A Letter to Boccaccio: Literary Humanism

Francesco Petrarch

Literary humanism, a movement to revive Classical literature and the values expressed in Classical writings, was central to the early Renaissance. This trend, which originated in northern Italy during the fourteenth century, represented a broadening in focus from otherworldly concerns and people as religious beings, which was typical to the Middle Ages, to include the problems of people and nature in this world. The individual most commonly associated with it and perhaps most responsible for its spread was the “Father of the Renaissance,” Florentine Francesco Petrarch (1304-1374). Best known for his love sonnets to Laura, he also collected and translated many Classical works and wrote numerous letters- often extolling the Classical authors and even writing in their style. In the following selection from a 1362 letter to his friend Boccaccio, Petrarch offered reassurance and responded to charges typically made against humanistic learning.

Consider: The nature of the charges Petrarch is refuting; how Petrarch relates humanism to religion; Petrarch’s perception of the benefits of literary humanism.

Neither exhortations to virtue nor the argument of approaching death should divert us from literature; for in a good mind it excites the love of virtue, and dissipates, or at least diminishes, the fear of death. To desert our studies shows want of self-confidence rather than wisdom, for letters do not hinder but aid the properly constituted mind which possesses them; they facilitate our life, they do not retard it. Just as many kinds of food which lie heavy on an enfeebled and nauseated stomach furnish excellent nourishment for one who is well but famishing, so in our studies many things which are deadly to the weak mind may prove most salutary to an acute and healthy intellect, especially if in our use of both food and learning we exercise proper discretion. If it were otherwise, surely the zeal of certain persons who persevered to the end could not have roused such admiration. Cato, I never forget, acquainted himself with Latin literature as he was growing old, and Greek when he had really become an old man. Varro, who reached his hundredth year still reading and writing, parted from life sooner than from his love of study. Livius Drusus, although weakened by age and afflicted with blindness, did not give up his interpretation of the civil law, which he carried on to the great advantage of the state…

Besides these and innumerable others like them, have not all those of our own religion whom we should wish most to imitate devoted to their whole lives to literature, and grown old and died in the same pursuit? Some, indeed, were overtaken by death while still at work reading and writing. To none of them, so far as I know, did it prove a disadvantage to be noted for secular learning…

While I know that many have become famous for piety without learning, at the same time I know of no one who has been prevented by literature from following the path of holiness. The apostle Paul was, to be sure, accused of having his head turned by study, but the world has long ago passed its verdict upon this accusation. If I may be allowed to speak for myself, it seems to me that, although the path to virtue by the way of ignorance may be plain, it fosters sloth. The goal of all good people is the same, but the ways of reaching it are many and various. Some advance slowly, others with more spirit; some obscurely, others again conspicuously. One takes a lower, another takes a higher path. Although all alike are on the road to happiness, certainly the more elevated path is the more glorious. Hence ignorance, however devout, is by no means to be put on a plane with the enlightened devoutness of one familiar with literature. Nor, can you pick me out from the whole array of unlettered saints, an example so holy that I cannot match it with a still holier one from the other group.
The city of Florence was ruled by the wealth and brilliant Medici family throughout most of the fifteenth century. After a brief republican interlude from 1492 to 1512, the Medici despots again gained control. One of those to suffer exile on the return of the Medici was Niccoló Machiavelli, who had worked in the Florentine diplomatic service. During his exile he wrote several books, the first of which, *The Prince* (1513), was a manual for rulers addressed to Lorenzo, the Medici prince. Written partially in the vain hope of regaining his official position, Machiavelli also pleaded with Lorenzo to put himself at the head of a “national” movement for the unification of the whole Italian peninsula and the expulsion of foreign armies.

Machiavelli had read deeply into the classics and, unlike so many of his predecessors who wrote about politics, had acquired a great deal of practical experience in government. Not concerned with ideal men and ideal societies or with religious principles, he confined himself to the realities of political life. His theories and recommendations were supported by examples which he drew from history. *The Prince* had influenced politicians and statesmen until our own day and Machiavelli’s name has become (probably unjustly) a synonym for that which is unscrupulous.

**Of the Things Which Men, and Especially Princes, Are Praised or Blamed**

It now remains to be seen what are the methods and rules for a prince as regards his subjects and friends… A man who wishes to make a profession of goodness in everything must necessarily come to grief among so many who are not good. Therefore it is necessary for a prince who wishes to maintain himself to learn how not to be good, and to use this knowledge and not use it according to the necessity of the case.

Leaving on one side, then, those things which concern only an imaginary prince, and speaking of those that are real, I state that all men, and especially princes, who are placed at a greater height, are reputed for certain qualities which bring them either praise or blame. Thus one is considered liberal, another…miserly;…one cruel, another merciful; one a breaker of his word, another trustworthy;…one humane, another haughty;…one frank, another astute; one hard, another easy; one serious, another frivolous; one religious, another an unbeliever, and so on. I know that everyone will admit that it would be highly praiseworthy in a prince to possess all the above-named qualities that are reputed good, but as they cannot all be possessed or observed, human conditions not permitting of it, it is necessary that he should be prudent enough to avoid the scandal of those vices without which it would be difficult to save the state, for it one considers well, it will be found that some things which seem virtues would, if followed, lead to one’s ruin, and some others which appear vices result in one’s greater security and well-being.

