

Johnson, P. The Renaissance.

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noting his work (*"scripti his iterum manu mea"*) on the verso of its thirty-eighth folio. Even more spectacular is the original manuscript of his collection of verses, the *Canzoniere*, or songbook. This is also in a Gothic book minuscule, but not all of the writing is Petrarch's; a professional scribe being responsible for some of it. On the other hand, the recto of the first folio has a first initial decorated with multicolored branches and leaves, in Petrarch's hand, and he continued to correct and embellish the manuscript until his death. The whole of the early Renaissance lives on in this noble page from the poet's mind and nimble fingers.

Petrarch may be called the first humanist, and he was certainly the first author to put into words the notion that the centuries between the fall of Rome and the present had been an age of darkness. In the medieval university, the seven "humanities" had been the least-regarded subjects of study. Petrarch placed them first, and he laid them out as follows. First came grammar, based upon study of the languages of antiquity as the ancients had used them (including the correct pronunciation). This involved the careful study and imitation of the great classical authors. Once the language was mastered grammatically, it could be used to attain the second stage, eloquence or rhetoric. This art of persuasion was not art for its own sake, but the acquisition of the capacity to persuade others—all men and women—to lead the good life. As Petrarch put it, "It is better to will the good than to know the truth." Rhetoric thus led to, and embraced, philosophy. Leonardo Bruni (c. 1369–1444), the outstanding scholar of the new generation, insisted that it was Petrarch who "opened the way for us to show how to acquire learning," but it was in Bruni's time that the word *umanista* first came into use, and its subjects of study were listed as five: grammar, rhetoric, poetry, moral philosophy and history.

It is important to grasp that at no time before the Reformation did the humanists acquire a dominant position at the established universities, which continued to be organized around the study of theology, "the queen of the sciences," and whose teaching methods were shaped accordingly. The humanists disliked, and reacted against, not only the curriculum of the universities but their reliance on the highly formalized academic technique of public debate and questions and answers to impart knowledge. They rightly saw it as inefficient, time-wasting and so entraining long courses, seven years or more, that a theology student could not normally hope to get his doctorate until at least thirty-five, at a time when the average life span was forty years or less. The method also made it difficult for master and pupil to establish a close relationship—and the notion of friendship in study was at the heart of the humanist love of letters.

Hence the humanists were outsiders, and to some extent nonacademics. They associated universities with the kind of closed-shop trade unionism also found in the craft guilds. Universities, in their view, stamped on individualism and innovation. Humanist scholars tended to wander from one center of learning to another, picking their choice fruits, then moving on. They set up their own little academies. In 1423, Vittorino da Feltré founded a school in Mantua that taught the new humanist curriculum. Six years later Guarino da Verona did the same in Ferrara. Humanists penetrated universities as a kind of subversive, protesting element. But they also attached themselves to noble and princely households, which could make their own rules and were often eager to embrace cultural novelty. One of the ablest of the humanists, Angelo Poliziano (1454–94), who wrote under the professional humanist name of Politian, became tutor to the Medici children, though he was also professor at the Florence Studio.

Politian belonged to a mid-fifteenth-century generation that took it for granted that a humanist scholar had some knowledge of Greek. Dante and Boccaccio knew no Greek. Petrarch knew a little, just enough to fill him with anguish that he did not know more and to allow him to perceive that, in Greek literature of antiquity, there was a treasure-house surpassing anything in Latin. In the later Middle Ages, Greek was quite unlike Latin in one important respect: it was still a living language, albeit in debased form, in the Byzantine Empire. That too, was debased and shrunken. The Italians, or Latins as the Byzantines called them, saw Constantinople, the capital, as a repository of marvels from antiquity, rather than a living cultural center. Contemporary Byzantine art was a staid, moribund tradition, from which Italian artists in the Middle Ages had to struggle to free themselves. The Venetians exploited the Fourth Crusade at the beginning of the thirteenth century to occupy Constantinople, which they saw as a trading rival, and pillage it, stealing the four great bronze antique horses they found there and placing them triumphantly over the arcade of their cathedral, St. Mark's.

Constantinople was also known in the West to contain depositories of ancient Greek literature and a few scholars familiar with it. In 1397 the Greek scholar Manuel Chrysoloras was invited to lecture in Florence, and it was from this point that classical Greek began to be studied seriously, and widely, in the West. One Italian scholar, Guarino da Verona, actually went to Constantinople, and spent some years there in the circle of Chrysoloras. He returned to Italy in 1408, not only fluent in Greek but with an important library of fifty-four Greek manuscripts, including some of the works of Plato, hitherto unknown in the West. The rest of Plato was brought from Constantinople in the 1420s by Giovanni Aurispa. This was the first great transmission of classical Greek literature.

The second occurred during the ecumenical council of Florence in the 1430s, an attempt to heal the schism between the Latin and Greek churches. The attempt failed, but the Greek delegation, which included a number of distinguished scholars, brought with them many important manuscripts that remained in Florence. A third batch arrived in the baggage of refugees escaping from Turkish rule to the West in the wake of the fall of Constantinople in 1453. Meanwhile, the rediscovery of Latin classics continued with the work of, among others, Poggio Bracciolini (1380–1459), an indefatigable ransacker of monastic libraries in Europe, who brought to light more Cicero, Quintilian, and other authors.

One reason why the humanists, while failing to dominate the old universities, got such a grip on society was their ability to infiltrate courts. They ran, in effect, a scholastic freemasonry, getting one another jobs and recommendations and chances to acquire patronage from the rich and powerful. Bracciolini, like Petrarch, worked in the papal service and attended the Council of Constance, 1414–18, where much trafficking in manuscripts was done. He also worked for a time for the English grandee Cardinal Beaufort. The humanists had ready pens, which could be used for political purposes, either in Latin or in the vernacular. ~~Columbo Salutati (1331–1409) was made chancellor of Florence, whose interest he defended fiercely with his literary skills. The Visconti of Milan claimed that Salutati's pen had done more damage than "thirty squadrons of Florentine cavalry," to which the chancellor replied, "I would not restrain my words on occasions when I would not fail to use my sword." Humanists were prominent in Florentine government, being chosen as chancellor on four occasions. Leonardo Bruni, for instance, who acquired administrative and diplomatic experience at the Papal Curia and was also the author of a laudatory history of Florence,~~