

# The Renaissance

## 1485-1660



A Fête at Bermondsey (c.1570)  
by J. Hoofnagel. Oil on panel.

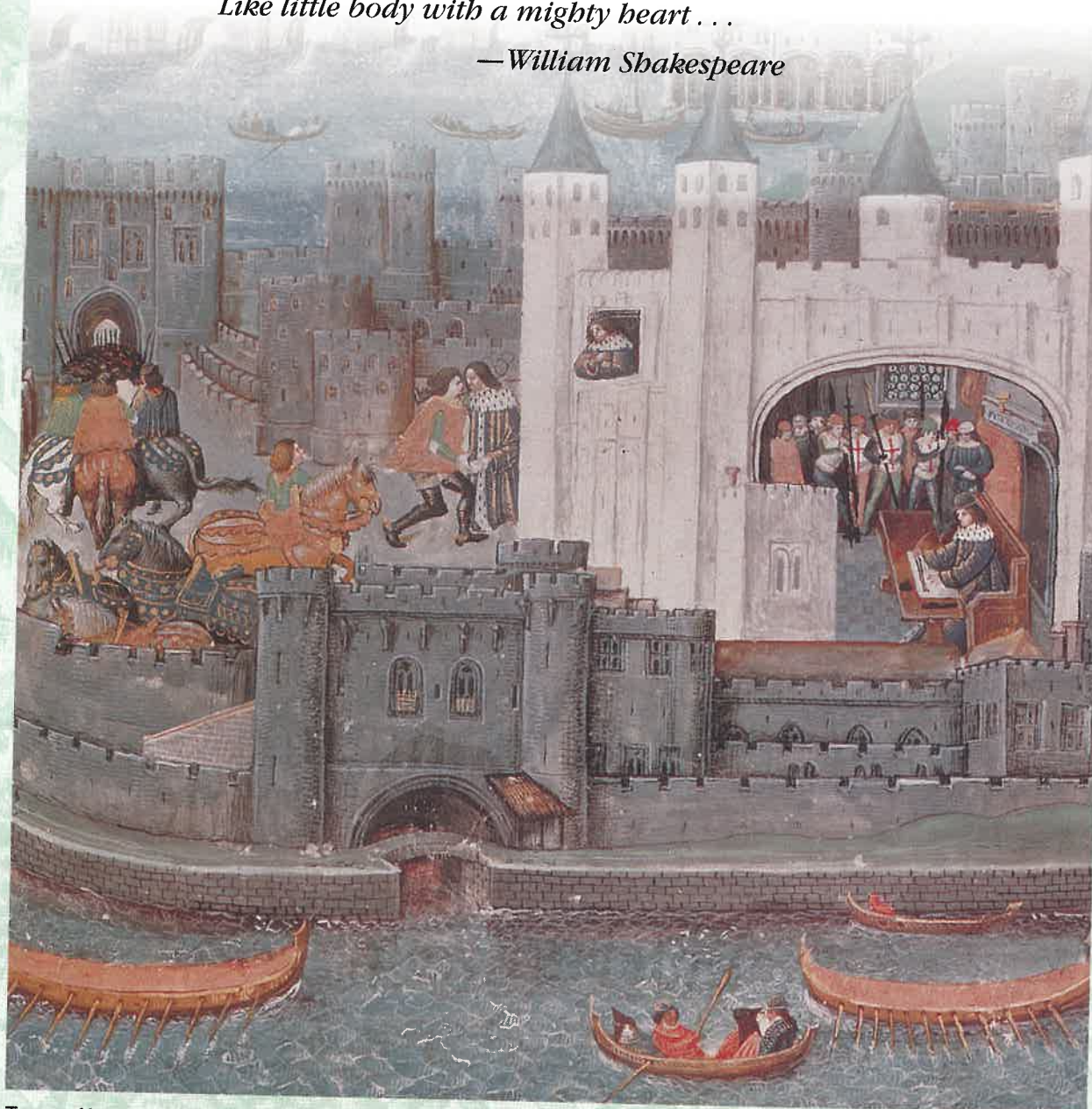


# The Renaissance

by C. F. Main

*O England! model to thy inward greatness,  
Like little body with a mighty heart . . .*

—William Shakespeare



Tower of London and shipping, with Charles, duke of Orleans, seated in the Tower writing, from the *Poems of Charles Duke of Orleans and Other Works* (c. 1500), Roy 16 F II fol. 73.

 [go.hrw.com](http://go.hrw.com)  
LE0 12-Renaissance

British Library, London.

**W**hat do you think people living a hundred years from now will call the age we live in today? Will they say we lived in the Space Age, the Age of Computers, the Age of Anxiety, the Age of Violence? We might be given a label we can't even imagine.

Just as we don't know what people of the future will think of us, the people of Europe living in the 1400s, 1500s, and 1600s didn't know that they were living in the Renaissance. Historical periods—the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Romantic period—are historians' inventions, useful labels for complex phenomena. The Middle Ages in England did not end at 11:59 P.M. on a certain night in 1485, when King Richard III's naked body, trussed up like a turkey, was thrown in an unmarked grave. And the English Renaissance did not begin at 12:01 A.M. when a Tudor nobleman was crowned King Henry VII. The changes in people's values, beliefs, and behavior that marked the emerging Renaissance occurred gradually. Much that could be called "medieval" lingered on long after the period known as the Middle Ages was past. Historical periods cannot be rigidly separated from one another, but they can be distinguished.

