

## **HUMANISM IN THE RENAISSANCE**

*"We have made you neither of heavenly nor of earthly form, neither mortal nor immortal, so that with free choice and dignity, you may fashion yourself into whatever form you choose"*

– Pico della Mirandola: *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, 1486

In a letter to Paul of Middleburg in 1492 Marsilio Ficino, Renaissance philosopher, philologist and physician, referred to his own times as 'a golden age which has restored to light the liberal arts which were almost extinct'. History has not successfully refuted his claim. The term 'La Rinascita' or 'rebirth' was coined by Giorgio Vasari (1511-74), painter, architect and art historian, in his *Vite* (Lives of the Artists, 1550) to describe developments from 14th to 16th century Italy in the visual arts that brought art closer to nature.

The word was elaborated in the 18th and 19th centuries. Voltaire suggested that the era was 'the time of Italy's glory' and one of the only four periods in human history worthy of consideration by a thinking person. In *The Revival of Classical Antiquity* (1859) Georg Voigt described the Middle Ages in terms of 'the corporative tendency', and the period, from Petrarch onwards, in terms of 'individuality and its rights'. Jules Michelet gave the word its French translation in his *Renaissance* (1855), where he characterised the period as one of 'the discovery of the world, the discovery of man'. Michelet's interpretation is thus much wider than Vasari's in viewing the Renaissance as an age of the discovery of truth and reason, of an eruption of life, of a programme of universal human history, and not merely as a period in the history of art. The emphasis has been changed to encompass the whole mind and spirit of man.

Jacob Burckhardt refined Michelet's ideas in *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860), a work which acquired classic status and which for many remains the most significant book ever written on the subject. He argued that the absence of centralised control in Italy had created an atmosphere of insecurity which encouraged the emergence of ruthless individuals, free spirits and geniuses. He referred to the role played by the Medici of Florence as cultural leaders. Cosimo de' Medici (1389-1464) was, in some respects, the godfather of the Renaissance. He was himself a classical scholar and at its height his library included more than 10,000 manuscripts of ancient Greek, Latin and Hebrew texts. His close friends were humanists like Niccolo Niccoli, Poggio Bracciolini and Marsilio Ficino, and he patronised artists and architects like Donatello, Brunelleschi, Fra Angelico and Fra Filippo Lippi. It was he, more than any other individual, who made Florence the centre of the Italian Renaissance. According to Burckhardt: "To Cosimo belongs the special glory of recognizing in the Platonic philosophy the fairest flower of the ancient world of thought, of inspiring his friends with the same belief, and thus of fostering within humanist circles themselves another and a higher resuscitation of antiquity" (p145). He established the Platonic Academy of Florence and appointed the neoplatonist Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) its first head. Cosimo is said to have died whilst listening to Ficino read one of Plato's *Dialogues*.

There are two aspects of Burckhardt's interpretation that concern us here: secularism and individualism. In contrast to the Middle Ages, Burckhardt argued that the Renaissance was a secular culture which revelled in pagan writings, art and values. This seems particularly evident in the art of the time. Botticelli painted *The Birth of Venus*; Titian painted *Sacred and Profane Love*; Donatello and Michelangelo glorified the nude figure.

Part IV of the book takes up Michelet's phrase in its title, 'The Discovery of the World and of Man' and includes the following famous statement: "In the Middle Ages both sides of human consciousness – that which was turned within as that which was tuned without – lay dreaming or half awake beneath a common veil. The veil was woven of faith, illusion and childish prepossession, through which the world and history were seen clad in strange hues. Man was conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people, party, family or corporation – only through some general category. In Italy this veil first melted into air; an *objective* treatment and consideration of the state and of all the things of this world became possible. The *subjective* side at the same time asserted itself with corresponding emphasis; man became a spiritual *individual*, and recognized himself as such".

In more recent, less optimistic times, it has been argued that the Renaissance is a powerful and seductive myth and that there was no clear line in European history which signals the end of the so-called Middle Ages. In the first place, there are arguments to the effect that so-called 'Renaissance men' were really rather medieval. They were allegedly more traditional in their behaviour, assumptions and ideals than we tend to think – and also more traditional than they saw themselves. Hindsight suggests that even Petrarch, 'one of the first truly modern men', according to Burckhardt, had many attitudes in common with the centuries he described as 'dark'. In the second place, the medievalists have accumulated arguments to the effect that the Renaissance was not such a singular event as Burckhardt and his contemporaries once thought and that the term should really be used in the plural, so that there were several Renaissances going back even as far as the 8th century. Finally, far from being secular, most Renaissance artists and thinkers were devout Christians and did not see a conflict between realising humanity's potential and having religious faith. Yet the critique of medieval religion, real or implied, was clearly present in the ideas of many humanists at the

time, and the explosion of creative talent was certainly real enough. After all, the period created, in Michelangelo and Shakespeare, respectively the greatest artist and the greatest poet who ever lived. Moreover, many of the main figures believed that they were living in an exciting new era. The liberal arts are 'now being reawakened and revived', declared Lorenzo Valla decades before Ficino announced a golden age.

The terms 'humanist' and 'humanism' have also been given a wide range of possible meanings and contexts. Alan Bullock in his book *The Humanist Tradition in the West* (1985) states that they are "words that no one has ever succeeded in defining to anyone else's satisfaction, protean words which mean very different things to different people and leave lexicographers and encyclopaedists with a feeling of exasperation and frustration". The two words were first used, centuries apart, in educational contexts and then expanded into wider cultural connotations.

'Humanist' originates in the Renaissance, but 'Humanism' – like 'isms' such as socialism, communism and capitalism – derives from the 19th century. It was coined in 1808 by the Bavarian educationalist Friedrich Immanuel Niethammer to refer to what had become a tradition of elitist education in the humanities. In the modern era both terms have acquired a non-theistic definition relating to the good life, the nature of man and man's place in the universe. In this broader philosophical conception, humanism has been applied backwards in time to the thought of many of the writers who were originally regarded as 'humanists' in the narrower, pedagogic, sense. In treating Renaissance humanists and humanism, I shall try to confine the discussion to those writers and thinkers who shared at least some of the broader humanist concerns. For there can be no doubt that the seeds of modern secular humanism were sown by Renaissance humanists.

The Italian word 'umanista' or 'humanista' was coined in the 15th century to denote a practitioner of the *studia humanitatis* or *artes liberales* (humanities or liberal arts). The term derived from ancient Rome and specifically Cicero's cultural ideal of *Humanitas*, 'the art of living well and blessedly through learning and instruction in the fine arts'. Aulus Gellius equated *Humanitas* with the Greek *paideia*, the classical Greek liberal education which was believed to develop the intellectual, moral and aesthetic capacities of a child. The aim was to prevent homo barbarus and instead help to create homo humanum, a civilised, virtuous human being. Thus in a real sense, humanism – even if that precise word was not used – was the Renaissance ideal.

