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Lecture 4: The Medieval Synthesis and the Discovery of Man: The Renaissance

From [The History Guide](#) by Dr. Steven Kreis



Petrarch
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*Living, I despise what melancholy fate
has brought us wretches in these evil years.
Long before my birth time smiled and may again,
for once there was, and yet will be, more joyful days.
But in this middle age time's dregs
sweep around us, and we beneath a heavy
load of vice. Genius, virtue, glory now
have gone, leaving chance and sloth to rule.
Shameful vision this! We must awake or die!*

—Petrarch, *Epistolae metricae*

When all is said and done, it can be argued that the Renaissance of the 14th and 15th centuries was not indicative of an extraordinary intellectual event or movement. The 12th century Renaissance, characterized as it was by the spirit of inquiry and skepticism of Peter Abelard (see [Lecture 1](#)), is much more deserving of that label. And when we think of the Renaissance today, we perhaps think of tangible images like sculpture, painting and architecture. We may even think of the de Medici, that powerful Italian family of bankers and purveyors of political intrigue. We may even think of the exploration of the New World and the exploitation of that world. Or perhaps we may focus our recollection on the perfection of moveable type by a German print master by the name of Gutenberg.

Why did the Renaissance occur? This is a difficult question at best — there are no easy answers. In general, however, we could argue that the ordered, formalistic, and compartmentalized society of the Middle Ages allowed those forces which had created it to destroy it as well. These forces developed to such an extent that they outgrew the fixed and narrow framework through which they functioned. In other words, the medieval matrix held the seeds of its own decline. Realities such as a surplus of agricultural produce, the increasing urbanization of Europe, a swelling population, wider trading zones and a thirst for knowledge finally broke the stranglehold of the medieval matrix. Man emerged from the fragments of the medieval synthesis and saw, perhaps for the first time since the classical age of Greece, the world of Man and the world of Nature.

Renaissance men and women turned their gaze backward in historical time. Not to their immediate past which they arrogantly assumed was “dark,” but to the classical past of ancient Greece and Rome, which they assumed was bathed in light. There they found a Golden Age. There they found thinkers who had similar interests and who had wrestled perhaps, with identical problems. There they found their “renaissance,” as [GIORGIO VASARI](#) (1511-1574) would put it. The medieval synthesis had grown formal, too compartmentalized, too confining. It was too damn logical. Too systematic. Too Aristotelian. And the Renaissance reacted strongly against the medieval matrix — against all that pigeon-holing.

By 1500 and in whatever field of endeavor we choose to examine — art, politics, science, economics, life — there is greater emphasis placed on human potentiality for growth and excellence. The new world view — at least part of it — would be fashioned according to the reigning two ideals of the period: individuality and self-sufficiency.

The Renaissance was clearly marked by vast economic changes. Although Europe was slow to recover from the ravages of the Black Death between 1347 and 1351, by the middle of the fifteenth century, finance, commerce, agriculture and industry were all on the upswing. Commerce demanded a money economy in place of the older barter system. And the restrictive practices of the guild system, at least in western Europe, were already showing signs of breakdown. All of this, of course, would be supported by the massive influx of gold and silver bullion into Europe which the eventual exploitation of the world across the Atlantic would make possible in the early 16th century.

Kings and their nobility, of course, grew wealthier. But on a comparative level, it was the city-dwelling merchant whose wealth grew even more. Italy, Germany, the Low Countries and in England were the main beneficiaries of the wealth that flowed into Europe during the first wave of overseas empire. Bankers financed mines, manufacturing and sheep-raising and the great merchants began to move beyond the confines of the medieval guild system. Commerce sought new markets in North and South America and India.

