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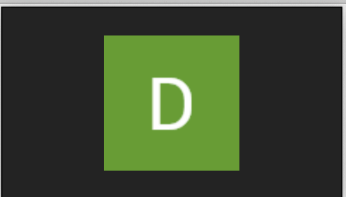

FIVE

HUMANISM

HUMANISM HAS BEEN defined generally as the central cultural expression of the Renaissance. This definition has nothing to do with the twentieth-century belief in human or humane as opposed to material or purely scientific values. Instead, it traces its etymological roots to late medieval student slang. In the Italian universities a *(h)umanista* was a professor of the *studia humanitatis*, that is to say, humane—or secular—learning canonized in a course of studies that had developed in Italian universities by the early

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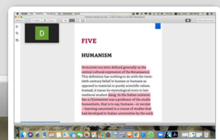
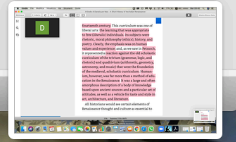
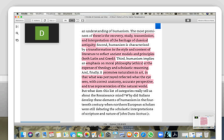


fourteenth century. This curriculum was one of liberal arts: the learning that was appropriate to free (*liberalis*) individuals. Its subjects were rhetoric, moral philosophy (ethics), history, and poetry. Clearly, the emphasis was on human values and experience; and, as we saw in Petrarch, it represented a reaction against the old scholastic curriculum of the trivium (grammar, logic, and rhetoric) and quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music) that were the foundation of the medieval, scholastic curriculum. Humanism, however, was far more than a method of education in the Renaissance. It was a large and often amorphous description of a body of knowledge based upon ancient sources and a particular set of attitudes, as well as a vehicle for taste and style in art, architecture, and literature.

All historians would see certain elements of Renaissance thought and culture as essential to

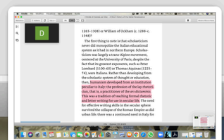


an understanding of humanism. The most prominent of these is the recovery, study, transmission, and interpretation of the heritage of classical antiquity. Second, humanism is characterized by a transformation in the style and content of literature to reflect ancient models and principles (both Latin and Greek). Third, humanism implies an emphasis on moral philosophy (ethics) at the expense of theology and scholastic reasoning. And, finally, it promotes naturalism in art, in that what was portrayed reflected what the eye sees, with correct anatomy, accurate perspective, and true representation of the natural world. But what does this list of categories really tell us about the Renaissance mind? Why did Italians develop these elements of humanism in the fourteenth century when northern European scholars were still debating the scholastic interpretations of scripture and nature of John Duns Scotus (c.



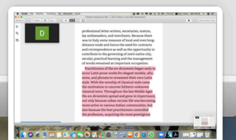
1265–1308) or William of Ockham (c. 1288–c. 1348)?

The first thing to note is that scholasticism never did monopolize the Italian educational system as it had in northern Europe. Scholasticism was largely a trans-Alpine movement, centered at the University of Paris, despite the fact that its greatest exponents, such as Peter Lombard (1100–60) or Thomas Aquinas (1225–74), were Italians. Rather than developing from the scholastic system of thought or education, then, humanism developed from an institution peculiar to Italy: the profession of the lay rhetorician, that is, a practitioner of the *ars dictaminis*. This was a tradition of teaching formal rhetoric and letter writing for use in secular life. The need for effective writing skills in the secular sphere survived the collapse of the Roman Empire as did urban life: there was a continued need in Italy for



professional letter writers, secretaries, orators, lay ambassadors, and merchants. Because there was in Italy some measure of local and even long-distance trade and hence the need for contracts and correspondence as well as the opportunity to contribute to the governing of one's native city, secular, practical learning and the management of words remained an important occupation.

Practitioners of the *ars dictaminis* began early to scour Latin prose works for elegant models, allusions, and phrases to ornament their own Latin style. With the worship of classical style came the motivation to uncover hitherto unknown classical texts. Throughout the late Middle Ages the *ars dictaminis* spread and grew in importance, not only because urban secular life was becoming more active in various Italian communities, but also because the best practitioners controlled the profession, acquiring the most prestigious



university chairs in the *studia humanitatis* (such as those in rhetoric, poetry, or moral philosophy), the best school masterships, and the best jobs as chancellors, secretaries, and ambassadors in Italian city republics and at the courts of princes and popes. As a result, a market for Latin style developed, and the pace of production of such scholars quickened.

There are two important points to note about this development of early humanism from the *ars dictaminis*. First, the movement was secular in nature, training, and intent. Second, it was practical, a functional program that applied particular skills to the immediate needs of a secular society. Clerics, by contrast, were educated according to the old scholastic method in which theology was explicated by Aristotelian philosophy. The language and style and even the cast of thought of clerics did not equip them to pursue careers

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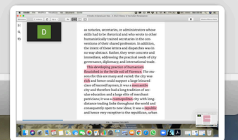
as notaries, secretaries, or administrators whose skills had to be rhetorical and who wrote to other humanistically trained secretaries in the conventions of their shared profession. In addition, the intent of these letters and dispatches was in no way abstract. Rather, they were concrete and immediate, addressing the practical needs of city governance, diplomacy, and international trade.

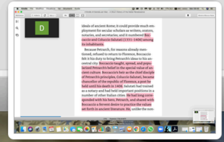
This developing practice of humanism flourished in the fertile soil of Florence. The reasons for this are many and varied: the city was rich and hence could support a large leisured class of learned laymen; it was a mercantile city and therefore had a long tradition of secular education and a large elite of merchant patricians; it was a cosmopolitan city with long-distance trading links throughout the world and consequently open to new ideas; it was a republic and hence very receptive to the republican, urban



ideals of ancient Rome; it could provide much employment for secular scholars as writers, orators, notaries, and secretaries; and it numbered Boccaccio and Coluccio Salutati (1331–1406) among its inhabitants.