**Beginning in the late 1400s, the English Renaissance marked changes in people's values, beliefs, and behavior.**

## Rediscovering Ancient Greece and Rome

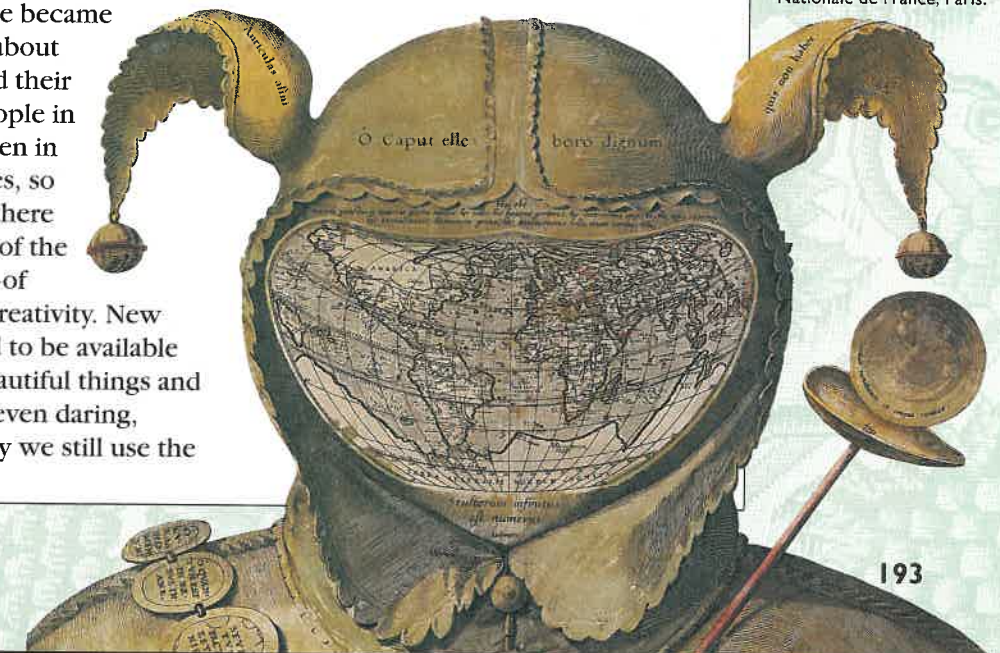
The term *renaissance* itself is a French word meaning "re-birth." It refers particularly to renewed interest in classical learning, which means the writings of ancient Greece and Rome. In the long period of the Middle Ages, most European scholars had forgotten the Greek language, and they used a form of Latin that was very different from the Latin of ancient Rome. Very few ordinary people could read. Those who could read were encouraged to concentrate on texts promoting Church doctrine. But in the Renaissance, people discovered the marvels hidden away in old Greek and Latin classics—books that had been tucked away on the cobwebbed shelves of monasteries for hundreds of years. Now people learned to read Greek once more and reformed the Latin that they read, wrote, and spoke.

Some people became more curious about themselves and their world than people in general had been in the Middle Ages, so that gradually there was a renewal of the human spirit—of curiosity and creativity. New energy seemed to be available for creating beautiful things and thinking new, even daring, thoughts. Today we still use the

Knowledge is power.  
—Francis Bacon, 1597

World map drawn in a fool's head (detail) (1590). Based on Ortelius's *Atlas*, 1570.

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# The Renaissance, 1485–1660

## LITERARY EVENTS



• Martin Luther's sermon (detail) (16th century) from a triptych by Lucas Cranach.

Book licensing laws introduced in England, 1538

Spanish priest Bernardino de Sahagún begins compiling exhaustive Aztec encyclopedia in Mexico, 1529

Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince* written, 1513

Thomas More's *Utopia* published, 1516

**William Shakespeare**, the Bard of Avon, born, 1564

*Tottel's Miscellany* (including poems of Wyatt and Surrey) published, 1557

**Edmund Spenser** publishes first three books of *The Faerie Queene*, 1590

**Christopher Marlowe's** *Doctor Faustus* written, 1588

Okuni, a former priestess, forms first kabuki theater company in Japan (in 1629, Okuni and all other women banned from the kabuki stage), c. 1586

In France, Montaigne begins his *Essais*, 1572

### 1485–1515

Richard III is killed in battle, 1485

John Cabot explores northeast coast of North America, 1497

Vasco da Gama reaches India via Cape of Good Hope, 1498

Leonardo da Vinci paints *Mona Lisa*, c. 1503

Henry VIII crowned king of England, 1509

Balboa crosses Isthmus of Panama and sights Pacific Ocean, 1513



• *Mona Lisa* (c. 1503) by Leonardo da Vinci.

### 1516–1540

Martin Luther posts his ninety-five theses on church door in Wittenburg, Germany, beginning the Protestant Reformation, 1517

First Africans taken to Americas as slaves, 1517

Magellan leads first expedition to circumnavigate the globe, 1519–1521

Hernando Cortés conquers Mexico, destroying Aztec empire, 1521

In India, Babur conquers Delhi and founds Mogul dynasty, 1526

Henry VIII proclaims himself head of the Church of England, c. 1533

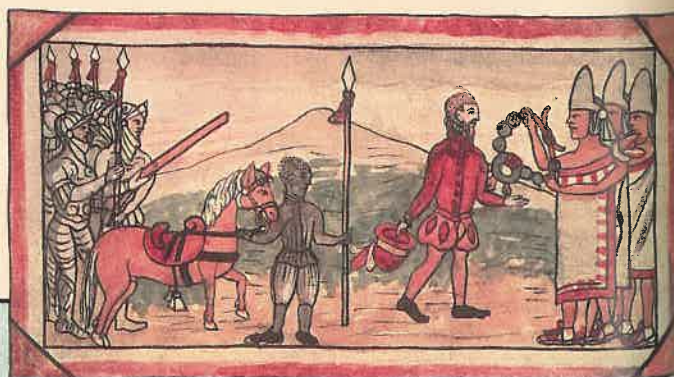
### 1541–1565

Michelangelo paints *The Last Judgment* on altar wall of the Sistine Chapel, 1534–1541

Polish astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus publishes theory that planets orbit the sun, 1543

Mary Tudor—"Bloody Mary"—reigns, restoring papal authority in England, 1553–1558

Elizabeth I becomes queen of England, 1558



• Hernando Cortés (1485–1547), Spanish explorer, meeting Montezuma II (c. 1480–1520), Aztec emperor.

### 1566–1590

English navy defeats Spanish Armada, 1588



• Nicolaus Copernicus (detail) (1575). German School.