Renaissance humanists interpreted *studia humanitatis* as a corpus of five subjects of study – grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history and moral philosophy – all based on the Latin and Greek classics. The 'humanists' themselves were generally teachers of these disciplines and, we should note, also sometimes poets and orators themselves. *Studia humanitatis*, or studies of humanity, were delineated from 'studia divinitatis', or studies of divinity, which concentrated on religious matters. So, already at the beginning, humanists focused on this life and its secular activities, not religion or the well-being of the soul in an after life; in other words, they were human-centred, not church-centred. Although they were usually, though not always, devout Christians, they promoted secular values and in this key respect they were genuine innovators.

## **CLASSICISM**

Appreciation of the classical past, though important, was not in Burckhardt's view the chief ingredient of the Renaissance. Nevertheless, we shall use it as a convenient starting point. A distinguishing feature of Renaissance humanists was,

as Paul Oscar Kristeller puts it, their belief that classical antiquity provided 'the common standard and model by which to guide all cultural activity'. We can see the attempt to regain possession of this classical legacy in the scholar and poet Francesco Petrarch (1304-74), sometimes called 'the father of Humanism'. In one of his poems he wrote: "Genius, virtue, glory now have gone, leaving chance and sloth to rule. Shameful vision this! We must awake or die". Disdaining what he believed to be the ignorance of the era in which he lived, Petrarch is credited with inventing, in the 1330s, the concept of the Dark Ages, and we might date the beginning of the Renaissance from this point. Classical Antiquity, so long considered the 'dark age' for its lack of Christianity, was now seen by Petrarch as the age of 'light' because of its cultural achievements, while his own time, lacking these achievements, was now seen as the age of darkness.

In the writings of ancient Greece and Rome Petrarch discerned a contrast between the contemplative, ascetic, other-worldly passivity of his own era and the more dynamic classical cultivation of worldly beauty, truth, ambition and personal ability. He spent much of his time travelling through Europe rediscovering and republishing the classic Latin and Greek texts and seeking to restore the classical Latin language to its former purity. "What else is all history", he wrote, "but the praise of Rome?" He even wrote letters to dead authors such as Cicero whom he says he addressed 'with a familiarity springing from my sympathy with his genius'. Cicero represented for him and many subsequent humanists the ideal of employing both wisdom and eloquence in the public good. It is important for our purposes to stress that Petrarch regarded the orator and the poet as philosophical teachers and with the philosophers of old he declared virtue and truth to be the highest goals of human endeavour. He viewed the preceding millennium as a time of stagnation and saw history unfolding, not along the religious outline of St. Augustine's Six Ages of the

World, but in cultural or secular terms, through the progressive developments of classical ideals, literature and art.

## **SECULARISATION OF EDUCATION**

A second distinguishing feature of Renaissance humanism was the secularisation of education. This was natural, since humanism was originally neither a philosophy nor a movement but a curriculum concerned with secular values. The central themes in all classical humanistic education was that 'no man was considered educated unless he was acquainted with the masterpieces of his tradition' and that 'the best way to a liberal education in the West is through the greatest works the West has produced'. In its earliest stages, the groundwork for the curriculum was laid down by private individuals such as Petrarch and public officials such as Coluccio Salutati (1331-1406), one of the most important leaders of Renaissance Florence and the city's chancellor for thirty years after 1375. A skilled writer and orator, he spent much of his salary on amassing a collection of 800 books, a large library by the standards of the time. He also pursued classical manuscripts, making a number of important discoveries, the most important being the lost letters of Cicero, which overturned the entire medieval conception of the Roman statesman. Coluccio also did important studies of history, tying Florence's origin not to the Roman Empire but to the Roman Republic. In his lifetime, the study of secular literature, especially pagan literature, was strongly frowned upon by the Roman Catholic Church. Coluccio played an important part in changing these viewpoints, frequently engaging in theological debates on the merits of pagan literature with Church officials. His eloquence prompted a bitter enemy from Milan to say that a thousand Florentine horsemen had hurt him less than the letters of Coluccio.

One of the most significant breaks with tradition came in the field of history. Leonardo Bruni (c.1370-1444), a successor to Salutati as chancellor (he held the post twice: in 1410, and from 1427 until his death), is credited with writing the first modern history book, *History of the Florentine People*. Bruni was the first historian to write about the three period view of history: Antiquity, Middle Age and Modern. The dates he uses to define the periods are not exactly what modern historians use today, but he laid the conceptual groundwork for a tripartite division of history. While it probably was not Bruni's intention to secularise the subject, the three period view of history is unquestionably secular, hence the 'modern' title he has acquired. It was Bruni and his fellow humanists such as Niccolo Niccoli and Poggio Bracciolini, appointed chancellor of Florence at the age of seventy three, probably with Cosimo's connivance, who believed they had reached the end of the Dark Age outlined by Petrarch and were entering a modern period, and thus logically called the intervening period a Middle Age. It was Bruni who used the phrase *studia humanitatis*, meaning the study of human endeavours versus those of theology and metaphysics, which is where the term 'humanists' originates.

Pier Paolo Vergerio the Elder (1370-c.1445), who was tutor of the princes of Carrara at their court at Padua and secretary to two popes and one emperor, wrote what could be regarded as the first humanist educational treatise, *De Ingeniis Moribus et Liberalibus Studiis* (On Noble Customs and Liberal Studies, circ.1402-4). In it he states: "We call those studies liberal which are worthy of a free man; those studies by which we attain and practise virtue and wisdom; that education which calls forth, trains, and develops those highest gifts of body and of mind which ennoble men, and which are rightly judged to rank next in dignity to virtue only... For to a vulgar temper, gain and pleasure are the one aim in existence, to a lofty mature, moral worth, and fame... For I may affirm with fullest conviction that we shall not have attained wisdom in our later years unless in our earliest we have sincerely

entered on its search". The historian John Hale (*The Civilization of Europe in the Renaissance*, HarperCollins, 1993, p192) points out that lessons were to shape the pupil's character and prepare him for a life of useful service. Grammar was to enable him to master the exemplary texts that would make his speech and writing easy and varied; history would provide him with examples of behaviour to shun or follow; poetry with a desire to imitate the virtues of the heroes of epic literature; and moral philosophy was to stress the high standards of personal behaviour that were expected of the responsible citizen.

