# The Northern Renaissance: Crash Course European History #3

Crash Course: European History
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**===== (00:00) to (02:00) =====**

Hi, I'm John Green and this is Crash Course European History.

So when we left off last time, the Renaissance was a very big deal, provided you were a member of the elite in approximately this part of the world. Today we're gonna follow the spread of the Renaissance, to France, England, Spain, the low countries, and the seventy-two bajillion mini-states of central Europe.

Also, suddenly there are a lot more books to read.

(Intro music)

The Renaissance was shaped and promoted by the discovery in the mid-15th century of moveable type printing. The credit mostly goes to the German goldsmith and tinkerer Johannes Gutenberg, whose printing press from the 1440s produced the famous Gutenberg Bible and fueled the spread of printed books.

Now, printing techniques, including movable type, had been used in China for many centuries, but printing could be quicker in Europe because the Latin alphabet only contained twenty-six characters and also innovations made the letters easier to eject and reset to form new words that eventually became pamphlets and newsletters and then entire books. In fact, there are books in the center of the center of the world today! (John gestures to the globe, which has opened up to reveal a small stack of books.) It's my favorite center of the world yet!

I love books! It's really hard to exaggerate just how big a deal printing was. Like, before our friend Gutenberg, most books in Europe were copied from other books by hand. This was time consuming and expensive and it introduced errors, and it also meant that books were not part of most people's lives. Like, if you were among the around 80% of people in England and France who worked in agriculture at the time, it's not just that you didn't need to learn to read to do your job, there was generally nothing you could read.

But printing changed all of that incredibly quickly. The first printing press arrived in Venice in 1469. By 1500, there were 417 printing presses in the city.

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In the first fifty years after printing came to Europe, over 20 million volumes of books were printed. This inculuded the great works from the classical world that the Renaissance was rediscovering, but also many legal works, and as jurists worked to discover the meaning of every Latin word of the corpus of Roman law, the Western legal tradition was born. More copies of the Bible were available to read and argue about, and new stories and poems could be shared more widely. Think of it this way: Whether you were interested in science or literature or law or mathematics, printing meant that more people had the opportunity to encounter far more voices across time and space.

And as Renaissance ideas spread north, fueled in part by printing, it followed that writers and scholars would see the ideas of humanism through the lens of local concerns. Also, of course, nothern European thinkers downplayed the movement's Italian origins. One of the great rules of history is that whenever Italy has an idea, northern Europe will be like "Yeah, no, we totally already had that idea, like, eight times. Our version is so much different and better, wait till you see how we do the Black Death / ballet / facism / automatic weapons / pizza / defensive-minded football."

Anyway, Pietro Bruegel's *Dutch Proverbs* is one example of how different Northern Renaissance art was from its Italian counterparts. Bruegel is still interested in the ideas of humanism in this painting. It's secular, focused on people, set in the natural world, but you can see that Bruegel's painting of scruffy, rural villagers acting out ridiculous common wisdom has none of the lyricism or elegence of, say, Botticelli's *Birth of Venus.*

Then again, in many respects, the Northern Renaissance wasn't so unique. The touchstone was still the classical world and its art and writing. Florentines had made much of the Roman legal tradition that empowered the paterfamilias, or male head of the family,

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and this was very much embraced in the north as well. The idea was that all social and political order stemmed from the exercise of the father's authority over the family unit. From the father's secure position, the wellbeing of the family flowed, and more than that, the wellbeing of the larger state depended on the good order of all the families it encompassed, just as the successes of Rome had rested on familial underpinnings. And if humanism was gonna open the door to re-thinking current values, some sort of anchor was needed to prevent chaos and people to the north and south agreed that this security was going to rest in the classical tradition of the father's legal dominance.

In both north and south, humanism also went radical. Some humanists began regularly teaching, not just discussing its principles and main subject matter, rhetoric, which may not seem like a big deal to you, but it meant that at least in parts of the radical fringe of the Renaissance world, ancient Latin and Greek were being taught, not just the medieval versions of those languages, which would eventually contribute to a re-thinking of what certain texts actually said, perhaps most notably the Bible. Also, girls sometimes joined their brothers in being tutored, a radical idea indeed, although one that could also trace itself back to the old light. In justifying the education of girls, scholars cited ancient women who'd recieved tutoring, including Sappho, Aspasia, and Cornelia, the daughter of the Roman general Scipio.

And as humanism grew, so did the number of universities. European universities had long taught a system of theology and philosophy known as scholasticism that focused on early church teaching and Aristotelian logic, but now they began to embrace humanism, spending less time studying religious texts and more time investigating the human condition and thinking about how to organize human societies, including how to establish and enforce laws.

And amid these developments,

**===== (06:00) to (08:00) =====**

Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam, also known as the "prince of the humanists," became the commanding figure in the Northern Renaissance.

Let's go to the Thought Bubble. .

Erasmus contributed to taking humanism along its twisted path from ideas of the study of humans and the active life into politics. He went to study at the university of Paris and began publishing his opinions on public affairs, including *The Responsibilities of a Ruler*. A prince, he declared in *The Education of a Christian Prince,* needed to study the classics and the deeds of worthy ancient leaders, and in these examples, he would discover the means by which great leaders achieved the public good and keep the peace, even in troubled times. He also emphasized the importance of reading the Bible and the leading Christian authors. It was for this

that he came to be known as advocating for a middle road between the pagan ancients and the more recent Christian thinkers, but he was at times also very critical of the Catholic church.

