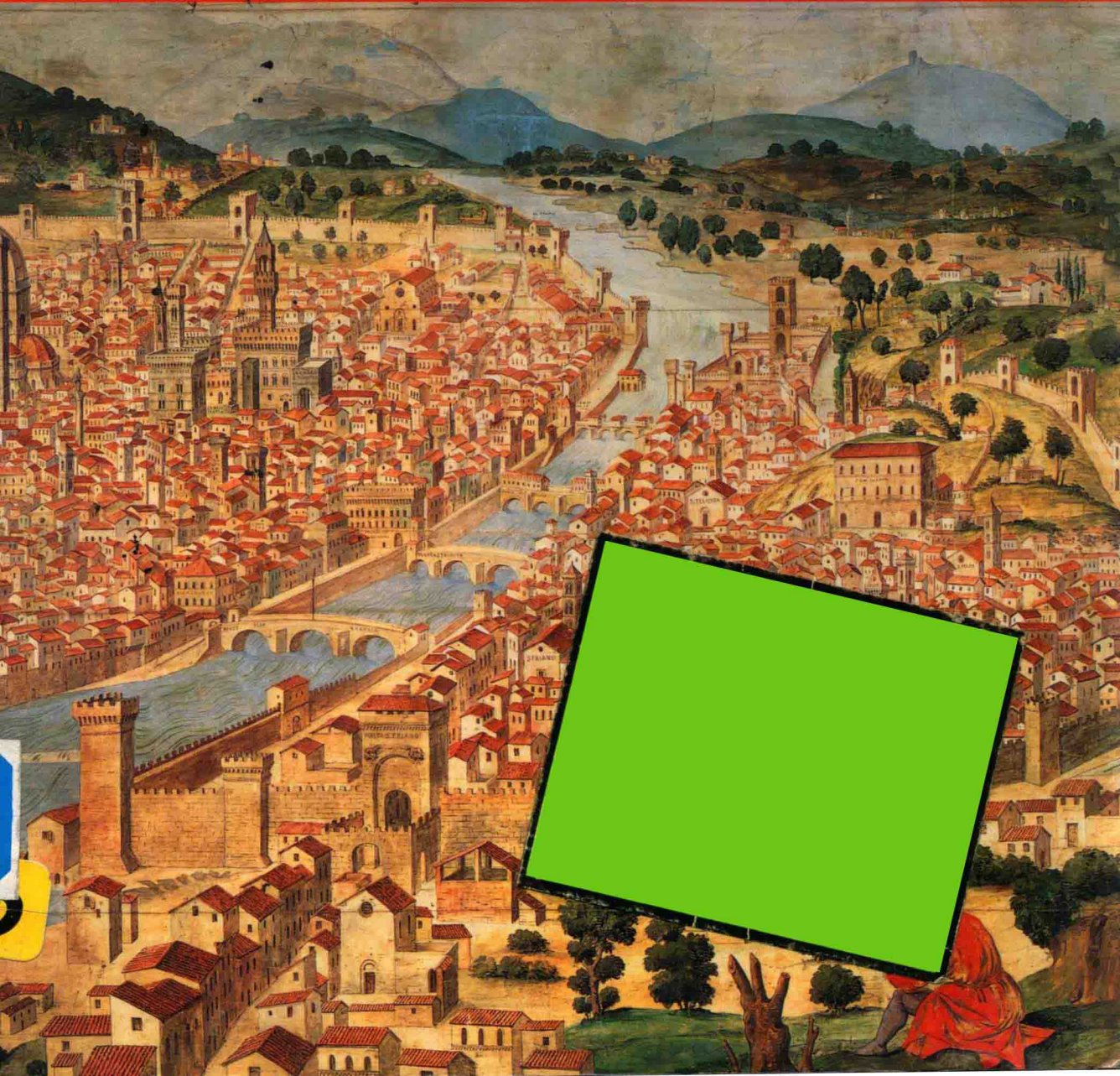


ORIGINS OF THE MODERN WEST

*Essays and Sources in Renaissance &
Early Modern European History*

THEODORE K. RABB
SOURCES EDITED BY SHERRIN MARSHALL



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THEODORE K. RABB

Princeton University

Sources Edited and Introduced by

SHERRIN MARSHALL

U.S. Department of Education

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ORIGINS OF THE MODERN WEST

Essays and Sources in Renaissance & Early Modern European History

*For the students of Humanities 202
and Humanities 204*

About the Authors

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Preface

Although this book is intended to stand on its own as an introductory text and collection of primary documents, it was originally written for college students as a companion to the instructional films based on the television series entitled "Renaissance." Naturally, therefore, the five one-hour films in the original television series determined much of the book's content and thus its application to college courses. In particular, since a basic purpose of the films was to examine some of the political, social, and cultural transformations of a distant era that helped shape the modern world, the telecourse of which this book is a part should be regarded not merely as an account of some central aspects of a historical period, but also as an introduction to the origins of the corresponding features of the modern West. A brief explanation of the structure of "Renaissance" should serve to clarify further the aims of the pages that follow.

