

* William Manchester, A World Lit
Only By Fire (1993).

WHAT WAS the world like — and to them it was the *only* world, round which the sun orbited each day — when ruled by such men? Imagination alone can reconstruct it. If a modern European could be transported back five centuries through a kind of time warp, and suspended high above earth in one of those balloons which fascinated Jules Verne, he would scarcely recognize his own continent. Where, he would wonder, looking down, are all the people? Westward from Russia to the Atlantic, Europe was covered by the same trackless forest primeval the Romans had confronted fifteen hundred years earlier, when, according to Tacitus's *De Germania*, Julius Caesar interviewed men who had spent two months walking from Poland to Gaul without once glimpsing sunlight. One reason the lands east of the Rhine and north of the Danube had proved unconquerable to legions commanded by Caesar and over seventy other Roman consuls was that, unlike the other territories he subdued, they lacked roads.

But there *were* people there in A.D. 1500. Beneath the deciduous canopy, most of them toiling from sunup to sundown, dwelt nearly 73 million people, and although that was less than a tenth of the continent's modern population, there were enough Europeans to establish patterns and precedents still viable today. Twenty million of them lived in what was known as the Holy Roman Empire — which, in the hoary classroom witticism, was neither holy, nor Roman, nor an empire. It was in fact central Europe: Germany and her bordering territories.* There were 15 million souls in France, Europe's most populous country. Thirteen

*The Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, as it was called after the mid-1400s, was also the First Reich, a cultural nation (*Kulturvolk*) of some three hundred different sovereign states. After Prussia's victory in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871, Otto von Bismarck created the Second Reich, a nation-state (*Staatsvolk*) over which the Hohenzollerns reigned until its defeat in 1918. The Third Reich (1933-1945) was, of course, Adolf Hitler's Nazi Germany.

and the lash were common punishments; for convicted felons the rope was commoner still.

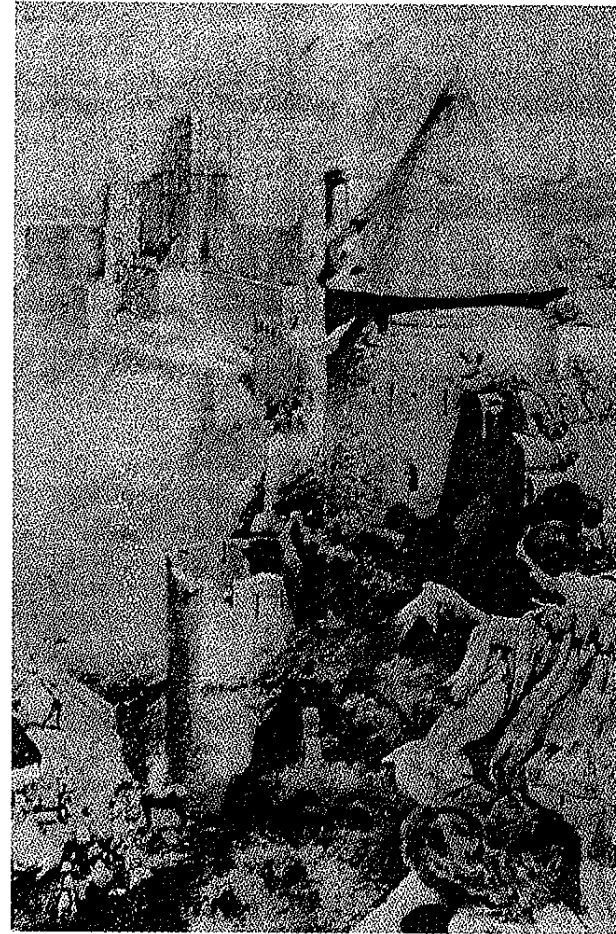
The donjon was the last line of defense, but it was the wall, the first line of defense, which determined the propinquity inside it. The smaller its circumference, the safer (and cheaper) the wall was. Therefore the land within was invaluable, and not an inch of it could be wasted. The twisting streets were as narrow as the breadth of a man's shoulders, and pedestrians bore bruises from collisions with one another. There was no paving; shops opened directly on the streets, which were filthy; excrement, urine, and offal were simply flung out windows.

And it was easy to get lost. Sunlight rarely reached ground level, because the second story of each building always jugged out over the first, the third over the second, and the fourth and fifth stories over those lower. At the top, at a height approaching that of the great wall, burghers could actually shake hands with neighbors across the way. Rain rarely fell on pedestrians, for which they were grateful, and little air or light, for which they weren't. At night the town was scary. Watchmen patrolled it — once clocks arrived, they would call, "One o'clock and all's well!" — and heavy chains were stretched across street entrances to foil the flight of thieves. Nevertheless rogues lurked in dark corners.

One neighborhood of winding little alleys offered signs, for those who could read them, that the feudal past was receding. Here were found the butcher's lane, the papermaker's street, tanners' row, cobblers' shops, saddlemakers, and even a small bookshop. Their significance lay in their commerce. Europe had developed a new class: the merchants. The hubs of medieval business had been Venice, Naples, and Milan — among only a handful of cities with over 100,000 inhabitants. Then the Medicis of Florence had entered banking. Finally, Germany's century-old Hanseatic League stirred itself and, overtaking the others, for a time dominated trade.

The Hansa, a league of some seventy medieval towns centering around Bremen, Hamburg, and Lübeck, was originally formed in the thirteenth century to combat piracy and overcome foreign trade restrictions. It reached its apogee when a new generation of rich traders and bankers came to power. Foremost among them

was the Fugger family. Having started as peasant weavers in Augsburg, not a Hanseatic town, the Fuggers expanded into the mining of silver, copper, and mercury. As moneylenders, they became immensely wealthy, controlling Spanish customs and extending their power throughout Spain's overseas empire. Their influence stretched from Rome to Budapest, from Lisbon to Danzig, from



A sixteenth-century town wall

Moscow to Chile. In their banking role, they loaned millions of ducats to kings, cardinals, and the Holy Roman emperor, financing wars, propping up popes, and underwriting new adventures — putting up the money, for example, that King Carlos of Spain gave Magellan in commissioning his voyage around the world. In the early sixteenth century the family patriarch was Jakob Fugger II, who first emerged as a powerful figure in 1505, when he secretly bought the crown jewels of Charles the Bold, duke of Burgundy. Jakob first became a count in Kirchberg and Weisserhorn; then, in 1514 the emperor Maximilian I — *der gross Max* — acknowledged the Fuggers' role as his chief financial supporter for thirty years by making him a hereditary knight of the Holy Roman Empire. In 1516, by negotiating complex loans, Jakob made Henry VIII of England a Fugger ally. It was a tribute to the family's influence, and to the growth of trade everywhere, that a year later the Church's Fifth Lateran Council lifted its age-old prohibition of usury.

Each European town of any size had its miniature Fugger, a merchant whose home in the marketplace typically rose five stories and was built with beams filled in with stucco, mortar, and laths. Storerooms were piled high with expensive Oriental rugs and containers of powdered spices; clerks at high desks pored over accounts; the owner and his wife, though of peasant birth, wore gold lace and even ignored laws forbidding anyone not nobly born to wear furs. In the manner of a grand seigneur the merchant would chat with patrician customers as though he were their equal. Impoverished knights, resenting this, ambushed merchants in the forest and cut off their right hands. It was a cruel and futile gesture; commerce had arrived to stay, and the knights were just leaving. Besides, the adversaries were mismatched. The true rivals of the mercantile class were the clerics. Subtly but inexorably the bourgeois would replace the clergy in the continental power structure.



THE TOWN, HOWEVER, was not typical of Europe. In the early 1500s one could hike through the woods for days without encountering a settlement of any size. Between 80 and 90 percent of the population (the peasantry; serfdom had been abolished everywhere except in remote pockets of Germany) lived in villages of

fewer than a hundred people, fifteen or twenty miles apart, surrounded by endless woodlands. They slept in their small, cramped hamlets, which afforded little privacy, but they worked — entire families, including expectant mothers and toddlers — in the fields and pastures between their huts and the great forest. It was brutish toil, but absolutely necessary to keep the wolf from the door. Wheat had to be beaten out by flails, and not everyone owned a plowshare. Those who didn't borrowed or rented when possible; when it was impossible, they broke the earth awkwardly with mattocks.

Knights, of course, experienced none of this. In their castles — or, now that the cannon had rendered castle defenses obsolete, their new manor houses — they played backgammon, chess, or checkers (which was called *cronometrista* in Italy, *dames* in France, and draughts in England). Hunting, hawking, and falconry were their outdoor passions. A visitor from the twentieth century would find their homes uncomfortable: damp, cold, and reeking from primitive sanitation, for plumbing was unknown. But in other ways they were attractive and spacious. Ceilings were timbered,

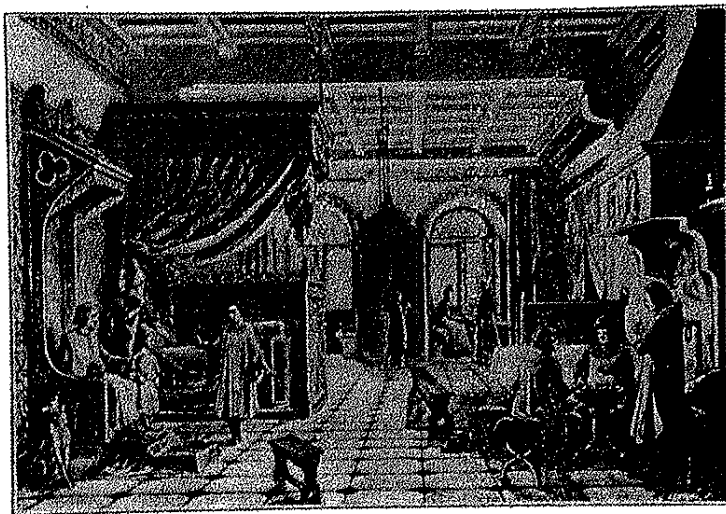


A medieval fair: customers, cloth merchants, a beggar, a draper's shop, a money-weigher, mountebanks

floors tiled (carpets were just beginning to come into fashion); tapestries covered walls, windows were glass. The great central hall of the crumbling castles had been replaced by a vestibule at the entrance, which led to a living room dominated by its massive hearth, and, beyond that, a "drawto chamber," or "(with)drawing room" for private talks and a "parler" for general conversations and meals.

Gluttony wallowed in its nauseous excesses at tables spread in the halls of the mighty. The everyday dinner of a man of rank ran from fifteen to twenty dishes; England's earl of Warwick, who fed as many as five hundred guests at a sitting, used six oxen a day at the evening meal. The oxen were not as succulent as they sound; by tradition, the meat was kept salted in vats against the possibility of a siege, and boiled in a great copper vat. Even so, enormous quantities of it were ingested and digested. On special occasions a whole stag might be roasted in the great fireplace, crisped and larded, then cut up in quarters, doused in a steaming pepper sauce, and served on outsized plates.

The hearth excepted, the home of a prosperous peasant lacked these amenities. Lying at the end of a narrow, muddy lane, his



Home of a medieval nobleman

rambling edifice of thatch, wattles, mud, and dirty brown wood was almost obscured by a towering dung heap in what, without it, would have been the front yard. The building was large, for it was more than a dwelling. Beneath its sagging roof were a pigpen, a henhouse, cattle sheds, corncribs, straw and hay, and, last and not least, the family's apartment, actually a single room whose walls and timbers were coated with soot. According to Erasmus, who examined such huts, "almost all the floors are of clay and rushes from the marshes, so carelessly renewed that the foundation sometimes remains for twenty years, harboring, there below, spittle and vomit and wine of dogs and men, beer . . . remnants of fishes, and other filth unnameable. Hence, with the change of weather, a vapor exhales which in my judgment is far from wholesome."

The centerpiece of the room was a gigantic bedstead, piled high with straw pallets, all seething with vermin. Everyone slept there, regardless of age or gender — grandparents, parents, children, grandchildren, and hens and pigs — and if a couple chose to enjoy intimacy, the others were aware of every movement. In summer they could even watch. If a stranger was staying the night, hospitality required that he be invited to make "one more" on the familial mattress. This was true even if the head of the household was away, on, say, a pilgrimage. If this led to goings-on, and the husband returned to discover his wife with child, her readiest reply was that during the night, while she was sleeping, she had been penetrated by an incubus. Theologians had confirmed that such monsters existed and that it was their demonic mission to impregnate lonely women lost in slumber. (Priests offered the same explanation for boys' wet dreams.) Even if the infant bore a striking similarity to someone other than the head of the household, and tongues wagged as a result, direct accusations were rare. Cuckolds were figures of fun; a man was reluctant to identify himself as one. Of course, when unmarried girls found themselves with child and told the same tale, they met with more skepticism.

If this familial situation seems primitive, it should be borne in mind that these were *prosperous* peasants. Not all their neighbors were so lucky. Some lived in tiny cabins of crossed laths stuffed with grass or straw, inadequately shielded from rain, snow, and wind. They lacked even a chimney; smoke from the cabin's fire

left through a small hole in the thatched roof — where, unsurprisingly, fires frequently broke out. These homes were without glass windows or shutters; in a storm, or in frigid weather, openings in the walls could only be stuffed with straw, rags — whatever was handy. Such families envied those enjoying greater comfort, and most of all they coveted their beds. They themselves slept on thin straw pallets covered by ragged blankets. Some were without blankets. Some didn't even have pallets.

