The Concept of Human Dignity in Renaissance Humanism

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Humanism is “A non religious philosophy based on liberal human values” It is a worldly and secular philosophy. It is anthropocentric - regarding human beings as the center of existence. It was a European phenomenon and sought to dignify and ennoble man. Renaissance and Reformation were its main manifestations. It liberated thought and brought in complete freedom of expression. Thomas Moore wrote Utopia, the masterpiece of English humanism. In Moore we find the happiest blend of the spirit of Christianity and humanism. Humanists of the Renaissance period were student of the literature of Greek and Latin poets, dramatists, philosophers, historians and rhetoricians. This attitude stood for revival of interest in classical literature and thought. And this Revival came but at the expense of medieval Scholasticism. At its best, humanism helped to civilize man, to make him realize his potential powers and gifts.

Sir Thomas More’s humanism was pure and serene. It brought hope and relief to the English people. Erasmus, a friend of More, said about More, “When did nature mould a temper more gentle endearing and happy than the temper of Thomas More”. Moore stood for freedom of thought. He made fun of scholasticism. He has nothing but hatred and contempt for wars and war makers. Soldiers to him are men slayers”. He extols communism, forbids the acquisition of the property and discredits gold. He makes work compulsory for all men. He believes in the goodness of the human heart. To him tolerance is the general law. His “Utopia” is great literary contribution to pure humanism.

Humanism was a movement that was at once a product of and a counteraction to a certain prevalent scholasticism. It was a way of dealing with the disequilibrium created by the conflict between belief and doubt. Humanism turned out to be a form of philosophy that concentrated on the preparation of a worldly life, rather than on the preparation for an eternal and spiritual life. In its more extreme form humanistic attitude regarded man as the crown and glory of creation, a point of view marvelously expressed by Shakespeare in Hamlet:

“What a piece of work is man!
How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty.
In form and moving how express and admirable in action,
How like an angel in apprehension, how like a God!
The beauty of the world. The paragon of animals.”

This passage has been taken as one of the great English versions of Renaissance humanism, an assertion of the dignity of man against the asceticism of medieval misanthrope. The dignity of man attained its greatest prominence and was given its characteristic meaning during the Renaissance.

“Man crosses the mighty deep, contemplates the range of the heavens, notes the motion, position, and size of the stars, and reaps a harvest from both land and sea, learns all kinds of knowledge, gains skill in arts, pursues scientific inquiry. ... He gives order to creation. Devils are subject to him. He explores the nature of every kind of being. He busies himself with the knowing of God and is God's house and temple.”

In his Lowell Lectures on “Shakespeare and the Nature of Man,” Theodore Spencer suggested that Shakespeare wrote in a time when there was a real conflict between the concepts of human dignity and human wretchedness. He quoted the poet, Sir John Davies, who wrote in 1599:

“I know my body's of so frail a kind,
As force without, fevers within can kill;
I know the heavenly nature of my mind,
But 'tis corrupted both in wit and will.

I know my Soul hath power to know all things,
Yet she is blind and ignorant in all;
I know I am one of Nature's little kings,
Yet to the least and vilest things am thrall.
I know my life's a pain and but a span,
I know my Sense is mock'd with everything:
And to conclude, I know myself a Man,
Which is a proud, and yet a wretched thing.”

Spencer emphasized that the part of the greatness of Shakespeare was his ability to depict in his characters that essential conflict which is so central to the human experience - of knowing ourselves as proud and wretched, as worthy and worthless. Hamlet, for example, begins with a hero who is "bright, orderly, and optimistic," but who gets in touch, before the curtain falls, with the parts of himself that are "full of darkness and chaos." Hamlet's greatness as a character, lies in the combination of both dimensions within the one character, but "his awareness of the conflict between what theory taught and experience proves, wrecks him." Othello gets trapped between his trust of Iago and his love for Desdemona. He is a man who tried to keep his passions under control, a rational man who was shipwrecked on the shoals of determination to be right: to be judge, jury, and executioner. Macbeth, Marc Antony, Lear - Spencer makes his point that what makes Shakespeare's dramas so timeless is their grappling with the conflict between their dignity and the harsher realities of their lives.
Shakespeare lived in the Age of Humanism and shared its basic optimism and good will toward human nature. Here we note that the evil that takes place in Shakespeare's plays is usually the result of villains described as unnatural and who frequently acknowledge having an unnatural bent. There are, to be sure, "honorable" men like Brutus in Julius Caesar who go astray, but for the most part, the bad characters are portrayed as abnormally perverse. Outside of the tragedies, Shakespeare plainly takes humorous shots at misanthropic characters like Jaques in As You Like It and Malvolio in Twelfth Night. 4

