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The Relationship between Literary Theory and Practice in the Renaissance Period

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Abstract

The century and a half following the death of Geoffrey Chaucer (1400-1550) is considered the most volcanic period of English history. It was the time England was swept by vast changes. The Renaissance, a European continental phenomenon, is one of the offshoots of the new thinking of the period. Even though Renaissance generally denotes the whole transition from the Middle Ages to the modern world, it is more correctly applied to the revival of art resulting from the discovery and imitation of classic models in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Whereas Renaissance took roots earlier in Italy and France, England was late in embracing it especially in the field of literature because Humanism in England had no decided effect on poetry and prose. In fact, English literature flowered when Italian literature had entered its decadence and when France was also far advanced into literature. Against this background, this study explores the whole concept of Renaissance and its background as well as the various perspectives that critics have brought to bear on it. It delves into English Renaissance in particular, drawing attention to how the phenomenon brought about the repudiation of Italianism and the rise of patriotic exaltation in England. It also draws attention to the revolt against imperialism and the rejection of artistic languor, a development that created room for literature to spring to vigorous life. Drawing upon some representative works, the study finally juxtaposes the theoretical underpinnings that have been identified with the literary practices that arose from them, be they on poetry or drama. That way, the study is able to situate Renaissance in the context of both theory and practice.

Key Words: *Revival, art, revolt, imperialism, theory, practice.*

INTRODUCTION

The term "Renaissance" denotes a new age in the history of Western civilization at the end of the Middle Ages. It derives from the rebirth or revival of learning or of the arts supposed to separate the Middle Ages and the Modern Period. The revival of learning denotes, in its broadest sense, that "gradual enlightenment of the human mind after the darkness of the Middle Ages" (Long 91). Renaissance and Humanism are often applied to the same movement. But Humanism specifically refers to the revival of classic literature and was so called following the example of Petrarch. In fact, revival of learning covers the whole movement whose essence, according to Lamartine, was that "man discovered himself and the universe" (Long 91). That man, so long blinded, had suddenly opened his eyes and seen.

In the Middle Ages, man's whole world consisted of the narrow Mediterranean and the nations that clustered around it. This little world seemed bounded by impassable barriers. Man's mind was also bounded by the same narrow lines. The revival stirred man away from this thinking. This concept of the revival of culture began with Italian writers and scholars of the 14th, 15th and 16th centuries who came to be called Humanists due to their preoccupation with the humanities. To be able to situate Renaissance in its proper perspective therefore, it is worthwhile to examine the role played by the Humanists in the development of this European continental phenomenon.

Between 1490 and 1520 when the religious quarrels of the Pope and Luther or Calvin began, there was an efflorescence of Humanism in England. This consisted in the desire of some young English men attracted to Italy to learn Greek. This Humanism provoked the renewal of poetry which the reformers stayed away from for they considered it secular and frivolous. With the Humanists however, verse had to be saved from languor and artistic disarray. This movement was pioneered by Thomas Wyatt and Surrey. Wyatt made sojourns in Italy and France and brought back the admiration of lyrical poetry.

He desired to fashion English verse along the model of the Italians. With him, English verse regained its nobility, grace arid harmony. For Glencoe McGraw-Hill, Sir Thomas Wyatt experienced the Italian Renaissance firsthand. "He came into contact with the sonnets of Petrarch and brought the sonnet

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form back to England where it came to have a profound effect upon English verse" (McGraw-Hill 210).

Other English Humanists, apart from Wyatt and Surrey include John Colet, Sir Thomas More, William Lily and Erasmus. More's *Utopia* is considered the masterpiece of English Humanism. It was originally written in Latin and later translated into English in 1551. It is considered the true prologue of the Renaissance. In it, all the conceptions of the past were opposed with vigorous emphasis. Erasmus of Rotterdam was the Prince of the Humanists. He emphasized the European-wide nature of the Humanist movement. With Humanism, pagan ideas were sold and this stimulated literature. There was not only a rediscovery of Medieval literature, but also of ancient classical writers. This rediscovery introduced new ideas into the art of writing. The invention of printing helped this to flower.

