

PAPER 10: MODULE 05: E-Text

MHRD-UGC ePG Pathshala - English

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Learning outcome:

After studying this unit, the students would be acquainted with another age, which furthered literary criticism. The spirit of Renaissance led to an open inquiry into dogmatic beliefs and brought about a renewed interest in the arts and other related fields as a result of the rediscovery of the ancient classics of Greece and Rome. The students would know about some great critics who shifted the focus from religion to humanism, and laid down rules for the art of poetry and justified the role of poetry in life.

INTRODUCTION

The word *Renaissance* comes from the French “re-” (back or again) and Latin “nascentia” /French “naissance” (to be born). According to the Cambridge Dictionary, Renaissance is “a new growth of activity or interest in something”. But the term is used especially with reference to “a new growth or renewed interest in the field of art, literature or music”. The term is also loosely associated with “the culture and style of art and architecture developed during the Renaissance”. According to the Merriam Webster Dictionary, this was “the transitional movement in Europe between medieval and modern times beginning in the 14th century in Italy, lasting into the 16th century, and marked by a humanistic revival of classical influence expressed in a flowering of the arts and literature and by the beginnings of modern science.”

This term has come to be associated with a period of history dating from the 14th to 16th Century C.E., where under the influence of classical models, a revival of European art and literature started taking place. There was a renewed interest in the ancient classics of Greece and Rome and the scholars of these ages, studied, edited, translated and critiqued the works created during the ancient times.

The Middle Ages was a period dating from the 5th Century to the Renaissance. This period was marked by intermittent wars and invasions and there was not much emphasis on advancement of learning and knowledge except in the domain of religion and church, which ruled the kingdoms and the world.

After the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453, the Greek scholars sought shelter in Italy. Many manuscripts were transported to Italy during this process and were revealed to the Italian scholars. The printing press invented in the late 15th Century enabled the making of multiple copies of manuscripts, which was unique and this led to the spread of ancient

knowledge to various readers and scholars. These scholars translated these texts, and as a result, a vast body of scholarship was revealed to the Europeans. All this happened at a time when new impulses were already at work and the discovery of the classical manuscripts served as a catalyst to boost the process of reawakening or revival.

The trend influenced not only literature but also all related fields of art, architecture, music, and painting. What started initially in Italy, soon engulfed the whole of the European continent, and there were marked signs of new energy and vitality in the creative impulses of the masses. As a cultural movement, the Renaissance encompassed innovative flowering of Latin and vernacular literatures all across Europe. Languages which were considered less prestigious than the Classical Greek and Latin started getting attention and a process of their development and standardization started.

With the onset of the Renaissance, there was a shift in perception towards the position of humans, who were exalted to the centre of the universe. The classicist thinkers too had placed man at the centre of the universe as against those in the medieval ages, who had emphasized God as supreme and humans as degraded. As a result, the movement of thinking in this period came to be known as 'Humanism'.

“The term “humanism” implies a world view and a set of values centred around human rather than the divine, using a self-subsistent definition of human nature (rather than referring this to God), and focusing on human achievements and potential rather than theological doctrines and dilemmas...” (Habib).

This rationalist system of thought gave greater importance to human rather than divine. The Renaissance cultural movement, Humanism, shifted away from medieval scholasticism and rekindled interest in ancient Greek and Roman thought. The study of Humanities, history, poetry, philosophy, grammar and rhetoric exalted the status of human beings in the universe.

This was furthered by changes going on parallelly in the field of science and reasoning. The age old geocentric model of the Earth given by Ptolemy was replaced at this time by the Copernican Heliocentric model, aided by inventions and discoveries. This knowledge overthrew the domination of God as the sole determiner and cause of all things and brought in a more mechanistic world view in place of a theosophical world order. The printing press was another such establishment which advanced learning.

This rediscovery of the classics gave a thrust to the ongoing changes and led to development and artistic productivity. The genres and styles used by the classical writers gave new models of artistic perfection and also the rules and means of attaining excellence in the creation. There was thus, an attempt to apply the new learning for educational purposes through the appreciation of Humanities.

A major difference between medieval and humanist attitudes to the classics was that the latter insisted upon a thorough knowledge of the classical languages: Latin and Greek. The humanists were of the view that the rules of grammar and composition should be modelled on the basis of the vernacular languages and not on the classical models. This reasoning extended to the realms of rhetoric and versification too. To achieve this end, humanists emphasized (set examples by doing so) using and cultivating the vernacular languages over the languages of the elite.

All these changes resulted in the flowering of new ideas, critical insights, and novel ways of thinking and marked a change in the general atmosphere of the period. In this module, we are going to look at the major trends in thought during this period.

THE COMPLETE MAN

During the Renaissance, thinkers and scholars were engaged with the question of the right kind of men to rule others and also to define the traits that are needed to be inculcated in them to ensure the inculcation of right virtues. Several works on the subject were published during this time. Castiglione's (1478-1529) *The Courtyre* (1561) originally written in Latin, translated later into English, discusses the talents and virtues ideally required in a courtier.

