

*A Document Study of the Italian Renaissance*  
*"Idealism and Humanism in Renaissance Italy"*

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Document One

Excerpt from "Funeral Oration" by Leonardo Bruni (Florentine scholar and chancellor who lived from 1370-1440).

"Now the knowledge of Greek literature, which had decayed in Italy for more than 700 years, has been revived and restored by our city. Now we are able to confront the greatest philosophers, the admirable orators, and other men of outstanding learning, not through the obscurity of clumsy interpretations but face to face. Finally, these humanities (*studia humanitatis*) most excellent and of highest value, especially relevant for human beings, necessary both for private and public life, adorned with a knowledge of letters worthy of free men, have originated in our city and are now thriving throughout Italy."

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Document Two

Excerpts from "Concerning the Study of Literature" by Leonardo Bruni.

"...familiarity with the great poets of antiquity is essential to any claim to true education. For in their writings we find deep speculations upon Nature, and upon the Causes and Origins of things, which must carry weight with us both from their antiquity and from their authorship. Besides these, many important truths upon matters of daily life are suggested or illustrated. All of this is expressed with such grace and dignity as demands our admiration...."

"We know, however, that in certain quarters, where all knowledge and appreciation of letters is wanting, this whole branch of Literature, marked as it is by something of the Divine, and fit, therefore, for the highest place, is decried as unworthy of study. But when we remember the value of the best poetry, its charm of form and the variety and interest of its subject matter, when we consider the ease with which from our childhood up it can be committed to memory, when we recall the peculiar affinity of rhythm and meter to our emotions and our intelligence, we must conclude that nature herself is against such headlong critics....Plato and Aristotle studied the poets, and I decline to admit that in practical wisdom or in moral earnestness they yield to our modern critics. They were not Christians, indeed, but consistency of life and abhorrence of evil existed before Christianity and are independent of it."

*WHY UNWORTHY*

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Document Three

Excerpts from the autobiography of Leon Battista Alberti (Florentine scholar; 1404-72) written by himself (even though he is writing in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person, he is talking about himself!).

"In everything suitable to one born free and educated liberally, he was so trained from boyhood that among the leading young men of his age he was considered by no means the last....he was devoted to the knowledge of the most strange and difficult things. And he embraced with zeal and forethought everything which pertained to fame.

"He strove so hard to attain a name in modeling and painting....his genius was so versatile that you might almost judge all the fine arts to be his....Letters, in which he delighted so greatly, seemed sometimes like flowering and richly fragrant buds, so that hunger or sleep could scarcely distract him from his books...."

"He played ball, hurled the javelin, ran, leaped, wrestled, and above all delighted in the steep ascent of mountains; he applied himself to all these things for the sake of health rather than sport or pleasure. As a youth he excelled in warlike games. With his feet together, he could leap over the shoulders of men standing by; he had almost no equal among those hurling the lance. An arrow shot by his hand from his chest could pierce the strongest iron breastplate. With his left foot lifted from the ground to the wall of a church, he could throw an apple into the air so high that it would be far beyond the top of the highest roofs...."

"On horseback, holding in his hand one end of a long wand, while the other was firmly fixed to his foot, he could ride his horse violently in all directions for hours at a time as he wished, and the wand would remain completely immobile. Strange and marvelous that the most spirited horses....would, when he first mounted them, tremble violently and shudder as if in great fear...."

"He could endure pain and cold and heat...showing by example that men can do anything with themselves if they will."

*HE IS A SCHOLAR, BUT ONLY TALKS ABOUT PHYSICAL*

Document Four

Excerpts from "Oration on the Dignity of Man" by Pico della Mirandola (1463-94)

"NOW THE HIGHEST FATHER, GOD THE ARCHITECT, ACCORDING TO THE LAWS OF HIS SECRET WISDOM, BUILT THIS HOUSE OF THE WORLD....HE ANIMATED THE CELESTIAL SPHERES WITH ETERNAL SOULS, AND HE FILLED THE EXCREMENTARY AND FILTHY PARTS OF THE LOWER WORLD WITH A MULTITUDE OF ANIMALS. BUT WHEN HIS WORK WAS FINISHED, THE ARTISAN LONGED FOR SOMEONE TO REFLECT ON THE PLAN OF SO GREAT A CREATION, TO LOVE ITS BEAUTY, AND TO ADMIRE ITS MAGNITUDE....HE BEGAN AT LAST TO CONSIDER THE CREATION OF MAN.

