

原版文学核心概念丛书

文艺复兴时期文学的 核心概念

Key Concepts in
Renaissance Literature

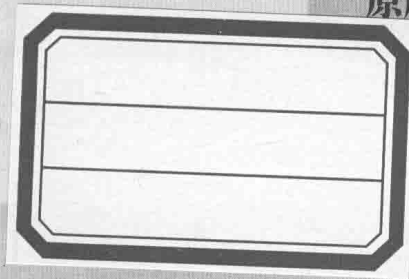
Malcolm Hebron



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相信本套丛书的引进将满足我国广大文学专业的师生及其他文学研究者、爱好者的需求，有力推动我国文学研究的发展与繁荣。

Key Concepts in Renaissance Literature

Malcolm Hebron

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General Editors' Preface

The purpose of Palgrave Key Concepts in Literature is to provide students with key critical and historical ideas about the texts they are studying as part of their literature courses. These ideas include information about the historical and cultural contexts of literature as well as the theoretical approaches in the subject today. Behind the series lies a recognition of the need nowadays for students to be familiar with a range of concepts and contextual material to inform their reading and writing about literature.

But behind the series there also lies a recognition of the changes that have transformed degree courses in Literature in recent years. Central to these changes has been the impact of critical theory together with a renewed interest in the way in which texts intersect with their immediate context and historical circumstances. The result has been an opening up of new ways of reading texts and a new understanding of what the study of literature involves together with the introduction of a wide set of new critical issues that demand our attention. An important aim of Palgrave Key Concepts in Literature is to provide brief, accessible introductions to these new ways of reading and new issues.

Each volume in Palgrave Key Concepts in Literature follows the same structure. An initial overview essay is followed by three sections – Contexts, Texts and Criticism – each containing a sequence of brief alphabetically arranged entries on a sequence of topics. Contexts essays provide an impression of the historical, social and cultural environment in which literary texts were produced. Texts essays, as might be expected, focus more directly on the works themselves. Criticism essays then outline the manner in which changes and developments in criticism have affected the ways in which we discuss the texts featured in the volume. The informing intention throughout is to help the reader create something new in the process of combining context, text and criticism.

*John Peck
Martin Coyle*

General Introduction

'Renaissance' means rebirth. In history books, the term usually denotes the four centuries between about 1300 and 1700: over this period, classical ideas were revived in scholarship and culture, and a number of momentous events in the spheres of religion and politics profoundly affected European consciousness. This period is in turn divided into two broad phases: in the first two centuries (the Early and High Renaissance) the movement was mainly contained within Italy; and from about 1500, Renaissance ideas crossed the Alps, bringing about 'The Northern Renaissance' including in England.

Books on the English Renaissance usually cover nearly two centuries of writing (1500–1660). A flourishing of Renaissance ideas occurred especially in the Elizabethan (1558–1603) and Jacobean periods (1603–1625). For some, it is the last phase, covering the Caroline Age (1625–1649) and the Commonwealth (1649–1660), which sees the fulfilment of the Renaissance movement, particularly in the writings of John Milton.

The validity of the term 'Renaissance', used to describe both a cultural movement and a time period, has been much debated. Some distinguished writers have declined to use the word at all, seeing it as too broad in its application to have any usefully specific meaning. But before we discuss this subject, let us look at a particular text and see what it can tell us about the time we label 'The Renaissance'.

The following lines come from the nineteenth elegy of John Donne (1572–1631), 'To His Mistress Going to Bed', probably written in the 1590s. In it, a lascivious male speaker describes his mistress undressing for bed, and then joins her there himself:

Licence my roaving hands, and let them go, [roving
Before, behind, between, above, below,
O my America! My new-found land,
My kingdome, safeliest when with one man man'd. [ruled
My myne of precious stones: My Emperie, [emperor's land
How blest am I in thus discovering thee?
To enter in these bonds, is to be free;
Then where my hand is set, my seal shall be.