In the view of Thomas Briggs, Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* outlines his conception of an ideal state free from the faults that the English life and government of his time exhibited" (Briggs 376). With this background in Humanism, Renaissance came to be the age of not only classical knowledge, but also of culture and intellectual changes. With it, the centre of culture in England changed. The controversy between the Calvinists and the Catholics at this point in time brought about religious decay. The authority of the Church was challenged and the Kings' Courts became centres of cultural life.

It is important to note that Renaissance in England affected literature much more slowly than in Italy and France because Humanism in England had no decided effect on poetry and prose. Again, the national language was immature. Prose lacked a strong tradition and glorious precedents. The best Humanisms made use of Latin. Verse remained irregular since the time of Chaucer and did not regain equilibrium and measure until Spenser's work began in 1579. The Renaissance in England was more aloof from the plastic arts than what obtained in Italy and France. England had no pictures or statues except those bought abroad and the Reformers protested against images. It was only after the Reformation when the Anglican religion had spread in the country with its tinge of Calvinism that Renaissance reached its triumph. This puritan atmosphere of England was suffocating to Renaissance which aspired to all forms of beauty.

The English Renaissance was also slow because English literature was all imported from France and mainly consisted of translations and adaptations. It had not assumed a truly national shape. Chaucer, the greatest English poet, was essentially French. Although Renaissance called for new paths, England remained faithful to the cult of the past longer than the continent. In France, the Renaissance was essentially aristocratic. In England, it was masses-based. England preserved and increased the vogue of the ballads. An intense and fervent patriotism favoured this continuity by glorifying the annals of the nation, its history, legends, traditions and antiquities. This patriotism gave rise to an ambition to rival the masterpieces of Greece and Rome as well as those of Italy and France.

Overview of the period

The English Renaissance spans the period 1578-1625. It was the time England experienced a quickening of intellectual interests. It had its beginnings in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in Italy. Thomas Briggs asserts that "the first intimations of Renaissance were found in an awakened interest in art" (Briggs 373). In England, this interest centred on Literature. The first anthology of English verse appeared in the sixteenth century under the title of *Tottel's Miscellany* Briggs holds that the lyrics of Whyatt and Surrey "were the most important contributions to this collection" (Briggs 377).

It is important to underline the fact that any discussion of the Renaissance which either by accident or design fails to take into consideration critics' characterisation of the phenomenon will be considered incomplete. This is because no age in literary history has ever escaped the critical searchlight of literary critics. If anything, periods in literary history assume their tags through these critics. Let us begin by pointing out that the coming of the Enlightenment increased interest in the revival of learning. It was therefore in the early nineteenth century that it was realised that the age of classical revival had something positive and creative to contribute to Western Civilization. With critics like John Ruskin, the use of the term 'Renaissance' to describe a definite period in the history of art became common, while the term 'humanism' was coined in Germany to refer to an intellectual movement the importance of which went far beyond the mere revival of classical style.

Julius Michelet, in 1855, introduced most of the themes present in the modern idea of Renaissance. To him, the Renaissance period is an absolute antithesis of the Middle Ages when nature and science had been proscribed and where man has abdicated his freedom.

For Jacob Burkhardt, the Conservative Swiss historian, the Renaisance was a distinct epoch that began in the fourteenth century and ended in the sixteenth century. He was interested in the mental traits of the new civilization. He saw a close connection between the new spirit and the social and political experience of the Italians. He believed that the political situation in Italy at the beginning of the fourteenth century provided the conditions for the development of the new mentality. The central characteristic of the Renaissance, for Burckhardt, was individualism. He was of the view that the development of the individual made possible the discovery of the world and the discovery of man. It is for this reason that he saw the revival of classical antiquity as an important feature but not the cause of the Renaissance. His ideas are highly accepted in the formulation of the concept of Renaissance.