Trade began to show signs of change. Trade in luxuries began to give way to trade in staple commodities. In the face of this economic reality, the old city guilds and all the regulations and restrictions attached to them were beginning to prove inadequate. The new urban leaders were the middle classes, the bourgeoisie, and not the bishops. The Church's role as temporal arbiter was challenged. Merchants needed firm and stable governments free from older feudal obligations so it is no accident that it was during the Renaissance that strong, centralized monarchies make their appearance. And this accounts for the political theory of [NICCOLO MACHIAVELLI](#) (1469-1527).

This rapid growth in the economy and in centralized government was especially marked in western Europe, the Low Countries and in England and was indicative of a general transformation of numerous existing social institutions. A thoroughgoing intellectual reconstruction was now a reality. Every new belief medieval men and women adopted had to be worked out by individuals living in this society. And there were numerous forces at work which allowed individuals to construct radically new aspirations. The new interest focused on man and his life in the here and now. While many retained their faith in life after death — indeed, most people did so — there was a coincident desire to enjoy the benefits of this world now. [St. Augustine](#) (354-430) would have been most disappointed. If his artificial dichotomy of the Two Worlds meant anything, it was that the City of God was superior in all ways to the City of Man.

It was nearly a coincidence that those individuals who felt these interests the most had an ancient literature to which they could turn and find purpose. In Greece and Rome — especially the Greece and Rome of [Plato](#) (c.427-c.347) and [Cicero](#) (106-43) — the Renaissance found its conscience. There in the classical world they found people who had the same passion for a free life in the world of Nature. The Renaissance passion for what was human and the discovery or rediscovery of this same inclination in the classical world we today call [HUMANISM](#). Christianity had spent the past fourteen centuries erasing this pagan and secular concern among its flock. Although the Church Fathers had to read and understand this pagan literature, they at the same time rejected its message. Or did they? Was it really possible for them to have not paid any attention to the content of what they read while they were seeking to improve the style of their writing? I think not. And as much as the Fathers may have complained about the paganism of the ancients, the ideas implicit within the ancient works became part of their thinking. In this way, classical humanism more or less slipped through the back door of medieval Christian literature.

Throughout the central and high middle ages we can discern a literature which abounds in the frank enjoyment of life and its pleasures. The verse of the [GOLIARDS](#) is one such example. The troubadours and wandering scholars, of course, were roundly condemned by the stern [St. Dominic](#) and Pope Innocent III went on to lead a Holy Crusade to stamp out the [Cathari](#) as well as the Goliards. And although [Thomas Aquinas](#) was certainly no pagan and clearly no devotee of the Goliards, it is also clear that he embraced his own brand of humanism. Aquinas was no ascetic in the mold of Augustine. Cited intellectual that he was, he did not deny himself the pleasures of earthly existence. His entire philosophy was grounded in the supremacy of that most human of man's qualities — Human Reason.

With the Renaissance, Europe learned from its past and borrowed what was deemed most useful. Of course, why the Renaissance had to go back to the past to find what was useful for the present is important. Why is it that this forward-looking age, this period of rebirth and rediscovery, needed to justify itself according to ancient models? I think the answer is quite simple: in order to escape the present — “shameful vision this. We must awake or die” — Renaissance humanists had to find a precedent elsewhere. The present disappointed them. The key to the present and the future then, lay in the virtues of the golden age of the classical world.

[Dante](#) was as full of models from the ancient world as he was of the late 13th and early 14th century. When he died in 1321, the father of the Italian Renaissance, [Francesco Petrarca](#) (1304-1374), had just reached his seventeenth birthday. The great Petrarch, symbol of all that was the Italian Renaissance, would cast Aristotle aside. Scholasticism, that great medieval combination of Theology and Philosophy, was also abandoned by Petrarch. “How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?” asked the medieval Scholastic. We can only imagine Petrarch's response — “who cares?” he might have said. Petrarch was more interested in the glories of this world. But, he looked backward, and found in Cicero a lamentation for the present. In other words, the meaning of the Renaissance came from the classical past.

