
UNIT 17 THE LATE RENAISSANCE

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17.0 OBJECTIVES

The primary intention of this unit will be to situate the writer in his literary, social and political context. It will be argued that:

- Milton does not belong strictly to the period conventionally identified as the Renaissance.
- Nevertheless, the diverse strains of thought and practice that are labelled as the Renaissance had a lasting impact on Milton, and may be seen in his work.
- Some of the main political and social transformations of the period, which will be identified in broad terms, also influenced Milton's work significantly.
- Milton's writings thus indicate a confluence of diverse factors, in which not just Renaissance elements but emergent trends in literature and culture are all woven together.

The unit will thus prepare the student for the more detailed examination of the life of Milton and the analyses of his poetry that follow in the remaining units.

171 INTRODUCTION

This unit will begin with a review of the key features of the Renaissance, which will help in identifying and locating the discursive context of Milton's writings. It will then briefly cover the period in which John Milton wrote, focusing specially on the literary, political and religious factors influencing his thought and work. We will explore some of the key issues relating Milton's poetry to the period, including the political and social context leading up to and running through the Civil War, literary and cultural developments of the period, and the role of religious upheavals in political and cultural transformations. A primary question that must be addressed is the question of periodisation, i.e., why we term the period when Milton was writing the Late Renaissance, and in what ways, if any at all, does that label aid our understanding of Milton's work.

17.2 A BRIEF REVIEW OF THE RENAISSANCE

'The Renaissance' is the term commonly used by historians to refer to the period in European history dating from the late fourteenth century in Italy, spreading to other countries through the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and probably reaching its

culmination in seventeenth century England with the work of John Milton, often referred to as the last great Renaissance poet. It is difficult to briefly encapsulate the many, sometimes contradictory, historical trends that constitute this period, and even more difficult to identify commonalities that would justify their inclusion under a single period label like 'the Renaissance'. But if we were to attempt a broad sketch, with our focus especially on the upper and learned classes of the different places and on their intellectual and cultural productions and developments, some running themes may be recognized. These suggest a porous but identifiably coherent period, that may be considered singular if only for the sake of convenience in arriving at an intellectual history of the period. Some of these themes are as follows:

17.2.1 Classical Learning

Perhaps the most striking feature of the Renaissance was the revival and popularization of classical learning. This began with the discovery of and a new interest in the writings of ancient Greece, producing scholarship that added to the widespread Latin scholarship of the Middle Ages. It was aided in its popularization to no small extent by the advent of the printing press (circa 1450?), which was to transform the range and reach of the intellectual and cultural world subsequently. This scholarship led to the development and centring of intellectual attention on human rather than divine objects, celebrating the virtues and potential of the human individual, or the discourse of Humanism and consequently of Individualism, both of which we shall return to later.

17.2.2 The Reformation

Another important factor in determining the course of the European Renaissance was the upheaval in Christianity that is referred to as the Reformation. This began as a series of attacks on the institution of the Roman Catholic Church and the proliferation of breakaway sects and cults. Martin Luther's (1483-1546) was probably the most influential in the efflorescence of such rejections of the Church during this period. The many ecclesiastical schools it generated within Christianity are together referred to as Protestantism. Most of these were premised on the fundamental observation that the path to salvation did not lie through the Church, which stood accused of substantial corruption in its beliefs and its institutional practices, but through the individual's acceptance of and adherence to the Holy Scriptures. Salvation was thus a matter of the individual's direct, unmediated relation to God. The Reformation and the consequent Counter Reformation within the Catholic Church led to several extended wars, political turmoil, and inter- and intra-state conflicts that lasted well into the seventeenth century, across Europe and Britain. While battled as religious wars, these conflicts were frequently about political power and control of the state, with Protestant ideologies finding special appeal with emerging bourgeoisies across Europe seeking a weightier political say, and greater autonomy in trade and usury, traditionally frowned upon by the Catholic Church.