**Of Cruelty and Clemency, and Whether It Is Better to Be Loved or Feared**

Proceeding to the other qualities before names, I say that every prince must desire to be considered merciful and not cruel. He must, however, take care not to misuse this mercifulness.…

Nevertheless, he must be cautious in believing and acting, and must not be afraid of his own shadow, and must proceed in a temperate manner with prudence and humanity, so that too much confidence does not render him incautious…

From this arises the question whether it is better to be loved more than feared, or feared more than loved. The reply is one that ought to be both feared and loved, but as it is difficult for the two to go together, it is much safer to be feared than loved if one of the two has to be wanting. For it may be said of men in general that they are ungrateful,…anxious to avoid danger, and covetous of gain…And
the prince who has relied solely on their words, without making other preparations, is ruined; for the friendship which is gained by purchase and not through grandeur and nobility of spirit is bought but not secured… And men have less scruple in offending one who makes himself loved than one who makes himself feared; for love is held by a chain of obligation which, men being selfish, is broken whenever it serves their purpose; but fear is maintained by a dread of punishment which never fails.

Still, a prince should make himself feared in such a way that if he does not gain love, he at any rate avoids hatred; for fear and the absence of hatred may well go together, and will be always attained by one who abstains from interfering with the property of his citizens and subjects… And when he is obligated to take the life of anyone, let him do so when there is a proper justification and manifest reason for it; but about all he must abstain from taking the property of others, for men forget more easily the death of their father than the loss of their patrimony [inheritance]….

But when the prince is with his army and has a large number of soldiers under his control, then it is extremely necessary that he should not mine being thought cruel; for without this reputation he could not keep an army united or disposed to any duty….

I conclude, therefore, with regard to being feared and loved, that men love at their own free will, but fear at the will of the prince, and that a wise prince must rely on what is in his power and not on what is in the power of others, and he must only contrive to avoid incurring hatred, as has been explained.

**In What Way Princes Must Keep Faith**

How laudable it is for a prince to keep good faith and live with integrity, and not with astuteness, everyone knows. Still, the experience of our times shows those princes to have done great things who have had little regard for good faith, and have been able by astuteness to confuse men’s brains, and who have ultimately overcome those who have made loyalty their foundation.

You must know then that there are two methods of fighting, the one by law, the other by force; the fist method is that of men, the second of beasts; but the first method is often insufficient, one must have recourse to the second. It is therefore necessary for a prince to know well how to use both the beast and the man….

A prince being thus obliged to know well how to act as a beast must imitate the fox and the lion, for the lion cannot protect himself from traps, and the fox cannot defend himself from wolves. One must therefore be a fox to recognize traps and a lion to frighten wolves. Those that wish to be only lions do not understand this. Therefore, a prudent ruler ought not to keep faith when by so doing it would be against his interest, and when the reasons which made him bind himself no longer exist. If men were all good, their percept [rule] would not be a good one; but as they are bad and would not observe their faith with you, so you are not bound to keep faith with them. Nor have legitimate grounds ever failed a prince who wished to show … excuse for the nonfulfillment of his promise. Of this one could furnish an infinite number of modern example and show how many times peace has been broken, and how many promises rendered worthless by the faithlessness of princes; and those that have been best able to imitate the fox have succeeded best…

It is not, therefore, necessary for a prince to have all the above-named qualities, but is very necessary to seem to have them. I would ever be bold to say that to possess them and always to observe them is dangerous, but to appear to possess them is useful. Thus it is well to seem merciful, faithful, humane, sincere, religious, and also to be so; but you must have the mind so disposed that when it is needful to be otherwise you may be able to change to the opposite qualities. And it must be understood that a prince, and especially a new prince, cannot observe all those things which are considered good in en, being often obliged in order to maintain the state to act against faith, against charity, against humanity, and against religion. And therefore he must have a mind disposed to adapt itself according to the wind and as the variations of fortune dictate, and, as I said before, not deviate from what is good, if possible, but be able to do evil if constrained [compelled].
A prince must take great care that nothing goes out of his mouth which is not full of the above-named five qualities, and, to see and hear him, he should seem to be all mercy, faith, integrity, humanity, and religion.

The Renaissance Courtier

Like the ancient Greeks and Romans the admired, the Italians of the Renaissance were dedicated to living the good life on earth. They devoted themselves to the cultivation of all the qualities and talents of the individual. The ideal of the Renaissance was the well-rounded personality. Among the many books dealing with the education and training of the “universal man,” the most popular was Baldassare Castiglione’s The Book of the Courtier, published in Italian in 1528. Castiglione (1478-1529) was himself a courtier and a successful diplomat. His book was translated into many languages and went through numerous editions. Castiglione’s portrait of the perfect courtier and his instructions for the development of both body and mind provided a model for the training and the behavior of a gentleman for the upper classes in Europe.