Typically, three years of harvests could be expected for one year of famine. The years of hunger were terrible. The peasants might be forced to sell all they owned, including their pitifully inadequate clothing, and be reduced to nudity in all seasons. In the hardest times they devoured bark, roots, grass; even white clay. Cannibalism was not unknown. Strangers and travelers were waylaid and killed to be eaten, and there are tales of gallows being torn down — as many as twenty bodies would hang from a single scaffold — by men frantic to eat the warm flesh raw.

However, in the good years, when they ate, they ate. To avoid dining in the dark, there were only two meals a day — “dinner” at 10 A.M. and “supper” at 5 P.M. — but bountiful harvests meant tables which groaned. Although meat was rare on the Continent, there were often huge pork sausages, and always enormous rolls of black bread (white bread was the prerogative of the patriciate) and endless courses of soup: cabbage, watercress, and cheese soups; “dried peas and bacon water,” “poor man's soup” from odds and ends, and during Lent, of course, fish soup. Every meal was washed down by flagons of wine in Italy and France, and, in Germany or England, ale or beer. “Small beer” was the traditional drink, though since the crusaders' return from the East many preferred “spiced beer,” seasoned with cinnamon, resin, gentian, and juniper. Under Henry VII and Henry VIII the per capita allowance was a gallon of beer a day — even for nuns and eight-year-old children. Sir John Fortescue observed that the English “drink no water, unless at certain times upon religious score, or by way of doing penance.”

THIS MUST HAVE LED to an exceptional degree of intoxication, for people then were small. The average man stood a few inches over

five feet and weighed about 135 pounds. His wife was shorter and lighter. Anyone standing several inches over six feet was considered a giant and inspired legends — Jack the Giant Killer, for example, and Jack and the Beanstalk. Folklore was rich in such violent tales, for death was their constant companion. Life expectancy was brief, half the people in Europe died, usually from disease, before reaching their thirtieth birthday. It was still true, as Richard Rolle had written earlier, that “few men now reach the age of forty, and fewer still the age of fifty.” If a man passed that milestone, his chances of reaching his late forties or his early fifties were good, though he looked much older; at forty-five his hair was as white, back as bent, and face as knurled as an octogenarian's today. The same was true of his wife — “Old Gretel,” a woman in her thirties might be called. In longevity she was less fortunate than her husband. The toll at childbirth was appalling. A young girl's life expectancy was twenty-four. On her wedding day, traditionally, her mother gave her a piece of fine cloth which could be made into a frock. Six or seven years later it would become her shroud.

Clothing served as a kind of uniform, designating status. Some raiment was stigmatic. Lepers were required to wear gray coats and red hats, the skirts of prostitutes had to be scarlet, public penitents wore white robes, released heretics carried crosses sewn on both sides of their chests — you were expected to pray as you passed them — and the breast of every Jew, as stipulated by law, bore a huge yellow circle. The rest of society belonged to one of the three great classes: the nobility, the clergy, and the commons. Establishing one's social identity was important. Each man knew his place, believed it had been foreordained in heaven, and was aware that what he wore must reflect it.

To be sure, certain fashions were shared by all. Styles had changed since Greece and Rome shimmered in their glory; then garments had been *wrapped* on; now all classes *put* them on and fastened them. Most clothing — except the leather gauntlets and leggings of hunters, and the crude animal skins worn by the very poor — was now woven of wool. (Since few Europeans possessed a change of clothes, the same raiment was worn daily; as a consequence, skin diseases were astonishingly prevalent.) But there

was no mistaking the distinctions between the parson in his vestments; the toiler in his dirty cloth tunic, loose trousers, and heavy boots; and the aristocrat with his jewelry, his hairdress, and his extravagant finery. Every knight wore a signet ring, and wearing fur was as much a sign of knighthood as wearing a sword or carrying a falcon. Indeed, in some European states it was illegal for anyone *not* nobly born to adorn himself with fur. "Many a petty noble," wrote historian W. S. Davis, "will cling to his frayed tippet of black lambskin, even in the hottest weather, merely to prove that he is not a villein."

Furred (and feathered) hats were favored by patricians; so were flowered robes and fancy jackets hanging at the sleeves. It was considered appropriate for the nobly born to flaunt the distinguishing marks of their sex. This had not changed since the death of Chaucer a century earlier. Chaucer himself — who as a page had worn a flaming costume with one hose red and one black — nevertheless deplored, in *The Canterbury Tales*, the custom of wearing trousers with codpieces over the genitalia. This flaunting of "shameful privee membres," he wrote, by men with "horrible swollen membres that they shewe thugh disgisyng[e] [disguise]," also made "the buttokes . . . as it were, the hyndre part of a sheape in the fulle of the moone."

He was even more offended by "the outrageous array of women, God wot that the visages of somme of them seem ful chaste and debonaire, yet notifie they" by "the horrible disordinate scantinesse" of their dress their "likerousnesse [lecherousness] and pride." Both sexes were advertising, not flirting, and they were certainly not bluffing; when challenged, by all accounts, they responded eagerly.

IT WAS A TIME when the social lubricants of civility, and the small but essential trivia of civilized life, were just beginning to re-emerge, phoenixlike, from the medieval ashes. Learning, like etiquette, was being rediscovered. For example, the arithmetic symbols + and - did not come back into general use until the late 1400s. Spectacles for the shortsighted were unavailable until around 1520. Lead pencils had appeared at the turn of the century, together with the first postal service (between Vienna and Brus-

sels). However, Peter Henlein's "Nuremberg Egg," the first watch, said to have been invented in 1502, is now regarded as a myth. Small table clocks and watches, telling time to the hour, would not begin to appear in Italy and Germany until the last quarter of the century. Bartolomew Newsam is said to have built the first English standing clock in 1585.

In all classes, table manners were atrocious. Men behaved like boors at meals. They customarily ate with their hats on and frequently beat their wives at table, while chewing a sausage or gnawing at a bone. Their clothes and their bodies were filthy. The story was often told of the peasant in the city who, passing a lane of perfume shops, fainted at the unfamiliar scent and was revived by holding a shovel of excrement under his nose. Pocket handkerchiefs did not appear until the early 1500s, and it was midcentury before they came into general use. Even sovereigns wiped their noses on their sleeves, or, more often, on their footmen's sleeves. Napkins were also unknown; guests were warned not to clean their teeth on the tablecloth. Guests in homes were also reminded that they should blow their noses with the hand that held the knife, not the one holding the food.

There is some dispute about when cutlery was introduced. Apparently knives were first provided by guests, who carried them in sheaths attached to their belts. According to Erasmus, decorum dictated that food be brought to the mouth with one's fingers. The fork is mentioned in the fifteenth century, but was used then only to serve dishes. As tableware it was not laid out in the French court until 1589, though it had appeared at a Venetian ducal banquet in 1520; writing in his diary afterward, Jacques LeSaige, a French silk merchant who had been among the guests, noted with wonder: "These seigneurs, when they want to take the meat up, use a silver fork."

There *was* such a thing as bad form, but it had nothing to do with manners. Any breach of rules established by the Church was a grave offense. Except for the Jews, of whom there were perhaps a million in Europe, every European was expected to venerate, above all others, the Virgin Mary — Queen of the Holy City, Lady of Heaven, *la Beata Vergine, die heilige Jungfrau, la Virgen Maria, la Dame debonnaire* — followed by her vassals, the Catholic

saints, who did her liege homage. Parishioners were required to hear Mass at least once a week (for knights it was daily); to hate the Saracens and, of course, the Jews; to honor holy places and sacred objects; and to keep the major fasts.

Fasts were the greatest challenge faced by the faithful, and not all were equal to it. In one Breton village the devout affirmed their Lenten piety by joining a procession led by a priest. Afterward one marching woman, who had worn a particularly saintly expression during the parade, retired to her kitchen and elatedly broke Lent by heating, and eating, mutton and ham. The aroma drifted out the window. It was identified by passersby. Seized, she was brought before the local bishop, who sentenced her to walk the village streets until Easter, a month away, with the ham slung around her neck and the quarter of mutton, on its spit, over her shoulder. Ineluctably — and another sign of the age — a jeering mob followed her every step.

THAT WAS a relatively minor infraction. Greater crimes provoked awesome rites. A drunken, irreverent baron found himself in deep trouble after stealing the chalice of a parish church. He had been seen galloping away with it. The local bishop ordered the church bell tolled in the mournful cadence usually reserved for major funerals. The church itself was draped in black. The congregation gathered in the nave. Amid a frightful hush the prelate, surrounded by his clergymen, each carrying a lighted candle, appeared in the chancel and pronounced the name of the thief, shouting: "Let him be cursed in the city and cursed in the field; cursed in his granary, his harvest, and his children; as Dathan and Abiram were swallowed up by the gaming earth, so may hell swallow him. And even as today we quench these torches in our hands, so may the light of his life be quenched for all eternity, unless he do repent!"

As the priests flung their candles down and stamped them out, the parishioners trembled for the knight's soul, which, they knew, had very little chance of surviving so awful an imprecation. The wayward baron was now an outlaw; every man's hand was against him; neither lepers nor Jews were so completely isolated. This social exile was a formidable weapon, and it brought the sinner to his knees, for eventually he bought back his salvation — at a

formidable price. First he donated his entire fortune to the bishop. Then he appeared at the chancel barefoot, wearing a pilgrim's robe. For twenty-four hours he lay prostrate before the high altar, praying and fasting; then he knelt while sixty monks and priests clubbed him. As each blow fell he yelled, "Just are thy judgments, O Lord!" At last, when he lay bleeding, bones broken and senses impaired, the bishop absolved him and gave him the kiss of peace.

The punishment seems excessive. Such a chalice, not fashioned from precious metal, had little monetary value; its theft had merely been an act of petty larceny. But the medieval Church was strong on law and order, and had this felony gone unpunished, the aftermath could have led to laxity, backsliding, even mutiny. Besides, there were greater sinners than the scourged baron, and crueler penances. For them the road to atonement was literally a series of roads, to be covered, over six, ten, or even twelve years in that greatest of penances, the pilgrimage.

In instances in which pilgrims had offended God and man, their journeys were actually a substitute for prison terms. European castles had dungeons — so did the Vatican — but they couldn't begin to hold the miscreant population. The chief legal penalty was execution. There were alternatives in lay courts — ears were cut off, tongues ripped out, eyes gouged from their sockets; the genitalia of wives who had betrayed their husbands were cauterized with white-hot tongs — but these, although extremely unpleasant, offered no hope for salvation. The violator still faced a writhing afterlife in Hades, and obviously everyone who had violated the law did not deserve that. Therefore the Church, which had its own legal system, paralleling secular courts, took over.

Offenders were ordered to shave their heads, abandon their families, fast constantly (meat only once a day), and set out barefoot for a far destination. Journey's end varied from offender to offender. Rome was a popular choice. Some were sent all the way to Jerusalem. The general rule was the longer the distance, the greater the atonement. If of noble birth, the penitent had to wear chains on his neck and wrists forged from his own armor, a sign of how far he had fallen. Frequently the felon carried a passport, signed by a bishop, specifying his crimes in the grimmest possible detail and then asking good Christians to offer him food and

lodging. From the felon's point of view this approach may have seemed flawed, but his opinion was unsolicited. And ecclesiastical verdicts could seldom be appealed.

Some men, in their search for absolution, suffered almost unendurable ordeals. The notorious Count Fulk the Black of Anjou, whose crimes were legendary, finally realized that his immortal soul was in peril and, while miserable in the throes of his conscience, begged for divine mercy. Count Fulk had sinned for twenty years. Among other things he had murdered his wife, though this charge had been dropped on the strength of his unsupported word that he had found her rutting behind a barn with a goatherd. The court felt helpless here. Decapitation on the spot was the fate of an adulteress caught in the act; adulterers usually went free, to be dealt with by the husbands they had wronged. In this case there had been no witnesses, and the goatherd had vanished, but counts, even wicked counts, did not lie. However, quite apart from that, Fulk the Black's catalog of crimes was a long one. He expected a heavy sentence, and that is what he got. He is said to have fainted when it was passed. Shackled, he was condemned to a triple Jerusalem pilgrimage: across most of France and Savoy, over the Alps, through the Papal States, Carinthia, Hungary, Bosnia, mountainous Serbia, Bulgaria, Constantinople, and the length of mountainous Anatolia, then down through modern Syria and Jordan to the holy city. In irons, his fleet bleeding, he made this round trip three times — 15,300 miles — and the last time he was dragged through the streets on a hurdle while two well-muscled men lashed his naked back with bullwhips.

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THE COUNT could have asked, though he didn't, what all this misery had to do with the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. In fact it had nothing to do with them. The distinction between devotion and superstition has always been unclear, but there was little blurring here. Although they called themselves Christians, medieval Europeans were ignorant of the Gospels. The Bible existed only in a language they could not read. The mumbled incantations at Mass were meaningless to them. They believed in sorcery, witchcraft, hobgoblins, werewolves, amulets, and black magic, and were thus indistinguishable from pagans. If a lady died, the instant

her breath stopped servants ran through the manor house, emptying every container of water to prevent her soul from drowning, and before her funeral the corpse was carefully watched to prevent any dog or cat from running across the coffin, thus changing her remains into a vampire. Meantime her lord, praying for her salvation, was lying prostrate, his head turned eastward and his arms stretched out, forming a cross. Nothing in the New Testament supported such delusions and rituals; nevertheless the precautions were taken — with the blessings of the clergy. In monastic manuscripts one repeatedly finds such entries as: "Common report has it that Antichrist has been born at Babylon and that the Day of Judgment is nigh." The alarm was spread so often that the peasants ignored it; on the Sabbath, after an early Mass, they would gossip, dance, sing, wrestle, race, and compete in archery contests until evening shadows deepened. There was hell enough on earth for them; they were too drained to ponder the risks of another world.