What will soon be apparent is that neither the films nor the book provide a comprehensive narrative account of the era of European history that, in traditional descriptions, covers both the Renaissance and the early modern era. The coverage is topical rather than chronological, and the subject matter extends, very broadly, from the middle of the fourteenth century to the last decades of the seventeenth. Within this time span, moreover, no attempt has been made to ensure that every major landmark receives due attention. Indeed, some of the most famous and influential figures of the age—Boccaccio, Columbus, Ferdinand of Aragon, Erasmus, Rabelais, Palestrina, Jakob Fugger, and Shakespeare, to name but a few—receive barely a mention or none at all. By contrast, others of less fame or moment, such as Paracelsus, are examined at length. And the same discrimination is apparent in the treatment of individual periods and specific topics—less on the late fourteenth century than on the late sixteenth, for example, and less on the papacy or the Black Death than on magic or Mannerism.*

* For an account that attempts to be inclusive, students and teachers should turn to S. H. Thomson's *Europe in Renaissance and Reformation* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, Inc., 1963), an 850-page survey which, though thirty years old, still offers reliable guidance on almost all significant topics from 1300 to 1650.

Why is there such selectivity, and what are its implications for the classroom uses of the book and the films? The reasons for the structure, it should be emphasized at the outset, were both practical and pedagogic. In the course of five one-hour films, only some 20,000 words can be spoken (around 60 printed pages). Within these limitations it is far more effective to make a few highlights as vivid as possible than to try to cover all bases. It was clear that a focus on five central topics, emblematic of the transformations associated with the Renaissance and early modern times, was more likely to evoke the period as a whole than an attempt to give every significant milestone or era its due. The five films and their subjects—chosen because they seemed especially suitable for making connections with modern times—are:

- “The Prince,” on the growth of centralized government
- “The Warrior,” on military developments and their effects on society
- “The Dissenter,” on changes in religious belief and their results
- “The Artist,” on the creation of a new aesthetic and new roles for art
- “The Scientist,” on the revolution in views of the natural world

But there is also a pedagogic purpose to the concentration on a limited number of well-defined themes. It is now widely appreciated by teachers of history that comprehensive coverage of an era is an illusion and that the very effort to achieve it can leave students overwhelmed by information and convinced that there is no shape to the past. By limiting the breadth of the subject matter and the number of discrete details that have to be absorbed, one can try not only to offer deeper insights into an age but also to fashion coherent stories whose very clarity can help bring an age to life. Such focused explorations, moreover, can illuminate an unfamiliar world with a richness that is immediately appealing, and the student, presented with comprehensible and self-contained accounts, can gain a sense of the period from just a few of its features.

Whether these goals have been achieved here, only readers and viewers can judge. It should now be plain, however, both why many traditional topics of Renaissance and early modern history have been omitted and why their absence may promote rather than hinder the attainment of historical understanding by beginners in this field. It should be clear, too, that the readings from original sources have been chosen with a similar intent: to suggest the flavor of the age rather than to survey its written records. In only one area—economic change and the rise of capitalism—did the constraints imposed by the film series cause an omission that seemed unacceptable for the purposes of the telecourse. Had there been a sixth film, it would have been “The Merchant.” Even without such a program, however, it was deemed essential to include the equivalent chapter on “The Merchant” in the book and to prepare, in addition, appropriate classroom films on economic change for the telecourse.

The opening and closing chapters of this book, for which there are also no equivalents in the five-part television series (though there are in the telecourse), are similar to the chapter on “The Merchant” in that they provide students with the background they will need to put the films in context. The first chapter offers a narrative overview of the entire period, geared to the subjects of the chapters that follow so that they can be fitted into an overall chronological framework. And the

final chapter outlines some of the modern connections that the entire book is designed to suggest. In this regard, it echoes one of the recurrent themes of the films—the interviews with contemporary equivalents of Renaissance figures, such as modern artists and scientists, who convey the continuing influence in our own world of the concerns that animated their Renaissance and early modern predecessors. A number of crucial respects in which our society and culture have been shaped by the past should emerge from a recognition of the persistence, to this day, of the questions and problems that absorbed our ancestors.

To make sure that we have before us the full story of how those questions were first posed and elaborated, the word “Renaissance” has been defined in the broadest terms. What this requires is a rejection of the strict boundaries established by the first great student of this period in modern times, Jacob Burckhardt, who limited the word to Italy between approximately 1300 and the 1520s. Although most historians would extend the term to include much of the rest of western Europe, a number of them might agree that it should not be used after the 1520s—a position that would win the support of art historians who perceive a new style, Mannerism, coming into vogue in that decade. For general historians, too, it often seems convenient to use the label “Reformation” to identify a new era beginning around that time and to call the years from the mid-sixteenth to the late-seventeenth century “early modern.” Moreover, there are medievalists who would object to the opening date of 1300, claiming that there was no significant break in historical development before 1500: What then deserves to be called a Renaissance?