Petrarch himself was impressed with the ancients. “Among the many subjects which interested me,” he wrote in his [Letter to Posterity](#), “I dwelt especially upon antiquity, for our own age has always repelled me.... In order to forget my own time I have constantly striven to place myself in a spirit of other ages, and consequently, I delight in history.” So Petrarch turned from [Aristotle](#) to Plato. But why? Well, simple. Plato was not Aristotle. The lyrical, poetic, soulful Plato was the antithesis of the logical, scientific, unemotional Aristotle. Plato was not

only the antithesis of Aristotle, he was the antidote to Aristotle.

Beyond Cicero and other writers of the classical age there lay another world for thinkers like Petrarch. There was the world of Florence — a city where science and philosophy were joined together. Florence — a city like no other. One hundred years after Petrarch's death we find another Renaissance humanist, Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), extolling the virtues of that city. In 1492, Ficino sent a letter to one of his friends. The letter's message is clear. It is a Renaissance document without question.

If we are to call any age golden, it is beyond doubt that age which brings forth golden talents in different places. That such is true of this our age [no one] will hardly doubt. For this century, like a golden age, has restored to light the liberal arts, which were almost extinct: grammar, poetry, rhetoric, painting, sculpture, architecture, music . . . and all this in Florence. Achieving what had been honored among the ancients, but almost forgotten since, the age has joined wisdom with eloquence, and prudence with the military art. . . . This century appears to have perfected astronomy, in Florence it has recalled the Platonic teaching from darkness into light . . . and in Germany . . . [there] have been invented the instruments for printing books.

Petrarch and Ficino were urban representatives of the very urban phenomenon we call the Renaissance. Their lives are ones of spiritual adventure and a thirst for knowledge. This thirst, the product of the 12th Century Renaissance, had become more generalized — its tentacles had spread across Europe, touching men and women who were eager for knowledge of any kind.

By 1500, Europe contained in excess of nine million volumes, of thirty thousand titles all of which came off the presses of more than one thousand printers. In 1451, Johannes Gutenberg (1397-1468) and Johannes Fust went into partnership and produced a forty-two line Bible and a thirty-two line Latin Grammar — one text was religious, the other secular. By 1465, printing presses based on Gutenberg's moveable type could be found in Italy, by 1470 in Paris. London followed in 1480. By 1499, there were presses in Stockholm, Constantinople and Lisbon. The consequences of the [PRINTING PRESS](#) were so immense that I hardly need to even explain why. The great age of information was produced by the Renaissance. And today we are totally bombarded with information. The primary effect of this boom in printing in the 15th century was that printed books began to fall into the hands of people who were not intellectuals. The effect was profound and perhaps without parallel.

Having established that the Renaissance self-consciously adopted the humanism of ancient Greece and Rome, the big question now is why? What did these rather modern humanists find? Well, they found the tools of textual criticism. They found Latin grammar and the found the passion of the scholar. However, medieval scholars had found this as well. What the Renaissance scholars really discovered was a great authority with whom they could arm themselves against the compartmentalization of the medieval matrix. The existence of the matrix and the rediscovery of ancient ways of thought produced tension and conflict. A crisis of identity was the result. Who are we, asked the Renaissance scholar? And out of this conflict, Renaissance scholars began to discover the beauty of form and they found Plato. So much did the Florentine scholars admire Plato that the [de Medici](#) family rebuilt [Plato's Academy](#). Plato's Academy was created around 390 B.C. and had remained in existence until the Byzantine emperor Justinian, closed its doors in 529. But there at the new Platonic Academy in Florence we find Marsilio Ficino trying to reconcile Plato and Moses, Socrates and Christ. There we find the mystic Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494) and his attempt to find a universal religion grounded in the fantastic combination of Plato's Ideas, the Jewish Kabbala and Christianity. In the opening section of his [ORATION ON THE DIGNITY OF MAN](#), Pico declared that unlike other creatures, mankind has not been assigned a fixed place in the universe. Our destiny is not determined by anything outside us. God has bestowed upon us a unique distinction: the liberty to determine the form and value our lives shall acquire. In other words, man is the master of his own destiny.