## CULTURAL/HISTORICAL EVENTS

**Shakespeare's** sonnets published (written c. mid-1590s), 1609

**Ben Jonson** writes *The Masque of Blackness* and *Volpone*, 1605–1606

**Shakespeare** writes *King Lear* and *Macbeth*, 1605–1606

Cervantes publishes Part I of *Don Quixote* (Part II published in 1615), 1605

Globe Theatre built in London, 1599

In London, outbreak of plague forces theaters to close, 1593–1594

### 1591–1610

British East India Company founded for trade with Asia, 1600

Gunpowder Plot, an attempt by Guy Fawkes and others to blow up Parliament and assassinate James I, averted, 1605

First permanent English settlement in North America established at Jamestown, Virginia, 1607

In Italy, Galileo is first to study sky with telescope, 1609

Newspapers first published in London, 1621

**Francis Bacon's** *Novum Organum* (New Instrument) published, 1620

Aemilia Lanier publishes her book of poetry, *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, 1611

**King James Bible** published, 1611

**John Donne's** *Holy Sonnets* written, 1610–1611

Lithograph showing the arrival of the Pilgrims in Massachusetts Bay (1620).



### 1611–1640

The *Mayflower* lands at Plymouth Rock, Massachusetts, 1620

English physician William Harvey explains the circulation of blood, 1628

Taj Mahal built near Agra, India, c. 1632–c. 1649

Japan expels all Europeans, 1639

English astrolabe (1559), a navigational instrument, made for Queen Elizabeth I by Thomas Gemini.



**John Milton** begins *Paradise Lost*, 1658

American poet Anne Bradstreet's *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America* published in London, 1650

Puritans close all theaters in England, 1642–1660

### 1641–1660

English Civil Wars fought, 1642–1651

Manchus proclaim Ch'ing dynasty in China, 1644



• Taj Mahal.

Charles I beheaded, 1649

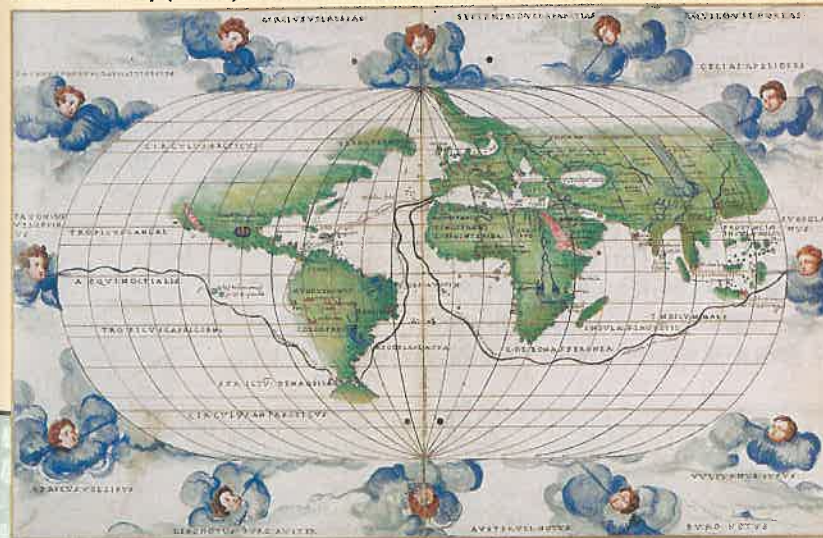
Dutch establish settlement in South Africa, 1652

Oliver Cromwell rules England as lord protector, 1653–1658

Jews legally readmitted to England (after being expelled in 1290), 1655

Puritan Commonwealth ends; monarchy restored with Charles II, 1660

• The World Map (c. 1540), from the *Portolan Atlas of the World* by Battista Agnese of Venice.



*Ladies and Gentlemen Dancing in a Sumptuous Interior* by Paulus Vredeman de Vries (1567–c. 1630).  
Christie's, London.



God made man and woman at the close of the creation, to know the laws of the universe, to love its beauty, and to admire its greatness. He bound his human creatures to no fixed place, to no prescribed form of work, and by no iron necessity, but gave them freedom to will and to love. "I have set thee," says the Creator, "in the midst of the world, that thou mayst the more easily behold and see all that is therein. I created thee a being neither heavenly nor earthly, neither mortal nor immortal only, that thou mightest be free to shape and to overcome thyself. Thou mayest sink into a beast or be born anew to the divine likeness. To thee alone is given a growth and a development depending on thine own free will."

—Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494),  
*On the Dignity of Humanity*

term "Renaissance person" for an energetic and productive human being who is interested in science, literature, history, art, and other subjects. (In America, Virginia's Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence, is referred to as a "Renaissance man.")

**Fifteenth-century scholars rediscovered the writings of ancient Greece and Rome. At this same time, people became more curious about themselves and their world.**

### It All Began in Italy: A Flourish of Genius

The new energy and creativity were first observable in Italy, where considerable wealth had been generated from banking and trade with the East. The Renaissance began in Italy in the fourteenth century and lasted into the sixteenth. Thinking about

just a few of the extraordinary people who flourished in this period—artists such as Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo, explorers such as Christopher Columbus, or scientists such as Galileo—reminds us how remarkably rich this period was, and how much we owe to it.

Almost everyone in Europe and Britain at this time was Roman Catholic, in name anyway, so the Church was very rich and powerful, even in political affairs—in ways we would probably object to today. Many of the popes were lavish patrons of artists, architects, and scholars.

Pope Julian II, for example, commissioned the artist Michelangelo to paint gigantic scenes from the Bible on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, a small church in the pope's "city" that was called, as it is today, the Vatican. Lying on his back on a scaffold, Michelangelo painted the Creation, the fall of Man and Woman, Noah's flood, and other Biblical and mythological subjects. His bright, heroic figures, which are still admired by thousands of visitors to Rome each year, show individual human beings who are noble and capable of perfection. This optimistic view of human nature was also expressed by many other Renaissance painters and writers.

