16th Century English Poetry: A Background

Historical Background

THE RENAISSANCE AND REFORMATION (c. 1485-1660 CE)

(The Renaissance takes place in the late 15th, 16th, and early 17th century in Britain, but somewhat earlier in Italy and southern Europe, somewhat later in northern Europe.)

I.   **Early Tudor Period** (1485-1558): The War of the Roses ends in England with Henry Tudor (Henry VII) claiming the throne. Martin Luther's split with Rome marks the emergence of Protestantism, followed by Henry VIII's Anglican schism, which creates the first Protestant church in England. Edmund Spenser is a sample poet.

II. **Elizabethan Period** (1558-1603): Queen Elizabeth saves England from both Spanish invasion and internal squabbles at home. The early works of Shakespeare, Marlowe, Kydd, and Sidney mark Elizabeth's reign.

III. **Jacobean Period.** (1603-1625): Shakespeare's later work, Aemilia Lanyer, Ben Jonson, and John Donne.

IV. **Caroline Age** (1625-1649): John Milton, George Herbert, Robert Herrick, the "Sons of Ben" and others write during the reign of Charles I and his Cavaliers.

V.   **Commonwealth Period** or **Puritan Interregnum** (1649-1660): Under Cromwell's Puritan dictatorship, John Milton continues to write, but we also find writers like Andrew Marvell and Sir Thomas Browne.

General Characteristics of the Renaissance

"Renaissance" literally means "rebirth." It refers especially to the rebirth of learning that began in Italy in the fourteenth century, spread to the north, including England, by the sixteenth century, and ended in the north in the mid-seventeenth century (earlier in Italy). During this period, there was an enormous renewal of interest in and study of classical antiquity.

Yet the Renaissance was more than a "rebirth." It was also an age of new discoveries, both geographical (exploration of the New World) and intellectual. Both kinds of discovery resulted in changes of tremendous import for Western civilization. In science, for example, Copernicus (1473-1543) attempted to prove that the sun rather than the earth was at the centre of the planetary system, thus radically altering the cosmic world view that had dominated antiquity and the Middle Ages. In religion, Martin Luther (1483-1546) challenged and ultimately caused the division of one of the major institutions that had united Europe throughout the Middle Ages--the Church. In fact, Renaissance thinkers often thought of themselves as ushering in the modern age, as distinct from the ancient and medieval eras.

Study of the Renaissance might well center on *five* interrelated issues. *First*, although Renaissance thinkers often tried to associate themselves with classical antiquity and to dissociate themselves from the Middle Ages, important continuities with their recent past, such as belief in *the Great Chain of Being*, were still much in evidence. *Second*, during this period, certain significant *political changes* were taking place. *Third*, some of the noblest ideals of the period were best expressed by the movement known as *Humanism*. *Fourth*, and connected to Humanist ideals, was the literary doctrine of *"imitation,"* important for its ideas about how literary works should be created. *Finally*, what later probably became an even more far-reaching

influence, both on literary creation and on modern life in general, was the religious movement known as the ***Reformation***.

1. **The Great Chain of Being**

Among the most important of the continuities with the Classical period was the concept of the Great Chain of Being. Its major premise was that every existing thing in the universe had its "place" in a divinely planned hierarchical order, which was pictured as a chain vertically extended. ("Hierarchical" refers to an order based on a series of higher and lower, strictly ranked gradations.) An object's "place" depended on the relative proportion of "spirit" and "matter" it contained--the less "spirit" and the more "matter," the lower down it stood. At the bottom, for example, stood various types of inanimate objects, such as metals, stones, and the four elements (earth, water, air, fire). Higher up were various members of the vegetative class, like trees and flowers. Then came animals; then humans; and then angels. At the very top was God. Then within each of these large groups, there were other hierarchies. For example, among metals, gold was the noblest and stood highest; lead had less "spirit" and more matter and so stood lower. (Alchemy was based on the belief that lead could be changed to gold through an infusion of "spirit.") The various species of plants, animals, humans, and angels were similarly ranked from low to high within their respective segments. Finally, it was believed that between the segments themselves, there was continuity (shellfish were lowest among animals and shaded into the vegetative class, for example, because without locomotion, they most resembled plants).

Besides universal orderliness, there was universal interdependence. This was implicit in the doctrine of "correspondences," which held that different segments of the chain reflected other segments. For example, Renaissance thinkers viewed a human being as a microcosm (literally, a "little world") that reflected the structure of the world as a whole, the macrocosm; just as the world was composed of four "elements" (earth, water, air, fire), so too was the human body composed of four substances called "humours," with characteristics corresponding to the four elements.