The first book on Education written in English was by Sir Thomas Elyot (1490-1546), *The Book of Governour* (1530), a treatise on moral philosophy and education, in which he placed great significance on the reading of literature. He adapts Greek models to serve as examples in the English context to propound moral lessons, like respect for law, courage, boldness, etc. In one of the chapters in this book, Elyot recommends reading Homer for his "incomparable wisdoms, and instructions for politike governaunce of people" as well as lessons on military warfare (quoted by Blamires). He alludes to several classical masters like, Aristotle, Virgil and Homer for exemplification of both moral instruction and pleasure of reading. For him, any work which is morally instructive, whether it is comedy or dancing, is to be valued and pursued. He believes that even comedy can be morally instructive as it is a "mirror of man's life". The young minds, he believes, should be trained to discern good from evil and at times showing evil is necessary to convey the ill effects of evil. He emphasizes the necessity of 'a healthy mind'. Though a Humanist, Elyot approved of the medieval notion of a universal order. He refers to a hierarchical order of things in the universe and man's infinitesimal place in the order of things.

Another important educationist was Roger Ascham (1516-68) who wrote the treatise *The Scholemaster*, containing two books. In the first book, 'teachyng the bringing up of youth', Ascham gives a lot of practical advice for the young. He was against corporal punishment and cruel treatment of boys in school. He critiqued Malory's *Morte D'Arthur* and expressed

his dissatisfaction with the two important themes of the text, manslaughter and bold bawdry, which set unworthy examples for the youth.

In the second book 'teachyng the ready way to the Latin tong' Ascham emphasizes that the only way to learn any language, mother tongue or a learned language is 'onlie by imitation' and therefore 'if ye would speake as the best and wisest do, ye must be conversant, where the best and wisest are'. He cites examples of how all renowned poets have followed their predecessors, and also gives examples that should be followed to develop different attributes in language learning.

THE ART OF POETRY

In consonance with the trend of thinking in the age regarding classical and vernacular languages, several writers in this age devoted their attention to the craft of poetry writing taking examples from the learned classical masters.

George Gascoigne (1534-77), a poet and dramatist wrote 'Certayne Notes on Instruction Concerning the making of Verse or Ryme in English' (1575), which is considered the first essay in English versification. While elaborating on the technical aspects of versification like, word order, stanza forms, rhyme schemes, he explained the system of scansion in detail. He also emphasized the significance of 'fine invention'. He stressed the need for poetic conceits, hiding the obvious by creative, imaginative thoughts and expressions. To do so, he also highlighted the need to stay away from the use of conventional conceits and obvious phrases and to use surprises and varying terms related to the theme.

Another work of significance, *The Arte of English Poesie* is attributed to George Puttenham (1529-91), nephew of Sir Thomas Elyot. In the first section 'Of Poets and Poesie', Puttenham praises the poets as 'the first priests, the first prophets, the first legislators, and politicians in

the world' (quoted in Blamires). He goes further to describe various kinds of poetry: religious, didactic, satirical, epitaphs, etc. He also showers praise by critiquing the poets who wrote before him: Wyatt and Surrey, Chaucer, Gower, Raleigh and others. Though it is also true that he was not a great critic and his criticism is said to be more superficial than profound.

In the second section of his work, 'Of Proportion Poetical' he emphasizes the visual appeal of stanzas in poetry. He describes various shapes: triangles, pillars, tapers, lozenges, etc. which can make the verse attractive to the reader. He is not too sure of the meter and falters in scansion of poetry. In the third section 'Of Ornament' he describes various kinds of figurative devices to be used in versification by citing examples. His work is interesting not so much because of originality or value of criticism but for the anecdotes and humorous digressions which enliven his work.

Apart from these two major writers, others contributed to the discussion on the art of poetry writing and appreciation. William Webbe (1568-91) takes classical poetry as his standard and appeals for discernment between good and bad poets, claiming that all who write rhymes do not deserve to be called poets. He appreciates poets like Phaet, who translated Latin works like Virgil's *Aeneid* into English, by citing examples from the translated text.

THE DEFENCE OF POETRY

Toward the 1580s, there was a charge on poetry and drama of becoming morally degraded. Several critics believed that mixing of tragic and comic scenes and violation of the three unities as prescribed by Aristotle was inappropriate. A lot of discussion and controversy ensued. Several writers wrote against immoral and profane writings and others wrote in favour of poetry, justifying the role and value of the works created by poets and playwrights.

Stephen Gosson (1554-1624) was a prominent critic of contemporary theatre. He lambasted contemporary theatre in his book *The School of Abuse, Containing a Pleasaunt Invective against poets, pipers, Plaiers, Jesters and suchlike Caterpillars of Commonwelth* (1579) for its lack of purpose and believed it to be a ground for promotion of the business of prostitutes. In his subsequent pamphlets, Gosson attacked tragedies for their evil and criminal themes and settings; comedies for their bawdry, flattery and immorality, and the characters for being drawn from amongst cooks, knaves, and parasites.

Gosson had dedicated his book to Sir Philip Sydney (1554-86) and as was natural, Sir Sydney had to rise to write *Defence of Poesie*, also called the *Apologie for Poetrie* (1595). You will read about this work in greater detail in another module as this is a very significant work and contains a lot of literary and critical value.