**The Renaissance began in fourteenth-century Italy, where the Catholic Church financed many intellectual and artistic endeavors.**

### Humanism: Questions About the Good Life

Refreshed by the classics, the new writers and artists were part of an intellectual movement known as **humanism**. The humanists went to the old Latin and Greek classics to discover new answers

to such questions as "What is a human being?" "What is a good life?" and "How do I lead a good life?" Of course, Christianity provided complete answers to these questions, answers that the Renaissance humanists accepted as true. Renaissance humanists found no essential conflicts between the teachings of the Church and those of an ancient Roman moralist like Cicero. They sought instead to harmonize these two great sources of wisdom: the Bible and the classics. Their aim was to use the classics to strengthen,



*The Outdoor Concert (detail)* (16th century) by the Italian School.  
Hotel Lallemand, Bourges, France.

not discredit, Christianity.

The humanists' first task was to recover accurate copies of these ancient writings. Their searches through Italian monasteries turned up writers and works whose very existence had been forgotten. Their next task was to share their findings. And so they became teachers, especially of the young men who would become the next generation's rulers—wise and virtuous rulers, they hoped. From the Greek writer

Plutarch, for instance, these humanist teachers would learn that the aim of life is to attain virtue, not success or money or fame, because virtue is the best possible human possession and the only source of true happiness.

**An intellectual movement known as humanism began to use the Latin and Greek classics, combined with traditional Christian thought, to teach people how to live and how to rule.**

Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested.

—Francis Bacon, 1625



Printing Shop (1580s) by Jan van der Straet. Engraving.

By permission of The Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, D.C.

### The New Technology: A Flood of Print

The computer has radically transformed how we get information today. Similarly, the printing press transformed the way information was exchanged during the Renaissance. Before this, all books were laboriously written out by hand—you can imagine how difficult and expensive this was and how few books were available.

The inventor of printing with movable type was a German named Johannes Gutenberg (1400?-1468). He printed the first complete book, an immense Latin Bible, at Mainz, Germany, around 1455. From there, the art and craft of printing spread to other cities in Germany, in the Low Countries (the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg), and in northern Italy. By 1500, relatively inexpensive books were available throughout western Europe. In 1476, printing reached England, then regarded as an



Bookbinder (16th century).

Correr Museum, Venice.

island remote from the centers of civilization. In that year, William Caxton (1422?-1491), a merchant, diplomat, and writer who had been living in the Low Countries, set up a printing press in Westminster (now part of London). In all, Caxton's press issued about one hundred different titles, initiating a flood of print in English that is still increasing.

**Gutenberg's printing press helped spread the new knowledge, making more books available to more people than ever before.**

### Two Friends—Two Humanists

When you hear people speak of humanism, you may hear the name Erasmus. Desiderius Erasmus (1466?-1536) is today perhaps the best known of all the Renaissance humanists.

Erasmus was a Dutch monk, but he lived outside the monastery and loved to travel, visiting many of the countries in Europe, including Italy, France, Germany, and England. He belonged, then, to all Europe. Because he wrote in Latin, he could address his many writings to all the educated people of western Europe.

On his visits to England, Erasmus taught Greek at Cambridge University and became friendly with a number of important people, among them a young lawyer named Thomas More (1477?-1535). More and Erasmus had much in common: They both loved life, laughter, and classical learning, and they both were dedicated churchmen, though they were impatient with some of the Church's corrupt practices at that time.

Like Erasmus, More wrote in Latin—poems, pamphlets, biographies, and his famous treatise on human society, *Utopia* (yōō·tō'pē·ə) (1516). This book became immediately popular, and it has been repeatedly translated into English and many other languages. Hundreds of writers have imitated or parodied it, and it has given us a useful adjective for describing impractical social schemes: *utopian*. More himself was far from impractical; he held a number of important offices, rose to the



Erasmus of Rotterdam (detail) (c. 1523) by Hans Holbein the Younger. Oil on wood (42 cm × 32 cm). Louvre, Paris.



Sir Thomas More (detail) (16th century) by Hans Holbein the Younger.

© The Frick Collection, New York.

## What Was the Renaissance?

Here, reduced to a small list, are the major characteristics of that great era called the Renaissance:

- People expanded their worlds by reading classical Greek and Roman writers rather than only religious writings that promoted Christian doctrine.
- Humanism spread, focusing attention on human life here and now, as well as on eternal life.
- A new technology—printing—made books widely available.
- A growing merchant class, rich with wealth plundered from the Americas, began to challenge the power of the bishops and the pope.
- The spread of scholarly Latin throughout Europe made possible the sharing of ideas.

very top of his profession, was knighted, and, as Lord Chancellor, became one of the king's chief ministers. More continues to fascinate people today. The play *A Man for All Seasons*, by Robert Bolt, later made into a movie (available on videotape), is about More and his tragic stand-off with King Henry VIII over a matter of law (see page 202). You might notice that many lawyers and politicians today hang a picture of Thomas More in their offices (the famous Holbein portrait is shown on page 199).

**Desiderius Erasmus and Thomas More, humanists and close friends, helped shape European thought and history.**

### The Reformation: Breaking with the Church

While the Renaissance was going on throughout Europe, there occurred in some countries another important series of events called the

**Reformation.** In England these two vast movements were closely related, and their forces were felt by all English writers. Although the exact nature of the Reformation varied from country to country, one feature was common to all Reformers: They rejected the authority of the pope and the Italian churchmen. In England, conflicts with the papacy had occurred off and on over the centuries, but adjustments had always been made on

both sides. By the 1530s, an open break with the Roman Church could no longer be avoided.

By then, a number of circumstances made such a break possible. Strong feelings of patriotism and national identity made the English people resent the financial burdens imposed on them by the Vatican—the pope, after all, was a foreign power in far-off Italy. Moreover, new religious ideas were coming into England from the Continent, especially from Germany. There, a monk named Martin Luther (1483–1546) had founded a new kind of Christianity, based not on what the pope said, but on a personal understanding of the Bible. Like any institution that has

Superstition, idolatry, and hypocrisy have ample wages, but truth goes a-begging.