For C.S Lewis, Renaissance is "the revival of learning, the recovery of Greek and the classicizing of Latin" (Lewis 55). While elaborating more on the concept, Lewis said that the word "Renaissance" is in a curiously different position from the general run of historical terms. The ancients, he argued,

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were not ancient. Gothic architecture was not "Gothic" at the time, it was merely architecture. No one thought of himself as a Bronze Age man. It was in this way, he said, that humanists became very conscious of living in renascentia. Consequently, "they claimed vociferously to be restoring all good learning, liberating the world from barbarism , and breaking with this past" (Lewis 56).

In the view of Wallace K. Ferguson, the Renaissance is a period of transition between the Middle Ages and the modern era during which the feudal and ecclesiastical elements of the Medieval world were gradually but steadily transformed, first in Italy, then in the rest of Europe, by the development of capitalism and urban society.

Yet, Glencoe McGraw-Hill writes: Renaissance "is a fitting title to describe the reawakened interest in science, art, and literature that swept across Europe during the period" (McGraw-Hill 201). During the period, great advances were made in education and science, while some of the world's finest artists and writers created their masterpieces.

Characterizing the Renaissance

Beyond what critics had to say about Renaissance, the phenomenon is associated with a number of characteristics. Foremost among them is the deep layer of translations that fertilized the rich soil. By 1579, many of the great works of ancient and modern times had been translated into English. Some of these translations formed current reading and became as popular as the best writings of English authors. Some of the translations include Plutarch's *Lives* translated by Thomas North and George Chapman. Homer's the *Iliad* which became a great Elizabethan poem. These translations triggerred off borrowings. The sonneteers were the most considerable of the borrowers. There was Italianism considered to be the most dominant foreign influence. Elizabethan literature was an expression of the national genius. It had its birth in Italianism. In those years, Italian books were the great matters in England. The development of drama and the novel owes largely to the skillful, dramatic and vivacious short stories of Boccaccio, Cinthio, Bandello, and others. This meeting between the English and Italian spirits which had already enriched Chaucer's poetry, brought a wealth of splendour to sixteenth century England. Italianism was, however, repudiated later. It was accused of exposing its admirers to new dangers bordering on corrupt morality and decadent civilization. Italy therefore turned out to be the antithesis of the English character. They saw it as a land of debauchery, crime and poison. It was the country of Machiavellianism and represented their Utopia of irregularity. Patriotic exaltation also characterized the English Renaissance. This patriotic zeal accomplished a lot for the development of English literature. There is, for instance, the accomplishment by Sir Francis Drake of his voyage of circumnavigation. In 1588, the English seamen destroyed the invincible Armada. With these, England caught up with her continental rivals and even out-spaced them.

This impulse of patriotism led to the production of works like John Lyly's *Euphues* and Spenser's *Shepherd's Calendar*. Everything, including religion, combined to reinforce this patriotism. They saw Protestantism as deliverance from foreign supremacy. This led to the rejection of the Papacy. It broke England's subjection to Rome. If there must be a union in Europe, they dreamt of a confederation of European states with England at the head. The Christian spirit was taking over from the Hebraic spirit. This is religious egoism. It was against this background that Lyly expressed in 1580 that God always had a tender care of England as of new Israel, his chosen people. He then submitted that the living God was only the English God (Steinberg 186).

The English Renaissance was also characterized by a high conception of poetry. This was provoked by the religious feeling which allowed literature to spring to vigorous heights. This helped in the flowering of the Renaissance. The patriotic pride culminated in the love for letters. With this, England started claiming pre-eminent place in every field of activity. She saw herself lagging behind in maritime discovery and seafaring. But with one leap, she caught up with her rivals like Spain, Portugal and France and even strove to outdistance them.