None of these objections can be dismissed, but this is true of most arguments for particular periodizations or labels. For our purposes, however, it was essential to find a single term that could be used broadly to define the entire period under consideration. The beginning and end seemed clear. Unless the accounts of our five subjects could begin in the mid-1300s, it would be impossible to explain how the era’s basic ambition—to revive and imitate the achievements of antiquity—arose in the generation of Petrarch. And unless we could finish in the second half of the seventeenth century, we could not bring to a proper conclusion the stories of the rise of science (with Newton), the acceptance of dissent (with Milton), or the triumph of central government (with Hobbes and Locke).

No single term can characterize these centuries as accurately as “Renaissance,” because all the issues under consideration here began their course through European history in that era (even narrowly defined) and can rightly be seen as Renaissance initiatives. Moreover, as will be argued in the first chapter, the new ambitions that were first defined in the fourteenth century—the revival of antiquity demanded by Petrarch and the quest for individual faith launched by Wycliffe—did not lose their force as engines of change until the late-seventeenth century. To the extent that Milton was still driven by some of the same aspirations as Petrarch—and is regularly described as a poet of the Renaissance—it is entirely appropriate to see the years that link them as a coherent period. Nor did the struggles over religious belief die down until the last years of Milton’s life. Indeed, many areas of scholarship make use of the term “Renaissance” well beyond 1650. Not until the Battle of the Books in the late-seventeenth century, when it was argued that contemporaries had at last outstripped the achievements of the ancient world, did it become clear that those who were forming European culture had moved beyond

Petrarch's ideals. And the same deferral, until after 1660, of a final resolution for the struggles that had been set in motion in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries colors political and military history (the acceptance of central power and the control of gunpowder warfare), the story of the rise to prominence of the artist, and the history of science.* Accordingly, "Renaissance" seemed the most appropriate summary title for the television series and hence for the telecourse, though the title of this volume acknowledges the attention given to the early modern period and periods beyond.

The latter bears emphasizing: Just as it is appropriate not to regard the book or the films as comprehensive accounts of an era, so too is it important that their implications not be limited to this one age, however expansively defined. The subjects they pursue—the roles of government, warfare, unorthodoxy, capitalism, art, and science in Western civilization—have been highlighted precisely for their relevance long after 1700. Indeed, the testimony of the modern counterparts of Renaissance figures, interviewed in the films, is intended to demonstrate the pertinence to this day of the long-standing issues they embody. And these connections—these suggestions of origins—enable the telecourse to address themes that transcend its chronology. The political, social, economic, religious, artistic, and intellectual conflicts that are its subject have been essential to the creation of the modern West and are therefore crucial to the study of history and the humanities throughout the last 600 years. A central purpose of this book is to add the detail and background that will enable students to examine these themes within the larger context of Western civilization. One can only hope that they will then come to understand how vital to the development of the modern world was the age we have called Renaissance.

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* I have examined the issues which dominated European history from around 1500 to the late-seventeenth century, and the general "crisis" which resolved them, in greater detail in *The Struggle for Stability in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975). The present book takes some of *The Struggle for Stability's* themes back to their Renaissance origins before 1500.

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ONE

Four Centuries: A Brief Overview

The transformations that began in Europe in the 1300s were not called a Renaissance until long after they had run their course. Even the major changes that are the subject of this book, which in some cases continued into the late 1600s, were only occasionally given that name while they were under way. Some contemporaries did refer to a *rinascita*, or “rebirth,” of the arts and letters after a period of darkness that had started with the fall of ancient Rome. Only in the 1800s, however, did historians looking at these years begin to speak of a comprehensive transformation of Europe; before then, people might have spoken of a revival of antiquity in some areas, but never of an entire period shaped by an attempt to revive the values of ancient Greece and Rome.

Yet this is what we have in mind when we think of the Renaissance today. Starting with a movement in philosophy and education, this was an age that deliberately rejected its immediate past and was inspired by what it found in the world of antiquity to move in new directions in almost every sphere of life. There was much else that contributed to this refashioning of society and ideas—political, economic, and demographic change; advances in technology and warfare; overseas discoveries; and struggles over religious and scientific beliefs—but nothing had so profound or pervasive an impact as the turn to the distant past. In the words of Jacob Burckhardt, the historian of Italian civilization who formed our understanding of this period, it was a time “colored in a thousand ways by the influence of the ancient world.” This coloration is what has given the era its image as a time of rebirth—of renaissance. Our overview of its history and main features, and of the early modern period in general, must therefore begin with the origins of that fascination with Greece and Rome.