Two other foundational figures in humanist education were Guarino Veronese (1374-1460) and Vittorino da Feltre (1373-1446), who had been a pupil of Vergerio. Guarino opened the first humanist school, in Venice about 1414, and Vittorino opened an academy for the training of pupils of both sexes in Mantua in 1423. They each independently designed an entire curriculum for their young students consisting of physical and intellectual education. They used the newly rediscovered texts of Quintilian as the model of their educational programme in which students had to master both Latin *and* Greek as well as acquire a thorough grounding in the works of Cicero, Plato, and Aristotle. This would become the model of Renaissance education in the century to follow. Vittorino summed up the civic thrust of humanist education: "Not everyone is called to be a physician, a lawyer, a philosopher, to live in the public eye, nor has everyone outstanding gifts of natural capacity, but all of us are created for the life of social duty, all are responsible for the personal influence that goes forth from us".

Lorenzo Valla (c.1406-1457), who was a pupil of Bruni, greatly enhanced the recovery of classical literature by developing sophisticated models of linguistic analysis to determine age and the sum total of the works, thoughts and faiths of humanity. Above everything else, the greatest human capacity is to be able to express or understand the whole of the human experience; in this light, the

principal freedom granted to humanity by God is freedom of inquiry. Thought indeed is free, and Renaissance humanists encouraged the ability of man to find out about the universe by his own efforts, and increasingly also to control it.

## **SCEPTICISM AND REASON**

The Protestant Reformation would not have been possible without the contribution of Renaissance humanism, which provided an intellectual justification for the challenge to Church authority. Looking back to classical times implied a criticism of the clerical and educational establishment that had dominated intellectual life throughout the Middle Ages. The dogmatism of the Catholic Church and the scholastic philosophy which it perpetrated were challenged by Renaissance humanists who claimed that it was not based sufficiently on practical experience or the needs of society, but relied too heavily on abstract thought. The humanists proposed to educate the whole person and placed emphasis not only on intellectual achievement, but also on physical and moral development. They were also generally drawn to ancient Greek and Roman scepticism. The rediscovery of Socrates in Plato's works for ever disputing static and unsatisfactory dogmas as to what was true or real set the pattern. The Greek word for 'doubt' or 'inquire' is *skepsis* and, after Plato, the Academy continued to be known for its 'scepticism'. The sixteenth century also saw the publication of the texts of Sextus Empiricus, a Greek writer who outlined the Hellenistic philosophy of scepticism known as Pyrrhonism. He argued that when we examine all claims to truth, we find that in many and various ways they are mutually contradictory or impossible and, to reach the state of ataraxia or peace of mind, philosophers must first learn to suspend judgement, that is, to believe to an equal degree any claim and its denial. On the other hand, the Academic sceptic, following Cicero's *Academica*, argued

that while there were no certain grounds for knowledge, we should behave as if there were enough bases of knowledge for us to function from day to day.

The fundamental attitude of academic scepticism denies the possibility of knowing anything for sure. What we perceive with our senses appears to be something, but we may be perceiving it wrongly. Doubt was thought by the sceptics to bring tranquillity, because the sceptic knows that he cannot know anything, and does not have to try hard to distinguish illusion and reality. In response, Stoics and Epicureans tried to establish in various ways a 'criterion of truth' or of certainty but their solutions failed to satisfy the Renaissance thinkers, and many of them turned their scepticism towards the Christian religion. We have seen that Valla was a pioneer of religious doubt. He was not alone. Pietro Pomponazzi (1462-1525) argued in *The Treatise on the Immortality of the Soul* (1516) that on all rational grounds man must be mortal because the mind, no less than the body, is adapted to and dependent upon the physical world. But the immortality which reason must deny faith may accept as a revealed truth. Pomponazzi thus stood for the separation of reason and faith, philosophy and theology. He, like Valla and Pico before him, ran into accusations of heresy.

Bernardino Telesio (1509-1588) was a fervent critic of metaphysics and insisted on a purely empiricist approach in natural philosophy – he thus became a forerunner of early modern empiricism. His book *De Rerum Natura* (On the Nature of Things, 1586) argued that all knowledge is sensation and that intelligence is therefore a collection of isolated data provided by the senses. This aroused the anger of the Church on behalf of its cherished Aristotelianism, and after his death his books were placed on the Index.

Others suffered worse fates. Tommaso Campanella (1568-1639), a Dominican from Stilo in Calabria, became a disciple of the Greek sceptics and a follower of Telesio. In 1591 he published *Philosophia Sensibus Demonstrata*, or 'Philosophy Demonstrated by the Senses', in defence of Telesio. Nature should be observed 'directly' rather than relying on the written texts and shibboleths of the past. The book was condemned by the Holy Office and Campanella was imprisoned for heresy. He got into more trouble for another work in which he argued that all nature was alive and that the world possessed a soul 'created and infused by God'. This time the Inquisition locked him up for 27 years. He eventually fled to France, where he lived his life out peacefully under the protection of Cardinal Richelieu. In 1622 he published his *Apologia pro Galileo* ('Defence of Galileo') in which he defended the Copernican system and the separate paths of Scripture and nature to knowledge of the Creator. He argued that truth about nature is not revealed in Scripture and claimed freedom of thought in philosophical speculation.

Giordano Bruno (1548-1600), a lapsed Dominican friar from the same region, was not so lucky. In *De l'Infinito, Universo e Mondi* (On the infinite Universe and Worlds, 1584) he argued that the universe is infinite and is full of a plurality of heliocentric systems, which are composed of matter and soul. Both matter and soul are two aspects of a single substance in which all opposites and all differences are reconciled. The soul of the universe is intelligent; it is – here Bruno takes a pantheistic view – in fact God. Birth is the individualization of the infinite (God) in the finite; death is the return of the finite to the infinite. Religion has a practical but not a theoretical value. Morality is the participation of the individual in the life of the universe. Bruno was charged with atheism because he identified God (the universe or external cause) and Nature (a different form of the universe although a totality of phenomena). To identify God and Nature was not a negation but an explanation, which construction led to Bruno's condemnation. This humanist

martyr, who championed the Copernican system and opposed the stultifying authority of the Church, refused to recant his philosophical beliefs throughout his eight years of imprisonment by the Venetian and Roman Inquisitions. In the early hours of the morning of 17th February 1600 he was taken to the Piazza dei Fiori in Rome and burnt alive at the stake.

His life stands as a testimony to the drive for knowledge and truth that marked the entire Renaissance epoch. In a sense, just as the period began about 1330, so it can be said to have reached its end, at least in its Italian manifestation, with Bruno's death in the year 1600. He challenged all dogmatism, including that of the Copernican cosmology, the main tenets of which, however, he upheld. He believed that our perception of the world is relative to the position in space and time from which we view it and that there are as many possible modes of viewing the world as there are possible positions. Therefore we cannot postulate absolute truth or any limit to the progress of knowledge.