"BUT AMONG HIS ARCHETYPES THERE WAS NONE FROM WHICH HE COULD FORM A NEW OFFSPRING, NOR IN HIS TREASURE HOUSES WAS THERE ANY INHERITANCE WHICH HE MIGHT BESTOW UPON HIS NEW SON....EVERYTHING HAD BEEN APPORTIONED TO THE HIGHEST, THE MIDDLE, AND THE LOWEST ORDERS. BUT IT WAS NOT IN KEEPING WITH THE PATERNAL POWER TO FAIL, AS THOUGH EXHAUSTED, IN THE LAST ACT OF CREATION....FINALLY THE GREAT ARTISAN ORDAINED THAT MAN, TO WHOM HE COULD GIVE NOTHING BELONGING ONLY TO HIMSELF, SHOULD SHARE IN COMMON WHATEVER PROPERTIES HAD BEEN PECULIAR TO EACH OF THE OTHER CREATURES....

REFERS TO GOD AS THE "GREAT ARTISAN"

"O SUBLIME GENEROSITY OF GOD THE FATHER! O HIGHEST AND MOST WONDERFUL FELICITY OF MAN! TO HIM IT WAS GRANTED TO HAVE WHAT HE CHOOSES, TO BE WHAT HE WILLS....WHEN MAN CAME INTO LIFE, THE FATHER ENDOWED HIM WITH ALL KINDS OF SEEDS AND WITH THE GERMS OF EVERY WAY OF LIFE. WHATEVER SEEDS EACH MAN CULTIVATES WILL GROW AND BEAR FRUIT IN HIM. IF THESE SEEDS ARE VEGETATIVE, HE WILL BE LIKE A PLANT; IF THEY ARE SENSITIVE, HE WILL BECOME LIKE THE BEASTS; IF THEY ARE RATIONAL, HE WILL BECOME LIKE A HEAVENLY CREATURE; IF INTELLECTUAL, HE WILL BE AN ANGEL AND A SON OF GOD.... WHO THEN WILL NOT WONDER AT THIS CHAMELEON OF OURS?

"MAY SOME HOLY ASPIRATION ENTER INTO OUR HEARTS, SO THAT WE ARE NOT CONTENT WITH MIDDLING THINGS, BUT PANT FOR THE HIGHEST AND STRAIN TO ACHIEVE THEM, SINCE WE CAN IF WE WILL."

Document Five

A description of Lorenzo de Medici (1449-92), the "magnificent" who was the head of government in Florence and a banker.

"The Magnifico called to him, from every part of Italy, men of genius, writers and artists of reputation....Poets of every kind....came from every quarter to animate the suppers of the Magnifico; whosoever sang of arms, of love, of saints, of fools, was welcome, or he who drinking and joking kept the company amused....Sometimes a select band of painters and sculptors collected in his garden...designing, modelling, painting, copying the Greek statues, and the torsi and busts found in Rome or elsewhere in Italy."

Document Six

Excerpt from the poem "The Song of Bacchus" written by Lorenzo "the Magnificent" de Medici.

"Sweet ladies and young lovers, come,  
Long live Bacchus and long live love!  
Let everyone play and dance and sing,  
And fill your hearts with joy.  
Do not toil and do not grieve,  
What's to be will come anyway.  
Be happy, if you will, today,  
Tomorrow is unsure."

Document Seven

Excerpts from the "Advent Sermon" given by Girolamo Savonarola, a Florentine monk (1452-98).

"Go thou to Rome and throughout Christendom; in the mansions of the great prelates and great lords there is no concern save for poetry and the oratorical art. Go thither and see; thou shalt find them all with books of the humanities in their hands, and telling one another they can guide men's souls by means of Virgil, Horace, and Cicero....And there is no prelate nor great lord that hath not intimate dealings with some astrologer, who fixeth the hour and the moment in which he is to undertake some piece of business..."

"Thou seest the great prelates with splendid miters of gold and precious stones on their heads, and silver crosiers in hand; there they stand at the altar, decked with fine copes and stoles of brocade, chanting those beautiful vespers and masses, and with so many grand ceremonies, so many organs and choristers, that thou art struck with amazement....But dost thou know what I would tell thee? In the primitive church the chalices were of wood, the prelates of gold; in these days the church hath chalices of gold and prelates of wood.

"What doest Thou, O Lord? Why dost Thou slumber? Arise and come to deliver Thy church from the hands of the devils!... hasten then the chastisement and the scourge, that it may be quickly granted us to return to Thee....Be ye not scandalized, O my brethren.... The only hope is that the sword of God may soon smite the earth."

## Document Eight

Comments on art and nature from the notebook of Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), an Italian artist, inventor, and scientist.

