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978-0-521-54781-9 - Humanism and the Culture of Renaissance Europe: Second Edition

Charles G. Nauert

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## *Humanism and the Culture of Renaissance Europe*

In this updated edition of his classic account, Charles Nauert charts the rise of humanism as the distinctive culture of the social, political, and intellectual elites in Renaissance Europe. He traces humanism's emergence in the unique social and cultural conditions of fourteenth-century Italy and its gradual diffusion throughout the rest of Europe from the late fifteenth century onwards. He shows how, despite its elitist origins, humanism became a major force in the popular culture and fine arts of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and the powerful impact it had on the Protestant and Catholic Reformations. He uses art and biographical sketches of key figures to illuminate the narrative and concludes with an account of the limitations and eventual transformations of humanism at the end of the Renaissance. This comprehensive account of the development and significance of humanistic culture will be essential reading for all students of Renaissance Europe.

CHARLES G. NAUERT is Professor Emeritus of History at the University of Missouri, Columbia. His major publications include several essays on pre-Reformation academic and religious controversies and *The Age of Renaissance and Reformation* (1977).

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# *Humanism and the Culture of Renaissance Europe*

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Second edition

CHARLES G. NAUERT

*University of Missouri, Columbia*



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## Preface

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This book aims to present a comprehensive account of the development and significance of the humanistic culture of Europe (north as well as south) in the age of the Renaissance. It is based on the researches of more than a generation of scholars active since about the end of the Second World War. At that time, critical attacks on the traditional picture of Renaissance civilization established by Jakob Burckhardt had produced so much doubt about the meaning, and even the existence, of a Renaissance that many historians abandoned use of the term itself, a situation brilliantly demonstrated in Wallace K. Ferguson's *The Renaissance in Historical Thought* (1948). In the aftermath of that historiographical demolition, I myself wrote a dissertation which systematically avoided use of the dread term 'Renaissance', and not a single member of my examining committee challenged or even mentioned the omission. Yet leaving 'the Renaissance' and 'humanism' out of the history of the Renaissance age was not a viable position, as I found when I undertook to revise my dissertation into a book that addressed the intellectual problems of the sixteenth century, and found in an even more pressing way when I faced the task of explaining the Renaissance to a class of college freshmen in a lecture of fifty minutes. Whether historians like the concepts 'Renaissance' and 'humanism' or not, the centuries to which those terms are conventionally applied really did exist and must be faced, since they contributed in important ways to the subsequent development of Western society and civilization.

In my teaching and in preparing this book, I have had the guidance of a host of scholars who have gone back to the sources and have created the materials out of which one can derive a credible account of the rise of humanistic culture and its historical significance. In my own thinking about the age, the crucial influences have been a handful of stimulating articles by Theodor E. Mommsen, whom I never met, and the publications and personal encouragement of Hans Baron, Paul Oskar Kristeller, and my own mentor, William J. Bouwsma. To go beyond this short list would be invidious, for I have learned from a whole generation of

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colleagues. Most of their names appear in the Bibliography, and I can only hope that I had the good sense to make constructive use of what their publications offer.

I owe special thanks to my colleagues in the Department of History at the University of Missouri-Columbia, especially for enabling me to have a year free from teaching to work on this book. I dedicate this book with love and thanks to my wife Jean and our sons Paul and Jon.



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## Preface to the Second Edition

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A decade after the appearance of the first edition, the opportunity to prepare a revised second edition has permitted me to introduce a number of changes in the text. Some of these are relatively minor revisions made in the interests of clarity and readability. Obviously, the new Bibliographical essay includes a number of important publications that appeared since my earlier work. Three changes, however, are more substantial. First, new publications on Italian education have caused me to rethink the treatment on that subject, now located in Chapter 2. Unfortunately, the story of the ‘educational revolution’ of the Italian Renaissance has become more complicated, though the revised account still maintains that a significant transformation in the nature of Italian grammar-school education took place during the fifteenth century. Second, new publications on what I have called Italian pre-humanism and on the role of ‘civic humanism’ (if any) in the development of Renaissance Italy have led to some rethinking of my earlier treatment, though I remain unconvinced that the basic idea of a historically decisive connection between political and intellectual history in Quattrocento Florence should be abandoned. As a result of these two areas of revision, the original Chapter 1 has been divided, with the new Chapter 2 beginning with the emergence of humanism as the dominant culture of the elite classes not only in Florence but throughout Italy. That emergence of humanism and the mechanisms (such as education) by which it took place are the main theme of the new Chapter 2.

A third change is a new section (also in Chapter 2) on the role of women in the history of Renaissance humanism. This is partly a response to an objection voiced by a learned reviewer of the first edition, but it also reflects my own reaction to teaching in a generation when women’s history emerged as a major historical specialty. In general, the most successful products of the turn towards the history of women have been in social history; cultural and intellectual history of women has been less productive, more anecdotal. Though I have been able to present some examples of women who aspired to become learned humanists and a

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larger group who became successful writers of vernacular books, women were still pushed to the margins of intellectual life. Mastery of Latin (and preferably, also Greek) was the essential key for entry into the world of humanistic learning, and it functioned to screen almost all females except a few daughters of high-ranking and wealthy families out of the pool of potential scholars. Hence female humanists were very few, and even those few were marginalized. For female writers in the vernacular languages, conditions were a little better. The spread of literacy in the vernacular, the growing number of translations of classical literary works into modern languages, and above all, the rise of the printing industry enabled a number of intelligent and persistent women to gain recognition as writers. Their number was small, but at least it represents a beginning in the entry of women into active participation in the world of literature.

I want to repeat my earlier thanks to my family and to my colleagues at the University of Missouri-Columbia, and also to thank the editors of the Cambridge University Press for their interest and helpfulness.