Bruno wrote in one of his final works, *De triplici minimo* (1591): "He who desires to philosophise must first of all doubt all things. He must not assume a position in a debate before he has listened to the various opinions, and considered and compared the reasons for and against. He must never judge or take up a position on the evidence of what he has heard, on the opinion of the majority, the age, merits, or prestige of the speaker concerned, but he must proceed according to the persuasion of an organic doctrine which adheres to real things, and to a truth that can be understood by the light of reason".

## **NORTHERN EUROPE**

By Bruno's time the Renaissance had already spread north beyond Italy affecting, notably, the Netherlands, France and England. Both the Dutchman Desiderius Erasmus (c.1466-1536) and the Frenchman Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) continued and refined the sceptical tradition of the Italian humanists. The same is true of English humanism which reached its peak in Shakespeare and Bacon.

Although born in Rotterdam, Desiderius Erasmus (c.1466-1536) passed most of his life elsewhere – in Germany, France, England, Italy and especially Switzerland. As with Bruno and so many earlier humanists, Erasmus recommended collating arguments on both sides of a question but suspending judgment, except on religion which he believed was not rational but a matter of the heart. With his conciliatory and moderate attitude and his non-dogmatic and basically ethical type of Christianity, he had a major influence on the development of humanism, not only in Holland but throughout the western world.

He was a major inspiration of Martin Luther and the Reformation – he was the man who 'laid the egg that Luther hatched'. After his death, his writings were placed on the Catholic Index, which is hardly surprising; for example, in 1514 he anonymously published a satiric dialogue, *Julius Exclusus*, in which Pope Julius II is turned away from the gates of Heaven by St. Peter. *The Education of a Christian Prince* was published in 1516, 26 years before Machiavelli's *The Prince*. Whereas Machiavelli stated that to maintain control it is better for a prince to be feared than loved, Erasmus preferred for the prince to be loved, and suggested that he needed a well-rounded education in order to govern justly and benevolently and avoid becoming a source of oppression.

Erasmus's best-known work was *The Praise of Folly* (*Moriae Encomium*), a vitriolic satire on the traditions of the Catholic Church, clerical corruptions and popular

superstitions, written in 1509 at the house of Sir Thomas More, published in 1511 and dedicated to his host and fellow humanist (its title is a pun on More's name). Using the familiar device of the 'wise fool' and speaking in the name of Folly, the term used in the Middle Ages as a synonym for human nature, he satirises priests, popes, pardons and indulgences, the worship of saints, transubstantiation, theological disputes, scholasticism, and indeed spares no one and nothing inherent in the Christian religion of his day. Of course, since Folly says these things, who can take her seriously? But the device goes deeper than that, because for Erasmus it is important to distinguish follies to be praised from those to be condemned. For, he argues, truth can be foolish, folly truth. Everything is two-sided and it is only in a tolerant, irrational love that truth can be discovered. Religion, like life itself, is a folly but we should embrace both with all our heart and soul.

*The Praise of Folly* points up a significant difference between the northern humanists and their Italian predecessors. Most Italian humanists – the civic humanists – spoke to and for the upper-class elements in their city-states. They urged political leaders to become more statesmanlike, businessmen to become more generous with their wealth, and all to become more moral. They did not dissent or speak out in opposition; in urging the elite groups to assume their responsibilities, they were actually trying to defend, not condemn, them. Italian humanism focused on the liberality or parsimony of princes, on the moral worth of riches, and on the question of how to define true nobility. The northern humanists like Erasmus, on the other hand, spoke out against a broad range of political, social, economic, and religious evils. They faced reality and became ardent reformers of society's ills.

The northern humanists also went further than the Italians in broadening their interest in ancient literature to include early Christian writings, particularly the Scriptures and the works of the Church Fathers. This led them to prepare new and more accurate editions of the Scriptures (Erasmus's Greek edition of the New Testament became famous and was used by Luther) and to compare unfavourably the complexities of the church in their own day with the simplicity of early Christianity. Since they held that the essence of religion was morality and rational piety – what Erasmus called the 'philosophy of Christ' – rather than ceremony and dogma, it is not surprising that the church became a major target of their reforming zeal.

Although a reformer and a liberal, Erasmus remained a Catholic. He disliked the religious warfare of the time because of the intolerant atmosphere it induced. Luther's stand, like that of the Church itself, was rigid and inflexible, and Erasmus preferred the road of moderation and conciliation. He was finally brought into conflict with Luther and attacked his position on predestination in his work *A Diatribe or Sermon on the Freedom of the Will* (1524). His arguments include that whoever denies the freedom of the will makes God responsible for sin which would be inconsistent with God's righteousness and goodness and that the demands of God upon man assume his freedom, otherwise God would be a tyrant. He takes the view that man is free to accept or reject the grace of God. He writes: "By free choice in this place we mean a power of the human will by which a man can apply himself to the things which lead to eternal salvation, or turn away from them". Erasmus steers a middle course, advocating a hybrid of grace and free will so that salvation is both by merit and grace. God co-operates with man, and man with God. It is a joint venture, a partnership. Erasmus believed man was bound to sin, but had a right to the forgiving mercy of God, if only he would seek this through the means offered him by the Church itself.

A.C. Grayling explains that what makes Erasmus a humanist, albeit a Christian humanist, "is not simply his love of the classics and his application of them in his life and thought, but more importantly his belief in man's rationality and his ability to take moral responsibility for himself" (*What is Good?*, p113). The Catholic Church, with its emphasis on man as a weak, irrational, fallen creature, eventually disowned him.

Ironically, in some of these respects reformers like Luther and Calvin were closer to the Catholic Church than to humanists like Erasmus. Luther, who had been educated in scholastic theology with little humanist influence, didn't believe in free will and replied to Erasmus's work in 1525 with *On Enslaved Will*. Both Luther and Calvin were dogmatic and absolutist theologians who could not remotely be described as humanists. So, while on a broad historical scale the Reformation was a step towards secularism, in its early years it proved to be a mirror image of the Catholic hegemony beforehand. It is not Luther who is the real champion of free thought, however brave his 'Here I stand, I can do no other' speech at the Diet of Worms, but Erasmus and the other main humanists of the Renaissance.

We can see this truth also in French humanists, many of whom were greatly influenced by Erasmus. The comic novels *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, written by François Rabelais (c.1494-1553), a Franciscan monk, humanist, and physician, are among the most hilarious classics of world literature. His heroes of the title are rude but funny giants travelling in a world full of greed, stupidity and violence. His books were banned by the Catholic Church and later placed on the Index. Rabelais, originally writing under the name Alcofris Nasier – an anagram of his own name – satirised his society while putting forth his humanist views on educational reform and inherent human goodness. He made vitriolic attacks on the abuses of the church and the shortcomings of scholastics and monks, but he had no

patience with overzealous Protestants either. What Rabelais could not stomach was hypocrisy and repression and for those guilty of these tendencies he reserved his choicest invective. Even humanists themselves are gently ridiculed for their desperate attempts to quench a seemingly unquenchable thirst for knowledge, sometimes beyond human ability to understand.

