

The Renaissance in Europe: a Cultural Enquiry

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Peter Burke

The Renaissance in Europe is an ambitious enterprise. It includes five volumes, at least five disciplines (history, art history, history of science, music and literature, in French and Spanish as well as in English), and a team of twenty-three people, from the course manager to the picture researchers and of course the thirteen authors. One of the five volumes is an anthology of 91 short extracts from texts written by Renaissance authors and another is a reader, comprising 34 selections from books and articles on the Renaissance, but the three principal volumes are the work of the course team themselves.

These three volumes, dealing respectively with 'The Impact of Humanism', with 'Courts, Patrons and Poets', and with 'Challenges to Authority', accompany an interdisciplinary course at the Open University 'designed for students who are new to cultural history and the Renaissance'. The importance of teamwork may be illustrated by the fact that a number of chapters have been produced in collaboration, sometimes by as many as four authors who work on different countries or in different disciplines. In the Open University tradition, the authors try to present scholarly debates in as accessible a manner as possible. The books contain many illustrations, some of them in colour, including maps. Care has been taken with the layout, including the headings and the typefaces, in order to make the books easy to use. Chronologies, genealogical tables and glossaries reinforce the information given in the text. Each chapter begins with a bulleted list of 'objectives' and many of them include exercises for students. A typical exercise invites readers to turn to a particular passages from the anthology or from one of the books recommended for the course and to answer questions about it, while the following section, headed 'discussion', lays out a model answer.

Together, the three principal volumes are intended to allow the readers to view Renaissance culture as a whole. The first volume focuses on humanism, describing the movement and discussing its influence or 'impact' on scholarship, music, philosophy and politics, mainly in Italy. In the second volume, the authors turn to the culture of the Renaissance court, emphasising the visual arts and literature and also four cities: Florence, Milan, Buda in the age of Matthias Corvinus, and London in the age of Elizabeth and James I. The third volume, bolder in conception, discusses the German Reformation, the Spanish picaresque novel, science, the occult, and the essays of Montaigne under the general title of 'challenges to authority'.

Throughout *The Renaissance in Europe*, the different authors make a point of discussing new approaches to the subject, noting for example how the Renaissance affected everyday life (one section is entitled 'Fonts, forks and fireworks'). To keep the balance, they also devote a good deal of space to more traditional views of the movement. Volume one begins with a chapter on Jacob Burckhardt, sympathetic but also critical, while references to Burckhardt's interpretation of the Renaissance recur in later chapters, on Machiavelli, for example, on court culture, and on science. Throughout these volumes the exposition is both lucid and even-handed.

Leaving the anthology and reader to one side, the three volumes run to nearly a thousand pages. Given this generous allocation of space, it may be useful to look for what isn't there, or what receives relatively slight emphasis. In the more than 350 pages allocated to Italy, vernacular literature is virtually absent. Ariosto, for instance, is barely mentioned, despite the importance of his *Orlando Furioso* as a model for narrative poems in many parts of Europe.

What I missed here was comparative analysis, for example a general discussion of the question whether and to what extent the Renaissance was a pan-European movement, in which (for example), the Netherlands, Poland, Denmark, Portugal and other countries participated while the region which was Orthodox in religion remained largely unaffected. Even the French, German and Spanish renaissance are not discussed as a whole, but only via Montaigne, Luther and *Lazarillo de Tormes*. More than sixty pages are devoted to Montaigne, for instance, but only two sentences to Francis I as a patron, while Ronsard is not even

mentioned.

Again, the chapter on the story of *Lazarillo de Tormes* refers to the Spanish humanist Juan Luis Vives, as if trying to make a link with volume one - but unfortunately, in the humanism volume, Vives is not even mentioned. An even more distinguished casualty of the division of labour is Petrarch, who receives only a few casual references in the humanism volume, together with a brief discussion of his sonnets in the courts volume in a chapter devoted to his British followers. There is a danger that the reader new to the Renaissance, the kind of reader for whom the volumes were written, will fail to see the wood for the trees.