Erasmus was also a central figure in the rising Republic of Letters, a growing international community of humanists in Europe. In fact, he corresponded with some five hundred people around Europe, including everyone from Sir Thomas More to Martin Luther to Pope Leo X. Aside from his work on Biblical translations, he also edited, translated, and published ancient pagan texts, like Cicero's, and the works of many pivotal religious authors, especially Sr. Jerome. He was astonishingly prolific, hiring editors, proofreaders, and even ghostwriters to help him produce moutains of humanistic texts and fashion himself as the quintessential figure of the Northern Renaissance. Before dying suddenly of dysentary at the age of 69 because, you know, it was the sixteenth century.

Thanks, Thought Bubble.

So, before he died, Erasmus saw the rise of the Protestant Reformation and he disagreed with much of Martin Luther's teachings and remained loyal to the Catholic Church,

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but Erasmus's emphasis on inner spirituality over ritual did in some ways presage Protestantism. Some felt that "Erasmus had laid the egg, and Luther had hatched it," but Erasmus dismissed that, saying, "Luther hatched a different bird entirely." Also, for the record, neither Erasmus or Martin Luther could lay eggs, because they were mammals, but now we're venturing into biology and getting a bit ahead of ourselves with the Reformation.

Before we start debating how many angels can fit on the head of a pin, we should acknowledge the other great Renaissance thinker who shaped what we now call political science: Niccolo Machiavelli, who was like the Erasmus living in the Upside-Down.

Machiavelli had been a faithful supported of Florence's republican traditions. After the death of Lorenzo Medici in 1492, Machiavelli served the republic in several positions, but after Spanish, Papal, and other forces defeated the republic in 1512, Machiavelli was imprisoned and tortured; he was hung by his wrists until his shoulders were dislocated. He was eventually released after three weeks in prison and then set out to write his masterwork, *The Prince*, which was only published in 1532, five years after his death.

*The Prince* was very different from the work of other humanists, especially from the political ideals of Christian humanism found in Erasmus's essays and letters. Machiavelli imagined a grounding in the classics for an aspiring leader of his day, but he believed the attitudes necessary for leaders were vastly different from what the ancients had counseled. His most quoted advice focused on whether a ruler should aim to be loved or feared. "One should wish to be both, but because it is difficult to united them in one person, it is much safer to be feared than loved."

Machiavelli took a so-called "realist" view of politics. He focused on how a prince could retain power and maintain order, and he was much more interested in what was effective than what was like, noble. And unlike many humanists, focused on maintaining peace,

**===== (10:00) to (12:00) =====**

Machiavelli believed that war was necessary. In fact, he wrote a book about it called Art of War. He argued that rulers needed to prepare for war by studying great military leaders of the past, and he believed that effective military leadership was vital to effective political leadership because those who win wars get to gain peace on their terms.

But there were also idealists among Renaissance humanists, like the Englishman Thomas More, who was one of Erasmus's five billion friends, and a close one, in fact. More wrote the classic book *Utopia*, which imagines a society without private property, where reason and cooperation have replaced struggles for glory and power.

It's an odd book. More was a devout Catholic and in fact would eventually be executed for opposing King Henry VIII's turn towards Protestantism, and yet, this seemingly enlightened Utopia is very much not Catholic. Like, the Utopians have married priests, for instance, and also they can get divorced. But regardless, More believed that humanistic analysis could lead to widespread peace and prosperity, which, by the way, I would argue turned out to be sort of correct, even though A) it would take a while for humanism's benefits to be felt, and B) More did not really get to enjoy them on account of being separated from his head in 1535.

A century before More's *Utopia*, another book that imagined an ideal city-state, *Book of the City of Ladies*, was written by Christine de Pizan. de Pizan was born in Venice, but moved to France as a kid when her dad got a job as the French king's astrologer, as you do. She married and had three kids, but then her husband died of the plague and thereafter she earned her living writing.

In *Book of the City of Ladies*, de Pizan gathered up all the great and good women of history and placed them in a city where the Virgin Mary is queen. The book argues that women can be virtuous leaders, and rational beings, and leadership by virtuous women could beget virtuous communities.

**===== (12:00) to (14:00) =====**

A stark contrast to Machiavelli's worldview.

So at this point, it's common to ask students to think about the relative merits of idealism and realism: Is a prince or princess, or for that matter a student at a high school, better off being loved or feared? Is it more important for a community to be fair or stable? Should leaders prioritize virtue or effectivenes?

These are big, interesting questions, and I think they're worth considering, but I would also ask you to look at the lens through which you're approaching those questions. Machiavelli's life was marked by endless wars and shifting alliances. He saw many short-lived governments fail to achieve stability. Christine de Pizan saw the intense oppression of women and the dismissal of their talents and intellect. Erasmus didn't exactly have an easy life, he was born out of wedlock and both his parents died of plague when he was a teenager, but he saw a very different world in Northern Europe than Machiavelli saw in Italy or than Christine de Pizan saw.

Where do you sit in the world, and how might that shape what kind of community you wish to see?

Thank's for watching. I'll see you next week.

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Thanks again for watching, and as they say in my hometown, don't

forget to be awesome.

**===== (14:00) to (14:02) =====**

((Outro screen))