There is a certain stoicism in Rabelais which is also found in Michel de Montaigne (1533-92), who at the age of thirty-eight gave up the practice of law and retired to his country estate and well-stocked library, where he studied and wrote. In ninety-four essays he set forth his personal views on many subjects although, as he himself said, "I am myself the matter of my book". He confessed that he had been brought up from infancy with the dead, that he had knowledge of the affairs of Rome long before he had any of his own house and that he knew the Tiber before he knew the Seine. He had a maxim inscribed on his library walls from Sextus Empiricus: "To any reason an equal reason can be opposed". He characterised his own approach as 'humanist', treating strictly human activities or 'fantasies' concerning subjects that are 'matters of opinion, not matters of faith', and treated in 'a lay not clerical manner', in contrast to that of the theologians, who nevertheless have a right to respect. He informed his readers that he did not pretend to have the final answer to the subjects he discussed and so he advocated open-mindedness and toleration, rare qualities in a period when France was racked by religious and civil strife.

Montaigne's scepticism was epitomised in his longest essay, *Apologie de Raimond Sebond*, which formed part of the Second Book of Essays published in 1580. Sebond was a 15th century Spanish theology professor at Toulouse whose *Theologia naturalis* (Natural Theology) was directed against the notion that reason and faith were irreconcilable. Sebond believed that God gave two books to man:

the book of nature and the Bible. At the Fall, man lost the ability to read the book of nature but he can succeed in reading it again if he is enlightened by God and cleansed of original sin. With faith and God's grace, man can read the book of nature correctly.

Much of Montaigne's *Apology* is taken up with an attempt to show that reason without the illumination of grace cannot give us knowledge. He deals not simply with Sebond's theological argument but with all forms of dogmatism and intellectual pretension. His essay demonstrates how like a animal man is, weak in reason, his senses unreliable, his morality irrational. The world is full of diversity and difference, the whole universe is characterised by flux and change.

So the question of how it is possible to be both a Catholic and a sceptic would be answered by Montaigne that, since we cannot grasp the nature of reality by either the senses or reason, only faith remains (according to Richard Popkin in *The History of Skepticism: From Erasmus to Spinoza*, Montaigne was a Catholic fideist, i.e. someone who uses scepticism in order to clear the ground for the entrance of Catholicism). In Montaigne's case this scepticism nevertheless reinforces the conviction that nothing can be known certainly. He famously wrote: "Man is certainly stark mad; he cannot make a worm, yet he will make gods by the dozen". On a purely human level, in his essays Montaigne tried to lay the bases for a new understanding of what it was to be human. Old philosophies had failed to find general solutions, a new search was in order, starting with the individual's self-study. Self-knowledge, one of the main tenets of ancient wisdom, would lead us to a mature acceptance of life in all its contradictions and to a realisation that every person is equally and fully human, a mixture of virtue and vice; that indeed 'the souls of emperors and cobblers are cast in the same mould'. Since there is no one perfect system of anything, diversity and tolerance are essential.

It is this affirmation of humility and human universality that, above all, renders Montaigne a humanist. He asks why should a gosling not say: "All parts of the universe have me in view: the earth serves for me to walk on, the sun to give me light, the stars to breathe their influences into me"? Like the goslings, we have tended to define the universe in our own image. So we egoistically imagine a transcendental purpose, mind and consciousness, all clothed in man-made form. But in a universe beyond human comprehension, Montaigne places us with the goslings rather than the gods. Although we are born to quest after truth, 'to possess it belongs to a greater power'. The world is 'but a school of inquiry', and success lies in the attempt.

The most significant figure in English humanism before Bacon and Shakespeare was Sir Thomas More (1478-1535), the friend of Erasmus. More is best known for his *Utopia*, the first important description of an ideal state since Plato's *Republic*. In this work, inspired by the Sermon on the Mount, More criticised his age by using as his spokesman a fictitious sailor who contrasts the ideal life he has seen in Utopia with the harsh conditions of life in England, a sad kingdom lacking in genuine Christian fellowship. Of course, 'utopia' means nowhere, and the work is ironic in that only in never-land can we overcome the facts of human nature and achieve total wisdom.

More's denunciations centred on the new acquisitive capitalism, which he blamed for the widespread insecurity and misery of the lower classes. More felt that governments "are a conspiracy of the rich, who, in pretence of managing the public, only pursue their private ends, ... first, that they may, without danger, preserve all that they have so ill acquired, and then, that they may engage the poor to toil and labour for them at as low rates as possible, and oppress them as much as they please".

In Utopia, by contrast, no one is in want because the economy is planned and cooperative and because property is held in common. Utopia is the only true commonwealth, concludes More's imaginary sailor: "In all other places, it is visible that while people talk of a commonwealth, every man only seeks his own wealth: but there, where no man has any property, all men zealously pursue the good of the public ... In Utopia, where every man has a right to every thing, they all know that if care is taken to keep the public stores full, no private man can want any thing; for among them there is no unequal distribution, so that no man is poor, none in necessity; and though no man has anything, yet they are all rich; for what can make a man so rich as to lead a serene and cheerful life, free from anxieties; neither apprehending want himself, nor vexed with the endless complaints of his wife?"

## **BACON AND SHAKESPEARE**

Finally, we come to the peak of the literary Renaissance which is found in Bacon and Shakespeare. Francis Bacon (1561-1626) was firmly rooted in the European humanist tradition. He was passionate in his belief that the world needed a Renaissance, although he used a different term, 'instauration' – which means restoration or renewal. In the Proem to *The Great Instauration* (1620), writing of himself in the third person, he states: "He thought all trial should be made, whether that commerce between the mind of man and the nature of things, which is more precious than anything on earth, or at least than anything that is of the earth, might by any means be restored to its perfect and original condition, or if that may not be, yet reduced to a better condition than that in which it now is". In other words, the 'instauration' was in Bacon's view an attempt to return to the pure state of Adam before the Fall when, being in close contact with God and nature, he

had insight into all truth and power over the created world. To this end, the plan would be 'to commence a total reconstruction of sciences, arts, and all human knowledge, raised upon the proper foundations'.