(lines 25–32)

In these lines we can immediately find much to engage us. To begin with, we can admire the poet's skilful use of language: his deft handling of iambic metre and rhyming couplets (with the concluding quadruple rhyme); the witty wordplay ('My myne'), and the modulation of tone from rapturous adoration ('O my America') to decisive affirmation ('my seal shall be'). We also note that the poet draws on language from several fields to express the speaker's thoughts: besides the extended imagery (a conceit) of colonial discovery there is an approving reference to government by a single ruler ('with one man man'd'); and in the last two lines, the poet employs legal terminology in allusions to the bonds, rituals ('where my hand is set') and seal of the contract of marriage. The exclamatory language, the colourful and varied images and shifting rhythms all evoke the man's excitement at taking sexual possession of his mistress. She, by contrast, is silent. The man is a conqueror, and the woman is a newfound continent, existing – in the mind of the speaker – in order to be ruled, exploited (like a goldmine) and owned (signified by 'my seal') by the male; yet at the same time she is rather forbidding, a whole perilous continent, a hard mine of stones.

This use of language introduces us to some key elements of Renaissance culture. One of these is Rhetoric – the mastery of patterns in language for persuasive effect. Here the rhetoric seems ostentatious: the poet shows off his virtuosic handling of ideas, his clever puns and use of rhetorical figures. We recognise the paradox of line 31; and trained Renaissance readers would have seen in 'man man'd' an example of the figure *traductio*, in which a word is played on in different parts of speech (here, noun and verb). Through such skilful manipulation, the speaker's sexual triumph is mirrored in the poet's triumph over language.

Rhetoric in turn suggests something about the wider taste of the age. The word 'artificial' for us usually has a pejorative sense. But in the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods it was a term of praise: it was used to applaud artistic skill, the craftsman's mastery of techniques and materials. We can see this quality of artful contrivance – equivalents to literary rhetoric – in many Renaissance artefacts, from miniature paintings to intricate polyphonic music. In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, this cleverness often involves startling mental pictures. An example in our poem is the use of surprising analogy. Small is compared with big: the woman's body is like a continent, the husband is like a King. Another pleasant surprise is the way that unlike things are yoked together in unexpected comparisons: the woman's soft body, as we have noted, is like a mine of hard stones.

The poem's imagery is thus an illustration of Renaissance rhetoric and virtuosity. It also leads us into some major themes of Renaissance history. The lines we are investigating allude to the discovery of the New World,

following Columbus's voyage in 1492, and the subsequent colonisation by European powers of these new-found lands. In Donne's lines we can see some of the reactions to this episode: a sense of the marvellous ('O my America!') with a strong possessiveness ('O *my* America!'). The 'manning' of the woman reflects the brutal European exploitation of resources and enslavement of native populations, then just beginning. In this context, though, we need to remind ourselves that England at this time had no colonies to speak of: the lines express the *hope* for conquest – of territory and the woman's body – rather than the gloating voice of an established imperial power.

Colonialism led to competition between the European powers, or rather envy of the leading power, Spain. There is perhaps a more subtle reference to this here. 'Licence', the first word in our passage, means 'Allow'. But it could also refer to the licence, or permission, which Queen Elizabeth I (r.1558–1603) gave to men like Sir Francis Drake (c.1540–1596) and Sir Walter Raleigh (1552–1618) to plunder Spanish ships. If we follow this sense, then the lover's roving hands suggest the predatory ships of English privateers, roaming the ocean 'Before, behind, between, above, below'. Conquest of new lands is thus mixed with conflict between the powers of the old world, and there is an undertone of violent conquest in the lines of the poem. More straightforwardly, beneath the erotic energy of the text, we have a reminder that during much of the Renaissance period, England was a nation at war.

Next, there is the praise of monarchy in the line 'My kingdome, safeliest when with one man man'd' (possibly 'woman' hovers around the sound of 'one man', a sly reference perhaps to England's *female* monarch, Elizabeth). This line points us to the interest in different forms of government which plays such an important part in Renaissance culture and history, from Shakespeare's study of republicanism in the Roman plays to the actual establishment of a Republic in England after the execution of Charles I in 1649. We usually find in Renaissance writing that the public, political sphere and the sphere of private experience are inseparable, integrated at the level of normal thinking. More usually, one is described in terms of the other: the analogy drawn by Donne in these lines between the government of a state and the government of a woman by a man is typical of the way Renaissance writing reflects large-scale issues in depictions of private and domestic experience. Indeed, thinking through analogy – describing one thing in terms of another thing – is a characteristic of Renaissance writing generally.