Nevertheless in pensive moments they worried. Should the left eye of a corpse not close properly, they knew, the departed would soon have company in purgatory. If a man donned a clean white shirt on a Friday, or saw a shooting star, or a will-o'-the-wisp in the marshes, or a vulture hovering over his home, his death was very near. Similarly, a woman stupid enough to wash clothes during Holy Week would soon be in her grave. Should thirteen people be so thoughtless as to sup at one table, one of those present would not be there for tomorrow morning's meal; if a wolf howled through the night, one who heard him would disappear before dawn. Comets and eclipses were sinister. Everyone knew that an enormous comet had been sighted in July 1198 and Richard the Lion-Hearted had died "very soon after." (In fact he did not die until April 6, 1199.)

Everyone also knew — and every child was taught — that the air all around them was infested with invisible, soulless spirits, some benign but most of them evil, dangerous, long-lived, and hard to kill; that among them were the souls of unbaptized infants, ghouls who snuffed out cadavers in graveyards and chewed their bones, water nymphs skilled at luring knights to death by drowning, dracs who carried little children off to their caves beneath the earth, wolfmen — the undead turned into ravenous beasts — and

vampires who rose from their tombs at dusk to suck the blood of men, women, or children who had strayed from home. At any moment, under any circumstances, a person could be removed from the world of the senses to a realm of magic creatures and occult powers. Every natural object possessed supernatural qualities. Books interpreting dreams were highly popular.

The stars were known to be guided by angels, and physicians were constantly consulting astrologers and theologians. Doctors diagnosing illnesses were influenced by the constellation under which the patient had been born or taken sick; thus the eminent surgeon Guy de Chauliac wrote: "If anyone is wounded in the neck when the moon is at Taurus, the affliction will be dangerous." Thousands of pitiful people disfigured by swollen lymph nodes in their necks mobbed the kings of England and France, believing that their scrofula could be cured by the touch of a royal hand. One document from the period is a calendar, published at Mainz, which designates the best astrological times for bloodletting. Epidemics were attributed to unfortunate configurations of the stars. Now and then a quack was unmasked; in London one Roger Clerk, who had pretended to cure ailments with spurious charms, was sentenced to ride through the city with urinals hanging from his neck. But others, equally bogus, lived out their lives unchallenged.

Scholars as eminent as Erasmus and Sir Thomas More accepted the existence of witchcraft. Conspicuous fakes excepted, the Church encouraged superstitions, recommended trust in faith healers, and spread tales of satyrs, incubi, sirens, cyclops, tritons, and giants, explaining that all were manifestations of Satan. The Prince of Darkness, it taught, was as real as the Holy Trinity. Certainly belief in him was useful; prelates agreed that when it came to keeping the masses on the straight and narrow, fear of the devil was a stronger force than the love of God. Great shows were made of exorcisms. The story spread across the continent of how the fiend entered a man's body and croaked blasphemy through his mouth until a priest, following a magic rite, recited an incantation. The devil, foiled, screamed horribly and fled.

The ecclesiastical hierarchy, through its priests and monks, repeatedly affirmed the legitimacy of specific miracles. Unshriven sinners were not the only pilgrims on Europe's roads. In fact, they

were a minority. The majority were simple people, identifiable by their brown wool robes, heavy staffs, and sacks slung from their belts. Their motivation was simple devotion, often concern for a recently departed relative now in purgatory. Although filthy and untidy, they were rarely abused; few wanted to lose the scriptural blessing reserved for those who, having shown kindness to a stranger, had "entertained angels unawares."

Pilgrims headed for over a thousand shrines whose miracles had been recognized by Rome. There was Our Lady of Chartres, Our Lady of the Rose at Lucca, Our Guardian Lady in Genoa, and other Our Ladies at Le Puy, Auray, Grenoble, Valenciennes, Liesse, Rocamadour, Ossier. . . . It went on and on. One popular destination was the tomb of Pierre de Luxembourg, a cardinal who had died, aged eighteen, of anorexia; within fifteen months of his death 1,964 miracles were credited to the magic he had left in his bones. Some saints were regarded as medical specialists; victims of cholera headed for a chapel of Saint Vitus, who was believed to be particularly efficacious for that disease.

But nothing could compete with the two star attractions: scenes actually visited by the savior himself and spectacular phenomena confirmed by the Vatican. At Santa Maria Maggiore, people were told, they could see the actual manger where Christ was born, or, at St. John Lateran, the holy steps Jesus ascended while wearing his crown of thorns, or, at St. Peter in Montorio, the place where Peter was martyred by Nero. Englishmen believed that the venerable abbot of St. Germer need only bless a fountain and lo! its waters would heal the sick, restore sight to the blind, and make the dumb speak. Once, according to pilgrims, the abbot had visited a village parched for lack of water. He led the peasants into the church, and, as they watched, smote a stone with his staff. Behold! Water gushed forth, not only to slake thirsts but also possessing miraculous powers to cure all pain and illness.



TRAVEL WAS slow, expensive, uncomfortable — and perilous. It was slowest for those who rode in coaches, faster for walkers, and fastest for horsemen, who were few because of the need to change and stable steeds. The expenses chiefly arose from the countless tolls, the discomfort from a score of irritants. Bridges spanning

ivers were shaky (priests recommended that before crossing them travelers commend themselves to God); other streams had to be forded; the roads were deplorable — mostly trails and muddy ruts, impassable, except in summer, by two-wheeled carts — and nights en route had to be spent in Europe's wretched inns. These were unsanitary places, the beds wedged against one another, blankets crawling with roaches, rats, and fleas; whores plied their trade and then slipped away with a man's money, and innkeepers seized guests' baggage on the pretext that they had not paid.

The peril came from highwaymen, whose mythic joys and miseries were celebrated by the Parisian François Villon. In reality there was nothing attractive about these criminals in the woods. They were pitiless thieves, kidnapers, and killers, and they flourished because they were so seldom pursued. Between towns the traveler was on his own. Except in a few places like Castile, where roads were patrolled by the archers of the Santa Hermandad, no policemen were stationed in the open country. Outlaws had always lurked in the woods; but their menace had increased as their ranks were thickened by impoverished knights returning from the ill-starred crusades, demobilized veterans of various foreign campaigns, and, in England, renegades from the recent War of the Roses. Sometimes these brigands traveled in roving gangs, waiting to ambush strangers; sometimes they stood by the road disguised as beggars or pilgrims, knives at the ready. Even gallant seigneurs declined responsibility for travelers passing through their lands at night, and many a less-principled sire was either a bandit himself or an accomplice of outlaws, overlooking their outrages provided they hold important personages harmless and present him with lavish gifts at Christmas.

Therefore honest travelers carried well-honed daggers, knowing they might have to kill and hoping they would have the stomach for it. Wayfarers from different lands usually banded together, seeking collective security, though they often excluded Englishmen, who in that age were distrusted, suspected of petty thefts, regarded by seamen as pirates, and notorious for the false weights and shoddy goods of their merchants. Even Britons like Chaucer, who denounced greed, were themselves greedy. Their women were unwelcome for another reason. They were so foul-mouthed

that Joan of Arc always referred to them as "the Goddams." And the English of both sexes were known, even then, for their insolence. In 1500 the Venetian ambassador to London reported to his government that his hosts were "great lovers of themselves, and of everything belonging to them; they think there are no other men than themselves, and no other country but England; and whenever they see a handsome foreigner they say that 'he looks like an Englishman,' and that it is a great pity that he is not one."

Doubtless the same thing could be said, *mutatis mutandis*, of other people, but Englishmen, aware of their reputation, always went abroad heavily armed — unless they were rich. Surrounded by bands of knights in full armor, wealthy Europeans traveled in painted, gilded, carved, and curtained horse-drawn coaches. They knew they were marks for thieves, and never left their fiefs to visit cities, or attend the great August fairs, unless heavily guarded.



A YORKSHIRE gravestone bears this inscription:

*Hear underneath dis laihl stean
las Robert earl of Huntingtun
neer arcir yer az hie sa geud
And pipl kauld in Robin Heud
sick utlawz as he an iz men
il england nivr si agen
Obiit 24 kal Decembris 1247*

Robin Hood lived; this marker confirms it, just as the Easter tables attest to the existence of the great Arthur. But that is *all* the tombstone does. Everything we know about that period suggests that Robin was merely another wellborn cutthroat who hid in shrubbery by roadsides, waiting to rob helpless wayfarers. The possibility that he stole from the rich and gave to the poor is, like the tale of that other cold-blooded rogue, Jesse James, highly unlikely. Even unlikelier is the conceit that Robin Hood, aka Heud, was accompanied by a bedmate called Maid Marian, a giant known as Little John, and a lapsed Catholic named Friar Tuck. Almost

certainly they were creatures of an ingenious folk imagination, and their contemporary, the sheriff of Nottingham, is probably the most libeled law enforcement officer in this millennium.

The more we study those remote centuries, the unlikelier such legends become. Later mythmakers invested the Middle Ages with a bogus aura of romance. The Pied Piper of Hamelin is an example. He was a real man, but there was nothing enchanting about him. Quite the opposite; he was horrible, a psychopath and pederast who, on June 20, 1484, spirited away 130 children in the Saxon village of Hammel and used them in unspeakable ways. Accounts of the aftermath vary. According to some, his victims were never seen again; others told of dismembered little bodies found scattered in the forest underbrush or festooning the branches of trees.

The most imaginative cluster of fables appeared in print the year after the Piper's mass murders, when William Caxton published Sir Thomas Malory's *Le morte d'Arthur*. Later, bowdlerized versions of this great work have obscured the fact that Malory, contemplating medieval morality, seldom wore blinders. He had no illusions about his heroine when he wrote: "There syr Launcelot toke the Fayrest Ladie by the hand, and she was naked as a nedel." Some of his characters may actually have existed. For over a thousand years villagers in remote parts of Wales have called an adulteress "a regular Guinevere." But Launcelot du Lac is entirely fictitious, and given the colossal time sprawl of the Middle Ages, it is highly unlikely that Guinevere, if indeed she lived, even shared the same century with Arthur.



WE KNOW LITTLE of the circumstances under which Magellan and his Beatriz were married in 1517, but if they were united by transcendental love, they were an odd couple. It is true that a young archduke in Vienna's imperial court had introduced the diamond ring as a sign of engagement forty years earlier, but its vogue had been confined to the patriciate, and even there it had found little favor. Typically, news of an imminent marriage spread when the pregnancy of the bride-elect began to show. If she had been particularly user-friendly, raising genuine doubts about the child's paternity, those who had enjoyed her favors drew straws. "Virginity," one historian of the period writes, "had to be protected

by every device of custom, morals, law, religion, paternal authority, pedagogy, and 'point of honor'; yet somehow it managed to get lost."

No one was actually scandalized; the normal, eternal reproductive instincts were merely asserting themselves. But such random matrimony disappointed parents; a girl's wedding was the pivotal event in her life, and its economic implications — the ceremony was among other things a merging of belongings — concerned both families. The tradition of arranged marriages, sensibly conceived, was obviously crumbling. Commentators of the time, believing that the old way was best, were troubled. In his *Colloquia familiaria* (*Colloquies*) Erasmus recommended that youths let fathers choose their brides and trust that love would grow as acquaintance ripened. Even Rabelais agreed in *Le cinquieme et dernier livre*. Couples who kicked over the traces were reproached in *The Scholemaster* by Roger Ascham, tutor to England's royal family. Ascham bitterly regretted that "our time is so far gone from the old discipline and obedience as now not only young gentlemen but even very young girls dare . . . marry themselves in spite of father, mother, God, good order, and all." At the University of Wittenberg, Martin Luther, dismayed that the son of a faculty colleague had plighted his troth without consulting his father — and that a young judge had found the vow legal — thought the reputation of the institution was being tarnished. He wrote: "Many parents have ordered their sons home . . . saying that we hang wives around their necks. . . . The next Sunday I preached a strong sermon, telling men to follow the common road and manner which had been since the beginning of the world . . . namely, that parents should give their children to each other with prudence and good will, without their own preliminary arrangement."

Females could marry — legally, with or without parental consent — when they reached their twelfth birthday. The age for males was fourteen. Even before she had reached her teens, a girl knew that unless she married before she was twenty-one, society would consider her useless, fit only for the nunnery, or, in England, the spinning wheel (a "spinster"). Hence the yearning of female adolescents for the altar. Getting pregnant was one way to reach it. On Sundays, under watchful parental eyes, girls would

dress modestly and be demure in church, but on weekdays they opened their blouses, hiked their skirts, and romped through the fields in pursuit of phalli.

Another five centuries would pass before young women would be so open in their pursuit of sex. In Wittenberg Luther complained that "the race of girls is getting bold, and run after the fellows into their rooms and chambers and wherever they can and offer them their free love." Later he fumed that young women had become "immodest, shameless. . . . The young people of today are utterly dissolute and disorderly. . . . The women and girls of Wittenberg have begun to go bare before and behind, and there is no one to punish or correct them." If the lover of a soon-to-be unwed mother decided he was not ready for marriage, her cause was not necessarily lost; often an attractive girl with a fatherless child and a long record of indiscretions could find a respectable peasant willing to take her to the altar.