Although Bacon regarded himself as the instigator or prime mover of this project to bring 'human dominion over the universe', he acknowledged the role of his humanist predecessors. And of course he was himself a humanist in the most important respects: he was steeped in the literary classics of ancient Greece and Rome and wrote in Latin as well as English; he was predominantly secular in his interests and wrote less about god and more about people; although a genuine Christian, he had a sceptical, yet open-minded outlook; he was committed to truth, reason and tolerance; he championed the struggle for 'the relief of man's estate'; he had faith in the essential goodness of human nature; and, last but by no means least, he regarded himself as a great educator.

Yet he also felt that there was too much respect for the past among Renaissance writers who were blinded to the deficiencies of ancient thought by their contempt for medievalism. He believed it would be a great shame if "the bounds of the intellectual globe should be restricted to what was known to the ancients". *The Refutation of Philosophies* (1606-7) was a polemic directed at a number of ancient philosophers, particularly Aristotle and Plato, and similar attacks occur in *Cogita et Visa* (Thoughts and Conclusions), which dates from the same period. Aristotle was accused of mistakenly trying to construct a world out of his own dialectics: 'Aristotle's oracle', the syllogism, cannot cope with the obscurity and subtlety of nature, though it can be useful in dealing with subjective topics like ethics and politics. As for Plato, he corrupted the study of nature with theology through his doctrine of ideal forms. In *The Advancement of Learning* Bacon stated that

Democritus, a pre-Socratic, is superior to both Plato and Aristotle because of his greater reliance on experience.

Although writers such as Campanella and Bruno did criticise the Aristotelian system, in Bacon's view humanists had failed to provide a practical programme for the future. Scepticism was not enough because it was contemplative, not active. In *The Advancement* he criticised some humanists for their 'delicate learning', which showed a preference for style over substance and eloquence of language in imitation of ancient authors to weightiness of matter and depth of judgment. Instead, he regarded the educator or philosopher as an active agent who manipulated nature in the production of good works. He was forever using the images of the hunt and exploration to represent the pursuit of knowledge and truth and himself as the herald or trumpeter of a new world.

Bacon would have completely agreed with Marx that philosophers have interpreted the world in various ways, but the point is to change it – or, at least, to develop a philosophy of progress that would act as a guide to change and the discovery of new knowledge. This did not necessarily mean substituting a 'system' in place of Aristotle's; indeed he expressly denied any desire to do this. Bacon did not want to become an idol to be worshipped or obeyed; instead he wanted to create a route to be followed (the word 'method' is misleading because Bacon uses it in the sense of delivering knowledge, not discovering knowledge).

The route that he outlined is very similar to the hypothetico-deductive method outlined by Karl Popper and others, even though he is sometimes portrayed as a pure and naive empiricist who simply advocated the collection of facts. According to Bertrand Russell in his *History of Western Philosophy* Bacon hoped that mere orderly arrangement of data would make the right hypothesis obvious, but his

conception of the inductive method is much more subtle than Russell supposes in recognising the importance played by theories. There is a fusion of reason and critically examined experience in the process which renders Bacon very 'modern' in his view of the process of scientific discovery. In *The Idea of History*, R.G. Collingwood regarded Bacon as one of the great masters of the 'logic of questioning' and described his theory of experimental science as based on a logic of question and answer.

Bacon was not a scientist in the professional sense: he formulated no new scientific hypothesis and contributed to none of the discoveries destined to alter the scientific horizon. But, first of all, to quote Perez Zagorin, "his opposition to the old regime of knowledge and the authority of the past was nevertheless crucial in the development of science" (*Francis Bacon*, Princeton, 1999, p127). He helped to create a new vision of the world by developing reasoned arguments to show new possibilities for the progress of knowledge. The very idea of 'experimental science' is a tribute to him. Secondly, he persuasively argued that science is not merely theoretical but can and should transform the condition of life on earth in accordance with the values of compassion, brotherhood and progress. Truth and human welfare are inextricably bound together. Thirdly, the extension of power over nature is never the work of a single investigator but the fruit of an organised, co-operative and collective effort. In short, Bacon added further dimensions to Renaissance Humanism in his emphasis on the practical, social and moral uses of science and philosophy.

This becomes clearer when we consider what he actually said about human affairs. For it is completely wrong to assume that Bacon was only or mainly concerned about the physical world. In fact, as Brian Wormald argues, Bacon had two equally important and interrelated programmes: the world of nature and the world of man

(*Francis Bacon: History, Politics and Science*, Cambridge, 1993). He maintained that the inductive method was applicable to all the sciences, including ethics and politics, and he also stated that he applied it in his own works. It is not clear to which works he referred, but the fact of the matter is that he recommended reading the works of historians and poets because they show characters in action and the Shakespeare canon would be a paradigm of Bacon's induction as applied to human nature. Moreover, the plays perfectly combine the parts of human learning which he outlines in the *Advancement*: "The parts of human learning have reference to the three parts of man's understanding, which is the seat of learning: history to his memory, poesy to his imagination, and philosophy to his reason". Who can deny that the Shakespeare plays are an inductive analysis of human behaviour through the dramatic fusion of history, poetry and philosophy? They are, indeed, a study of human nature precisely as Bacon advocated.

Bacon's moral philosophy which, as Zagorin suggests, is 'fundamentally secular and autonomous in its character', lies fully in the tradition of Renaissance civic humanism in its endorsement of the active life – the *vita activa* – of engagement in the world as a citizen on behalf of the common good. The travesty that he favoured Machiavelli's moral outlook lingers on, despite the evidence to the contrary. Nothing could be more remote from Machiavelli's views than the essay *Of Goodness, and Goodness of Nature*, which opens: "I take goodness in this sense, the affecting of the weal of men, which is that the Grecians call philanthropia; and the word humanity (as it is used) is a little too light to express it. Goodness I call the habit, and goodness of nature the inclination. This, of all virtues and dignities of the mind, is the greatest, being the character of the Deity: and without it man is a busy, mischievous, wretched thing, no better than a kind of vermin".

The beautiful ending of this essay, which is a quintessential statement of Humanism, is also worth quoting: "If a man be gracious and courteous to strangers, it shows he is a citizen of the world, and that his heart is no island cut off from other lands, but a continent that joins to them: if he be compassionate towards the afflictions of others, it shows that his heart is like the noble tree that is wounded itself when it gives the balm: if he easily pardons and remits offences, it shows that his mind is planted above injuries, so that he cannot be shot: if he be thankful for small benefits, it shows that he weighs men's minds, and not their trash: but, above all, if he have St Paul's perfection, that he would wish to be an anathema from Christ for the salvation of his brethren, it shows much of a divine nature, and a kind of conformity with Christ himself".