17.2.3 The Emergence of Imperialism

The emergence of European, specifically British imperialism, though not often considered integral to understanding the Renaissance, may actually be seen as its economic underpinning. Commensurate with the expansion of intellectual discourses was the European discovery of various new continents and countries on the globe, one of the most significant of these being the Americas. Trade and the settling and exploitation of these places substantially enriched the European nations, besides opening out the horizons of the imagination to new geographies and peoples. Both these forms of enrichment – of the economy and of the imagination – provided the necessary prerequisites for the flourishing of arts and culture that is characteristic of the period in Europe.

17.2.4 The New Cosmology

The cosmology of the Middle Ages had been firmly Ptolemaic, envisioning the earth at the centre of several concentric celestial spheres. With the publication of the Copernican theory in 1543, proposing a heliocentric universe with the earth as one among many planets in orbit around the sun, this became deeply controversial. Though its real impact was felt only several decades later, it was sufficiently controversial for Milton to refer to it in his own work, and even at that time indicated the increasing inroads made by scientific discourses and methods into domains of knowledge traditionally held by religion.

Certainly all these factors are still evident at the time Milton was writing. However, his period is also marked by the simultaneous presence of several new historical trends that actually come to define the following age, the Age of Enlightenment, which spans the latter part of the seventeenth century and much of the eighteenth century. Chief among these are the celebration of reason, of scientific method in the pursuit of knowledge, and the pursuit of a discourse of civic rationality that attempted to explore and outline the relations of individual to society. The last was manifested largely through a relatively new popularization of the genre of political and cultural criticism, of which Milton was an early and powerful exponent. In his poetry too, these elements of an emerging age are engaged with, albeit circumspectly. The power of reason is explored for instance in Book I of *Paradise Lost*, in Satan's attempt to rationalise his fall from heaven and the consequences for him. The engagement with science is evident in Milton's metaphors and similes more than through any actual employment of the new scientific discourses and methods. And while the whole of *Paradise Lost* may be read as an early attempt to grapple with the complexities of the relations between individual and state, individual and God and individual and society, the possibilities of a civic rationality are inevitably renounced in favour of the more Renaissance trait of the celebration of the human as divine being rather than as rational being. In the poems we will be examining, it is this theme that appears to preoccupy Milton more than rationality, as in poems like 'L'Allegro' and 'Il Penseroso'.

Milton may thus be seen to occupy a transitional period in history between two ages, bearing in his work the defining intellectual and cultural traits of both. Nevertheless it appears to be more appropriate to associate him with the Renaissance – in fact to identify him as the last major Renaissance writer – than with the Enlightenment, because of his own leaning towards the intellectual preoccupations and positions of that earlier period. To speak of him as representative of the late Renaissance – which we can now identify as approximately the period from the early to the middle decades of the seventeenth century – would thus be reasonably accurate. The peculiar position he occupies nevertheless needs to be further understood in the light of the political and historical circumstances of his writing, which we will now explore.

17.3 THE POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

Following the death of Elizabeth in 1603, the English throne passed from Tudor hands to the Stuarts of Scotland with the Scottish King James VI, who took the title James I of England as well. His reign, lasting till 1625 is referred to as the Jacobean period in English history. It was witness to several major transformations in English society, perhaps the most important being the gradual alienation of the court from its increasingly insistent and demanding subjects, and of the King from an increasingly Puritan Parliament. Population increased sharply, almost doubling in this period, an increase that was commensurate with steeply rising prices and rents and a concomitant fall in real wages. Poverty was widely evident and at a new high, leading to social unrest and the rapid dissolution of traditional forms of social relations between classes and ranks. English society even under Elizabeth had begun seeing