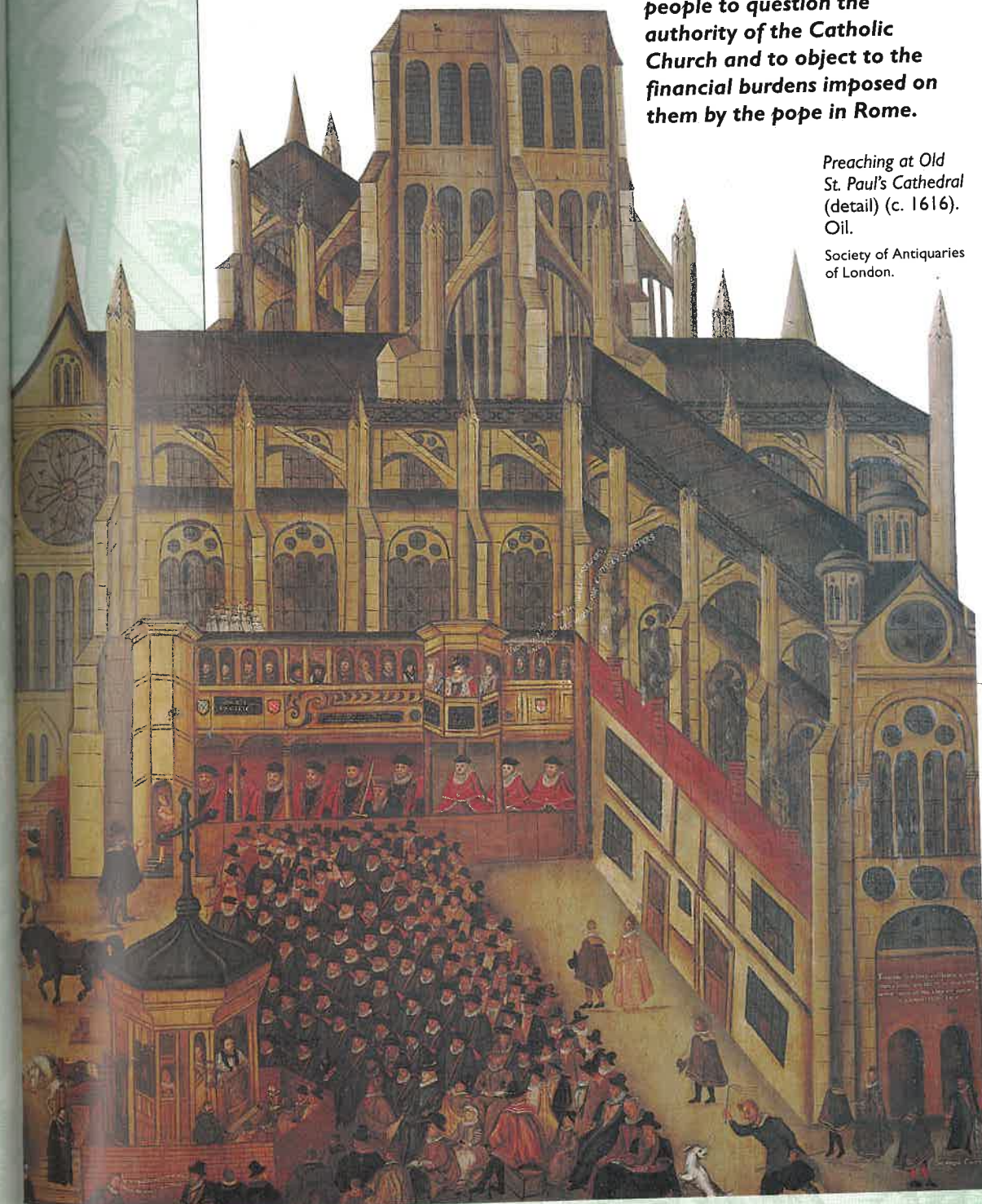
—Martin Luther, *Table Talk*, published in 1569

been around for a long time and that has ignored corruption within its ranks, the Church needed reform. Right at home in England, humanists like More and Erasmus were ridiculing old superstitions, as well as the ignorance and idleness of monks and the loose living and personal wealth of priests and bishops.

**Strong feelings of patriotism and new ideas coming from the Continent encouraged people to question the authority of the Catholic Church and to object to the financial burdens imposed on them by the pope in Rome.**

Preaching at Old St. Paul's Cathedral (detail) (c. 1616). Oil.

Society of Antiquaries of London.



### King Versus Pope: All for an Heir

The generations-old conflict between the pope and the king of England came to a climax when Henry VIII wanted to get rid of his wife of twenty-four years. Divorce was not allowed, especially for kings (until recently, that was still true in Britain), so Henry needed a loophole. He asked Pope Clement VII to declare that he, Henry, was not properly married to his Spanish wife, Catherine of Aragon, because she had previously been wedded—for all of five months—to his older brother Arthur, now dead. (It was against Church law to marry a dead sibling's spouse; the Biblical basis for the law is in Leviticus.)

Henry had two motives for wanting to get rid of Catherine. First, although she had borne him a princess, she was too old to give him the male heir that he thought he must

have. (Catherine had lost five babies.) What is more, another younger woman had won Henry's dangerous affections: The king now wished to marry Anne Boleyn, who had been his "favorite" for several years. (Henry had earlier seduced Anne's sister.) The pope was not able to grant Henry the annulment of his marriage, even if he had wanted to, because the pope was controlled by Queen Catherine's nephew, the emperor of Spain. And so, upon receiving the pope's refusal in 1533, Henry simply declared himself head of the English Church. He then appointed a new archbishop of Canterbury, who obligingly declared Henry's marriage to Catherine invalid.

With Catherine packed away under house arrest—since she refused to accept the annulment of her marriage—Henry closed all of England's monasteries and sold the rich buildings and lands to his subjects. While the vast majority of his subjects agreed with Henry's changes in the Church, some of them did not. The best known of all those who remained loyal to the pope was Sir Thomas More, now the

Lord Chancellor of England. More felt he could not legally recognize his friend Henry as head of the Church. For More's stubbornness, Henry ordered that his Lord Chancellor be beheaded. It wasn't the first—or last—time that Henry executed a friend.