Tales of dominant exploration flourished as the spirit of imperialism became paramount. Stories of adventure were reproduced and translated by people like Richard Eden. This led to the publication in 1589 of Richard Hakluyt's "The Principal Navigations" and Samuel Purchas's *HakluytusPosthumus*. This spirit of conquest and self-glorification swept literature onwards. England balanced her literary accounts and did not find herself in a very comfortable position. She strove to be the first. She placed faith in her own genius, language and prosody. She strove to put them to order. Hitherto, she had been paralysed by timidity or by a certain languor. She is now determined to be bold and to venture into all the genres of literature. This faith in her letters and in her poetry made the poet the first of men. Sidney wrote *Apology for Poetry* and Spenser wrote *The English Poet*. While Sidney saw the poet as the monarch of the Sciences, Spenser was of the view that heroes and famous poets are born together. This was how the fever of poetry gripped the generation. Poetry became neither the privilege of a caste nor the apanage of a few. It heated men's brains, gave a lyrical turn to the whole of literature and beflowered and falsified the poetic prose. For McGraw-Hill, Sir Philip Sidney was "truly a Renaissance man - someone who can do a variety of things exceptionally well, as so many of the great figures of the Renaissance were able to do" (McGraw-Hill 232).

The spirit of independence also flourished during the period. This consisted in the rejection of strict rules. There was frank and free boldness. Individuals employed their initiatives. There was no established grammar and stereotype syntax. Versification was no longer reduced to a single principle, but it recognized the syllabic and accentuation law.

Poetic and Dramatic Modes of the Period

In characterizing the English Renaissance, we have come across some of the major literary trends in Renaissance England. We shall, however, be more explicit

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here by examining aspects of the poetry and drama of the period.

Poetry, as we have earlier noted in our characterization of the Renaissance period, was preeminent during this age. Being an age of profound courtly activities, the poets of the period were mostly courtiers. John Lyly, Sir Philip Sidney and Edmund Spencer were the pioneers of Renaissance literature except, perhaps, in the area of drama. But their influence on poetry was profound. Romances of the time bore the imprint of Lyly's *Euphues* and Sidney's *Arcadia*. Pastorals were imitated from Spencer and Sidney. The publication of Sidney's *Astropheland Stella* provoked the flowering of sonnets. Edmund Spencer's major contribution lay in *Shepherd's Calendar* and the *FairieQueene*.

As we have earlier observed, the favourite genre in the poetry of the Renaissance *was* the sonnet. This genre was popularised by Petrarch, an Italian poet. Petrarch in his poems idealised women. His poems are addressed to his dead love Laura. This Petrarchian tradition of idealization of women and love was imported into English literature by Sir Thomas Wyatt, an early sixteenth century English poet.

Wyatt is published posthumously in a collection entitled *Tottel's Miscellany*. This rejection by the Renaissance poet of strict rules in the writing of poetry was exemplified by Wyatt. He makes deliberate use of irregular rhythm. His poem is not sing song. His themes, however, follow faithfully the love tendency of Petrarch. In one of his poems, "A Song", he addresses the perennial question of love through his love. In it, we are presented with a lover whose love song has not been rewarded. If anything, the lady has refused to listen. In another poem, "Forget not...", he still lapses into an unhappy mood. The lover here is frustrated but he remains patient. While he has been consistent, the woman, his subject of desire, indulges in inconsistency. He however implores her not to forget as he hopes that peace would, someday, come unto them. In ''The Flee", he changes his style. Although it is a love poem, there is no complaint in it. The poem simply describes real love where both parties are faithful. In "Tangled I Was", the sense of freedom which the poet now enjoys is celebrated. He is no longer ensnared by love. A sense of the return of great energy overwhelms him. Colloquial expressions are used to emphasize this sense of freedom.

Like Wyatt, George Gascoigne (1539-1578), is another sixteenth century English poet. His poetry is more old-fashioned than Wyatt's. There are no traits of Petrarchian influence in him. He writes in the English tradition. His poems are conversational and loose in construction. They are simple in language and have religion as their focus. His poems are classified into weeds, herbs and flowers. The weeds represent the immoral poem of his youth, while the herbs are corrective ones.

In the poem, ''Goodnight", he admonishes that one should examine one's conscience after the grind of everyday existence. The poem repudiates the temptation to fall into easy ways. It counsels that sin is destructive and that the path to restitution lay in being sober and in pleasing God. He urges that death should be remembered in all we do. This reference to death establishes the medieval influence of Gascoigne.