2. **Political Changes :**

The fear of "disorder" was not merely philosophical--it had significant political ramifications. The proscription against trying to rise beyond one's place was of course useful to political rulers, for it helped to reinforce their authority. The implication was that civil rebellion caused the chain to be broken, and according to the doctrine of correspondences, this would have dire consequences in other realms. It was a sin against God, at least wherever rulers claimed to rule by "Divine Right." (And in England, the King was also the head of the Anglican Church.) In Shakespeare, it was suggested that the sin was of cosmic proportions: civil disorders were often accompanied by meteoric disturbances in the heavens. (Before Halley's theory about periodic orbits, comets, as well as meteors, were thought to be disorderly heavenly bodies.)

The need for strong political rule was in fact very significant, for the Renaissance had brought an end for the most part to feudalism, the medieval form of political organization. The major political accomplishment of the Renaissance, perhaps, was the establishment of effective central government, not only in the north but in the south as well. Northern Europe saw the rise of national monarchies headed by kings, especially in England and France. Italy saw the rise of the territorial city-state often headed by wealthy oligarchic families. Not only did the chain of being concept provide a rationale for the authority of such rulers; it also suggested that there was ideal behavior that was appropriate to their place in the order of things. It is no wonder then

that much Renaissance literature is concerned with the ideals of kingship, with the character and behavior of rulers, as in Machiavelli's *Prince* or Shakespeare's *Henry V*.

3. Humanism

A common oversimplification of Humanism suggests that it gave renewed emphasis to life in this world instead of to the otherworldly, spiritual life associated with the Middle Ages. Oversimplified as it is, there is nevertheless truth to the idea that Renaissance Humanists placed great emphasis upon the dignity of man and upon the expanded possibilities of human life in this world. For the most part, it regarded human beings as social creatures who could create meaningful lives only in association with other social beings.

In the terms used in the Renaissance itself, Humanism represented a shift from the "contemplative life" to the "active life." In the Middle Ages, great value had often been attached to the life of contemplation and religious devotion, away from the world (though this ideal applied to only a small number of people). In the Renaissance, the highest cultural values were usually associated with active involvement in public life, in moral, political, and military action, and in service to the state. Of course, the traditional religious values coexisted with the new secular values; in fact, some of the most important Humanists, like Erasmus, were Churchmen. Also, individual achievement, breadth of knowledge, and personal aspiration (as personified by Doctor Faustus) were valued. The concept of the "Renaissance Man" refers to an individual who, in addition to participating actively in the affairs of public life, possesses knowledge of and skill in many subject areas. Nevertheless, individual aspiration was not the major concern of Renaissance Humanists, who focused rather on teaching people how to participate in and rule a society.

4. "Imitation"

Another concept derived from the classical past (though it was present in the Middle Ages too), was the literary doctrine of "imitation." Of the two senses in which the term had traditionally been used, the theoretical emphasis of Renaissance literary critics was less on the "imitation" that meant "mirroring life" and more on the "imitation" that meant "following predecessors." In contrast to our own emphasis on "originality," the goal was not to create something entirely new. To a great extent, contemporary critics believed that the great literary works expressing definitive moral values had already been written in classical antiquity.

Theoretically, then, it was the task of the writer to translate for present readers the moral vision of the past, and they were to do this by "imitating" great works, adapting them to a Christian perspective and milieu. (Writers of the Middle Ages also practiced "imitation" in this sense, but did not have as many classical models to work from.) Of course Renaissance literary critics made it clear that such "imitation" was to be neither mechanical nor complete: writers were to capture the spirit of the originals, mastering the best models, learning from them, then using them for their own purposes. Nevertheless, despite the fact that there were a great many comments by critics about "imitation" in this sense, it was not the predominant practice of many of the greatest writers. For them, the faithful depiction of human behavior--what Shakespeare called holding the mirror up to nature--was paramount, and therefore "imitation" in the mimetic sense was more often the common practice.

5. The Protestant Reformation

Finally, as it developed during the Renaissance, the Protestant Reformation was a movement that had profound implications, not only for the modern world in general, but specifically for literary history. Just as Renaissance Humanists rejected medieval learning, the Reformation seemed to reject the medieval form of Christianity. (It should be noted, however, that both Catholics and Protestants were Humanists, though often with different emphases.) In the early sixteenth century, the German monk Martin Luther reacted against Church corruption, the sort depicted, for example, by Chaucer in the *Canterbury Tales*.

Many Catholics like Erasmus wanted to reform the Church from within. However, Luther's disagreements with Church policy ultimately led him to challenge some of the most fundamental doctrines of the Church, which in turn led him and his followers to break away from the Catholic Church in protest; hence they were known as Protestants. The Reformation had significant political ramifications, for it split Europe into Protestant and Catholic countries which often went to war with each other during this period. Protestantism broke up the institution that had for so long unified all Europe under the Pope (though there were also national struggles with the Papacy that had little to do with Protestantism).