This was the very beginning of Protestantism in England. Many people were dissatisfied with the new church for reasons just the opposite of More's. They felt that it was not reformed enough, that it was merely a copy of Catholicism, as in



Catherine of Aragon  
(16th century) by M. Sittou.  
Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

... reminding us of a point in astronomy, which is that the longer the days are the farther off is the sun and yet the hotter; so is it with our love, for although by absence we are parted it nevertheless keeps its fervency, at least in my case and hoping the like of yours . . .

—King Henry VIII, in a letter to Anne Boleyn, 1528

This hath not offended the king.

—Sir Thomas More, drawing his beard aside as he placed his head on the block, 1535

some respects it was. These dissidents, known as Puritans, Baptists, Presbyterians, Dissenters, and Nonconformists, wanted to get rid of many things they called "popish," such as the bishops, the prayer book, the priest's vestments, and even the church bells and the stained-glass windows. Some of them said that religion was solely a matter between the individual and God. This idea, which is still the foundation of Protestant churches, is directly traceable to the teachings of those Renaissance humanists who emphasized the freedom of all human beings.

**In 1531, refused an annulment by the pope, Henry VIII broke with the Catholic Church in Rome and declared himself head of the English Church. This marked the beginning of the Protestant Reformation in England.**



The Great Harry (detail) (1546) from the Anthony Roll manuscript. The Pepys Library, Magdalene College, Cambridge.

### Henry VIII: Renaissance Man and Executioner

The five Tudor rulers of England are easy to remember: They consist of a grandfather, a father, and three children. The grandfather was Henry VII (1457–1509), a Welsh nobleman who seized the throne after England was totally exhausted by the long and bloody struggle called the Wars of the Roses. (Both factions involved used a rose as their emblem, one red, one white.) Henry VII was a shrewd, patient, and stingy man who restored peace and order to the kingdom; without these, there could never have been a cultural Renaissance.

His son Henry VIII (r. 1509–1547) had six wives: After Catherine of Aragon and Anne Boleyn, there were Jane Seymour, Anne of Cleves, Catherine Howard, and Catherine Parr. The fates of these unfortunate women are summarized in a jingle:

Divorced, beheaded, died,  
Divorced, beheaded, survived.

The sexual intrigues of the court trapped several of Henry's wives: The king could play around, but he couldn't tolerate being suspicious of his wives' fidelity. The price paid by two young wives was heavy. Like Thomas More, Anne Boleyn and Catherine Howard lost their heads on the chopping block.

Despite his messy home life, Henry VIII was a very important figure. He created the Royal Navy, which put a stop to foreign invasions of England and provided the means for this island kingdom to spread its political power, language, and literature all over the globe. If we overlook his use of the sword against his enemies (and friends), Henry VIII himself deserves the title "Renaissance man." He wrote poetry and played many different musical instruments well; he was a champion athlete and a hunter; and he patronized the new humanistic learning. But in his old

age, Henry was also coarse, dissolute, arrogant, and an unregenerate womanizer. He died without knowing that the child he ignored because she was female would become the greatest ruler England ever had.

**Henry VIII's rule was bold and bloody. He increased England's strength and ensured its security by building up the Royal Navy, but those close to the king paid a high price.**



An Allegory of the Tudor Succession: The Family of Henry VIII (c. 1589-1595) by the British School, possibly after Lucas de Heere. Oil on panel (45" x 71 3/4"). Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, New Haven.

### The Boy King and Bloody Mary

Henry VIII was survived by three children: Mary, daughter of the Spanish princess, Catherine of Aragon; Elizabeth, daughter of Anne Boleyn, a lady-in-waiting at the court; and Edward, son of noblewoman Jane Seymour, who died three days after her son's birth. According to the laws of succession, the son had to be crowned first, and so at age nine the son of Henry and Jane Seymour became Edward VI (r. 1547-1553). An intelligent but sickly boy, he ruled in name only while his relatives wielded the actual power.

When Edward died of tuberculosis, he was followed by his half-Spanish half-sister Mary (r. 1553-1558). Mary was a devout, strong-willed Catholic determined to avenge the wrongs done to her mother. She restored the pope's power in England and ruthlessly hunted down Protestants.

Had she lived longer, and had she exercised better judgment, Mary might have undone all her father's accomplishments. But she made a strategic error when she burned about three hundred of her subjects at

the stake. She further lost the support of her people when she married Philip II, king of Spain, a country England was beginning to fear and hate. (Mary was thirty-seven and Philip only twenty-six.) Mary's executions earned her the name "Bloody Mary." When Mary died of a fever, childless, her sister Elizabeth became queen.

**Mary Tudor succeeded her father Henry VIII. Immediately, she killed Protestants and reversed her father's policies: She restored the pope's power in England.**

### Elizabeth: The Virgin Queen

Elizabeth I (r. 1558-1603) was one of the most brilliant and successful monarchs in history. Since she inherited a kingdom torn by fierce religious feuds, her first task was to restore law and order. She reestablished the Church of England and again rejected the pope's authority, and the pope promptly excommunicated her. To keep Spain appeased, she pretended that she just might marry her widowed brother-in-law, King Philip.

Philip was the first of a long procession of noblemen, both foreign and English, who wanted to wed her. But Elizabeth resisted marriage all her life and officially remained "the Virgin Queen" (thereby giving the American colony Virginia its name). She knew that her strength lay in her independence and her ability to play one suitor off against another. "I am your anointed Queen," she told a group from Parliament who urged her to marry. "I will never be by violence constrained to do anything. I thank God I am endowed with such qualities that if I were turned out of the realm in my petticoat, I were able to live in any place in Christendom."



Portrait of Queen Elizabeth I within the Armada Jewel (16th century) by Nicholas Hilliard. The Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



Mary Tudor (16th century) by an unknown artist. Musée Condé, Chantilly, France.