Another more or less missing topic, despite its importance in traditional accounts of the Renaissance, is the republic. Following new trends, the authors and organisers place their emphasis on courts. A brief reference is made to Hans Baron and his idea of 'civic humanism', but the Florence discussed at length is the Florence of the Medici, just as Machiavelli's *Prince* is privileged at the expense of his *Discorsi*, while Venice is virtually absent from these volumes. This neglect of republics, and more generally of civic patronage, amounts to a serious imbalance.

Although the introduction to the first volume refers to the reception of the Renaissance as a 'key area' of recent research, the topic is not treated very often or at any length, despite its importance in any 'European' account of the Renaissance. The reader will find little discussion of translation, either in the literal sense (despite the importance of translations into Italian, French, Spanish, English and other languages in the Renaissance movement), or in the sense of 'cultural translation', the conscious or unconscious adaptation of cultural items to a new environment. Nor will readers of these volumes come away with much sense of the changes in the movement over time, the 'curve of development' as Alfred von Martin called it, from early to 'high' and late Renaissance. Topics and regions are emphasised at the expense of phases. Given the claim that the volumes are contributing to cultural history, this limitation is a serious one.

The omissions I have mentioned appear to be linked to the practical problems of organising the volumes. The course team does not seem to have had a leader; at any rate, the three main volumes have different editors. It looks as if individuals or small groups wrote their chapters in their own way, even if they did this in the knowledge of the general framework. Some topics may have been omitted because everyone thought that someone else was dealing with them. Some links were not made, perhaps for similar reasons. Despite the clear and vigorous introduction to volume one, readers may finish the course with a sense of fragmented knowledge rather than a vision the Renaissance as a whole. The broth has not been spoiled, and there may not have been too many cooks, but it might have been a good idea to appoint a head chef. The chapters in volume two in particular would have benefited from being pulled somewhat closer together.

The three main volumes are each intended to be 'self-sufficient', but this is not completely the case. The impact of humanism, for example, is analysed in volume one without reference to the visual arts, because they would be discussed in detail in volume two, although this risks giving readers of volume one alone a false impression of the scope of the humanist movement. Short linking passages and cross-references might have solved the problem in this case, but it seems to have been no one's responsibility to provide them.

Humanism and patronage are relatively conventional aspects of the Renaissance which are treated here in a relatively conventional way - which is no criticism of volumes which are intended not to innovate but to make scholarly debates accessible to a relatively wide audience. The third volume, on the other hand, is more original and also takes more risks by including under the umbrella of the 'Renaissance' not only magic and science but also witchcraft (neatly linked to humanism via Gianfrancesco Pico and to English literature via the play *The Witch of Edmonton*), and the Reformation. The chapter on 'Renaissance and reform' brings out the connections between Luther and the German humanists very clearly, though - curiously enough, in a text intended as a guide to scholarly debate, it does not explain why some scholars have presented the Reformation as the antithesis of the Renaissance. The concept underlying this volume, that of 'challenges to authority', might have been subjected to rather more critical scrutiny. Did Luther, for example, or Copernicus, or Vesalius challenge authority willingly or reluctantly? Vesalius, for example, greatly admired the ancient medical writer Galen, and found it difficult to contradict him (a point duly made in the discussion

of the scientific renaissance in chapter five). Was there one 'Authority' to challenge? Luther criticised more recent traditions in the name of older ones, and Copernicus was at pains to point out that in disagreeing with Ptolemy, he had other ancient writers on his side. The Bible, the ancients, and local traditions were not infrequently in conflict. Once again, then, general issues arise from the individual chapters that are not discussed anywhere in the volume, despite their importance. A longer, stronger introduction to volume three would have been useful, to say the least.

All the same, *The Renaissance in Europe* will be of considerable value to readers who have no connection with the Open University, as well as those who take its courses. Scholars too might well learn from the techniques of presentation exemplified in these volumes, ranging from the use of headings to the combination of surveys with case studies.

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