Plato seemed to be the thinker of the hour. He was more poetic, more lyrical and, so Renaissance scholars believed, was easily reconcilable with Christianity. In fact, I hope you are getting the major thrust of this argument for what the Renaissance was trying to accomplish, especially in its northern manifestation, was to reconcile the City of God with the City of Man. The result, as we shall see when we turn to some of the ideas of Erasmus, was Christian humanism.

Aristotle just had to go. I don't know how else to put it. His logic chopping proved little more than that it was logical. A fifty page demonstration of the proof that God's will was omnipotent, whether produced by an Aquinas or not, now seemed to mean very little. Once you knew how many angels could dance on the head of a pin, of what good was this information? There was more to life, it seemed, than logical argument and it was Plato who seemed to provide the necessary corrective.

Most of what Renaissance humanists borrowed from Socrates, Plato and Cicero was their happy, natural and wholesome enjoyment of human life. In the refined civilization that was the Renaissance, the humanists believed they were the ancients reincarnate. Their ideal was

excellence, moral and intellectual excellence. And the ancient Greeks had a word for this quality: *arete*. The virtue of excellence and the excellence of virtue. Be healthy in mind and in body. Seek virtue. Live the good life. Explore all potentialities. Serve the *civitas*. This is Platonic idea of *paideia*, what we today call culture.

All of this — and quite a bit more — meant a revolt from the medieval Christian ethic. In place of obedience to God's will came the freedom and responsibility of the individual guided by human reason. In place of faith came the fearless, intrepid quest of intellect. For instance, one of the keenest and most daring of the Italian humanists was Lorenzo Valla (1405-1457). It was Valla who attacked the *Donation of Constantine* — upon which the papacy grounded its claim to temporal authority — as a forged document. At it was Valla who, in his brief work, *The Monastic Life*, denied any value to asceticism and holiness. And in his treatise, *On Pleasure*, he placed himself with the Epicureans who placed the highest good in peaceful pleasures. He declared that the prostitute is better than the nun because she makes men happy while the nun lives in the cloistered world of the nunnery.

Even for Erasmus, the greatest of the northern humanists, there was sanctity to be found in married life. It was the task of Erasmus to situate the Christian in the real world, away from monasteries, nunneries and the desert. For Erasmus, divine contemplation was synonymous with idleness and monkish solitude was nothing more than baneful selfishness. Again, it is worth stressing, that for northern humanists like Erasmus, what was perhaps most important was placing the life of the true Christian in the real world.

In Italy, humanists were inspired by a revulsion to Christianity bordering on paganism. In the world of art, this revulsion was muted and we perhaps see a blending of the Christian and the pagan. Under the great Popes of the Italian Renaissance, it seems that the new learning, the new art and the new love of humanity was to be made, in fact, more Christian. This near perfect blend of what was Christian and what was human — an assimilation of each by each — nearly accomplished a synthesis not unlike the one Aquinas had made. Just the same, numerous Italian artists revolted from the Christian ethic — an ethic of devotion, salvation and asceticism — and instead embraced the multitude forms of beauty. There is no doubt that the Renaissance cultivated every natural tendency within the fine arts.