Fain would I climb, yet fear I to fall.  
—Sir Walter Raleigh to Elizabeth I, scratched on a windowpane  
If thy heart fails thee, climb not at all.  
—Elizabeth's reply, scratched underneath



## THE GLASS OF FASHION

They displayed their new costumes from ten to twelve o'clock in the morning, strolling up and down the center aisle of St. Paul's Church. They insisted on rich fabrics: velvet, taffeta, gold brocade, and fur. They wore the finest silk stockings and cork platform shoes. They curled their hair, perfumed their gloves, and (if daring) wore makeup. They showed off favorite jewels—pearls, perhaps—in earrings, bracelets, and designs sewn all over their clothes. The men in the Renaissance were peacocks indeed!

Portrait of Elizabeth Vernon, countess of Southampton (c. 1610) by an unknown artist.

By permission of the Duke of Buccleuch, Kettering, England.



Portrait of a lady said to be Lady Style (detail) (16th century) by the circle of William Larkin. Christie's, London.



Portrait of a nobleman said to be the 7th earl of Shrewsbury in garter robes (detail) (16th century) by Paul van Somer. Christie's, London.



**Exquisite excess.** Women also dressed flamboyantly in the Renaissance. Elizabeth I herself owned eighty wigs and three thousand gowns at her death.

In the 1580s and 1590s, the Renaissance silhouette was ridiculously exaggerated. Starched linen neck ruffs stretched from shoulder to shoulder. Shoulders themselves were extended with "wings" that make even the most exaggerated of today's shoulder pads look like cotton balls. Hoop skirts (called farthingales) could be four feet wide at the

hips, and men's full, thigh-length pants were padded to what critics called "monstrous and outrageous greatness."

Women corseted their waists into painful narrowness while men stiffened doublets (an upper garment) with pasteboard and stuffed them with horsehair, rags, or even bran in order to achieve what was called a peascod belly. A man's silhouette was

narrowest at the bottom, where stockings and garters worn above the knee made even shapely legs look better.

**Symbols and signals.** In the Renaissance, intricate pattern (like poetry's "artificiality") was also a must. Braids, bows, spangles, and lace covered the luxurious fabrics, and slashed sleeves and doublets allowed embroidered underclothes to peek through. Colors were rich and bold—red, gold, black, and white was a favorite combination.

Colors and designs also had symbolic meanings: Green meant love, white and tawny together showed patience in adversity, a pansy represented sadness, a snake flattery, and so on.

Queen Elizabeth often wore white and black together—both colors symbolized chastity. Whole trea-

An unknown lady in a masque costume (detail) (c. 1615).

City of Bristol Museum and Art Gallery, Bristol, England.



Mary Denton, née Martyn, age 15 in 1573 (detail) (16th century) by the circle of George Gower.

York City Art Gallery, York, England.



tises were devoted to color and to defining "emblems" such as rainbows, clouds, worms, and flies.

**Reading T-shirts.** How will historians of dress read the clothes we wear today? Are bodices embroidered with flies so strange when viewed against the sort of printed T-shirts available by the hundreds in any shopping mall? What messages do our clothes send out to the world, and what will they tell the future?

Lettice Knollys, daughter of Sir Henry Knollys, wife of 4th Lord Paget (detail) (16th century) by the English School.

Manor House, Stanton Harcourt, Oxon, England.



Gilbert Talbot, 7th earl of Shrewsbury, age 40 (detail) (16th century) by William Seger. Christie's, London.





Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh.

Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots (16th century) by an unknown Dutch artist.

A truly heroic person, Elizabeth survived many plots against her life. Several of these plots were initiated by her cousin, another Mary—Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots. As Elizabeth had no children, Mary was heir to England's throne because she, too, was a direct descendant of Henry VII. But Mary, a Catholic, was eventually deposed from her throne in Protestant Scotland. Put under house arrest, she lived as a royal exile in England, carefully watched by her cousin Elizabeth. Elizabeth endured Mary and

her plots for twenty years and then, a true daughter of her father, sent her Scottish cousin to the chopping block.

**Like her father, Elizabeth quickly and efficiently settled disorder both in her kingdom and in her own household. She once again rejected the pope and reestablished the Church of England. Elizabeth's intelligence and independence made her reign one of the most successful in England's history.**

### The Spanish Armada Sinks: A Turning Point in History

King Philip of Spain, ever watchful for an excuse to hammer at England, used Mary's execution as an excuse to invade England. He assembled a vast fleet of warships for that purpose: the famous Spanish Armada. In 1588, England's Royal Navy, assisted greatly by nasty weather in the Irish Sea, destroyed the Armada. This victory assured England's and all of northern Europe's

... Then she, lying very still upon the block, one of the executioners holding her slightly with one of his hands, she endured two strokes of the other executioner with an axe, she making very small noise or none at all, and not stirring any part of her from the place where she lay: and so the executioner cut off her head, saving one little gristle, which being cut asunder, he lift up her head to the view of all the assembly and bade God save the Queen. Then, her dress of lawn falling from off her head, it appeared as gray as one of threescore and ten years old, polled very short, her face in a moment being so much altered from the form she had when she was alive, as few could remember her by her dead face. Her lips stirred up and down a quarter of an hour after her head was cut off...

—Robert Wynkfield, an eyewitness to the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots, 1587

(Opposite) English Ships and the Spanish Armada, August 1588 (detail). English School. Oil.

National Maritime Museum, London.



To be a king and wear a crown is more glorious to them that see it than it is pleasure to them that bear it.

—Elizabeth I, 1601

independence from the powerful Catholic countries of the Mediterranean. It was a great turning point in history and Elizabeth's finest moment. If Spain had prevailed, history would have been quite different: All of North America, like most of South America, might be speaking Spanish instead of English.

**In 1588, the English Royal Navy defeated the Spanish Armada. This stunning sea victory assured England's independence from the powerful Catholic countries of the Mediterranean.**

As for her face, it is and appears to be very aged. It is long and thin and her teeth are very yellow and unequal, compared with what they were formerly, so they say, and on the left side less than on the right. Many of them are missing so that one cannot understand her easily when she speaks quickly. Her figure is fair and tall and graceful in whatever she does; so far as may be she keeps her dignity . . .