Thomas Lodge (1558-1625) pioneered an angry and irritated reply to Gosson's attack in his *The Defence of Poetry* (1579) claiming, that a handful of astray poets prove nothing for the whole set.

Sir John Harrington (1561-1612) too, defended poetry in his 'A Brief Apology for Poetry' prefixed to his translation of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (1591). This was the first English translation of the poem. In 'the Apology', he highlights the various levels of signification that poetry allows, viz., historical/moral/ allegorical, etc. Then he goes on to elaborate on kinds and types of allegory. He further underlines the merits of verse as ease of memorizing, forcefulness of expression and entertaining to the ear. He stresses the idea that verse makes people, more honest and wise. He quotes examples from several poets including Homer and Dante to substantiate his views on poetry and its merits.

Several writers of this period were of the view that showing wickedness and profaneness on stage was also morally instructive, as it provided examples of what is incorrect and not to be

pursued. The necessity of showing evil and its just punishment in the universal order was justified, as the triumph of good set examples of morals to be cultivated and instruction in traits to be avoided.

Classical or native versification

It was popular to apply the rules of Latin to that of English. The same prevailed for versification in English too. Conservatives in this period extolled poets who applied classical quantitative meters, rhyme and even similes to poetry being written in English. However, this was very difficult and at times, impossible. The sound patterns were different and the spellings varied. The accentual patterns too differed in the two languages. Latin considered a syllable long if it ended with two consonant sounds but this was not the case in English. The writers found it challenging to adhere to the classical versification. As a result there ensued a lot of controversy on the subject. Conservatives were steadfast and the contemporary scholars challenged their views by highlighting the concerns and issues faced in loyalty to tradition.

A series of letters exchanged between Spenser (*Three proper and witty familiar letters*, 1580) and Cambridge scholar Gabriel Harvey (*Two other very commendable letters*, 1580) were published on the subject. Several other writers too took part in the ongoing controversy. George Chapman and Samuel Daniel were the ones who praised the classical meters and argued for it, citing excellence of custom and the nobility of Latin and Greek tongues. They believed that any language could attain perfection only if it modelled itself after these two classical languages.

Sir Philip Sidney had praised Spenser's *The Shepheardes Calender* (1579) in his *Apologie*. E.K. or Edward Kirke (1553-613) who wrote the Preface to the *Calender* also praised Spenser for his conformity to the ancients and his attempts at restoration of archaisms on the

ground that they had long been out of use and as they were heritage, they rightfully deserved to be brought back into the language.

Harvey, Thomas Campion, and a French poet Joachim du Bellay highlighted the inadequacy of this argument and illustrated how English and French were different from the classical languages and hence, such kind of argument and application was inappropriate. They showed the clumsiness that results when classical meter is applied to English verse.

Francis Bacon

Francis Bacon (1561-1626) was a product of his age in the sense that he was a humanist as well as an empiricist who emphasized employment of methods of reasoning, observation and verification rather than mere tradition, custom and faith, which were the mainstays of the medieval period. Habib says that Bacon was “the forerunner of the empiricist tradition in Britain, urging the use of the inductive method and direct observation as against scholastic reliance upon authority, faith, and deductive reasoning.”

Bacon wrote an important treatise *The Advancement of Learning* (1603 and 1605). In the second book of this work, he makes an in-depth analysis of the different branches of study. He differentiates between three segments of human understanding: memory (which relates to history); imagination (which relates to poetry); and reason (which relates to philosophy). Bacon regards poetry as superior as it is a combination of the imagination and reason, and is not limited by memory, history or actual facts. He further states that poetry is ‘feigned history’ in its subject matter, as it takes events and acts which are greater and more heroic than history and the results of actions, good or evil are allocated on a more just and fair basis than is done in life. In this sense poetry is closer to Divine Providence as it fulfils the aspirations of human beings.

In this book Bacon discusses different kinds of poetry: narrative (which is an imitation of history) and representative (in which action is presented on stage in a dramatic form). He regards poets as superior even to philosophers as they analyse and express human condition, compulsion, customs and corruptions but they are lessor than orators as the latter are better in terms of 'wit and eloquence'. (Blamires)

CONCLUSION

In this module, you have learnt about the Renaissance, which was a period of revival of interest in classical learning, whether in the form of philosophy, literature, music, or art. This period was marked by a movement called 'humanism', where human beings were restored to their dignified place in the system of universe. This trend marked a distinct departure from the thinking in the Middle ages, where human life was dependent on divine will and directives of the church. Under the influence of the revived classical learning there was a flowering of imagination and re-examination of established rules and practices.

A lot of attention was focussed on language and its learning. Scholars debated the relevance and significance of learning classical languages vis-a-vis vernacular tongues which were so far obscure. The proper modes and models of learning languages were discussed at length by scholars of this age. Poetry, which was at a time considered inferior was defended by critics and theorists and was now regarded as a form which combined imagination and philosophy. The critics debated and discussed the art of poetry as well as the characteristics of a complete man and suggested rules for the standardization of vernacular languages as against the blind following of the classical tongues.

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