Like *Leonardo*, the bastard child genius from Vinci, they studied not the surface, but the soul and structure of things. The eye, “knowing how to see,” wrote Leonardo, “controls the skilled hand.” And for both Aristotle and Plato, Leonardo had only scorn. “Where there is shouting there is no true science,” he wrote, “for truth has only one term, which being declared, the disputation is ended for all time.” The artist is the true philosopher in that he re-creates nature — he extracts from nature more than meets the eye. Northern humanists and artists, however, found more in life than beauty or structure. The French satirist François Rabelais (c.1495-1553), author of *GARGANTUA AND PANTAGRUEL*, grasped the fullness of life from the street gutters to the stars in the heavens. A Franciscan monk and physician, Rabelais writes with a sense of the comedic. His pages shake with laughter, the laughter of the human soul. Gargantua, his hero, is saved from monkish stupidity concealed by Thomistic logic-chopping — he learns all the arts, all languages, all sciences, all sports. The message is clear: all knowledge is eminently useful. There ought to be no clock summoning the individual to their duties, no monks or nuns — nothing but fair women and handsome men are to be allowed in the new abbey of Thélème, built by Gargantua. All may marry and all should be rich and live at liberty. “In all their Rule...there was but this one clause to be observed, Do what thou wilt.” The spirit of Rabelais is the spirit of the Renaissance revolt:

Flee from the rabble of squint-minded fellows, dissembling and counterfeit saints, demure lookers, hypocrites, pretended zealots, tough friars, monks and other such sect of men, who disguise themselves like maskers to deceive the world. . . . Fly from these men, abhor and hate them as much as I do, and upon my faith you will find yourself the better for it. And if you desire to . . . live in peace, joy, health, making yourselves always merry, never trust those men that always peep out through a little hole.

Through two giants, Gargantua and Pantagruel, Rabelais satirizes the Church, universities, the monastic orders, theologians, lawyers and philosophers. With the characters of Rabelais, and Erasmus' famous work *Praise of Folly*, the conflict between the Age of Faith and the Age of Man is fought out and parodied.

Very similar to the Rabelaisian gusto for life in its fullest were those canvases painted to adorn the walls of solid, respectable Flemish merchants. Taverns, drunken and obscene festivals, men caught in the act of urinating into a chamber pot, a skating party or middle class interiors — all this and more. The Flemish truly loved the life they saw around them and represented this in their art. Flemish art betrays a “nouveau riche” aping of the grace and luxury of the very wealthy. Just the same, in the domestic scenes of a *Jan Vermeer* (1632-1675) there is a sense of dignity and thrift characteristic of an age to come. It is clear that the Renaissance of Flanders is infused with what can only be called a Puritan ethic, an ethic of hard work and all the moralistic baggage that the ethic brings with it. German humanist art, quite unlike Flemish, delights in minutiae. In *Albrecht Dürer* (1471-1528), there is little of the sensuous beauty we find in Vermeer or the

Flemish school as a whole. With Dürer, we see the rude, stark outlines of life itself. It is a serious contemplation or preoccupation with the practical life. Northern humanism rejoiced in the play of light on common objects — here we find, perhaps, the soul of man, his passions and his wonder, the glory of his longing — his utmost humanity. [Rembrandt](#) (1606-1669) embraced life in its objectivity — in all its beauty and fullness. His is an art of restraint — he gives us a hint of what he does not portray.

And [William Shakespeare](#) (1564-1616) peopled his world with an infinite variety of social and psychological types. He highlights the human condition — the condition of all. Even his language is unlordly — his poetry is full of the Rabelaisian gusto of living life in its fullest. In the humanistic spirit, Shakespeare's characters are mortal but they do not struggle with philosophies or theologies. Rather, their struggle is with the universal forces of nature that surely transcend philosophy — whether Scholastic or otherwise. Shakespearean characters live by their humanity, oblivious to the logic chopping of an Aristotle or Aquinas.

The overwhelming concern of the 13th century was God. The overwhelming concern of the Renaissance is Man. Among the English and German humanists, there is an infinite yearning for the stars — the Faustian spirit in man that yearns for endless knowledge and power rather than beauty, regardless of the cost. The Elizabethans clothed this quest in poetry. So we have [Christopher Marlowe](#) (1564-1593), scholar, a wild fellow, killed in a tavern brawl — his verse pours out something even more than life itself.