In this lusty age the most a parent could extract from a daughter was her promise not to yield until the banns had been read. Once a couple was engaged, they slept together with society's approval. If a peasant girl was not pregnant, there were only two practical deterrents to her acceptance of a marriage proposal. It was her desire either to enter a convent or, at the far end of the spectrum, to join the world's oldest profession. Harlotry not only paid well; it was frequently prestigious. Because prostitutes had to expose their entire bodies, they were the cleanest people in Europe. The competition was fierce, but it always had been, and once established, these women became what were now being called courtesans (from the Italian *courtigiane*), or female courtiers. Moves to suppress them were rare and unpopular; Luther lost many followers when, though affirming the normality of sexual desire, he proclaimed that the sale of sex was wrong and persuaded several German cities to outlaw it.

GREAT RENAISSANCE ARTISTS flourished while lesser talents actually starved in garrets; but the highly profitable production of erotica, including salacious illustrations, kept many men well fed. Their work was available at every fair and in all large cities, sold by postmen, strolling musicians, and street hawkers. The dissolute

Pietro Aretino's *Sonetti lussuriosi* (*Lewd Sonnets*) was as popular in Augsburg and Paris — and, when Clement VII became pope, in the Vatican — as in the poet's own Arezzo. After Aretino's expulsion from Rome he was thought to have explored the outer limits of propriety. Then François Rabelais, a priest, published his *Gargantua* epic, using gutter language which shocked Aretino but outsold the *Sonetti*. As happens from time to time, permissiveness was eclipsing faith. Some pornographic books were used as how-to sex manuals. And sometimes a community would treat the most wanton behavior as normal. Witch-hunting being a popular sport of the age, from time to time suspicious nocturnal gatherings would be reported to the authorities. In each case, chronicles of the time attest — with obvious relief — those assembled had been engaging in an even more popular pastime. Their meetings, according to a historian of the period, were "excuses for promiscuous sexual relations, and for initiating young people in the arts of debauchery."

Sex among the nobility was complicated by more intricate property transactions. Looking to future generations and plotting bluer bloodlines, patricians usually arranged betrothals for their sons and daughters shortly after their seventh birthdays. There were instances in which this was done when they were as young as three. These alliances could later be annulled, provided they had not been consummated, but unless strong steps were taken, consummation naturally began shortly after the parties reached puberty, opportunity and temptation being, as always, the prime requisites for coitus. Because these couples had not married for love, triangular entanglements came later. Since divorce was forbidden by the Church, adultery was an obvious solution, usually with the consent of both spouses.

Bohemian artists scorned monogamy, and the aristocracy agreed with them. To the ladies in the Nérac court of Marguerite of Angoulême, queen of the independent medieval kingdom of Navarre and the sister of France's King Francis I, extramarital sex was considered almost obligatory. Those wives in the *noblesse d'épée* who remained faithful to their husbands were mocked by the others. To abstain from the pleasures of adultery was almost a breach of etiquette, like failing to curtsy before royalty. Some

of Marguerite's remarks at the baths of Cauterets have survived. At a time when "love" was a synonym for casual sex, one young *madame la vicomtesse* asked her, "You mean to say, then, that all is lawful to those who love, provided no one knows?" The reply was, "Yes, in truth, it is only fools who are found out." Marguerite never mentioned any intrigue of her own. As a patron of humanists and an author in her own right, she was one of the outstanding figures of the French Renaissance, and was far too shrewd to risk weakening her influence. Besides, women who dropped names were not invited back to Nérac; they had compromised their lovers, thereby eliminating them as candidates for future dalliance. However, according to Seigneur de Brantôme's *Les vies des dames galantes*, Marguerite did advise the young comtesses and marquesas around her to take their marriage vows lightly: "Unhappy the lady who does not preserve the treasure which does her so much honor when well kept, and so much dishonor when she continues to keep it." Rabelais, enchanted, set aside his misogyny and dedicated *Gargantua* to her.

By the time they had mastered the sophisticated techniques of seduction, mature lords and ladies were unafflicted by pangs of conscience. However, their youthful married children did not lightly break a solemn, unambiguous commandment, even though many a *petit seigneur* must have been aware of his parents' intrigues. The first lapses of the youthful, once one of them had been attracted to a third party, were made easier by the elaborate embroidery of romantic love, now popular. Aware that infidelity was sinful, young men and women who were married, but not to one another, forswore sex. Sublimated courtship followed. The infatuated couple exchanged gifts, lays, madrigals, sonnets, odes, billets-doux, meaningful glances, and met, their hearts pounding, in secluded trysts. Their platonic fiction was encouraged by Baldassare Castiglione's *Il cortegiano*, the arbiter of aristocratic manners during the Renaissance. Castiglione assured them that although they aroused one another's passions, they could remain just friends, scrupulously chaste. Of course, they couldn't. *Il cortegiano* was a fraudulent work, its author a civilized pied piper. The period was not one of restraint; boys were sexually aggressive, and girls liked them so. Both wrote poetry, but their object was

mutual possession; in the end he always settled in between her thighs.

LUBRICITY FLOURISHED in all its various forms. "Sodomy was frequent," a chronicler observes; "prostitution was general, and adultery was almost universal." Contemporary records suggest that extramarital sex was most flagrant in France. Although wives were committing a capital offense, "illicit love affairs," a historian writes, "were part of the normal life of French women of good standing." Yet it appears to have been no different in England, where, historian James Froude later wrote, "private life was infected with impurity to which the licentiousness of the Catholic clergy appeared like innocence" — which, as we shall see, was saying a great deal. "There reigned abundantly," Raphael Holinshed noted in his chronicle, "the filthy sin of lechery and fornication, with abominable adulteries, speciallie in the king."

Holinshed probably had Edward VI in mind, but a number of other monarchs could have fallen under the same indictment. One of Edward's predecessors took Jane Shore, a commoner, as his favorite mistress, and in that role she served as a friend at court for many good Englishmen in need of royal favors. Across the Channel Francis I (r. 1515-1547), *le roi grand nez* — a long nose was thought to signify virility, and he had both — seemed bent on outperforming Don Juan. Francis's most memorable royal concubines were Françoise de Foix, comtesse de Chateaubriant, and Anne de Pisselieu, whom he created duchesse d'Étampes. But he always had other irons, so to speak, in the fire. According to one legend, he invested Milan, not to take the city, but to pursue a pair of lovely eyes he had once glimpsed there. In France his exercise of his *droit du seigneur* was not as popular as he assumed it to be. The husband of la belle Ferroniere, a lawyer's wife who had been chosen to share the royal bed, deliberately infected himself with syphilis and gave it to her so that she might pass it along to the king. Still another mistress-in-waiting disfigured herself in the hope that Francis would find her too repulsive to mount. It didn't work. She had been under the impression that the king was interested in her face.

These two, however, were exceptional. Most young Frenchwomen are said to have been delighted when conscripted to receive the king in all his manly glory, and in their appearances at court they competed for his attention. Opening their bodices, they displayed swelling bosoms down to, and sometimes below, their nipples (unless the bosoms were inadequate, in which case padding had been inserted under the stays). Their backs had been cut down to the last vertebra, sleeves billowed, gowns were pinched at the waist and tightened under the breasts, hidden wires spread out the skirt, and high heels gave each hopeful candidate a prancing, sexy



King Francis I of France (1494-1547)

walk. In his last years Francis moved to Fontainebleau and surrounded himself with what he called his *petite bande* of lovely maidens, whom he deflowered while watched by those waiting their turn. On his deathbed, where he finally slept alone, he summoned his sole heir and warned him not to be dominated by a woman. But the youth, who ascended to the throne as Henry II, had already established the format of his domestic life. France would be ruled by a *ménage à trois*: the king himself; his queen, Catherine de' Medici, whose parents had died of syphilis three weeks after her birth; and the king's mistress, Diane de Poitiers.

Various reasons have been advanced to explain why, as medieval shadows receded, European morals declined. This much seems certain: behavior had become so abandoned that family ties were loosened; impudicity threatened to overflow the channels within which the institution of marriage sought to confine it, if only for the sake of the social order. To be sure, there were laws against lascivious behavior, but governments lacked both the manpower and the will. In such times they generally do. Divorce, which might have brought the problem under control, was rejected by all authorities. The pope, Luther, Henry VIII, and Erasmus agreed that bigamy was preferable to divorce. After the great split in Christendom, Protestant theologians moved hesitantly toward the acceptance of divorce, but only in the case of adultery. "Probably the basic cause in the moral loosening in Western Europe," a modern historian argues, "was the growth of wealth." Nevertheless, the religious revolution played a role. There were no theological villains here. Martin Luther agreed that depravity increased in his Protestant congregations after the Reformation, but lechery and sexual license had also run amok in Catholic Spain and Catholic Italy, and Francis, whatever his private sympathies, ruled a Catholic France. Yet the shocking attacks on Rome and by Rome clearly led to a decline of respect for all vows and inhibitions. "Nobody cares about either heaven or hell," wrote Andreas Musculus, a Lutheran preacher, sadly; "nobody gives a thought to either God or the Devil." That was true, however, only during the transition from one Church to many churches. Then conservatives on all sides restored moral discipline, and patricians were persuaded to set an example. Indeed, in the case of

some sects — Calvinism, for example — reforms became so excessive that ardent spirits of both sexes looked back with secret envy to the exuberant, orgasmic laxity of the past.

BUT THAT CAME later. During the early sixteenth century lust, and particularly noble lust, seethed throughout Europe. In France this was the age of Rabelais, and across the Channel the lords and ladies of Tudor England were establishing a tradition of aristocratic promiscuity which would continue in the centuries ahead. Yet Rome, the capital of Christendom, was the capital of sin, and the sinners included most of the Roman patriciate. Among the holy city's great families, each of which was represented in the sacred College of Cardinals, were the nouveau riche Della Roveres, whose cupidity matched their enthusiasm for illicit public coupling in all its permutations. They occupied the epicenter of Roman society. Two Della Roveres became popes (Sixtus IV and his nephew Julius II), their names were on every guest list, and if an invitation to their satirical parties was ever refused, the fact is unrecorded.

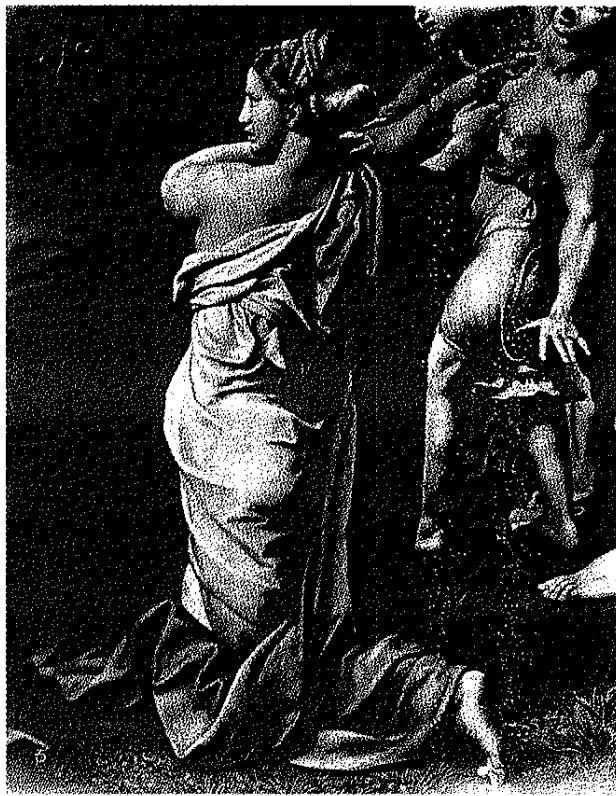
They had not, however, been pacesetters. That questionable distinction belongs to the notorious Borgias. So many bizarre stories have been handed down about this hot-blooded Spanish family that it is impossible, after five centuries, to know where the line of credibility should be drawn. Much of what we have is simply what was accepted as fact at the time. However, a substantial part of the legend was documented — enough to set it down here with confidence that, however extraordinary it may seem now, what was believed then was, in the main, undoubtedly true. The tale is a long one. The Borgias had been acting scandalously at least two generations before Giuliano Cardinal della Rovere, taking the name Pope Julius II, assumed the chair of Saint Peter in October 1503. He was lucky to have lived that long. Ten years earlier, when the papal tiara had been placed on the brow of his great rival, Alexander VI, the Borgia pope, Alexander had plotted Cardinal della Rovere's assassination. At the last moment Giuliano had eluded the cutthroats by fleeing to France. Then he — himself a future Vicar of Christ — had taken up arms against the papacy.

The Borgia name had become notorious a half-century earlier, when the reigning pontiff was Pius II. Pius was hardly a prig — as Bishop Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini he had fathered several children by various mistresses — but when elected pontiff he had put all that behind him, telling his court, "Forget Aeneas; look at Pius." In 1460 he himself had been watching twenty-nine-year-old Cardinal Borgia — the future Alexander — in Siena. Troubled by what he saw there, he sent Borgia a sharply worded letter, rebuking him for a wild party the prelate had thrown. During the festivities, Pius dryly observed, "none of the allurements of love was lacking." He further noted that the guest list had been odd.