Because Petrarch, for reasons already mentioned, refused to return to Florence, Boccaccio felt it his duty to bring Petrarch's ideas to his ancestral city. Boccaccio taught, spread, and popularized Petrarch's belief in the special value of ancient culture. Boccaccio's heir as the chief disciple of Petrarch's principles, Coluccio Salutati, became chancellor of the republic of Florence, a post he held until his death in 1406. Salutati had trained as a notary and had held important positions in a number of other Italian cities. He had long corresponded with his hero, Petrarch, and shared with Boccaccio a fervent desire to practice the values set forth in ancient literature. He, unlike the non-

political Petrarch and Boccaccio, enjoyed a unique opportunity through being selected as chancellor of the republic. Although Salutati was a transitional figure in the development of humanism, he established an important example. He remained throughout his life a very devout Christian who fluctuated between sustaining the medieval values of a contemplative life while exemplifying an active, secular life of political and scholarly activity. He married and had children, and he attracted those whose commitment to an active, secular life was perhaps even greater than his own. This coterie of young men trained in secular learning and devoted to classical literature and the active life provided candidates for administrative offices in Florence and elsewhere; and the model of an engaged secular life increasingly was seen as a route to success, riches, and influence. Thus, the chancellorship of Florence from Salutati until the



end of the republic reads like a catalog of Florentine humanists: Salutati, Leonardo Bruni, Carlo Marsuppini (1399–1453), and Poggio Bracciolini, just to note the most celebrated. Indeed, so many of the great figures of the humanist movement held that post that it became almost a measure of a scholar's stature.

The chancellory was the highest non-elected office in the state, and it was awarded for rhetorical elegance and power. The chancellor was the official letter writer of the *signoria*, its voice and style to the outside world. It was Salutati who used his eloquence to defend Florence and its republican liberties from the despots who wished to expand at its expense. He wrote, harangued, cajoled, propagandized, and attacked the Visconti of Milan, the papacy, and the kings of Naples, and any other threat to his city's freedom. Duke Giangaleazzo Visconti (1351–1402) was said to have

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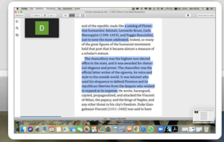
remarked that one letter from Salutati was more effective than a hundred lances on the field.

In Salutati we can also see the growing maturity of that second aspect of humanist thought, embryonic in Petrarch but destined to develop in fifteenth-century Florence into civic humanism. The values of the ancient world had come to provide the energizing myth of the republic of Florence. In his studies of ancient literature, Salutati sought manuscripts with better or more complete texts of Latin authors; and he began to study Greek, although he never mastered the language. In 1396 as chancellor, he did, however, arrange for the Florentine *studio* to establish a chair in Greek, to which Manuel Chrysoloras (1355–1415), the great teacher in Italy of ancient Greek language and literature, was appointed. Salutati's collection of over eight hundred manuscripts became an important resource for later humanist



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scholars, and the methods of textual editing and philological analysis he developed established Florence not only as a center for an engaged humanism of civic action but also as a place where young men could learn Latin and Greek and acquire the skills to understand ancient texts and apply their content and style to their own lives. His discoveries, including the lost letters written by Cicero to his friends (*Litterae Familiares*) and his historical studies of the Florentine state, which were to greatly influence later historians such as Leonardo Bruni, succeeded in shifting the perspective of educated Florentines away from their traditional assumptions about Florence's past.

Salutati was in many ways a transitional figure, however. He felt the need, like Petrarch, to seek to harmonize the morality of pagan letters with Christian revelation, and he continued to value

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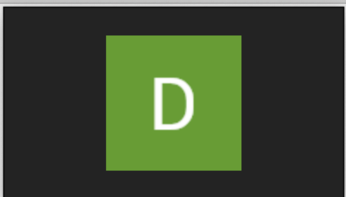
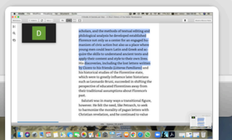


the practice of the contemplative as well as the active life. He wrote in praise of the retreat from the world in monasticism (*De seculo et religione*, 1381) and believed that human reason was insufficient without divine guidance. Nevertheless, he wrote a book comparing the practice of medicine with that of law (*De nobilitate legum et medicinae*, 1399) in which he suggests that lawyers are of greater value because of their involvement with civic society and their active dedication to helping solve the problems of secular life. But his commitment to divine inspiration remained, and his conclusions were ambiguous. His political positions were equally traditional. In his *De tyranno* (1400), he praises monarchy as the ideal form of government and seems to be following the principles of Dante's *De monarchia* (c. 1312) by proposing a universal empire to bring peace and unity. Although working for



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a republic and using his rhetorical skills to help defeat Giangaleazzo Visconti, Salutati continued to be imprisoned by the Aristotelian belief that only monarchy could bring stability, a perspective perhaps reinforced by his close observation of the Florentine republic from within. Salutati, then, exhibited a kind of intellectual and cultural tension that made a complete commitment to civic humanism impossible. It was more in the model of his secular, conjugal, active, and engaged life that Salutati moved humanism increasingly into the sphere of political affairs and out of the realm of speculation.

THE CIRCLE OF SALUTATI