Literature is the interpretation of life through imagination and passions. The subject matter of literature is man and its theme is human life--its infinite forms and manifestations. The mind of the artist is all-free, unrestricted and can take flight in any direction, can talk of any subject under the sun in a personal way. The literary attitude is the attitude of freedom, of liberal humanism. A literary man is the Universal man—a man for all seasons and climes.

Man and man’s life is the concern of literature. A true artist is the guiding power and an inspiring force for the society. Literature sustains life. Literature deals with the drama of human life as a whole. Literature stands for the principles of order, symmetry, beauty and effectiveness. According to Milton “A good book is the precious life blood of a master spirit embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life”. Literature deals with the universal and permanent themes such as love, hatred, jealousy ambition, human joys and sorrows, the problem of life and destiny as a whole. Poets, dramatists and novelists always attempt to reveal the whole truth about life. Goethe, Shakespeare, Milton, Homer, Dante and Marlow are all humanist in this sense.

Shakespeare’s influence on man is profound though silent, like the influence of nature. We drink him up like water and are bettered and yet know not how. His humanity is as wide as life itself. And Milton, the truly religious man, wrote “Paradise Lost” “to justify the ways of God to man”. He was a man fired with deepest charity to infuse good things into others. Milton inspires us with his courage, temperance, toil and angelic devotion, which carried the life of man to new heights of spiritual grace and dignity.

Literature and humanistic attitude meet happily in the pages of Shakespeare, Milton, and other renaissance writers. Shakespeare cares chiefly even when he deals with the beast of chase, for the suffering of the mind. Can there be any more wonderful pleading for mercy than the one given by Shakespeare in the following lines:

“The quality of mercy is not strained,
It dropeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath, It is twice blessed,
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.
It is mightiest in the mightiest:
It becomes the throned monarch better than his crown
His scepter shows the forces of temporal power

The attribute to awe and majesty
Where in doth sit the dread and fear of kings
But mercy is above this sceptred sway,
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,
It is an attribute of God himself.” 5
Shakespeare’s charity and sympathy are not confined to human world only. He has boundless love and affection for the hunted deer and the hunted hare in, “As you Like It” and in “Venus and Adonis”. These descriptions go beyond the stolid sympathies of average selfish humanity. Our view of humanity is shaped by the stories Shakespeare told and the characters he developed. The concept of humanity throughout *Macbeth* is portrayed differently by the two characters Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. 

The fact that Shakespeare endowed his character with such deep humanity makes us identify with him, no matter what our sex, race, or religion. The fragility of civilization may have been an idea that Shakespeare saw as peculiarly relevant to a Moor living in Venice, but it is equally relevant to everyone here and now. We all have a barbarism we are trying to clamp down. The concept of the dignity of man, which had thus been given a definite literary form by the renaissance humanists, derived from and contained within itself two divergent theological and philosophical positions. Man's dignity lay in his creation in the image and likeness of God, which could be interpreted as meaning either that it was man's destiny to transcend the limitations of his image-likeness and to ascend to eventual deification by a progress toward perfect assimilation of image and model, or that man thought, felt, and acted in a godlike manner in his domination, utilization, guidance, and reconstruction of the world of sub-human nature.

The word *dignitas* is a Latin rhetorical and political term indicating either the possession of high political or social rank or the moral qualities associated with it. It is used with great frequency by Cicero who begins to give it some of the connotations of general worthiness it acquired during the Renaissance. It is derived from the same root as *decus* and *decorum* (Sanskrit *da-cas*, “fame”). Cicero discusses dignity as the quality of masculine beauty as a subtopic to the fourth, but most emphasized virtue to be sought by man, *decorum*, or propriety, which he derives from Panaetius' concept, *to prepon* (*De officiis*, I. 27, 36). In the course of this discussion Cicero applies the term “dignity” to the human race, as that quality which distinguishes it from animals.