Pope Julius II (1443-1513)

breathtakingly lovely, nineteen-year-old Giulia Farnese, who in the words of one contemporary was “*una bella cosa a vedere*” — “a beautiful thing to see.” Again, as priest, he arranged a wedding in the chapel of one of his family palaces. After he had pronounced Giulia and a youthful member of the Orsini family man and wife, Signor Orsini was told his presence was required elsewhere. Then Signora Orsini, wearing her bridal gown, was led to the sparkling gilt-and-sky-blue bedchamber of the cardinal, her senior by forty years. A maid removed the gown and, for some obscure reason, carefully put it away. She cannot have thought that Giulia would want to keep it for sentimental reasons, for thenceforth Borgia’s



Giulia Farnese (d. 1524)

new bedmate was known throughout Italy as *sposa di Cristo*, the bride of Christ.

Once he became Pope Alexander VI, Vatican parties, already wild, grew wilder. They were costly, but he could afford the lifestyle of a Renaissance prince; as vice chancellor of the Roman Church, he had amassed enormous wealth. As guests approached the papal palace, they were excited by the spectacle of living statues: naked, gilded young men and women in erotic poses. Flags bore the Borgia arms, which, appropriately, portrayed a red bull rampant on a field of gold. Every fete had a theme. One, known to Romans as the Ballet of the Chestnuts, was held on October 30, 1501. The indefatigable Burchard describes it in his *Diarium*. After the banquet dishes had been cleared away, the city’s fifty most beautiful whores danced with guests, “first clothed, then naked.” The dancing over, the “ballet” began, with the pope and two of his children in the best seats.

Candelabra were set up on the floor; scattered among them were chestnuts, “which,” Burchard writes, “the courtesans had to pick up, crawling between the candles.”

~~started. One of the spectators, a Frenchman, wrote that the pope and his children were in the best seats. The courtesans were naked and danced with the guests. The dancing over, the ballet began, with the pope and two of his children in the best seats. Candelabra were set up on the floor; scattered among them were chestnuts, which the courtesans had to pick up, crawling between the candles. The courtesans were naked and danced with the guests. The dancing over, the ballet began, with the pope and two of his children in the best seats.~~

After everyone was exhausted, His Holiness distributed prizes — cloaks, boots, caps, and fine silken tunics. The winners, the diarist wrote, were those “who made love with those courtesans the greatest number of times.”

Despite the unquestioned depravity of Alexander, the most intriguing figure in the carnal history of the time was one of the pope’s four children by Vannozza dei Catanei. Born in 1480, the Lucrezia Borgia who has come down to us is an admixture of myth, fable, and incontestable fact. It is quite possible that she was, to some degree, a victim of misogynic slander. The medieval Church saw woman as *Eva rediviva*, the temptress responsible for Adam’s fall, and the illegitimate daughter of a pope may have been an irresistible target for gossip, particularly when she was physically attractive. To this day her reputation is controversial.

BAH!
Inappropriate!

According to the *Cambridge Modern History*, "Nothing could be less like the real Lucrezia than the Lucrezia of the dramatists and romancers." Historians disagree, however, over what the real Lucrezia was like. There is certainly evidence that in at least some respects she was what she was thought to have been, but only a few documents are extant. Although these are shocking, we are largely dependent upon what her contemporaries thought of her. It was not flattering. Even Rachel Erlanger, one of her more sympathetic biographers, agrees that she had "a sinister reputation" for "incredible moral laxity."

Yet it was obvious that there was more to Madonna Lucrezia, as the Vatican court called her, than her celebrated sexuality. Fluent in Tuscan, French, and Spanish, she read classical Greek and Latin, had been educated in manners and style, could engage in lengthy learned discussions, and was an accomplished poet. It seems equally clear that she was vulnerable; beginning in her childhood she had been enveloped in her father's love, and she suffered from an almost fatal compulsion to please. By all accounts she was exceptionally comely. A contemporary described her as "a woman of great loveliness." That was women's impression of her. Men thought her ravishing.

Under the supervision of Giulia Farnese, her father's mistress, she devoted herself to what Jakob Burckhardt, the nineteenth-century Swiss historian, called Italy's "national pastime for external display." In her youth she was called *dolce tiera* (sweet face) because of her innocent expression. Bernadino di Betto di Biago (Pinturicchio) captured that artlessness in his portrait of her, painted in her early teens, and the debauchery and lewd excesses which followed do not seem to have altered it. Her most spectacular feature was her long golden hair, which reached to her feet. To enhance its beauty, she washed it using a formula set out in *Esperimenti*, a book compiled by Caterina Sforza. This was a diluted solution of honey, black sulfur, and alum. It was reported to guarantee a shade called *filo d'oro*.

Lucrezia was said to have inherited her father's lustiness at an early age, and her tales of her orgasmic exploits had made her a Roman legend long before she became, at the age of twenty-one, the duchess of Ferrara. By her seventeenth birthday, she was wise beyond

her years. This was perhaps inevitable. Her holy and biological father used her beauty and her sexual appetite as pawns. Papal politics made strange bedfellows for Alexander's daughter. He had wed her to her first husband, Giovanni Sforza, lord of Pesaro and a member of a powerful Milanese family, when she was thirteen and he was negotiating against the Aragonese dynasty of Naples. Then, using his powers of annulment, he moved her from one marriage to another, depending upon which alliance he was forming.

Left to her own devices in the palazzo of Santa Maria in Portico, built near the Vatican by Battista Cardinal Zeno, she is reported



Lucrezia Borgia (1480-1519)

to have spent her time between marriages making an obsessive study of dalliance, seeking to expand the outer limits of lewd pleasure. All the situations, positions, and groupings of participants found in pornographic books and films have been attributed to Lucrezia's lustful imagination. But there must have been more to it than that. The men around her were dissolute. Knowing that they regarded her as a sex object, and wanting to be what they wanted her to be, she may have cultivated debasement. To the degree to which that is true, the consequences for the men in her immediate family — her father and two brothers — were to be both profound and sensational.

ONLY CESARE BORGIA (1475–1507) could have been fit, or unfit, to be Lucrezia's most notorious brother — Cesare, the handsome cardinal who became a multiple murderer while wearing the robes of a prince of the Church. His homicidal career began in his youth and continued to the day he himself was slain in a skirmish outside Viana. Yet — and here he was very much a figure of his time — Cesare was no brute. Dapper, eloquent, and even more erudite than his sister, he was a master of the cruel, perfidious politics of his time — was, in fact, the model for Niccolò Machiavelli's *Il principe*. Machiavelli could not approve of Cesare, but he found him fascinating. And so he was, though the qualities that made him so were hardly endearing.

The circumstances surrounding the death of his elder brother, Juan, duke of Gandía, are the murkiest in the annals of his sinister family, and impossible to confirm. If what was believed then is true, they are also the most sordid. The crime began with Alexander himself. In 1497, the pope, manipulating his daughter in his remarkable fashion, decided to divorce her from Sforza. Knowing his father-in-law, Lucrezia's first husband fled Rome, fearing for his life. In Milan, however, he seethed. The pope had publicly called him impotent. That being a grave insult in Italy, Sforza — who later fathered children — shouted out what all Rome suspected but none had dared whisper: that the Borgia pope's real motive was incestuous, that he wanted his captivating daughter, not remarried, but active in his own bed.

Even for those times, this was scandalous. The rejected hus-

band's family was powerful enough to protect him, which made the pontiff's position extremely awkward. If he kept Lucrezia near the Vatican and discouraged suitors, no one in Rome would doubt that he was spending his nights in her bed; that was consistent with both his reputation and hers. Intimations of lecherous desire on his part were accurate. His daughter had just turned seventeen and was at the height of her beauty. We now know that he was, in fact, her lover. Whether or not that was known in Milan is another question. In any event, he didn't brave it out, which would have been in character; instead he hastily prepared to find a new, politically suitable husband for her.



Cesare Borgia (1475–1507)

Here, however, the tale darkens. Romans had scarcely absorbed the news that the father lusted for his daughter when they heard even more shocking gossip. Lucrezia was said to be unavailable to her father because she was already deeply involved in another incestuous relationship, or relationships — a triangular entanglement with both her handsome brothers. The difficulty, it was whispered, was that although she enjoyed coupling with both of them, each, jealous of the other, wanted his sister for himself.

On the morning of June 15, 1497, Juan's corpse was found floating in the Tiber mutilated by nine savage dagger wounds. Cesare's guilt was immediately assumed — he was a killer, and known to be jealous of his brother for other reasons — and the longer the mystery remained unsolved, the more certain his guilt seemed. History may take another view; Juan, like all Borgias, had other enemies. But myth has a significance all its own. At the time, the only Borgia to emerge unscathed was Lucrezia, whose reputation, by then, was beyond redemption.

It touched bottom with the birth of her illegitimate son Giovanni, the so-called *Infans Romanus*, when she was eighteen. She had conceived the child between marriages, during intercourse with either her father or her surviving brother. We know she had caught the seed of one of them because the pope, deciding to legitimize his daughter's child, issued two extraordinary bulls September 1, 1501. The first, which was made public, identified the three-year-old boy as the offspring of Cesare and an unmarried woman ("*coniugato genitus et soluta*"). Using Cesare's name permitted Alexander to evade canonical law, which would have prevented him from recognizing a bastard child fathered by him during his pontificate. The second, secret bull acknowledged Giovanni to be the son of the pope and the same woman ("*. . . non de praefato duce, sed de nobis et de dicta muliere*").

Alexander had named the boy a duke and awarded him the duchy of Nepi and Camerino. It is possible that he had accepted paternity to prevent Cesare from getting his hands on the duchy lands, though historian Giuseppe Portigliotti has suggested another reason for the two bulls — that Lucrezia herself, engaging in double incest, may not have known which of her two lovers

was the child's father. Rome assumed that the Holy Father was. Actually, the Borgias would have preferred that the public be unaware of Giovanni's existence, and while he was still a fetus plans had been made along those lines. Before Lucrezia had begun to show, she had entered the Convent of San Sisto on the Via Appia, expecting to wait out her pregnancy as a nun. It was impossible. Instead of her finding anonymity in the nunnery, the nunnery, with her present, became notorious. She had brought another of her lovers, a young Spanish chamberlain, with her. The other nuns, an Italian historian wrote, showed themselves 'deplorably susceptible' to the example set by their eminent colleague. Indeed, they went so far in "abandoning the old austerity of their regime" that after her departure "sweeping reforms were necessary to bring them back to the sublime joys of self-mortification and to exorcize the atmosphere . . . which had grown up inside those pious walls."

However, it was her father's ambitions which had exposed Lucrezia's pregnancy to the world. He was arranging a politically advantageous new marriage for her. Later it would end tragically when Cesare murdered the groom, but then it seemed worth pursuing. To that end, she had had to appear at the Lateran Palace on December 22, 1497, for a ceremonial annulment of her ties to Sforza, to be justified on the ground their union had never been consummated. The pope had decided that once the infant was born, Lucrezia could pass him off as her baby brother — as indeed she did for the rest of her life. Her third husband, heir to the dukedom of Ferrara, knew better, but didn't care; his family was accustomed to the mingling of its legitimate and illegitimate children. However, in 1497 that lay in the future. As the Lateran ceremony approached, Vatican servants spread stories of Lucrezia's coital bouts with her father and brothers. A curious crowd flocked to the palace, and there they saw that the pontiff's daughter, despite her loose, full skirt, was six months with child. When the canonical judges delivered their judgment, solemnly declaring her *intacta* — a virgin — laughter echoed throughout the old halls. Jacopo Sanzaro, the Neapolitan humanist, wrote an epigram in the form of a Latin epitaph:

*Hoc tumulo dormit Lucretia nomine, sed re
Thais, Alexandri filia, sponsa, nurus.**

*Here lies Lucretia, who was really a tart,
The daughter, wife, and daughter-in-law of Alexander.*

MEANTIME, as tumult and intrigue marked papacy after papacy, Italian arts flourished. It is a paradox that painters and sculptors frequently thrive amid chaos. The deplorable circumstances — the ferment, the vigor generated by controversy, the lack of moral restraint or inhibitions of any kind — all seemed to incite creativity. Yet it should be added that the greatest of the artists were shielded from the excesses of the time. To be sure, some of the era's most gifted men, like everyone else, lived precariously, even dangerously. The great Albrecht Dürer was reduced at various times to illustrating tarot cards and designing fortifications for cities. Lorenzo Lotto, near starvation, was forced to paint numbers on hospital beds. Carlo Crivelli was imprisoned on the charge (which was quaint, considering the period) of seducing a married woman. Luca Signorelli, when not painting in the Sistine Chapel, was moving from city to city, one jump ahead of the police, and Benvenuto Cellini was in and out of jails, or plotting an escape from one, for most of his life.

These illustrations are deceptive, however. Dürer prospered through most of his career; Lotto was approaching the end of his life and had lost his talent; Crivelli's real crime was that he had bedded the *wrong* wife, a Venetian noblewoman; Signorelli, as a political subversive, was asking for trouble; and Cellini was one of history's great rogues — a thief, a brawler, a forger, an embezzler, and the murderer of a rival goldsmith; the sort of character who in any century, whatever the outrage, is wanted by the police to help them with their enquiries.

More to the point, and more revealing of the time, is the fact that after Crivelli had paid his debt to a hypocritical society in

*Thais was an Athenian *hetaira* (courtesan) who, in the fourth century B.C., became Alexander the Great's mistress. She is said to have persuaded him to burn down the Achaemenian capital of Persepolis during a drunken revel. Dryden's *Alexander's Feast* is based on the incident, which is probably apocryphal.

which a *nobildonna* might betray her *nobiluomo* nightly, he was knighted by Ferdinand II of Naples; and that despite Cellini's criminal record, he enjoyed the patronage of Alessandro de' Medici, Cosimo de' Medici, Cardinal Gonzaga, the bishop of Salamanca, King Francis I of France, Cardinal d'Este of Ferrara, Bindo Atoviti, Sigmondo Chigi, and Pope Clement VII, whose other dependents included Raphael and Michelangelo.