the emergence of a new trading middle class and a landed gentry that began to invest more and more in trade and commerce. These sections aggressively challenged existing orders of social rank and hierarchy with strong Puritan support. The nobility's increasing financial dependence on social sections outside their own ranks rendered the crown politically dominant but vulnerable. Charles I who followed James I in 1625 established a reign of decadent opulence and arbitrary power that was intended to reflect great power and glory but succeeded only in gradually eroding his moral and political authority, feeding accusations against him of Catholic sympathies and then demands for substantial curbs in royal power especially from the increasingly powerful Puritans who dominated the House of Commons in Parliament. By 1641, civil war had erupted between the Royalists and the forces owing allegiance to the leaders of the House of Commons who had challenged the King's power. Under Thomas Fairfax and Oliver Cromwell, the New Model Army of the Commonwealth, successfully gained superiority, eventually leading to the capture and subsequent execution several years later of Charles in 1649, and to the declaration of England as a republic named 'the Commonwealth'. This did not end civil war in England, however; mistrust and antagonism amongst the members of the Parliament eventually led to Cromwell's use of his army to disband Parliament on charges of corruption. He then took over direct rule of England, Ireland and Scotland as Lord Protector of the realm in 1653, ruling till his death in 1658. The regicide of Charles I – an event that had shocked both Catholic and Protestant sentiments across Europe – however had had a lasting impact, resulting in repeated challenges to the legitimacy of Cromwell's government. The Commonwealth reign he established was eventually dissolved and Charles II, who had ceaselessly fought Cromwell from exile in France, was invited to re-assume power in England in 1660 by the remaining members of the Parliament. But it was only with the Glorious Revolution of 1688 that it was finally established that Parliament would be the supreme political authority, to whose mandate even the king would have to submit.

This period of deep strife and civil unrest in England may be seen then as essentially a moment of political and social transition in which the power of the king became subject to examination and regulation by an increasingly powerful civil body, the Parliament. These changes were welcomed by the new trading and mercantile sections, who fought in the name of religion for greater political and economic autonomy. Alongside these changes at the level of the visible political structure, English society was also witnessing radical transformation. With the gradual colonisation of the Americas and the expansion of trade, towns and cities became major centres of concentration of finance and labour, permitting the quick popularisation of various strands of Puritanism like the Diggers and the Quakers espousing radically new proto-socialist ideas, and consequently fomenting civil unrest. In different ways, these religious ideologies challenged the existing orders and conventions of rank, ecclesiastical and political authority, attitudes to private property and very importantly, to the relations between the sexes. Women took an active part in the civil unrest, with several emerging as powerful Puritan preachers. Their presence in an until-now male dominated public space was a powerful challenge to patriarchal dispensations, even if this was not their specific intent. Much literature of the period stems from these diverse challenges to a still dominantly feudal-patriarchal worldview, often taking the form of pamphleteering and political treatises and tracts, like some of Milton's works, that sought to influence public opinion and thereby bring about political and social change. That these were set essentially in terms of a religious debate should not blind us to the deeply political intentions and implications of the debate itself. The dominant theme was the question of the autonomy and rights – political, religious, economic – of the individual in relation to existing forms of authority – whether state, church or social conventions – and in its formulations drew heavily on both Renaissance and Reformation discourses of humanism and individualism. In many ways, this question is at the heart of Milton's *Paradise Lost* too.

17.4 LITERARY AND CULTURAL INFLUENCES ON POETRY

We have already noted the emergence to prominence of the genre of the essay and the (usually political) tract. Much of this literature – and of other literary forms of the period – was focused on religious issues; nevertheless, the humanist influences, ideas and concerns of the High Renaissance left a lasting impact. Many of the genres that became prominent in this period – the verse satire, the epigram, the essay, the meditation, the masque, the tragicomedy, the pastoral play – were imports from Europe as part of the baggage of Renaissance influences in England. Another feature of the period with a bearing on the kind of literature it produced was the proliferation of schools and the promotion of education in the classical languages, literatures and disciplines like logic and rhetoric, with an emphasis on memorising. Writers could thus draw extensive allusions to earlier works knowing their readers would recognise them, indicating a highly restricted but homogeneous culture. Much of this writing was in Latin, and writing in English was either largely experimental or translations of Continental writers, at least in poetry. While Elizabethans like Spenser, Sydney and Raleigh did write very successful English verse, they remained substantially indebted to Continental, specifically Italian and French writing. It is in the verse of John Donne (1572-1631) that an entirely different, particularly English sensibility became evident: playful, even irreverent, sometimes deliberately shocking but always retaining a degree of seriousness and close attention to poetic craft. Later literary historians were to label the kind of writing practised by Donne and some of his contemporaries and successors – Ben Jonson, George Herbert, Henry Vaughn, Andrew Marvell – 'Metaphysical poetry', alluding to its often abstract and strikingly unlikely figures of speech. Milton too explored the short lyric in poems like 'L'allegro' and 'Il Penseroso', before he essayed the epic *Paradise Lost*, although his own style tended towards the classical forms and themes. The dominant poetry of the period was thus the short lyric.