—André Hurault, French ambassador, writing about Elizabeth I, 1597

### A Flood of Literature

What is the connection between these political events and English literature? With their own religious and national identity firmly established, the English started writing as never before. After the defeat of the Armada, Elizabeth became a beloved symbol of peace, security, and prosperity to her subjects, and she provided inspiration to scores of English authors. They represented her mythologically in poetry, drama, and fiction—as Gloriana, Diana, the Faerie Queene, and Cynthia. Literary works that did not directly represent her

were dedicated to her because authors knew she was a connoisseur of literature and a person of remarkably wide learning.

**Elizabeth encouraged and inspired many writers. With the era of peace and prosperity that followed the defeat of the Spanish Armada, the English started writing as never before.**

### Decline of the Renaissance: A Dull Man Succeeds a Witty Woman

Elizabeth died childless, so her second cousin, James VI of Scotland, was her successor. James was the son of Elizabeth's cousin Mary whom Elizabeth had beheaded years before. As James I of England (r. 1603–1625), he lacked Elizabeth's ability to resolve (or postpone) critical issues, especially religious and economic ones. James was a spendthrift where Elizabeth had been thrifty; he was thick-tongued and goggle-eyed where she had been glamorous and witty; he was essentially a foreigner where she had been a complete Englishwoman.

James I tried hard. He wrote learned books in favor of the divine right of kings and against tobacco, he patronized Shakespeare, he sponsored a new translation of the Bible, and he was in many respects an admirable man and a benevolent, peaceful ruler. Yet his relationship with many of his subjects, especially with pious, puritanically minded merchants, went from bad to worse.

The difficulties of James's reign became the impossibilities of his son's. Charles I (r. 1625–1649) turned out to be remote, autocratic, and self-destructive. Some of his most powerful subjects had him beheaded in 1649. For the next eleven years, England was ruled by Parliament and the Puritan dictator Oliver Cromwell, not by an anointed king. When Charles's self-indulgent son returned to power eleven years later, in 1660, England had changed in many important ways.

Of course the Renaissance did not end in 1660 as Charles II returned from exile in France, just as it had not begun at any specific date. Renaissance values, which were primarily moral and religious, gradually eroded, and Renaissance energies gradually gave out. The last great writer of the English Renaissance was John Milton, who lived on into an age in which educated people were becoming more worldly in their outlook. Scientific truths were soon to challenge long-accepted religious beliefs.

The English Renaissance was over.

**The political climate in England began to change after Elizabeth's death. The end of the English Renaissance is usually marked by the return of the exiled king in 1660. By this time, more political and secular values were beginning to challenge the accepted doctrines of religion.**

All my possessions  
for a moment of time.

—Elizabeth I's last  
words, 1603

Bird's-eye view of  
London, from the  
Atlas Civitatis Orbis  
Terrarum (c. 1574)  
by Georg Braun.  
Map L85c #27.

By permission of The  
Folger Shakespeare  
Library, Washington, D.C.



## JEWISH LIFE IN ENGLAND: EXPULSION AND RETURN

As you read the literature of Renaissance England, you'll notice that many selections use Christian imagery or are about Christian topics. Certainly, all the writers in these collections were Christian. But what about Jewish life in England?

The most famous Jewish character in Renaissance literature is Shylock, the moneylender in Shakespeare's play *The Merchant of Venice* (c. 1596–1598). Shylock is portrayed as cruel and greedy, a man incapable of mercy. In Shakespeare's play, Shylock is a usurer, which means that he lent money at interest, something commonly done by banks today. But charging interest on borrowed money (called usury) was considered sinful by the Christian church. (Many usurers charged exorbitant interest, and a small loan might ruin a poor widow and her family.) Since Jews were usually not allowed to own land, they became the people who handled money.

With Shylock, Shakespeare presents us with a complicated character who is at once a stereotype and a persecuted individual. Stereotypes like this one of the greedy moneylender were used to justify

relentless persecution of the Jews. Without a homeland, Jews had been moving for most of their history. Expelled from many European cities and countries, Jewish refugees streamed into cities that already housed more Jews than their rulers wanted. Some cities, such as Venice (the setting for *The Merchant of Venice*), dealt with Jews by segregating them in ghettos and charging them extra taxes.

There were a few Jews in Shakespeare's England, although English Jews had been banished centuries before by King Edward I in 1290—because of controversy over their purchase of land. (Ownership of land by people considered “outsiders” was alarming then, as it still is in some places.) Some individual Jews probably continued to practice their religion in secret, but it wasn't until the middle of the seventeenth century, under the rule of Oliver Cromwell, that Jews were officially allowed to return to England.

*Initial Word-Panel Illumination Showing a Marriage Ceremony, from the Hamburg Halakhhah Miscellany. Padua (1467–1477). The Hebrew letters mean “all.” Codex Hebrew 337 (Scrin 132) fol. 75v. Vellum (6" × 4 1/2").*

Staats und Universitätsbibliothek, Hamburg.



### Quickwrite



The humanists of the Renaissance were concerned with a question that we still ask ourselves today. “What is a good life?” they wondered. How would you answer this same question? What's the good life for you? Will you have a good life if you're rich, or if you're famous, or if you're able to do some good for someone, or if you have power, or if most of your days are simply happy? Write down your thoughts on this complex question. What do you think has influenced the way you define “the good life”?

Wyatt	Raleigh	Jonson
Spenser	Herrick	Suckling
Shakespeare	Marvell	Lovelace
Marlowe	Donne	Neruda

since feeling is first

since feeling is first  
who pays any attention  
to the syntax of things  
will never wholly kiss you;

wholly to be a fool  
while Spring is in the world

my blood approves,  
and kisses are a better fate  
than wisdom

lady i swear by all flowers. Don't cry  
—the best gesture of my brain is less than  
your eyelids' flutter which says

we are for each other:then  
laugh,leaning back in my arms  
for life's not a paragraph

And death i think is no parenthesis

—E. E. Cummings  
(American, 1894–1962)