I am of opinion that the principal and true profession of the Courier ought to be that of arms; which I would have him follow actively about all else, and be known among others as bold and strong, and loyal to whomsoever he serves. And he will win a reputation for these good qualities by exercising them at all times and in all places, since one may never fail in this without severest censure….

And… I would have him well built and shapely of limb, and would have him show strength and lightness and suppleness, and know all bodily exercises that befit a man of war: whereof I think the first should be to handle every sort of weapon well on foot and on horse, to understand the advantages of each, and especially to be familiar with those weapons that are ordinarily used among gentlemen….

[The Courtier should] avoid affectation to the uttermost; … and, to use possibly a new word, to practice in everything a certain nonchalance that shall conceal design and show that what is done and said is done without effort almost without thought….

Our Courtier then will be esteemed excellent and will attain grace in everything, particularly in speaking, if he avoids affectation; into which fault many fall, and often more than others, some of us Lombards, who, if they have been a year away from home, on their return oat once begin to speak Roman, something Spanish or French, and God knows how. And all this comes from overzeal to appear widely informed….

I think that what is chiefly important and necessary for the Courtier in order to speak and write well is knowledge….

Nor would I have him speak always of grave matters, but of amusing things, of games, jests, and wagery, according to the occasion; but sensibly of everything, and with readiness and lucid fullness; and in no place let him show vanity or childish folly….

I would have him more than passably accomplished in letters, at least in those studies that are called the humanities, and conversant not only with the Latin language but with the Greek, for the sake of the many different things that have been admirably written therein. Let him be well versed in the poets, and not less in the orators and historians, and also proficient in writing verse and prose, especially in this vulgar [vernacular] tongue of ours….

You must know that I am not content with the Courtier unless he be also a musician and unless, besides understanding and being able to read notes, he can play upon diver instruments. For if we consider rightly, there is to be found no rest from toil or medicine for the troubled spirit more becoming and praiseworthy in time of leisure than this….
I wish to discuss another matter, which I deem of great importance and therefore thing our Courtier ought by no means to omit: and this is to know how to draw and to have acquaintance with the very art of painting.

And do not marvel that I desire this are, which today may seem to savor of the artisan and little to befit a gentleman; for I remember having read that the ancients, especially thought Greece, had their boys of gentle birth study painting in school as an honorable and necessary thing.

The game of tennis ... is nearly always played in public, and is one of those sports to which a crowd tends much distinction. Therefore I would have our Courtier practice this, and all the others except the handling of arms, as something that is not his profession, and let him show that he does not seek or expect praise for it, nor let him seem to devote much care or time to it, although he may to it admirably...

Besides daily showing everyone that he possesses the worth we have already described, I would have the Courtier strive, with all the thoughts and forces of his mind, to love and almost to adore the prince whom he serves, above every other thing, and mold his wishes, habits, and all his ways to his prince’s liking...

Our Courtier... will not be a bearer of evil tidings; he will not be thoughtless in sometimes saying things that offend instead of pleasing as he intends. He will not be obstinate and disputatious, as some are who seem to delight in nothing but to be troublesome and disagreeable like flies, and who make a point of spitefully contradicting everyone...

Let him above all take care not to weary his lord, and let him wait for favors to be offered him rather than angle for them so openly as many do, who are so greedy that it seems as if they must die if they do not get what they seek....

I would that our Courtier... might love, honor, and respect others according to their worth and merits, and always contrive to consort [mingle] more with such as are in high esteem and noble and of known virtue, than with the ignoble and those of little worth; in such ways that he may be loved and honored by them also. And he will accomplish this if he be courteous, kind, generous, affable, and mild with others, zealous and active to serve and guard his friends’ welfare and honor both absent and present, enduring such of their natural defects as are endurable, without breaking with them for slight cause, and correcting himself those that are kindly pointed out...

I do not care at present to go more into detail in speaking of things that are too well known, such as that our Courtier ought not to avow himself a greater eater or drinker, or given to excess in any evil habit;... because a man of this kind not only may not hope to become a good Courtier, but can be set to do more fitting business than feeding sheep...

If our Courtier excels in anything besides arms, I would have him get profit and esteem from it in fine fashion; and I would have him so discreet and sensible as to be able with skill and address to attract men to see and hear what wherein he thinks he excels, always appearing not to do it from ostentation, but by chance and at others’ request rather than by his own wish... Then, in that of which he knows he is wholly ignorant, I would never have him make any pretense or seek to win any fame; nay if need be, let him frankly confess his ignorance....

I wish our Courtier to guard against getting the name of a liar or a boaster, which something befalls even those who do not deserve it....

Let it suffice to say, besides the things already said, that h should be of such sort as never to be without something to say that is good and well suited to those with whom he is speaking, and that he should know how to refresh the minds of his hearers with a certain sweetness, and by his amusing witticisms and pleasantry to move them cleverly to mirth and laughter.