In ''Lullaby", he implicitly compares sleep and death. The poet confesses to the fact that he is getting old. He sings lullaby to his youth. He regrets his wasted youth and strives to find peace and harmony. Since ageing is inescapable, he seems to suggest that there is need for adjustment. "A Libel of Divorce" has more serious theme than "Lullaby". It uses extended metaphor of reality. Here the poet compares himself to a man and his concubine. His concubine deserts him and he plans to leave his wife for that reason. While his wife represents life, his concubine stands for love. Death, he says, is the ultimate judge. "The Green Knight's Farewell to Fancy" like "Goodnight" is in the medieval tradition-. It focuses on death - a favourite theme of medieval poems. The poet there bids farewell to frivolous lifestyle. His lifestyle has been vain. He realises that he deceived himself in the past. He is now ready to jettison that way of life. The theme of the poem is religious.

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) comes at the end of the tradition of sonnets and sonnet sequences. His poems are addressed to two characters - a handsome young man, and a dark lady. In them, he depicts neoplatonic and idealized love. The later poems focus on the dark woman. Shakespeare borrowed heavily from a Roman writer, Catullus, whose major preoccupation was the "Carpe Diem" (seize the day). Shakespeare explored this theme in his early poems. He uses this notion of "seize the day" as a justification for seduction poems. Another litrary mode that was well developed in the Renaissance age was drama. All Renaissance plays have a unifying factor. This lies in revenge. The revenge motif was dominant and progresses with a lot of intrigues. Devious devices of murder and suicide abound. These charcteristics of Renaissance drama developed out of the adaptations of the classical and Euro-christian traditions of drama.

In Renaissance drama, there is the belief that the mundane world is transitory and its experiences are useful in so far as they help to prepare us for eternal life. There is also the belief that there are two forces at war with each other. These are good and evil. The good is usually expected to triumph. But more often than not, the reverse holds true. In Renaissance view, the triumph of evil over good is only temporary. The ultimate victory belongs to the good. This Renaissance philosophy is in line with Christian orthodoxy.

Having identified the main current of ideas in Renaissance drama, it is now worthwhile to show how these theories are put into practice. We shall use Christopher Marlowe's *he Jew of Malta* and John Webster's *The White Devil* for illustration. Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* is concerned with revenge. Barabas, a Jew, is bent on revenging on the people of Malta. His property was seized on the order of the governor of Malta, Ferneze, for refusing to contribute to the indemnity Malta was to pay to Turkey. Barabbas vows to wreak revenge on Ferneze and the people of Malta. He uses a lot of intrigues. He gets his

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daughter to fall in love with Mathias, a gentleman and Lodowick, Ferneze's son. They fight and kill each other. He poisons the nuns, Friar Benardine and Ithamore to hide his heinous acts. He does not stop there. He plans to revenge on Malta. In a war with Malta, Calymath and his crew take Malta due to the treasonable indulgences of Barabas. He becomes the governor of Malta but realising that his position is precarious, he invites Ferneze to a banquet where he plans to hand over power to him. Here, he wants to eliminate Ferneze but the inexorable hands of fate caught up with him. He eliminates himself instead. The play has not only shown the revenge motif for which Renaissance is known, it has as well shown the way good triumps over evil, at least in the Renaissance setting.

In Webster's *The White Devil*, there is a syndicate of evil forces. Here, corruption in courtly life is depicted. Brachiano, an amorous Duke, takes over the wife of Camileo. To have their way, Brachiano and Victoria, Camileo's wife, eliminate Camileo and Isabella, Brachiano's wife. Francisco vows to revenge the death of his sister, Isabella. The processes of revenge result in the elimination of Brachiano.

The play, as in *The Jew of Malta*, focuses on revenge as well. It also has its lessons on the futility of evil. What is suggested is that evil is transcient. The ultimate is the good. The Renaissance plays we have looked at have faithfully demonstrated this basic philosophy of Renaissance drama. From the foregoing, it is evident that the poetic and dramatic forms reflect the characteristics of the period or what the period is known for.

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