“But in every investigation into the nature of duty, it is vitally necessary for us to remember always how vastly superior is man's nature to that of cattle and other animals: their only thought is for bodily satisfactions.... Man's mind on the contrary, is developed by study and reflection....”

According to the chain of being concept, all existing things have their precise place and function in the universe, and to depart from one's proper place was to betray one's nature. Human beings, for example, were pictured as placed between the beasts and the angels. To act against human nature by not allowing reason to rule the emotions--was to descend to the level of the beasts. In the other direction, to attempt to go above one's proper place, as Eve did when she was tempted by Satan, was to court disaster. Yet Renaissance writers at times showed ambivalence towards such a rigidly organized universe. For example, A philosopher of the Renaissance, Pico della Mirandola, , exalted human beings as capable of rising to the level of the angels through philosophical contemplation. In his "Oration on the Dignity of Man", he told hostile clerics about the dignity of the liberal arts and about the dignity and the glory of angels. His comments implied the human dignity. This oration is commonly seen as one of the central texts of the Renaissance, intimately tied with the growth of humanist philosophies.
Some Renaissance writers were fascinated by the thought of going beyond boundaries also set by the chain of being. A major example was the title character of Christopher Marlowe's play *Doctor Faustus*. Simultaneously displaying the grand spirit of human aspiration and the more questionable hunger for superhuman powers, Faustus seems in the play to be both exalted and punished. Marlowe's drama, in fact, has often been seen as the embodiment of Renaissance ambiguity in this regard, suggesting both its fear of and its fascination with pushing beyond human limitations modified by man's sin and the hope of redemption. Shakespeare's literary version of this order is given in *Troilus and Cressida*.

The heavens themselves, the planets, and this center
Observe degree priority and place
Insisture course proportion season form
Office and custom, in all line of order,.....
Oh, when degree is shak'd,
Which is the ladder to all high designs,
The enterprise is sick. 11

The theme of good and evil--this dual nature in man--is paramount in *Macbeth* also. Although at the outset of the play Macbeth is described as "Too full of the milk of human kindness" (Act 1.v.17) he is capable of murdering Duncan, the acknowledged good and gracious king who is his guest and kinsman. This dual nature of being is an inherent flaw in man, and predisposes him to trouble. Job notes that, "man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward" (Job 5:7). Time has not changed this aspect of human existence. Shakespeare does not fail to remind his audience of this problem

Renaissance Humanists placed great emphasis upon the dignity of man and upon the expanded possibilities of human life in this world. For the most part, it regarded human beings as social creatures who could create meaningful lives only in association with other social beings. The Renaissance belief in the dignity of the individual played a key role in the gradual rise of democratic ideas. In the terms used in the Renaissance itself, Humanism represented a shift from the "contemplative life" to the "active life." In the Middle Ages, great value had often been attached to the life of contemplation and religious devotion, away from the world (though this ideal applied to only a small number of people). In the Renaissance, the highest cultural values were usually associated with active involvement in public life, in moral, political, and military action, and in service to the state. Of course, the traditional religious values coexisted with the new secular values; in fact, some of the most important Humanists, like Erasmus, were Churchmen. Also, individual achievement, breadth of knowledge, and personal aspiration (as personified by Doctor Faustus) were valued. The concept of the "Renaissance Man" refers to an individual who, in addition to participating actively in the affairs of public life, possesses knowledge of and skill in many subject areas. (Such figures included Leonardo Da Vinci and John Milton, as well as Francis Bacon, who had declared, "I have taken all knowledge to be my province.") Nevertheless, individual aspiration was not the major concern of Renaissance Humanists, who focused rather on teaching people how to participate in and rule a society (though only the nobility and some members of the
middle class were included in this ideal). Overall, in consciously attempting to revive the thought and culture of classical antiquity, perhaps the most important value the Humanists extracted from their studies of classical literature, history, and moral philosophy was the social nature of humanity.

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