That *was* typical of the age. The most powerful men knew artistic genius when they saw it, and their unstinting support of it, despite their deplorable private lives and abuse of authority, is unparalleled. All the wretched popes — beginning with Sixtus, who in 1480 commissioned Botticelli, Ghirlandajo, Perugino, and Signorelli to paint the first frescoes in the Sistine Chapel, and including Julius II, under whom Michelangelo completed the chapel's ceiling thirty-two years later — were committed to that greatness. Of course, their motives were not selfless. Immortal artistic achievements, they believed, would dignify the papacy and tighten its grip on Christendom. Nevertheless they were responsible for countless glories, including the paintings in the large papal apartment Stanza della Segnatura (Raphael), the frescoes for the Cathedral Library in Siena (Pinturicchio), and the soaring architecture of the new St. Peter's (Bramante and Michelangelo). Nor was all Renaissance art supported by pontiffs. Their fellow patrons and patronesses included the Borgia siblings, and Isabella d'Este of Mantua, whose generous funding of the brilliant, handsome Giorgione Barbarelli is unmitigated by the fact that she was sleeping with him, since most of her friends were, too.

In an ideal world, genius should not require the largess of wicked pontiffs, venal cardinals, and wanton contessas. But these men of genius did not live in such a world, and neither has anyone else. In art the end has to justify the means, because artists, like beggars, have no choice. Other ages have provided different sources of support, though with dubious results. Five centuries after Michelangelo, Raphael, Botticelli, and Titian, nothing matching their masterpieces can be found in contemporary galleries. No pandering to popular tastelessness, adolescent fads, or philistine taboos guided the brushes and chisels of the men who found immortality in the Renaissance. Political statements did not

concern them. Instead they devoted their lives to artistic statements, leaving time to judge their wisdom.

It is incontestable that the Continent's most powerful rulers in the early sixteenth century were responsible for great crimes. It is equally true that had this outraged the painters and sculptors of their time we would have lost a heritage beyond price. Botticelli pocketed thousands of tainted ducats from Lorenzo de' Medici and gave the world *The Birth of Venus*. In both temperament and accomplishments Pope Julius II was closer to Genghis Khan than Saint Peter, but because that troubled neither Raphael nor Michelangelo, they endowed us with the *Transfiguration*, *David*, the *Pietà*, and *The Last Judgment*. They took their money, ran to their studios, and gave to the world masterpieces which have enriched civilization for five hundred years.



THE VIGOR of the new age was not found everywhere. Music, still lost in the blurry mists of the Dark Ages, was a Renaissance laggard; the motets, psalms, and Masses heard each Sabbath — many of them by Josquin des Prés of Flanders, the most celebrated composer of his day — fall dissonantly on the ears of those familiar with the soaring orchestral works which would captivate Europe in the centuries ahead, a reminder that in some respects one age will forever remain inscrutable to others.

Yet almost everywhere else there was an awareness of both endings and beginnings. Enormous cathedrals, monuments to the great faith which had held the Continent in its spell since the collapse of imperial Rome, now stood complete, awesome and matchless: Chartres, with its exquisite stained-glass windows and its vast Gothic north tower; Canterbury, the work of over four centuries; Munich's Frauenkirche; and, in Rome itself, St. Peter's, begun nearly twelve hundred years earlier and still, it seemed, unfinished, for Pope Julius II laid the first stone of a new basilica in 1506, proclaiming indulgences which required all sovereigns in Christendom to pay for its renewed splendor, thereby demonstrating their royal fealty to a Church still undivided.

But these achievements were culminations of dreams dreamed in other times, familiar and therefore comfortable to those loyal

to the fading Middle Ages. Their day was ending; for every house of God now there were thousands of new words and thoughts challenging the bedrock assumptions of the past. Among the masses, for example, it continued to be an article of faith that the world was an immovable disk around which the sun revolved, and that the rest of the cosmos comprised heaven, which lay dreamily above the skies, inhabited by cherubs, and hell, flaming deep beneath the European soil. Everyone believed, indeed *knew*, that.

Everyone, that is, except Mikolaj Kopernik, a Polish physician and astronomer, whose name had been Latinized, as was the custom, to Nicolaus Copernicus. After years of observing the skies and consulting mathematical tables which he had copied at the University of Kraków, Copernicus had reached the conclusion — which at first seemed absurd, even to him — that the earth was actually *moving*. In 1514 he showed friends a short manuscript, *De hypothesibus motuum coelestium a se constitutis commentariolus* (*Little Commentary*), challenging the ancient Ptolemaic assumptions, and this was followed by the fuller *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* (*On the Revolutions of the Celestial Orbs*), in which he concluded that the earth, far from being the center of the universe, merely rotated on its own axis and orbited around a stationary sun once a year.

In the sixth volume of his *Story of Civilization*, Will Durant notes that Pope Leo X, who succeeded Julius, made no summary judgment of Copernicus. Being a humanist, the pontiff sent Copernicus an encouraging note, and liberal members of the Curia approved. But the astronomer's work was not widely circulated until after his death, and his peers then were divided into those who laughed at him and those who denounced him. The offended included some of the brightest and most independent men on the Continent. Martin Luther wrote: "People give ear to an upstart astrologer who strove to show that the earth revolves, not the heavens or the firmament, the sun and the moon. . . . This fool wishes to reverse the entire scheme of astrology; but sacred Scripture tells us that Joshua commanded the sun to stand still, not the earth." John Calvin quoted the Ninety-third Psalm, "The world

also is stabilized, that it cannot be moved," and asked: "Who will venture to place the authority of Copernicus above that of the Holy Spirit?"

When Copernicus's chief protégé tried to get his mentor's paper printed in Nuremberg, Luther used his influence to suppress it. According to Durant, even Andreas Osiander of Nuremberg, who finally agreed to assist with its publication, insisted on an introduction explaining that the concept of a solar system was being presented solely as a hypothesis, useful for the computation of the movements of heavenly bodies. As long as it was so represented, Rome remained mute, but when the philosopher Giordano Bruno



Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543)

published his Italian dialogues, declaring a rotating, orbiting earth to be an unassailable fact — carrying his astronomical speculations far beyond those of Copernicus — the Roman Inquisition brought him to trial. He was convicted of being the worst kind of heretic, a pantheist who held that God was immanent in creation, rather than the external creator. Then they burned him at the stake. Catholics were forbidden to read Copernicus's *De revolutionibus* until the deletion of nine sentences, which had asserted it to be more than a theory. The ban was not lifted until 1828.



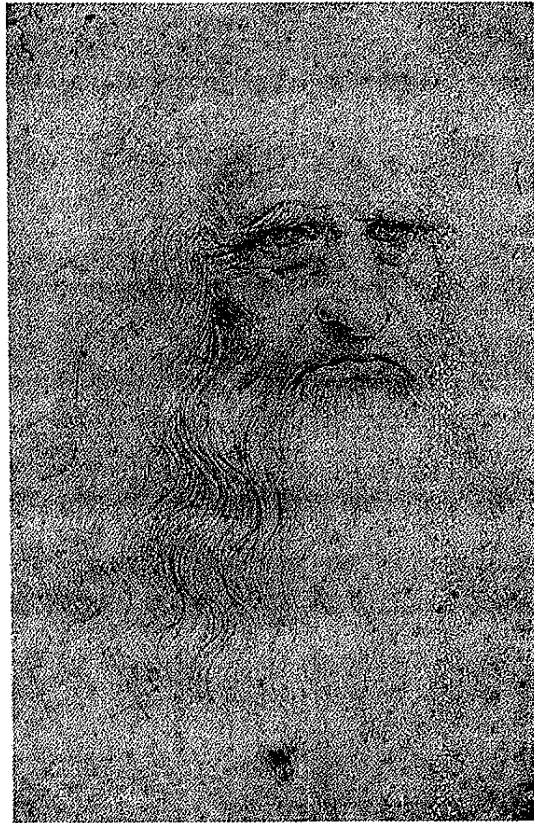
LEONARDO DA VINCI (1452-1519), the most versatile creative figure of that age — perhaps of any age — confronted traditional authority with a more awkward problem. His artistic genius guaranteed his immunity from blacklisting heresimachs; for seventeen years Milan's duke, Ludovico Sforza, shielded him by appointing him *ictor et ingeniarius ducalis*, and after Ludovico's fall Leonardo found other sponsors, even serving Cesare Borgia briefly as his military architect. If Cesare's many crimes deserve to be remembered, as they do, so should this generous gesture. Like the patron himself, however, it was short-lived. Miraculously, the Borgia cardinal manqué had survived to the age of thirty, but now killers with long knives were closing in. Cesare had celebrated his last birthday. His great protégé found new sanctuaries in the courts of the powerful, though, they, too, were to prove temporary, because of all the great Renaissance artists, Da Vinci alone was destined to fall from papal grace.

His disgrace was significant. Leonardo's transgressions were graver than Botticelli's or Cellini's. Indeed, in a larger sense he was a graver menace to medieval society than any Borgia. Cesare merely killed men. Da Vinci, like Copernicus, threatened the certitude that knowledge had been forever fixed by God, the rigid mind-set which left no role for curiosity or innovation. Leonardo's cosmology, based on what he called *saper vedere* (knowing how to see) was, in effect, a blunt instrument assaulting the fatuity which had, among other things, permitted a mafia of profane popes to desecrate Christianity.

In the Age of Faith, as Will Durant called the medieval era, one secret of the papacy's hold on the masses was its capacity to inspire

absolute terror, a derivative of the universal belief that whoever wore the tiara could, at his pleasure, determine how each individual would spend his afterlife — cosseted in eternal bliss or shrieking in writhing flames below. His decision might be whimsical, his blessings were often sold openly, his motives might be evil, but that was his prerogative. Earthly life being “nasty, brutish, and short,” in Thomas Hobbes’s memorable phrase, only the deranged would invite the disfavor and retribution of the Holy See.

This accounts for the last extraordinary moments of Girolamo Savonarola’s life. For seven years his Florentine followers had



Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519), a self-portrait

turned out to cheer his indictments of Pope Alexander VI’s depravity. Now, on the day of his last public appearance, which was also his execution, they flocked into the Piazza della Signoria to taunt and jeer his final agony. He had given Florence the best government the city had ever had. His only local enemies were the Arrabbiati, a political party resentful of his reforms. None of the witnesses to his agony could doubt that every charge he had laid at the door of the Borgia pontiff’s Vatican apartments was true. The explanation for their switch, otherwise inexplicable, is that the pope had threatened to excommunicate the city’s entire population if Florentines refused to turn on him. None had paused to wonder why God should be party to so monstrous an injustice. As children they had been taught that a pope possessed that terrible power, and they had never thought to question it.

Leonardo, *sui generis*, questioned everything. Rather than accept the world God had created, as Christians had always done, he probed endlessly into what human ingenuity could achieve by struggling *against* it. So mighty was his intellect and so broad the spectrum of his gifts — he was, among other things, a master of engineering, biology, sculpture, linguistics, botany, music, philosophy, architecture, and science — that presenting an adequate summary of his feats is impossible. However, it is worth noting that at a time when Europe was mired in ignorance, shackled by superstition, and lacking solid precedents in every scholarly discipline, this uneducated, illegitimate son of an Anchiano country girl anticipated Galileo, Newton, and the Wright brothers.

He did it by flouting absolute taboos. Dissecting cadavers, he set down intricate drawings of the human body — God’s sacred image — and wrote his *Anatomy* in 1510. Meantime he was diverting rivers to prevent flooding; establishing the principle of the turbine by building a horizontal waterwheel; laying the groundwork for modern cartography; discovering screw threads, transmission gears, hydraulic jacks, and swiveling devices; creating detailed, practical plans for breech-loading cannons, guided missiles, and armored tanks; building the world’s first revolving stage; developing a canal system whose locks are still in use; and, after exhaustive research into water currents and the flight of birds, designing a submarine, then a flying machine, and then — four

centuries before Kitty Hawk — a parachute. Along the way he left an artistic heritage which includes *The Adoration of the Magi*, the *Mona Lisa*, and the *Last Supper*.

Medieval minds retained the orbs and maces of authority, yet they could not cope with men like Copernicus and Leonardo. Of course, that did not prevent them from trying. Leonardo was left-handed; his notes, seven thousand pages of which have been preserved, were written in mirror script. Though quite legible, they can be read only by holding them up to a looking glass. In the sixteenth century that was enough to envelop him in suspicion. The existence of Satan and his extraordinary powers was believed to be irrefutable. Leonardo was capable of marvels, men whispered, but — and here they would nod knowingly — his inspiration was anything but divine. They knew where and how he would spend *his* afterlife; it had been memorably described two centuries earlier in the *Divine Comedy* of Dante Alighieri, which had included hell's terrible warning to immigrants: "*Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch'entrate.*"

Among the attentive listeners to this rubbish — predicting that upon his death the most gifted man in the pope's realm would be told to abandon all hope before entering what lay beyond — was the new pontiff. In secret audiences Pope Leo X received the whisperers, nodded thoughtfully, and sent them away with expressions of gratitude. These smears came late in 1513, the worst possible time for Da Vinci. He was sixty-one years old and in straits. Encouraged by the Vatican's patronage of Michelangelo and Raphael, and told that he could expect support from Giuliano de' Medici — a brother of Leo — he appeared in Rome to ask the Holy See for support. He didn't get it. The Holy Father not only denied him alms but decreed that his future research — particularly his sacrilegious mutilations of the divine image — would be either restricted or proscribed. Luckily, the French crown, not for the first time, came to the rescue of Italian genius. Francis I invited the great pariah to Paris as "first painter and engineer to the king." He left his native land immediately and forever, spending his last years in a little castle near Amboise, working to the end on architectural blueprints and canal designs.