Through these few lines, then, we can enter the flow of history and ideas, as they played on the feelings and imagination of one particular mind. It is not only the mind depicted in the poetry that is at issue here, though, but our own mind, too. A text brings us some of the

cultural baggage of one age, but in turn we bring our own assumptions and opinions to the text when we read. As inhabitants of a particular time in history, we most quickly recognise themes – such as gender relations and imperialism – which remain live issues for us. In the light of feminism, and post-imperial guilt, these are aspects of the poem that we will soonest respond to. We may well deplore the attitudes expressed by Donne's speaker, who apparently approves of the exploitation of colonised countries and regards the woman merely as a passive object to be appropriated and enjoyed. In this way, the poem can speak to us about topics which are central to our own age and move us to strong feelings of approval or disagreement.

Yet as well as being relevant to our own concerns, this text, like all writings from previous centuries, also challenges us to enter a different world and see through the eyes of people remote from us in their outlook and beliefs. How would an educated sixteenth-century gentleman – Donne's first audience – have responded to this text? Possibly he would have shared the ideas about women and colonies set out here, but it is equally likely that he would not have taken them very seriously to begin with. Our hypothetical reader would very probably have seen this text as first and foremost an ingenious literary exercise. He – and I stress 'he' since it is historically likely to have been a male reader, and a male reader is arguably implied by the text – would probably have read it intertextually, that is by mentally placing the poem against other texts, to appreciate how Donne was playing with certain traditional formulae. He would see, for example, that Donne is writing a *blazon*, a specific kind of text which specialises in describing a woman's beauties. Read against other blazons, the poem becomes a sophisticated literary exercise, playing with inherited conventions. Our hypothetical reader might also have considered the poem as variations on a source text, frequently of great importance in Renaissance writing. Where we might prize novelty and originality, Renaissance readers were interested in seeing what an artist could do with older materials – whether these were stories, literary forms or intellectual concepts. The most important text 'behind' Donne's poem is the *Amores* by the Roman poet Ovid (43 BC–17 AD). The *Amores* describe, with sensuous eroticism, the psychology of a lustful male: because of their sexual content, they were not taught in schools and could freely circulate only in Latin – thus they were safely restricted to the educated elite. Donne's sequence of elegies (so-called because they describe the sufferings of love) starts with some close imitation of his Roman model and then moves into freer variations on the basic theme of a man desiring a woman. Its first readers must have relished their 'forbidden fruit' quality, and have listened out for the poet's own witty play on the voice of the Ovidian male.

Donne thus looks back to Ovid, but at the same time he is clearly alive to the experience of colonialism, a key issue of his own day. This is the quintessential feature of much Renaissance culture: it looks back to the classics, but in order to shape and examine the modern. Renaissance art uses the materials of the past to make new things in the present. Just as Donne uses Ovid's verse to present the mind and voice of a sixteenth-century lover, with sixteenth-century preoccupations, the architects Inigo Jones (1573–1652) and Christopher Wren (1632–1723) used elements of classical buildings to make modern palaces and churches. The Renaissance is, we might say, both a 'rebirth' of the classical and a reshaping of classical elements to make a new world.