In theatre, the Jacobean reign saw the peaking of popular theatre and its waning following repeated Puritan attacks on it as licentious and promoting vice. The tragedies and the masques of the Caroline court were the most common forms that were performed, and both employed metrical verse in dialogue. With the closure of the theatres and the growing strength of the Puritans, prose in the form of meditations, pamphlets, essays and tracts became a major literary vehicle by the mid-seventeenth century. Much of this as we have noted centred on issues of religion and the state. The literature of the period was also influenced by the new scientific method of inquiry propounded by Sir Francis Bacon, by the pursuit of scientific knowledge that it accelerated and by scientific discoveries like those of Copernicus and Galileo. It makes an often playful appearance in the poetry of the Metaphysicals, but its lasting influence was in the challenge it was to throw to religious perceptions of the world. Milton's famous lines in the invocation to *Paradise Lost* – asserting that his epic was to 'justify the ways of God to Men' -- may thus be understood in terms of either the legalistic discourse of the conflict between the king and Parliament or that of answering the challenge of scientific inquiry, or both. The sentiments of Jacobean tragedy and its vehicle of metrical verse also had a lasting impact on poetry, judging from the prolific number of now little-known attempts to write the first English epic in metrical verse. While several poets attempted the long narrative or the epic forms – Patrick Hannay's *Sheretine und Mariana* (1622), D'Avenant's *Gondibert* (1650), W Chamberlayne's *Pharonnida* (1659), to name just a few -- none really succeeded till Milton. It is reasonable to argue that one reason for Milton's success was his use of the epic form to represent the contemporary struggle between religion and the state as itself an epic struggle, rather than confining himself to simply reconstructing the form and its conventional classical themes in English, for its own sake. That is, Milton rendered the epic topical and contemporary, while retaining its

formal classical moorings. One dimension of the epic's contemporaneity is its negotiations with current debates on gender. A problem that was thrown up for Puritan patriarchy in its promotion of individualism was that it opens up the question of women's individuality and autonomy. The resolution of this demanded an engagement with Biblical notions of free-will and of the culpability of women in the Fall from Grace. Milton engaged in his poetry with these issues in some detail in the speeches between Adam and Eve in *Paradise Lost*.

17.5 LET'S SUM UP

In this unit we identified some of the main features of the phenomenon known as the Renaissance, and proceeded to examine their relevance to understanding Milton. Our aim was to try and locate Milton historically, as constituting a transitional moment between the Renaissance and the period that followed. We have also seen how the seventeenth century was a period riven by civil war, political and religious turmoil, and by large scale transformations in the composition of English society. Along with this, we noted how various changes took place in the literary climate of the period, and suggested that these changes owed partly to the spread of Renaissance ideas and to the consequences of the Reformation, in the form of the growing power of various kinds of Puritanism. We noted how these inflected the kind of literature that emerged as well as explored the debt that Milton's own writing owed to these changes.

17.6 REVISION QUESTIONS

1. From your readings in Milton's social and cultural context, do you agree with the view that Milton is the last of the great Renaissance writers? Give reasons for your answer.
2. Identify some of the main features of the English Renaissance that were to influence Milton's poetic work:
3. To what extent was the Reformation transformative of the Renaissance in England?
4. What were some of the cultural and political factors that led to the making of Milton as the first major English epic poet?

17.7 ADDITIONAL READING

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