

Module 12: The Renaissance

Topic 3 Content: Writers from the Northern Renaissance

Introduction



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Desiderius Erasmus



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The major goal of Northern Renaissance humanism was to reform the Catholic Church, and the most well-known Christian humanist was a Catholic priest from Flanders named Desiderius Erasmus. According to Erasmus, Christians should strive to live pious lives on a daily basis rather than occupy themselves with achieving salvation. He criticized the abuses in the Church, and promoted the teachings of Christ and Christian works.


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In 1511, Erasmus wrote a humorous satire called *The Praise of Folly*. As you might guess from the title, Erasmus used this work to poke fun at the aspects of his society that he felt were most in need of reform, targeting scholars, merchants, and especially the clergy. Scorning monks more than anyone, Erasmus criticized their obsession with details, explaining that even when it comes to tying shoes: "Just so many knots must be on each shoe and the shoelace may be of only one specified color."

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Sir Thomas More



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Thomas More was an English lawyer and statesman during the early 16th century. He ensured that even his daughters were highly educated, inspiring other nobility to follow his example. His close friend Erasmus praised his intellect and spiritual pureness, and even claimed that More almost gave up his legal career to become a monk. As a devout Catholic, More opposed King Henry VIII's attempt to supersede the Pope's religious authority. He was subsequently found guilty for treason and executed.

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Before he died, More published numerous works, the most famous of which is called *Utopia*. Published in 1516, the novel describes life and politics on an imaginary island country named Utopia, which is contrasted against the imperfect European society. More's novel gave rise to the literary genres of utopian and dystopian fiction, which portray perfect societies and the opposite, respectively.

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François Rabelais



François Rabelais

One of the most notable French writers during the Renaissance period was a monk and Greek scholar named François Rabelais. Originally a Franciscan monk, Rabelais studied Greek, Latin, philology, science, and law. Due to the direction of his studies, he received some harassment and successfully petitioned the Pope to join the Benedictine order, where he was more warmly welcomed. He later practiced medicine, and in his spare hours, he began to write humorous pamphlets critical of the established authority of his time, and expressing his perception of individual liberty.

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François Rabelais



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Rabelais' most famous work is *The Life of Gargantua and of Pantagruel*, a series of five novels about the lives of father and son giants, although the authenticity of the fifth novel is questioned by some. Rabelais' writing is rich in the use of French vernacular, and full of witty comedy, ranging from gross burlesque to insightful satire. In fact, Rabelais pushed the boundaries of social propriety so much that he often found himself condemned by French scholars for his obscene writing, although *Gargantua and Pantagruel* was enormously popular.


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William Shakespeare



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By the time William Shakespeare appeared in London in 1592, theater was already a popular form of entertainment among all different social classes. Playwrights had to appeal to the educated nobility, lower class peasants, and everyone in between. The most accomplished of these playwrights was Shakespeare, who used his mastery of the English language and intuition of human psychology to write the plays that would today mark him as a literary genius. Whether he was writing a tragedy or a comedy, Shakespeare revealed in his work an insightful understanding of the human condition.


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The canon of popular Shakespearean works is extensive, but among his most well-known tragedies are *Romeo and Juliet*, which recounts the tale of two lovers from feuding families, and *Hamlet*, a story of revenge that explores themes of madness, treachery, and moral corruption. One of Shakespeare's most popular comedies is *Much Ado About Nothing*, featuring an older, witty couple and a sweet, younger couple caught up in a plot of revenge. Shakespeare was also a gifted poet and wrote numerous sonnets.

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Conclusion

Writers from the Northern Renaissance

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