Having acknowledged that Donne is working within a tradition, we might still ask questions like 'Does the poet mean what he is saying? Does he want us to sympathise with the speaker and share in his expressions of delight?' Inevitably, we are going to have assumptions about the relation between text and writer, but these assumptions change from age to age. We are still influenced today by the Romantic movement, which conceived of poetry as the intense expression of a powerfully felt experience. At some level we still expect a poem to have some clearly traceable link with the psyche and biography of the poet. Yet Renaissance poems very often work differently. They are not usually a direct record of the inner experiences of the poet; rather, they are more like miniature theatres, in which different personae play out psychological dramas. We can see in Shakespeare's plays this fascination with the possibilities of 'trying on' another character in the many instances of disguise and pretence in his plots. In the same way, Donne in this poem may be 'trying on' the voice of a particular kind of lover, exaggerating his triumphant boastfulness to the point of comedy. Both poems and prose texts of the Renaissance often have this quality of performance: authors use writing to explore ideas by acting out parts, and the voices we hear may all be fictive, existing at an ironic distance from the thoughts and feelings of the writer. This still raises the question of a writer's responsibility for the words he puts down; and to say that Renaissance writers knew nothing of sincerity would be going too far. However, when reading a Renaissance text, we should be wary of assuming that it represents an attempt by the writer to present a truthful record of a real experience.

Still another challenge to the modern reader lies in the circumstances in which we meet a text. We are likely to come across a poem like Donne's in print, in a book, annotated by an expert editor, and possibly as part of a taught course. It is thus on several levels an 'authorised' text. We have already seen how Donne's readers would have regarded these quasi-pornographic pieces as something *anti-official*, with the pleasure of contraband goods (a printing of Marlowe's English versions of Ovid

was actually burned by order of the bishops in 1599). And while we may see Donne's poems as a book, the first readers saw it only in private handwritten papers. One hundred and fifty years after the invention of movable type, gentlemen like Donne still preferred to circulate their works in manuscript among friends. Consequently, the poem we have been discussing was not printed until some 70 years after it was written. It was passed around Donne's circle, rather as we might circulate an email or digital image to friends today. This 'coterie culture' creates a particular community of interpretation: there may be in-jokes, private understandings and coded references which outsiders struggle to understand. When the poem passed into print – itself a key Renaissance invention – its conditions of reception, and consequently its potential meanings, also changed.

It is time to summarise our findings. We have seen how some lines by Donne have led us to some key themes of Renaissance history of society: colonialism, war, attitudes to women, forms of government. They have also illustrated some aspects of literature and culture: rhetoric, artifice, the imitation and adaptation of classical models, the fictive persona, manuscript and print, the educated reader, coterie culture. These closely interrelated matters are among the topics we shall be exploring in this book. In studying them, we shall also take notice of the methods and insights offered by modern literary criticism and theory: Feminist criticism helps us to examine the depiction of women in texts; Rhetorical criticism trains us to perform detailed close readings, in Renaissance terms, while textual and bibliographical scholarship can help us to understand the forms in which texts were encountered. Literary theory can further assist us in exploring the kinds of questions which our brief discussion has raised: Is it legitimate to read a Renaissance poem out of its context and look for issues relevant to our own time? Or should we be thinking ourselves back into the age when a work was written and interpreting it in its own context? When we read, should we bring our own moral convictions to bear and make judgements on how a poem depicts women or people of other races? Or should we leave moral reactions to one side and accept that different ages have different values to our own?

There are, of course, other important Renaissance literary topics and themes, other critical approaches and other important theoretical issues. In this book, we shall be describing some of these, but inevitably leaving out many others. Part One explores the wider contextual world: political, religious and historical processes which flow through and around the writings of the age. In Part Two, we look at topics in literature, such as genres, modes and Renaissance theories of what literature was for. Finally, in Part Three, we shall consider some of the critical approaches

taken to studying the Renaissance today and the theoretical questions they raise.

Such is the structure of the present book. How it is used depends very much on the nature of the project being undertaken. We have seen how a few lines of one poem can take us into many themes and issues. Equally, one subject can cross many texts and involve material from history, literature and modern criticism: the study of a female Renaissance author, for example, would involve researching the situation of the Renaissance woman, the writings of women in the period and the approaches offered by modern feminist analysis. These are the kinds of tasks which this book is designed to assist. Neither the book nor its individual entries can hope to be comprehensive. But I hope that they are at any rate useful as a starting point, and above all suggestive of ways in which Renaissance literature may be studied. As well as helping with particular assignments, I also hope that the material in this book might encourage you to pursue fresh lines of enquiry, which in turn will enlarge our understanding of this rich and fascinating field.

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