Among the most important tenets of Protestantism was the rejection of the Pope as spiritual leader. A closely related Protestant doctrine was the rejection of the authority of the Church and its priests to mediate between human beings and God. Protestants believed that the Church as an institution could not grant salvation; only through a direct personal relationship with God--achieved by reading the Bible--could the believer be granted such. Many scholars argue that this emphasis on a personal, individual connection with God spawned the modern emphasis on individualism in those cultures affected by Protestantism. On the other hand, some Protestants also believed that after the Fall of Adam in Eden, human nature was totally corrupted as far as human spiritual capabilities were concerned. (Early Protestantism's emphasis on human depravity distinguishes it sharply from Renaissance Humanism.) Humans therefore are incapable of contributing to their salvation, for instance through good deeds; it could only be achieved through faith in God's grace. Overall, there is a good deal of ambivalence regarding many of the Protestant positions, and in fact the disagreement among the many Christian sects may be precisely what distinguishes Renaissance from Medieval religion.

THE POETRY OF RENAISSANCE

The English poetry of Renaissance developed under the influence of Chaucer's traditions, folk songs and Italian verse forms. Two common themes in 16-th century poetry were the relationship between men and women, and the treachery and hypocrisy of courtly life. Many imitators of Chaucer appeared after his death in 1400, but few are of great interest. More than a century had to pass before any further important English poetry was written. Queen Elizabeth ruled from 1558 to 1603, but the great Elizabethan literary age is not considered as beginning until 1579. Before that year two poets wrote works of value.

The sonnet becomes a very important poetic form in Elizabethan writing. The sonnet, a poem of fourteen ten-syllable lines, came from the Italian of Petrarch. The first examples in English were written by Sir Thomas Wyatt, and the form was then developed by Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, they are often mentioned together, but there are many differences in their work. Both

wrote sonnets, which they learned to do from the Italians; but it was Wyatt who first brought the sonnet to England. Surrey's work is also important because he wrote the first blank verse in English. Surrey's blank verse is fairly good; he keeps it alive by changing the positions of the main beats in the lines.

In the form of the sonnet Waytt mainly followed the Italian poet Petrarch (1304-74). In this form, the 14 lines rhyme abbaabba (8) + 2 or 3 rhymes in 8 the last 6 lines. The sonnets of Shakespeare are not of this form; they rhyme ababcdcdefefgg.

Before and during Elizabethan age, the writing of poetry was part of education of a gentleman, and the books of sonnets and lyrics that appeared contained work by numbers of different writers. The prominent date, so called milestone in the development of the English poetry was an anthology called Tottel's Miscellany [miscellany = selection]. This collection of poems, " Songs and Sonnets, written by the honorable Lord Henry Howard, late Earl of Surrey, and others" was published in 1557. This book of poems is called after its publisher's name "Tottel's Miscellany", or "Tottel's Songs and Sonnets". It contains 40 poems by Surrey and 96 by Wyatt, there are 135 poems by the other authors.

Sir Thomas Wyatt was a popular member of the court of Henry VIII (1509 – 1547) and was often sent on diplomatic missions overseas. However, he was twice arrested, once in 1536 with the fall of Anne Boleyn, Henry's second queen, and again in 1541 with the fall of his patron, Thomas Cromwell. Perhaps his first arrest was because he had been Anne's lover before her marriage to the king. Whatever the reasons, he was fortunate to regain the king's favour. On the second occasion he was charged with treason and imprisoned in the Tower of London. Wyatt's verse, essentially English but much influenced by Italian verse forms, was written to be passed – and sometimes sung – among friends at court.

The sonnet is a lyric poem of (usually) fourteen lines in iambic pentameter which became popular in England in the sixteenth century .Later sonnet writers sometimes varied the number of lines between ten and sixteen lines, but still called the poem a sonnet (George Meredith for instance in his **sonnet sequence** *Modern Love* used sixteen lines, Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote sonnets that had ten-and-a-half lines).

One distinguishes between two main rhyme patterns in the sonnet: The **Italian** or **Petrarchan sonnet** is divided into an **octave** or **octet** (eight lines) rhyming *abbaabba* and a **sestet** rhyming *cdecde* or some variation (for example *cdccdc*). Very often this type of sonnet develops two sides of a question or a problem and a solution, one in the octave and, after a **turn** often introduced by 'but', 'yet' or a similar conjunction that indicates a change of argument, another in the sestet. In the following sonnet the speaker laments his inability to serve God on account of his blindness in the octave, but in the sestet takes courage again from the thought that God will not expect more of him than he can do and that his best servitude is to bear his lot in patience. Milton varies the form slightly by placing the turn ("but") in the last line of the octave. **Blank verse** is a non-rhyming iambic pentameter, usually stichic. Under the influence of Shakespeare it became a widely used verse form for English dramatic verse, but it is also used, under the influence of Milton, for non-dramatic verse.