In his essay *Of Wisdom for a Man's Self*, Bacon writes: "Wisdom for a man's self is, in many branches thereof, a depraved thing: it is the wisdom of rats, that will be sure to leave a house somewhat before it fall: it is the wisdom of the fox, that thrusts out the badger who digged and made room for him; it is the wisdom of crocodiles, that shed tears when they would devour". In truth Bacon's writings are littered with attacks on selfishness and expediency, and Fowler is clearly right when he suggests: "His place is, surely, not with the small class of moralists, who, like Machiavelli, Hobbes and Mandeville, appeal only, or mainly, to the selfish instincts of mankind, or to the reflections of a cool self-love, but with that far larger class who recognise benevolent principles of action as co-ordinate with and often controlling those which merely regard ourselves" (T. Fowler: *Francis Bacon*, 1881, p44).

One fact which perhaps induces a misunderstanding of Bacon's ethical concern is his practice of avoiding preaching and moralising. This habit was deliberately cultivated, and in *The Advancement of Learning* he tells us the reason: "Another

precept is, that the mind is brought to anything better, and with more sweetness and happiness, if that whereunto you pretend be not first in the intention, but tanquam aliud agendo (as if they doing something else), because of the natural hatred of the mind against necessity and constraint". It is therefore all the more interesting that those who most strongly deny the moral intentions of Shakespeare are nevertheless often the first to insist that he is a great moral teacher. It is worth emphasising that Bacon regarded 'the poets and writers of histories' as the best 'doctors' of moral knowledge, and Shakespeare would appear to have fulfilled this very task and in the very manner that Bacon outlined.

There are two important ethical principles which Bacon stressed. First, morality at least partly consists in the rationalisation of the passions: "The end of logic is to teach forms of argument, in order to guard the understanding, not to ensnare it; in like manner, the end of ethics is so to compose the passions, that they may fight on the side of reason, and not invade it". Also, according to Bacon, 'rhetorical art' (drama?) also has this function: it should 'contract a confederacy between the reason and imagination against the affection'. This emphasis on the importance of reason in controlling the emotions is found throughout Bacon's works.

The second principle is to establish a balance between the self and others. Bacon's approach is the heart of liberalism: "the sum of behaviour is to retain a man's dignity, without intruding upon the liberty of others". And this idea is repeated in the essay *Of Wisdom for a Man's Self*: "Be so true to thyself as thou be not false to others". In other words, only pursue your own ends to the extent that they do not conflict with the ends of other people. Where they do, Bacon is emphatic that the public or common good should prevail over private or individual good. Bacon never believed that science and technology, as such, represented the salvation of man. This liberation can be painfully achieved only through the labour, the works,

the well-being of the whole of humanity. Humanism believes that human well-being or, in Bacon's words, 'the relief of man's estate' through 'the effecting of all things possible', requires the responsible search for truth through freedom, reason, empirical research and tolerance. This was exactly what Bacon believed. It was, he said, his hope that 'there may spring helps to man, and a line and race of inventions that may in some degree subdue and overcome the necessities and miseries of humanity'.

Shakespeare shared all the characteristics of a humanist that we have discussed. He was a man of the highest culture and a large familiarity with the classics, which are of central importance in the plays and in the structure of his imagination. The works are saturated with his favourite classical authors, especially Ovid, Virgil, Seneca, Plautus, Cicero, Terence and Plutarch. Indeed, he has the ancient mythology and history at his finger tips. He also shared the Renaissance desire to seek the truth about human nature. The ancient adage *nosce teipsum* - know thyself - was a key principle of humanist thought and Hamlet's speech about holding the mirror up to nature implies that poetry and drama can help us to acquire that wisdom. By doing so, we can better guard against the barbarism lurking below the surface which the baser side of human nature creates and instead promote the more civilised values. As Robin Headlam Wells writes, Shakespeare's plays show their humanist origins in the themes they dramatise: "Repeatedly, they come back to those matters that concern Duke Vincentio in *Measure for Measure*: 'the properties of government', 'our city's institutions', 'the terms for common justice', 'the nature of our people'" (*Shakespeare's Humanism*, p27).

At first glance, the brand of Humanism espoused by Shakespeare seemed closer to Montaigne than Bacon. True, he appeared to be much less religious than Montaigne, but the great nihilistic speeches of Hamlet, Macbeth and Lear have

distinct echoes in the Psalms and the Book of Job, and Shakespeare's Christian ethic was subtly and deeply woven into the works. About human nature, both Montaigne and Shakespeare have been described as 'disillusioned' Humanists who stressed the limitations of reason and understanding, in contrast to the optimism of Bacon and most other Renaissance writers, who believed that cultivating reason would lead to a better understanding of how to act and thus to great benefits for society as a whole. Shakespeare's apparent scepticism about such matters is exemplified in Hamlet's famous speech: "What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty! In form and moving how express and admirable! In action how like an angel! In apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the world! The paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?" (*Hamlet*, Act II, Scene II). This appears to be a counterblast to Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man*.

Yet we must not assume that Hamlet's pessimistic nihilism is Shakespeare's final verdict. At this stage of the play Hamlet is a confused and disillusioned idealist. But he matures as he grows older. Ultimately the play challenges Hamlet's early cynicism. Similarly, the author himself shows progression from the tragedies to the late romances, where the message is both quintessentially humanist and optimistic about the future.

Prospero in *The Tempest* is a metaphor for the civilising power of the artist and educator whose 'liberal arts' tame the tempests in the human spirit. He exhibits the ennobling qualities of compassion, generosity, friendship, wisdom, and so on. He does not seek to retaliate against those who wronged him; he seeks only to bring them out of the darkness of hatred and revenge. In this respect, it has been suggested that he is like the Renaissance humanist who builds a bridge for the

Dark Ages to cross into the enlightenment of a new age in which humankind renounces its old barbarity and savagery.

Bernard D. Grebanier writes: "Shakespeare is perhaps the perfect expression of Renaissance humanism. His profound sympathy for humanity enabled him to pierce to the very core of his characters; his unexcelled gifts as a poet made his men and women unforgettable creatures of flesh and blood. This may be said as much of the best of his earliest plays as of *The Tempest*, where Prospero is himself a kind of incarnation of the best of what the Renaissance had extended to mankind" (Bernard D. Grebanier, et al. *English Literature and Its Backgrounds*, New York: Holt, 1950 (p 242).

It is also important to stress that, like many Renaissance humanists, Shakespeare delighted more in presenting issues than in espousing systems and held critical awareness, as opposed to doctrinal rectitude, to be the highest possible good. An increasing number of writers are becoming aware of the deliberately dialectical and provisional nature of his works and the fact that they dramatise the unresolvable tensions that are the fundamental conditions of life. Similarly, his unparalleled realism may be seen as the ultimate embodiment, in poetic terms, of the intense concern for specificity endorsed by humanists from the 14th century on. Shakespearean drama is a treasury of the disputes that frustrated and delighted humanism, including (among many others) action versus contemplation, theory versus practice, art versus nature, appearance versus reality, dogmatism versus scepticism, *res versus verbum*, monarchy versus republic, human dignity versus human depravity, and individualism versus communality.