*"I am fully aware that the fact of my not being a man of letters may cause certain arrogant persons to think that they may with reason censure me, alleging that I am a man ignorant of book-learning. Foolish folk! Do they not know that I might retort by saying, as did Marius to the Roman patricians, "They who themselves go about adorned in the labor of others will not permit me my own." They will say that because of my lack of book-learning, I cannot properly express what I desire to treat of. Do they not know that my subjects require for their exposition experience rather than the words of others? And since experience has been the mistress of whoever has written well, I take her as my mistress, and to her in all points make my appeal.*

*"The painter will produce pictures of little merit if he takes the works of others as his standard; but, if he will apply himself to learn from the objects of nature, he will produce good results. This we see was the case with the painters who came after the time of the Romans, for they continually imitated each other, and from age to age their art steadily declined.... It is safer to go direct of the words of nature than to those which have been imitated from her originals with great deterioration and thereby to acquire a bad method, for he who has access to the fountain does not go to the water-pot.*

*"The eye, in which the beauty of the world is reflected, is of such excellence that whoever consents to its loss deprives himself of the representation of all the works of nature. Because of the sight of these the soul is content to stay in the prison of the body, for through the eyes nature in all its variety manifests itself to the soul.... Certainly there is no one who would not rather lose the senses of hearing and smell rather than that of sight. In losing hearing, one loses knowledge based on words, but not the beauty of the world itself."*

## Document Nine

Excerpts from "Rules of Etiquette" by Giovanni della Casa (1503-56).

"Your conduct should not be governed by your own fancy, but in consideration of the feelings of those whose company you keep.... For this reason it is a repulsive habit to touch certain parts of the body in public as some people do.

"When you have blown your nose, you should not open your handkerchief and inspect it, as if pearls or rubies had dropped out of your skull.

"It is not polite to scratch yourself when you are seated at table. You should also take care, as far as you can, not to spit at mealtimes, but if you must spit, then do so in a decent manner. It is bad manners to clean your teeth with your napkin, and still worse to do it with your finger....

"It is wrong to rinse your mouth and spit out wine in public, and it is not a polite habit to carry your toothpick either in your mouth, like a bird making its nest, or behind your ear....

"No one must take off his clothes, especially his lower garments, in public, that is, in the presence of decent people.... Anyone who makes a nasty noise with his lips as a sign of astonishment or disapproval is obviously imitating something indecent, and imitations are not too far from the truth."

## Document Ten

Excerpts from The Book of the Courtier, written by Baldassare Castiglione (1478-1529).

**Then Signor Gasparo said: "Women are imperfect creatures... Nevertheless, since these defects in women are the fault of nature, we ought not on that account to despise them, or fail to show them the respect which is their due. But to esteem them to be more than what they are seems a manifest error to me..."**

**The Magnifico said: "If you compare the worth of women in every age to that of men, you will find they have never been a whit inferior..."**

**Then Messer Cesare said: "Who does not know that without women we can take no pleasure or satisfaction in this life of ours, which, but for them, would be uncouth and devoid of all sweetness, and wilder than that of wild beasts?"**

## Document Eleven

Excerpts from The Book of the Courtier by Baldassarre Castiglione.

"I am of the opinion that the principal and true profession of the Courtier ought to be that of arms; which I would have him follow actively above 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....

"(The Courtier should) avoid affectation to the utmost....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 and 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 at once begin to speak Roman, sometimes Spanish or French, and God knows how. And all this comes from overzeal to appear widely informed.... 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 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 divers 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...."

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You are to CRITICALLY READ the following documents. As you well know, that means you should highlight and look up vocabulary, mark up the documents as needed, and make notes on separate paper. Your critical reading should help you get a basic understanding of each document and nail down the main ideas that are presented. Then....

Answer the following questions completely, using direct quotes and references from the documents to support your answer. These questions are designed to further your understanding and help you analyze the content of the enclosed excerpts.

1. Why does Leonardo Bruni feel that knowledge of ancient literature and the humanities is so important? (documents 1 and 2)
2. What views of human nature and potential to Alberti and Mirandola express? (docs. 3 and 4)
3. How would you describe Lorenzo de Medici's "philosophy of life"? (docs. 5 and 6)
4. How do the views of Savonarola compare to those of Bruni? Lorenzo de Medici? (docs. 2,5,6 and 7)
5. What does Leonardo da Vinci say is the major source of human knowledge and inspiration? Explain (document 8)
6. What are the qualifications of the ideal courtier? (documents 9 and 11)
7. What is Castiglione's view of women? (document 10)
8. What was the perception of Lorenzo de Medici during this time period? Is he a humanist? How do you know this? (docs. 5, 6, and 10)

Again, use specific references and quotes from the documents to answer these questions. These questions should have longer responses with a great deal more detail. Your grade will be based upon the thoughtfulness of your answer, the interpretation of the documents, and the presence of concrete supporting evidence to back up your answers.

1. Having read all of the documents, describe the ideal Renaissance person. What characteristics would this person have? Explain.
2. Having read all of the documents, describe the view of the world and of humans that characterized the Italian Renaissance. Be specific and complete in your response.
3. How do the ideals of the Renaissance "turn away" from the ideals of the Middle Ages? Explain. *Keep*
4. Many historians view the Renaissance as the beginning of "Modern Europe." Based on the documents that you read, would you agree with this view? Explain.
5. Explain how these documents reflect or do not reflect the ideals of humanism that we have discussed in class. Could these documents be classified as "humanistic"? Why or why not? Explain completely.