglione: Il Cortegiano, Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam: Colloquia familiaria – The Abbot and the Educated Woman, The Parliament of Women). (Burckhardt, 1990.) Education gradually became a priority, and a desirable female characteristic, marked by the appearance of virago, the woman with qualities equal to man, like Caterina Sforza, also nicknamed as "prima donna d'Italia", or Izabella Gonzaga and Vittoria Colonna, maintaining excellent intellectual relations with Michelangelo (Burckhardt, 1990.) Italians naturally did not refrain from indulging in the pleasures of bodily love and sensuality.

The courtesans in Venice, like Izabella de Luna, Caterina di San Celso, became particularly well-known, while Imperia also known as "la grande putana", was one of the most famous courtesans of the time, her entourage was almost like a royal court, she could speak and read in Greek and Latin, and was depicted as Sappho by Rafael. Once a poet wrote: "Two gods presented Rome with a gift: Mars's gift was the Imperium, Venus's gift was Imperia." (Friedell, 1953., p.166.)

Baldassare Castiglione: Il Cortegiano

Il Cortegiano a work by Baldassare Castiglione – who was one of the most influential authors of his time – made guidelines for those with ambitions of being successful in court life. In the introduction of his work, he emphatically denied Boccaccio's Decameron had any effect on him, even though there are obvious similarities between the two. The genre itself is identical -i.e. a situation typical of the Renaissance as going back to antiquity- conversation and debate (Akademos' garden or the Peripatetics, the teaching method of Plato and Aristotle, the "memories"), sources of remarkable intellectual delight for every participant. What we have here is not a proclamation but an exchange of views between equal individuals.

Like in Decameron in Il Cortegiano also the role of the "Queen of the Society" played by Elisabetta Gonzaga, Duchess of Urbino (wife to Guidobaldo de Montrefeltro, a seriously ill man) does exist. However, there are other prominent participants such as Cardinal Pietro Bembo, an excellent humanist. Pietro Aretino who was famous for his vitriolic language and is to be considered as the first modern author, labeled as "divine" in his own time, or the ill-fated Giuliano de Medici, younger brother of Lorenzo "Il Magnifico".

Giuliano was stabbed in the neck in front of the altar in the Duomo in Santa Maria del Fiore, not far from Battisterio, the chapel of St. John the Baptist, by a member of the hostile Pazzi family. The chapel's Gates of Paradise are relief sculptures and are among the first and most significant works of art in Renaissance. (Friedell, 1953.) Castiglione's work was, an attempt to describe the perfect Courtier: a conversation in which humanists participate for four evenings. What should the characteristics of a young man – possibly one of noble descent – who wishes to become a successful Courtier be? Good looks and build, good skills in handling weapons, should be a good wrestler and an excellent hunter. Should also be an expert in contemporary music and dance (in other words, the young man in question should have the qualities of a medieval knight.) Moreover, it is also important to be familiar with the art of painting and erudition as well: to have rhetoric skills; and to be "qualified to an extent higher than average" (dilettante) regarding sciences, Latin and Greek languages. The key element was not the actual depth of knowledge but to be able to take part in conversations whatever the topic might be.

The Courtier should be a likable, charming person. Castiglione believes that the best one can do, is to be born with these qualities. If, however, this is not the case, one can learn from a Master showing substantial expertise in these matters. The point is, whatever we do we should not give the impression of behaving unnaturally. The Courtier needs to have self-confidence, but may not turn into conceit. He should be the entertaining type of a man but should never be rude. He should be an admirer of the beauty of women but should also be reserved, humane and well-intentioned. He should get closer and closer to being perfect in all the aforementioned subjects and qualities, in other words, he should be "uomo universale", a universal man without making others envious.

Achieving all these values is still not the end though. Castigilone points out the sublime idea: The Courtier needs to become perfect and universal in his qualities to be able to help, protect and teach the sovereign, i.e. serve the cause of the state. Demonstrating the significance of the topic, Castigilone devotes Chapter 4 entirely to the issue of the perfect Woman of the Court. The "queen of the society", Elisabetta Gonzaga and her companion, Emilia Pia, ask the following question: "what are the qualities" that a Woman of the Court should be characterized by? First of all, a

Woman of the Court should be feminine, nice and beautiful but should also be in the possession of the comprehensive knowledge of a contemporary humanist. In other words, she should be familiar with literature, arts, and should be a good musician and dancer. The inner qualities of the Women of the Court are much more important than the external ones. She should behave naturally, being kind, modest and generous, void of evil intentions; she should not be gossipy and at the same time, should neither be one who makes accusations nor should she be smarmy. Castiglione mentions several examples from the Antiquity to illustrate that a number of women had all these good qualities in the course of history, adding the names of the noblewomen of his age, praising among others Beatrice, King Matthias Corvinus' wife: "What I say is that women of good qualities also have a place here. My contention is that we had two outstanding queens in Naples and that recently the Queen of Hungary, an outstanding woman – a worthy companion of her husband, King Matthias Corvinus, the invincible, glorious king – died there." (Castiglione, u.d., p. 218.)

Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam: De civilitate morum puerilium

Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam, the excellent humanist, turns his attention towards a much wider social stratum than Castiglione, particularly the citizens of towns. Erasmus summarized the major transformations in the mentality of citizens in his time. He was the most widely acclaimed, most popular author among all the others. He was commissioned to dedicate some of his works – by using Mirrors for Princes as a pattern to follow in a humanist version of the original – to specific individuals. He dedicated "The Christian Prince" to the person who later became Charles V or "The Christian Widow" to Mary Habsburg, widowed wife of Louis II as a symbolic gesture. However, his most famous piece of writing is "De civilitate morum puerilium", A Handbook on Good Manners for Children (for both boys and girls) on the civilized habits of children was published in 1530. This little handbook reached over 30 editions in six years between its publication and the death of Erasmus, and in most households, it was the second most popular book after the Holy Bible. One of his most successful works is Giovanni Della Casa's Galateo. (Elias, 1978.)

The topic of "De Civilitate Morum Puerilium" is an indication of the fact that humanists at that age did not confine themselves to tackle only philosophical subjects, but also dealt with problems of a more humane kind, affecting people's everyday life such as the positive and negative behavioural aspects the body, personal hygiene, spitting, wiping of the nose, "doing natural business", forms of socialization, visiting other people, playing games, bedroom behaviour, church morals, etc. The above list of topics is an indication of the fact that the book relied on medieval traditions and was inspired by works from the medieval times dealing with topics such as "good manners at the table", little poems, memory boosters, mostly by anonymous authors, had already been in existence. These were meant to educate people through examples of good and bad manners. The rules themselves were rather lax, including few restrictions: Don't spit over or on the table! Don't pick your teeth with a knife! – the fact that these activities were mentioned several times seems to indicate that these were frequent occurrences at the table. (Elias, 1978.)

Erasmus's booklet was very fresh at the time, primarily in the sense that it did expand the list of topics beyond the subject of table manners and good manners in general, it touched situations from everyday life derived from personal observation. "If offered a napkin, put it over your left shoulder or arm. If you sit at a table where distinguished people are sitting, take off your hat and make sure your hair is properly combed. On your right on the table there is the goblet and the knife, on your left is the bread. Certain people have the habit of putting their hands into the dish as

soon as they sit down at the table. This reminds one of the way wolves behave… Do not touch a bowl which has just been brought in and placed on the table – not just because you will be looked upon as a greedy individual, but also because this is dangerous. If you recklessly start eating and the meal is too hot, you will either have to spit it out or you will have your palate hurt if you swallow it. This is ridiculous and pathetic behaviour. To dip a finger in the sauce is the way peasants behave. When taking something out of the dish, use a fork and a knife. Do not rummage through the entire dish the way greedy individuals do. Pick out what happens to be nearest in the dish.

What you cannot take using your fingers, pick out with the quadra. If someone offers you a spoonful of pâté or cake, hold your plate in that direction or take the spoon, put the dollop onto your plate and return the spoon. If the meal offered is in liquid form, taste it and return the spoon but first wipe it off with the napkin. To lick fat off your fingers or wipe them into your clothes is bad manners. It is better to use a table napkin or a hand cloth." (Elias, 1978., p. 89-90.) In the modern age, it became important to be attentive to what one looked like when observed by others, and what others thought about one person has become crucial, the social control over the individual has increased in general. Erasmus's definition gives a clear idea of the essence of civilitas, the most important factor is empathy and tolerance towards others: "Be lenient with others if they make mistakes. This is the main virtue of *civilitas* – politeness.

You should not like your companion less because his manners are not so good. There are people who compensate you with other gifts for the absence of subtlety in their behaviour…If one of your peers makes a mistake and is unaware of it… tell this to no one but him, and be friendly. This is civilitas." (Elias, 1978., p. 81.)

Summary

Naturally, these changes did not occur overnight. It was a gradual, long step by step process.

As Caxton wrotein his *Book of Curtesye*:

"Thingis whilom vsed / ben now leyd a syde

And newe feetis / dayly ben contreuid_e_

[Sidenote: new ways are invented every day,]

Mennys actes / can in no plyte abyde

They be changeable and_e_ ofte meuid_e_

Thingis somtyme alowed / is now repreuid

And after this / shal thinges vp aryse

[Sidenote: and will be hereafter.]

That men set now / but at lytyl pryse." (Elias, 1978., p. 82.)

According to a famous story, in the 11th century, the Doge of Venice married a Greek princess, who had her meals in the Byzantine manner, and brought a two-pronged golden fork to her new home. Her unique behaviour did upset many of the locals, and when sometime later she fell ill suffering from a nasty disease, people considered her sickness (including Saint Bonaventura) as a form of God`s punishment. Five hundred years had to pass before the fork became accepted and widespread across Europe. It was recorded that handkerchiefs were not used very often, either. In the 16th century, Henry IV of France had only five handkerchiefs that were also kept under lock.

Society was in a state of hectic changes and the desire was perceptible – whether or not it was articulated – for individuals to behave properly in everyday or even unusual situations. This need coming from the lower ends of the social scale was eventually very similar to what humanists wanted to achieve. Humanists provided answers to questions, they established the basic rules of manners, rules of behaviour that became step by step accepted by a wide range of groups through the centuries. Reading their texts, we get the impression that they were naturalistic on one hand – part of a medieval tradition- while on the other hand, the texts seem evident and self-explanatory. These texts and the social rules explained in them are the very roots of our modern age and manners. These texts are the end products of the renaissance and humanists who proudly and conscientiously believed in the immortality of creation. This belief and hope manifest perfectly in the following lines by Pico della Mirandola: “We shall live forever, not via the school of thought stemming from hair-splitting debates about Andromache’s mother and Niobe’s sons, but among the wise who look more deeply into the reasons of divine and human action.” (Friedell, 1953., p. 174-175.)

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