BEFORE THE DENSE, overarching, suffocating medieval night could be broken, the darkness had to be pierced by the bright shaft of learning — by literature, and people who could read and understand it. Here Durant is informative. Until late in the fifteenth century most books and nearly all education had been controlled by the Church. Volumes had been expensive, and unprofitable for writers, who, unprotected by copyright, lived on pensions or papal grants, in monastic orders, or by teaching. Few reached wide audiences. Scarcely any libraries possessed more than 300 books. The chief exceptions were those of Humphrey, duke of Gloucester, with 600; of the king of France, with 910, and of Christ Church priory, Canterbury, with some 2,000. So valuable were they that each volume was chained to a desk or lectern.

The typographical revolution did not come all at once. The Chinese had designed wooden typography before 1066 and used it to print paper money; block printing in Tabriz dated from 1294, and the Dutch may have experimented with it in 1430. Practical use of it awaited other discoveries — oily ink, for example, and paper. The ink was quickly found. Paper took longer. Muslims had introduced its manufacture to Spain in the 900s, to Sicily in the 1100s, to Italy in the 1200s, and to France in the 1300s. During that same century linen began to replace wool in the wardrobes of the upper classes; discarded linen rags became a cheap source of paper, and its price declined. The stage was set for the main event.

Its star, of course, was Johannes Gutenberg Gensfleisch, who preferred to be known by his mother's maiden name (his father's name, Gensfleisch, being German for "gooseflesh"). In 1448 he had moved from Strasbourg to Mainz, where, with the help of Peter Schöffer, his typesetter, he developed engraved steel signatures for each number, letter, and punctuation mark. Metal matrixes were formed to hold the figures, and a metal mold to keep them in line. Gutenberg then borrowed money to buy a press and, in 1457–1458, published his superb Bible of 1,282 outsized, double-columned pages. It was one of the great moments in the history of Western civilization. He had introduced movable type.

The invention of printing was denounced by, among others, politicians and ecclesiastics who feared it as an instrument which

could spread subversive ideas. But they were a minority. Copies of the first type-printed book were studied all over Europe; Gutenberg had built a bonfire in Mainz, and printers throughout Christendom flocked to kindle their torches from it. Presses duplicating his — but at no profit to him, since patents, like copyrights, did not exist — appeared in Rome (1464), Venice (1469), Paris (1470), the Netherlands (1471), Switzerland (1472), Hungary (1473), Spain (1474), England (1476), Denmark (1482), Sweden (1483), and Constantinople (1490).

Who were the first readers, and how many were there? Historians have reasoned that businessmen needed books for trade and industry, and middle- and upper-class women wanted them for romantic escape. The difficulty here is that by the most positive estimate over half of the Continent's male population was illiterate, and the rate among women was higher — perhaps 89 percent. (East of Vienna and north of the Baltic both figures were a great deal worse.) Exact calculations are impossible, but we know that reading was taught before writing. An examination of signed depositions, wills, applications for marriage certificates, bonds, and subscribers to declarations and protests permits a rough reckoning of illiteracy by both class and occupation.

Literacy rates varied from place to place and from time to time, but some general figures are available. The percentage of those who could not read at all was 0 percent in the clergy and professions. Among gentry it was 2 percent, yeomen 35 percent, craftsmen 44 percent, peasants 79 percent, and laborers 85 percent. By trade, 6 percent of the grocers were illiterate, 9 percent of the haberdashers, 12 percent of all merchants, 27 percent of bakers, 36 percent of innkeepers, 41 percent of brewers, 44 percent of tailors, 45 percent of blacksmiths, 48 percent of butchers, 59 percent of sailors, 64 percent of carpenters, 73 percent of gardeners, 76 percent of masons, 88 percent of bricklayers, 90 percent of the shepherds, and 97 percent of all thatchers.

In one important sense these figures, though reasonably accurate, are misleading. They represent comprehension of the vernacular, or colloquial, tongues — Spanish, Portugese, English, French, Dutch, Flemish, Danish, German, and Tuscan (Italian). Some grasp of the vernacular was sought by everyone who wished

to raise himself in the world, but in most of Europe Latin was still the language of the elite — the Church, scholars, scientists, governments, and the courts. During 1501, for example, in France eighty volumes were published in Latin and only eight in French; in Aragon, between 1510 and 1540, one hundred and fifteen were printed in Latin and just five in Spanish. Indeed, throughout the sixteenth century Latin dominated works displayed at the annual Frankfurt book fair. Several reasons account for its survival. It was still the language of international communication; if you wanted to address the European public and be universally understood, you had to use it. In countries whose languages were rarely learned by foreigners — Flemish, German, and, yes, English — Latin was the language of choice.

Those who preferred the colloquial were few, and were sometimes resented by their peers; when the great French surgeon Ambroise Paré chose to publish his work on the method of treating gunshot wounds as *La méthode de traicter les playes faites par les arquebuses et aultres bastons à feu*, he was reproached by colleagues on the Faculty of Medicine at Paris. The Church aggressively opposed vernacular languages. Authors hesitated to use their native tongues because they were at the mercy of printers' foremen and compositors. Thus, in an English manuscript, "be" could come out as "bee," "grief" as "greef," "these" as "thease," "sword" as "swoord," "nurse" as "noorse," and "servant" as "servaunt." Yet in the long run native languages were destined to triumph. The victory was not altogether glorious. It meant that the dream of a unified Christendom, with a single Latin tongue, was doomed.

That outcome was not evident in the early 1500s. The curricula at monastic schools were unchanged. All teaching there was in Latin; younger monks and country youth were led through primary instruction in the *trivium* — grammar, rhetoric, and dialectics (the art of reasoning) — and bright students were encouraged to tackle the *quadrivium*: astronomy, arithmetic, geometry, and music. The monks had made some progress in botany and geology, collecting curious minerals, herbs, and dried bird and animal skins, but a monk reincarnated from the eighth century would have found little that was unfamiliar. Boys from the surrounding

countryside who attended classes picked up a kind of pidgin Latin, adequate for the comprehension of political and religious pamphlets. Later that would become important.



MEANTIME, outside monastery walls, the reading public was surging, though not by design. No new literacy programs were introduced, the educational process continued to be chaotic, and those who received any degree of systematic teaching had to be either fortunate or unusually persistent. The number of people who were fortunate remained stable. It was persistence, and the number of schools, which rose. As the presses disgorged new printed matter, the yearning for literacy spread like a fever; millions of Europeans led their children to classrooms and remained to learn themselves. Typically, a class would be leavened with women anxious to learn about literature and philosophy, and middle-class adolescents contemplating a career in trade.

Instruction was available in three forms: popular education, apprenticeship, and the courses of study at traditional schools and universities. Only the first was available to the vast majority, and it is impossible to define because it varied so from place to place. Two generalizations hold: popular education was confined to colloquial tongues, and it was unambitious. The teachers themselves knew no Latin; many were barely literate in their native languages. Some gave their services free, beginning with classes teaching little children their letters; others were poor women eager to make a few pennies. Pupils helped each other. The curriculum was limited to reading, writing, simple arithmetic, and the catechism. "That a relatively large number of people knew how to read, write and count," conclude the authors of *The New Cambridge Modern History*, "was due to the casual and ill-organized efforts of thousands of humble individuals. Such were the uncertain foundations not only of the popularity of vernacular literature but also of technical advance and the diffusion of general knowledge."

Apprentices were fewer. The sons of master journeymen were given special consideration; property qualifications were imposed on outsiders, and the children of peasants and laborers were excluded. In the cruder trades instruction was confined to skills which

were mechanically imitated. But the better crafts went beyond that, teaching accounting, mathematics, and the writing of commercial letters. This was especially important to merchants — commerce was still regarded as a trade, though dealers were quickly forming the nucleus of the new middle class — and the sons of merchants led the way in learning foreign languages. They were already among the most attentive pupils. The growth of industry gave education a new urgency. Literacy had been an expensive indulgence in an agrarian culture, but in an urban, mercantile world it was mandatory. Higher education, based on Latin, was another world. Schools concentrated on preparing boys for it, using as fundamental texts Donatus's grammar for instruction in Latin and Latin translations of Aristotle.

In 1502 the Holy See had ordered the burning of all books questioning papal authority. It was a futile bull — the velocity of new ideas continued to pick up momentum — and the Church decided to adopt stronger measures. In 1516, two years after Copernicus conceived his heretical solution to the riddle of the skies, the Fifth Lateran Council approved *De impressione liborum*, an uncompromising decree which forbade the printing of any new volume without the Vatican's imprimatur.

As a response, that was about as fruitful as the twentieth-century encyclicals of Popes Pius XI and Paul VI rejecting birth control. *De impressione liborum* was, among other things, too late. The literary Renaissance, dating in England from William Caxton's edition of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* in 1477, had been under way for a full generation. As the old century merged with the new, the movement pushed forward, fueled by a torrent of creative energy, by the growing cultivation of individuality among the learned, and by the development of distinctive literary styles, emerging in force for the first time since the last works of Tacitus, Suetonius, and Marcus Aurelius had appeared in the second century. The authors, poets, and playwrights of the new era never scaled the heights of Renaissance artists, but they were starting from lower ground. With a few lonely exceptions — Petrarch's *De viris illustribus*, Boccaccio's *Decameron* — medieval Europe's contributions to world literature had been negligible. Japan had

been more productive, and the Stygian murk of the Dark Ages is reflected in the dismal fact that Christendom had then published nothing matching the eloquence of the infidel Muhammad in his seventh-century Koran.

In the years bracketing the dawn of the sixteenth century, that began to change. Indeed, considering the high incidence of illiteracy, a remarkable number of works written or published then have survived as classics. *Le morte d'Arthur* (1495) and *Il principe* (1513) are illustrative, though both authors are misunderstood by modern readers. In the popular imagination Sir Thomas Malory has been identified with the fictive chivalry of his tales. Actually he was a most unchivalrous knight who led a spectacular criminal career, which began with attempted murder and moved on to rape, extortion, robbery of churches, theft of deer and cattle, and promiscuous vandalism. He wrote his most persuasive romances behind bars.

Malory has been spared; Niccolò Machiavelli has been slandered. Machiavelli was a principled Florentine and a gifted observer of contemporary Italy; his concise *Il principe* reveals profound insight into human nature and an acute grasp of political reality in the scene he saw. Nevertheless, because of that very book, he has been the victim of a double injustice. Though he was only analyzing his age, later generations have not only interpreted the work as cynical, unscrupulous, and immoral; they have turned his very name to a pejorative. In fact, he was a passionate, devout Christian who was appalled by the morality of his age. In an introspective self-portrait he wrote:

*Io rido, e rider mio non passa dentro;
Io ardo, e l'arsion mia non par di fore.*

I laugh, and my laughter is not within me;
I burn, and the burning is not seen outside.

Among the other memorable works of the time were Sebastian Brandt's *Das Narrenschiff*; Peter Dorland van Diest's *Elckerlijck*; Guicciardini's *Storia d'Italia*; Rabelais's *Pantagruel*; Castiglione's *Il cortegiano*; Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*; Philippe de Commynes's *Mémoires*; William Dunbar's *Dance of the Sevin Deidly Sinnes*; Lu-

dovico Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*; Fernando de Rojas's *La Celestina*; Machiavelli's *Discorsi sopra la prima deca di Tito Livio*, his penetrating *Dell'arte della guerra*, and his superb comedy, *La Mandragola*; the plays of John Skelton; the poetry of Sir Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard, earl of Surrey; and all the works of Desiderius Erasmus, who left his native Holland to roam Europe's centers of learning and turn out a stream of books, including *Enchiridion militis Christiani*, and *Adagia*, his collection of proverbs.

Scholars — most of whom were theologians — continued to be fluent in classical tongues, but in the new intellectual climate that was inadequate. Publishers could no longer assume that their customers would be fluent in Latin. In past centuries, when each country had been a closed society, an author who preferred to write in the vernacular was unknown to those unfamiliar with it. No more; provincialism had been succeeded by an awareness of



Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527)

Europe as a comity of nations, and readers were curious about the work of foreign writers — so much so that translations became profitable. In England, for example, Brandt's book appeared as *The Ship of Fools*, Van Diest's as *Everyman*, Castiglione's as *The Courtier*, and Machiavelli's comedy as *The Mandrake*. In 1503 Thomas à Kempis's *De imitatione Christi* came off London presses as *The Imitation of Christ*. Erasmus's *Institutio principis Christiani* became available as *The Education of a Christian Prince*, and Hartmann Schedel's illustrated world history was published simultaneously in Latin and German.

Learned men became linguists. Ambrogio Calepino brought out *Cornucopiae*, the first polyglot dictionary, and the Collegium Trilingue was founded in Louvain. This was followed by publication, at the University of Alcalá, of a Bible in four tongues: Greek, Latin, Hebrew, and Aramaic. To be sure, none of them was widely understood in western Europe, but at least the Scriptures could, fifteen centuries after the crucifixion, be read in the language of Christ himself.