And was Shakespeare's ethic also a humanist one? Like Bacon, he eschews moralising. Bacon's sentiment that preaching constrains the mind is echoed by

Lucio in *Measure for Measure*: "And yet, to say the truth, I had as lief have the foppery of freedom as the morality of imprisonment". The absence of an obvious ethical viewpoint has led some critics to assume that Shakespeare has none. Dr Johnson lamented that 'he sacrifices virtue to convenience, and is so much more careful to please than to instruct that he seems to write without any moral purpose'. Yet Johnson forgets the Renaissance habit of instructing by pleasing.

Consider Hamlet's 'mirror up to nature' speech. Here the playwright seems to be telling us what he is trying to do in his plays, and Johnson concludes that Shakespeare is indeed a great poet of human nature in the sense of laying it bare in all its great variety. But Levin comments: "The Elizabethan conception of art as the glass of nature was ethical rather than realistic, for it assumed that, by contemplating situations which reflected their own, men and women could mend their ways and act with greater resolution thereafter" (H. Levin: *The Question of Hamlet*, 1959, p157). In other words, Shakespeare is doing precisely what Bacon is advocating: by exposing the weaknesses, cynicism and evil in the world and the destructive consequences which they inevitably produce, the writer is educating his readers to avoid the same mistakes. And he is doing it through 'the foppery of freedom' rather than the 'morality of imprisonment'. In fact, Shakespeare states this purpose clearly in Jaques' speech in *As You like It*:

*"Invest me in my motley; give me leave  
To speak my mind, and I will through and through  
Cleanse the foul body of th'infected world,  
If they will patiently receive my medicine"*

Shakespeare's plays are profoundly moral and deal with the deepest ethical themes and issues. The clearest indication of Shakespeare's moral purpose is that evil never triumphs in the plays. It always suffers ultimate defeat. Othello does not

end with Iago gloating over the dead bodies of Othello and Desdemona. Hamlet does not end with the prince destroying his enemies and ruling Denmark happily ever after. Even characters who are essentially good are punished for their evil acts; so in a sense Hamlet dies for the killing of Polonius and Romeo for slaying Tybalt. The ultimate defeat of evil is not strictly 'realistic' and in this sense Shakespeare's 'feigned' histories - to use Bacon's language - 'submit the shows of things to the desires of the mind'.

Again, when we seek to discover Shakespeare's basic ethical principles, we find a lack of fixed, predetermined dogma. And, again, there are a few exceptions, the importance of reason being an obvious one. 'Unbitted lusts' and passions, combined with egotism, overcoming reason is a constant theme. The title of *The Tempest* symbolises the storms of the emotions. Prospero seeks revenge for his banishment, but the movement of the play is towards the recovery of his humanity. In forgiveness he finds not only a way towards justice but also a road back into human society itself. And by submitting his capacity to reason, Prospero epitomises Renaissance Humanist thought: "Yet with my nobler reason 'gainst my fury do I take part: the rarer action is in virtue than in vengeance". In *The Tempest* we see Shakespeare's supreme humanism at work, expressing not only a feeling for human fallibility but also an ability to see man as a potential godlike creature with powers of moral judgment finally equal to the emotional struggles these powers engender.

As in Bacon, so in Shakespeare we find also this preoccupation with 'balance' between self and others. It is noticeable that all Shakespeare's villains are individualists, motivated primarily by egotism. Richard of Gloucester sums it up: "I am myself alone". Parolles in *All's Well That Ends Well* avers: "Simply the thing I am shall make me live". And Iago says: "In following him, I follow but myself". The

selfish ambitions of such people, or their lust or envy, lead to chaos and disaster. Moreover, by asserting themselves at the expense of others, they become isolated not only from other people but also from themselves. So, after the death of Duncan, Macbeth confesses that: "To know my deed, 'twere best not know myself". The evil acts snowball, and the result is described by Albany in King Lear:

*"If that the heavens do not their visible spirits  
Send quickly down to tame these vile offences,  
It will come  
Humanity must perforce prey on itself,  
Like monsters of the deep" (4: 2).*

Hamlet, Othello, Lear, Macbeth, and so on, are all faced with the choice of putting themselves or others first. Their tragedies therefore arise ultimately from their selfishness. Yet, it is curious irony that one of Shakespeare's great 'messages' is often assumed to lie in the advice of the selfish opportunist Polonius:

*"This above all, to thine own self be true,  
And it must follow, as the night the day,  
Thou canst not then be false to any man"  
(Hamlet, 1: 2).*

Despite the beauty of the words, the sentiment is assuredly not Shakespeare's. Polonius thinks that we should put ourselves and our own interests first. Shakespeare believes precisely what Bacon says in the essay *Of Wisdom for a Man's Self*: "Divide with reason between self-love and society; and be so true to thyself as thou be not false to others". Bacon is saying that we should only be true to our own ends *in so far as* they do not conflict with others; while Polonius is offering purely

selfish advice. If we are true only to our own ends, then logically we can only appear 'false' to others by their standards, not by our own.

On the positive side, Shakespeare extols the same virtues as Bacon. Thus when Lady Macbeth suggests to her husband that his nature is 'too full o' the milk of human kindness', she wants him to become less human and more of a monster. An essential feature of kindness is the capacity for fellow-feeling, and clearly Shakespeare's good characters have this quality in common. It is also this quality that shines through the entire works and causes commentators to refer to Shakespeare's great compassion. Indeed, love of humanity - or what Bacon calls 'philanthropia' - is the overriding theme of the plays (the tragedies illustrate the loss of this love).

Repentance and forgiveness are continually stressed and Portia's great speech about the quality of mercy in *The Merchant of Venice* expresses sentiments which surely lie deeply in the heart of the author. Note, in particular, the end where she says of mercy that:

*"It is an attribute to God himself;  
And earthly power doth them show likest God's  
When mercy seasons justice" (4:1).*

These lines echo the end of Bacon's essay *Of Goodness and Goodness of Nature*, when he says that love of one's fellows 'shows much of a divine nature, and a kind of conformity with Christ himself'.

In Shakespeare and Bacon we come face to face with the acme of Renaissance Humanism. There is the same desire to make human beings the focus of attention

and to write about universal moral and philosophical problems, the same superficial absence of moral preaching combined with deep moral concerns, the same belief in balance or moderation in the claims of self and others, and the same emphasis on reason mixed with compassion and love of humanity. This identity of moral thinking might even lead to the conclusion that Bacon wrote Shakespeare.