*Our souls whose faculties can comprehend the world,
And measure every wandering planet's course,
Still climbing after knowledge infinite
And always moving as the restless spheres . . .*

Marlowe's Faustus, his Tamburlaine, yearn for the chance to know, to do, to feel everything — they crave that vague thing, still unknown, but which, when found, yields earthly power. Not science, not wisdom, not the revelation of an understanding mind not a Platonic Form — instead, yearning for an enhancement of personality that comes with power.

But power — to what end is this power? For [Francis Bacon](#) (1561-1626), the true epitome of all that was Faust, knowledge is power. "Knowledge is a rich storehouse for the glory of the Creator and the relief of man's estate," wrote Bacon in *The Advancement of Learning* (1605). In human hands, power destroys, craves, manipulates. For Marlowe, it is inner striving, striving for that infinitesimal, transcendental more. To the modern mind it was perhaps [DESIDERIUS ERASMUS](#) (1466-1536) who stood fast for ideals singularly our own. His ideas were submerged by the Reformation but resurfaced in the naturalism and humanitarianism of the 18th century. Erasmus, despite both his faults and his virtues, is the ideal humanist. Dare I say it, the penultimate Renaissance man. He didn't care for the art of his own generation, he was unconcerned with the discovery of the New World and was bitterly hostile to the emergent new science. Instead, he typifies a humanism which worshipped a Roman Cicero rather than the fathers of Cicero, the Greeks. He is not responsible for original thinking — he made no new discoveries. The best of the past, not the nascent future, was his main concern. He stood for tolerance and mediation, not the courageousness required to face forward. He was not the equal of one of his contemporaries, [Martin Luther](#) (1483-1546). Yet, Erasmus' virtues were indeed great. He was the most civilized man of his age. He was at home in the age of Augustus, Horace, Ovid, Virgil and Cicero. His Rotterdam, London or Basel sometimes amused him but at other times, the city filled him with pity and indignation. Just the same — his remedy fell on deaf ears. The glorification of antiquity and his rational Christian ethics did not impress his contemporaries. But, he managed to Christianize the Renaissance — he humanized Christianity. He wanted to wean men away from the mystery of faith and attach their pieties to civilized nature. "Saint Socrates, pray for me," he wrote.

When Erasmus died in 1536, northern humanism was showing signs of depletion. Humanism, now rejected by both the priests of the old matrix as well as the prophets of the new, seemed less significant in the face of the Copernican revolution and the age of religious wars which Luther and [John Calvin](#) (1509-1564) helped to make a reality. When [Voltaire](#) (1694-1778) took Europe by storm with his wry smile — 200 years later — a new Erasmus was born. "Écrasez l'infâme!" shouted Voltaire. "Wipe out the infamous!" Superstition, cruelty, religious fanaticism, prejudice and medieval dogmatism were all anathema to a wit like Voltaire. When, however, Voltaire took up the pen left to him by Erasmus, he had something no scholar of the Renaissance had ever enjoyed — the mighty ally of science. And not just science, but the grand philosophical synthesis provided by the mathematical genius of [Isaac Newton](#) (1642-1727). What Erasmus had started with his pen, Voltaire finished with the aid of the Newtonian physical universe.

In retrospect, the ideal of individual perfection which underlies the Renaissance, is aristocratic, and as such, exclusive. In Holland, Germany and by the 17th century, in England, there grew up the ideal of a society which could support such gods. This is a new conception of the dignity of human society. All walks of life are intrinsically good — industry, thrift and productive labor are now construed as cardinal virtues. In many ways, all this was implicit in the theology of Martin Luther. However, the true history of this state of mind, this

ethic, lay outside Luther. As the economic life of the low countries, Germany and England grew in scope and importance, religious asceticism seemed less important. Enjoying prosperity and success, northern Europe shunned solitude as selfish, contemplation as idleness and a married and productive life as truly godly. Whereas the 13th century man or woman cast off their material wealth to embrace a holy life, in the Renaissance and after, we find the exact opposite. I imagine what all this boils down to saying is that where the 12th century Renaissance made the attempt to Christianize humanity, the 14th and 15th century Renaissance, especially in northern Europe, tried to humanize Christianity. Those were the choices one made. Those were the choices which remained. However, by the 17th century a third option was thrown into the mix — the new science.