THE DAYS WHEN the Church's critics could be silenced by intimidating naive peasants, or by putting the torch to defiant apostates, were ending. There were too many of them; they were too resourceful, intelligent, well organized, and powerfully connected, and they were far more strongly entrenched than, say, the infidel host the crusaders had attacked. Their strongholds were Europe's crowded, quarrelsome, thriving, and above all independent new universities.

Before the Renaissance, Christendom's higher education had been in hopeless disarray. Some famous institutions had been established, though their forms and curricula would be almost unrecognizable to members of twentieth-century faculties. Oxford's earliest colleges dated from the 1200s; Cambridge had begun to emerge a century later; and for as long as Parisians could remember, groups of students had been gathering, at one time or another, in this or that *quartier*, on the left bank of the Seine. But they had represented no formidable force in society.

Various chronicles enigmatically note "the beginnings" of universities in scattered medieval communities, among them Bo-

logna, Salamanca, Montpellier, Kraków, Leipzig, Pisa, Prague, Cologne, and Heidelberg. Precisely what this meant varied from one to another. We know from Copernicus that there was learning in Kraków. He was fortunate. In most cities, academic activity had been confined to the issuance of a charter, the drawing up of rough plans, and, where students and professors met at irregular intervals, heavy emphasis on animism and Scholasticism. Animists believed that every material form of reality possessed a soul — not only plants and stones, but even such natural phenomena as earthquakes and thunderstorms. Scholastics sought to replace all forms of philosophy with Catholic theology. Both were shadowy disciplines, but there was worse: the divine right of sovereigns, for example; astrology; even alchemy; and, late in the period, Ramism.

Within universities, there were no colleges as the term later came to be understood. Selected students lived in halls, but 90 percent of the undergraduates boarded elsewhere. They were governed by peculiar rules: athletics were forbidden, and since 1350 scofflaws at Oxford had been subject to flogging. In theory, classes began at 6 A.M. and continued until 5 P.M. In practice most students spent their time elsewhere, often in taverns. As a consequence, hostility between town and gown was often high; at Oxford one clash, which became known as the Great Slaughter, ended in the deaths of several undergraduates and townsmen.

In those centuries students who yearned for genuine learning had to become autodidacts. Medieval universities had exalted three traditional disciplines: theology, law, and medicine, which were but distantly related to what they would later become. Courses were offered in the "arts" — grammar, logic, rhetoric, dialectics — but these were considered inferior, and were chiefly meant for youths planning to enter the lower clergy. Except in Italy, the arts teachers were usually Benedictine, Franciscan, and Dominican monks. They paid lip service to the great leaders of Hellenic and Roman culture but were largely ignorant of their works; except for selections or adaptations by scholars with an imperfect grasp of the ancient tongues. Few knew Greek; they were dependent upon Latin translations of it.

The Latin of arts faculty members was so corrupted by

scholastic and ecclesiastical overlays that it bore little resemblance to the language of Rome at its peak. They knew Ovid and Virgil, but, typically, had interpreted the *Ars amatoria*, the Art of Love, as they had the Song of Solomon — not as a tribute to human sensuality, but as a mystic embodiment of divine love. That was fraudulent, and because of its speciosity, the prestige of universities declined. Attendance at Oxford fell from its thirteenth-century peak to as low as a thousand in the fifteenth century. Even academic freedom vanished after the expulsion of John Wyclif, master of Balliol, in 1381. Wyclif had denounced the inordinate arrogance, wealth, and power of the Catholic clergy. Five separate bulls had condemned him, and Oxford lectures since then had been subject to rigorous episcopal control.

The reawakening — the establishing of new ties with the gems of antiquity — was one of the great triumphs of the Renaissance. Its first seeds had been sown early in the fourteenth century, with the rediscovery of Latin classics; then the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453 gave impetus to the revival of Greek learning. Confronted with the overwhelming might of the infidels, the religious and political powers of Byzantium appealed to their fellow Christians in the West for help, even if the price was capitulation by the eastern Church to Roman orthodoxy. During the negotiations several Byzantine scholars traveled to Rome, some to participate in the talks, some merely anxious to escape the Ottoman peril. With them they brought genuine Hellenic manuscripts. For over a thousand years Italian professors fluent in Greek had assumed that the original texts of cultural masterpieces had perished. Discovering that they had survived, specialists and emissaries traveled through Croatia, Serbia, and Bulgaria to Constantinople, bearing gifts and gold and passionately searching for old manuscripts, statues, and coins, tokens of the glorious past. Thus began the transfer of priceless documents from East to West, where they joined the great Latin heritage of Italy.

The implications reached far beyond scholarship, leading to the redefinition of knowledge itself. The eventual impact on the Continent's hidebound educational establishment was to be devastating, discrediting medieval culture and replacing it with ancient, resurrected ideals, paideia and *humanitas*. The best minds in the

West began a scrupulous reappraisal of Scholasticism, which, for two centuries, had been degenerating into an artificial sort of dialectics. In the ancient texts Renaissance scholars found an unsuspected reverence for humanity which, without actually dismissing the Bible, certainly overshadowed it. And in the wisdom of antiquity they discovered respect for man in the free expansion of his natural impulses, unfreighted by the corrupting burden of original sin. The Italian scholar Leonardo Bruni declared: "I have the feeling that the days of Cicero and Demosthenes are much closer to me than the sixty years just past." Acclaim for humanity was the theme of *De dignitate et excellentia*, by Giannozzo Manetti, a Florentine philologist, and the *Oratio de hominis dignitate*, by brilliant young Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. The Christian faith was not repudiated, but the new concept of the cultivated man was the Renaissance *homo universale*, the universal man: creator, artist, scholar, and encyclopedic genius in the spirit of the ancient paideia.

In that spirit Scotland and Ireland, despite their poverty, established the universities of St. Andrews, Glasgow, Aberdeen, and Trinity College, Dublin, institutions destined to pour generation after generation of first-rate men into the intellectual life of the British Isles. Between 1496 and 1516 five new colleges were founded at Oxford and Cambridge. Meantime, across the Channel, the great transition had led to the founding of genuine, post-medieval universities at Genoa (1471), Munich (1472), Uppsala and Tübingen (1477), Copenhagen (1479), Valencia and Santiago (1501), Wittenberg (1502), and Frankfurt an der Oder (1506). Here lay the essence of the emerging intellectualism. Students like young Martin Luther, a member of the third class to enter Wittenberg, and François Rabelais, at the older but restructured Montpellier, were taught that Renaissance meant renewal, a recovery of those disciplines lost in the collapse of Roman civilization. The French refined it to *la Renaissance des lettres*, and though its leaders embraced more than literature — they sought the re-emergence of all the lost learning of the old world, including the flowering of art, esthetics, mathematics, and the beginnings of modern science — the heaviest emphasis was on reverence for classical letters, the poetical and philosophical Hellenic heritage,

scholarly purity, and the meticulous translation of the ancient manuscripts retrieved in Athens and Rome.



THE NEW PROFESSORS, called humanists, declared the humanities to be superior to medicine, law, and theology — especially theology. Der Humanismus, as the movement was known in Germany, its stronghold, coalesced during the last years of the Borgia papacy. In 1497, the Holy Roman emperor Maximilian I served as humanism's midwife by appointing Conradus Celtis, a Latin lyrical poet, to the most prestigious academic chair in Vienna. Celtis used his new post to establish the Sodalitas Danubia, a center for humanistic studies, thereby winning immortality among intellectual historians as Der Erzhumaniste (the Archhumanist).

Within a year his first manuscripts were at hand. Aldus Manutius, the great Italian printer and inventor of italic type (for an edition of Virgil), had been toiling for twenty years on the Aldine Press to produce a series of Greek classics. His *editio princeps*, a five-volume folio Aristotle edited by Aldus himself, was in proof and ready for scholars by late 1498. During the next fourteen years it was followed by the works of all the Hellenic giants: Theocritus, Aristophanes, Thucydides, Sophocles, Herodotus, Euripides, Homer, and Plato.

All this ferment led to that rarest of cultural phenomena, an intellectual movement which alters the course of both learning and civilization. Pythagoreans had tried it, four hundred years before the birth of Christ, and failed. So, in the third and fourth centuries A.D., had Manichaeans, Stoics, and Epicureans. But the humanists of the sixteenth century were to succeed spectacularly — so much so that their triumph is unique. They would be followed by other ideologies determined to shape the future — seventeenth-century rationalism, the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, Marxism in the nineteenth century, and, in the twentieth, by pragmatism, determinism, and empiricism. Each would alter the stream of great events, but none would match the achievements of Renaissance humanists.

By the end of the decade following Manutius's accomplishment, humanism had begun to replace the old curricula, dominating both the new universities and the refurbished old. Lecture

halls were crowded, great libraries kept their well-worn works of humanist scholars in constant circulation, and leaders of Europe's metropolises — merchants, lawyers, physicians, bankers, ship-owners, and the bright priests who, in the century's fifth decade, would join the new Jesuit order — studied and discussed the newly published humanist treatises, including the denunciation of Scholasticism by England's Thomas More, who wrote that exploring the subtleties of Scholastic philosophy was "as profitable as milking a he-goat into a sieve."

We picture the eminent scholars of the time, each in the short jacket favored by the professional classes then, wearing their distinctive outsized berets, the floppy brims hooding their ears, bowed over desks tilted toward them, pen and ink at hand. Poring over manuscripts and proofs in several languages, reliving the glories of the ancient past, half lost in the life of the mind, they were exalted by the awareness that they were rekindling flames extinguished in the glorious past. They cannot have been unaware of the recognition of their contemporaries. Each was a personage, admired beyond the borders of his own state, a man of substance in whom his compatriots took pride and a friend and confidant — at least in the first fifth of the century — of the Roman Catholic hierarchy. The peasant, the tradesman, the ordinary townsman, lacked the feeblest grasp of the source for the scholars' fame, and wouldn't have understood it if told, but he doffed his cap or tugged his forelock in the presence of such towering humanists as Pico della Mirandola of Florence, the Neapolitan Alessandro Alessandri, Genoa's Julius Caesar Scaliger, the French philologist Guillaume Budé, the Spaniard Juan Luis Vives, John Colet and Thomas More in England, and Erasmus of Rotterdam, doyen of the movement.



THEY CONSTITUTED the Western world's first community of powerful lay intellectuals since Constantine's Ecumenical Council in the fourth century A.D. Among their strengths was society's traditional respect for learning. Anti-intellectualism as it later evolved was unknown; even the incomprehensible jabber of the Latin Mass inspired humility as well as reverence. But beyond that, the humanists were honored as though they were nobility. Since the

beginning of the Renaissance, their status had risen as rulers of states and principalities singled them out, granting them perquisites reserved for the favored, establishing them as a privileged class. Ulrich von Hutten, for example, held an imperial appointment in Maximilian's court, enjoyed the patronage of the elector of Mainz, and dined frequently with Mainz's archbishop. Pico della Mirandola was a protégé of both Lorenzo de' Medici and the philosopher Marsilio Ficino. Huldrych Zwingli, rector of Zurich, was a formidable political and religious leader, and so great was Budé's prestige that Francis I founded a college at his suggestion. Girolamo Aleandro, who taught Greek and held the office of rector at the University of Paris, served as Vatican librarian, papal nuncio to France, Germany, and the Netherlands, and, finally, became a cardinal. The Vatican brought Manutius's son Paulus to Rome as the official Vatican printer; Henry VIII chose Polydore Vergil, an Italian humanist, as his official historiographer and summoned Juan Luis Vives from Spain to tutor his daughter. Erasmus, at Cambridge, and Philipp Melanchthon, at Wittenberg, held their chairs as professors of Greek with royal approval. John Colet's position as dean of St. Paul's Cathedral also had royal sanction. And John Skelton, England's poet laureate, had served as royal tutor to the future King Henry VIII, with the consequence that Henry, when he mounted the throne in 1509, was the product of a thorough humanist education.

No humanist rose higher in public life than Sir Thomas More, who, until his fall from royal grace, was as distinguished a statesman as he was a scholar. During Henry VIII's early reign More had been appointed undersheriff of London, king's councillor, and a judge of the courts of requests. In 1520, when the sovereigns of England and France conferred on the Field of the Cloth of Gold outside Calais, he served as Henry's aide. Knighted, he then rose swiftly through a series of royal appointments — undertreasurer, speaker of the House of Commons, high steward of Oxford and then of Cambridge, chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, and, finally, when he succeeded Cardinal Wolsey, lord chancellor, the foremost living Englishman, after the king, of his time.

Erasmus, whose close friend he was, asked: "What did Nature ever create milder, sweeter, and happier than the genius of Thomas

More?" But that says more about Erasmus's generosity than More's character. Unquestionably the Englishman was benevolent for his time, but it was not an age when men of mild and sweet disposition rose to power; a savage streak was almost a prerequisite for achievement. So it was with Sir Thomas More. He had first attracted royal notice — from Henry VII — for his skills as a Star Chamber prosecutor. In argument he was bitter, vituperative, given to streams of invective. And although as a writer he celebrated religious tolerance in his *Utopia*, in practice he was a rigid Catholic, capable of having a servant in his own home flogged for blasphemy. He believed that heretics, atheists, and disbelievers in a hereafter should be executed, and as chancellor he approved such



Sir Thomas More (1478–1535) as lord chancellor of England

sentences. At the same time, he was a loyal subject to Henry VIII. Presiding over the House of Commons, he cannot have imagined a time when he would be forced to choose between his king in Hampton Court and the pope in Rome. But that time was coming.