The Protestant Reformation, in the hands of a man like Martin Luther, was not a moral movement — neither was it a didactic movement. It was not until John Calvin that the flames of Puritanism — and its attendant ethic — rose in power and in scope. A humanist like Erasmus was swept aside, caught up in the giant tidal wave that was the Reformation itself. Also swept aside were Christian reformers and the apostles of simple virtue. As one historian has aptly written: “It mattered little whether the Catholic system were well or ill administered; the important thing was that it was useless and costly.”

Since the 1860s when the Swiss art historian Jacob Burckhardt (1818-1897), published his *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* in two volumes, it has been the fashion to regard the essence of the Renaissance as “the rediscovery of the world and of the natural man.” Those are Burckhardt’s words. This is far too simple, I think — the reason being that any semi-intensive study of the period known as the Renaissance reveals numerous intellectual and cultural cross-currents that defy our penchant for pigeon-holing. Humanistic values, Thomism, Augustinianism, paganism, mysticism and the new science exist side by side with one another. But, I think the one value all these currents perhaps share is an increasing individualism, an increasing impatience with the older medieval forms of social organization. This individualism was perhaps a natural reflex of an economy bursting forth from its medieval limitations. Feudalism, at least in northern and western Europe, sealed its own fate by its very existence. And the guild system, as I’ve already mentioned, seemed to have dug its own grave. In the wake of economic and social changes came changes in the way the individual thought about the world.

Thinkers clearly began to think for themselves rather than conform and the general reaction was certainly a rejection of the Scholastic logic-choppers. When all was said and done, Aristotelian logic was a closed book — a dead end. However, for all its cultural brilliance, and few would deny the cultural brilliance of this great age of art and sculpture, the Renaissance was more a movement of feelings and shifting values. There was no systematic philosophy to emerge from the period. There is no Leonardoism, no Petrarchian philosophy. In fact, attempts were not made to synthesize, congeal, amalgamate ideas — if anything, individualism perhaps meant the dissolution of systems. Scholasticism organized social institutions and culture — this *ancien regime* the old order, was crumbling. Erasmus knew it. So did Petrarch — “Shameful vision this. We must awake or die.”

In this view then, the Renaissance was a profound act of rebellion and in the wake of protest, a new world was likely to emerge. So, it is fairly safe to say that the Renaissance, its cultural and intellectual merits considered together, placed a premium upon the individual and the capacity of the individual for improvement. And whether we consider an Italian merchant, a [Sir Thomas More](#) (1478-1535) or an Erasmus, this individualism led to the glorification of creativity. Creativity has always existed — but up to the Renaissance, bound firmly in the stranglehold of the medieval matrix.

One final point is worth mentioning. Renaissance scholars discovered a new purpose for mankind. That purpose was revealed by human history. The expression Renaissance was not invented by Burckhardt or any other historian — instead, the word was realized by the scholars of the Renaissance. The Renaissance scholars then, made the Renaissance a reality. They looked both backward to the classical past and forward to an unknown future. The future, although unknown, did admit of at least one thing — it would be the work of real, living and breathing men. And that future would be bright — it would be one of progress. Man was the intrepid explorer and after one thousand years of Christian dogmatism, sectarianism, heresy and the authority of the Church, Renaissance thinkers and artists gazed proudly to the future. The man of God, resolute in his dogmatic opinions and asceticism — fashioned by centuries of Church domination and synthesized by Aquinas — had, by the 14th century, become godlike himself. The new Faust was, in the end, destined to make his own future, to make his own history.

For a different approach to the Renaissance, read my lecture, [Renaissance Portraits](#), which is part of my series, [Lectures on Early Modern European History](#).

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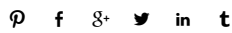
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