

The Italian Renaissance – Document Packet

Document 1

[LOVE FOR GREEK LITERATURE]

Then first came the knowledge of Greek, which had not been in use among us for seven hundred years. Chrysoloras the Byzantine, a man of noble birth and well versed in Greek letters, brought Greek learning to us. When his country was invaded by the Turks, he came by sea, first to Venice. The report of him soon spread, and he was cordially invited and besought and promised a public stipend, to come to Florence and open his store of riches to the youth. I was then studying Civil Law, but....I burned with love of academic studies, and had spent no little pains on dialectic studies, and had spent no little pains on dialectic and rhetoric....

....There are doctors of civil law everywhere; and the chance of learning will not fail [me]. But if this one and only doctor of Greek letters disappears, no one can be found to teach [me]....

[ON LEARNING AND LITERATURE]

....The foundations of all true learning must be laid in the sound and thorough knowledge of Latin: which implies study marked by a broad spirit, accurate scholarship, and careful attention to details. Unless this solid basis be secured it is useless to attempt to rear an enduring edifice. Without it the great monuments of literature are intelligible, and the art of composition impossible. To attain this essential knowledge we must never relax our careful attention to the grammar of the language, but perpetually confirm and extend our acquaintance with it until it is thoroughly our own....To this end we must be supremely careful in our choice of authors, lest an inartistic and debased style infect our own writing and degrade our taste; which danger is best avoided by bringing a keen, critical sense to bear upon select works, observing the sense of each passage, the structure of the sentence, the force of every word down to the least important particle. In this way our reading reacts directly upon our style....

But we must not forget that true distinction is to be gained by a wide and varied range of such studies as conduce to the profitable enjoyment of life, in which, however, we must observe due proportion in the attention and time we devote to them.

First amongst such studies I place History: a subject which must not on any account be neglected by one who aspires to true cultivation. For it is our duty to understand the origins of our own history and its development; and the achievements of Peoples and of Kings.

For the careful study of the past enlarges our foresight in contemporary affairs and affords to citizens and to monarchs lessons of incitement or warning in the ordering of public policy. From History, also, we draw our store of examples of moral precepts....

The great Orators of antiquity must by all means be included. Nowhere do we find the virtues more warmly extolled, the vices so fiercely decried....Further, from oratory we derive our store of those elegant or striking turns of expression which are used with so much effect in literary compositions. Lastly, in oratory we find that wealth of vocabulary, that clear easy-flowing style, that verve and force, which are invaluable to us both in writing and in conversation.

I come now to Poetry and the Poets....For we cannot point to any great mind of the past for whom the Poets had not a powerful attraction. Aristotle, in constantly quoting Homer, Hesiod, Pindar, Euripides and other [Greek] poets, proves that he knew their works hardly less intimately than those of the philosophers....Hence my view that familiarity with the great poets of antiquity is essential to

any claim to true education. For in their writings we find deep speculations upon Nature, and upon the Causes and Origins of things, which must carry weight with us both from their antiquity and from their authorship....To sum up what I have endeavoured to set forth. That high standard of education to which I referred at the outset is only to be reached by one who has seen many things and read much. Poet, Orator, Historian, and the rest, all must be studied, each must contribute a share. Our learning thus becomes full, ready, varied and elegant, available for action or for discourse in all subjects. But to enable us to make effectual use of what we know we must add to our knowledge the power of expression. These two sides of learning, indeed, should not be separated: they afford mutual aid and distinction. Proficiency in literary form, not accompanied by broad acquaintance with facts and truths, is a barren attainment; whilst information, however vast, which lacks all grace of expression, would seem to be put under a bushel or partly thrown away. Indeed, one may fairly ask what advantage it is to possess profound and varied learning if one cannot convey it in language worthy of the subject. Where, however, this double capacity exists—breadth of learning and grace of style—we allow the highest title so distinction and to abiding fame. If we review the great names of ancient [Greek and Roman] literature, Plato, Democritus, Aristotle, Theophrastus, Varro, Cicero, Seneca, Austustine, Jerone, Lactantius, we shall find it hard to say whether we admire more their attainments or their literary power.

SOURCE: Leonardo Bruni [1374-1444] from his works *History of His Own Times in Italy* and *On Learning and Literature*.

Document 2

...For why should we not admire the angels themselves and the most blessed choirs of heaven more? At last I seem to have understood why man is the most fortunate creature and thus worthy of all admiration, and what precisely is the place allotted to him in the universal chain, a place to be envied not only by the beasts, but also by the stars, and the Intelligences beyond this world. It is an incredible and wonderful thing. And why not? For this is the very reason why man is rightly called and considered a great miracle and a truly marvelous creature. But hear what this place is, Fathers, and courteously grant me the favor of listening with friendly ears.

Now the Highest Father, God the Architect, according to the laws of His secret wisdom, built this house of the world, this world which we see, the most sacred temple of His divinity. He adorned the region beyond the heavens with Intelligences, He animated the celestial spheres with eternal souls, and He filled the excrementary and filthy parts of the lower world with a multitude of animals of all kinds. But when his work was finished, the Artisan longed for someone to reflect upon the plan of so great a creation, to love its beauty, and to admire its magnitude. When, therefore, everything was completed, as Moses and the *Timaetus* testify, He began at last to consider the creation of man. But among His archetypes there was none from which He could form a new offspring, nor in His treasure houses was there any inheritance which He might bestow upon His new son, nor in the tribunal seats of the whole world was there a place where this contemplator of the universe might sit. All was now filled out; everything had been apportioned to the highest, the middle, and the lowest orders. But it was not in keeping with the Paternal power to fail . . . Finally the Great Artisan ordained that man, to whom he could give nothing belonging only to himself, should share in common whatever properties had been peculiar to each of the other creatures. He received man, therefore, as a creature of undetermined nature, and placing him in the center of the universe, said this to him: *Neither an established place, nor a form belonging to you alone, nor any special function have We given to you O Adam, and for this reason, that you may have and possess, according to your desire and*

judgment, whatever place, whatever form, and whatever functions you shall desire. The nature of other creatures, which has been determined, is confined within the bounds prescribed by Us. You, who are confined by no limits, shall determine for yourself your own nature, in accordance with your own free will, in whose hand I have placed you. I have set you at the center of the world, so that from there you may more easily survey whatever is in the world. We have made you neither heavenly nor earthly, neither mortal nor immortal, so that, more freely and more honorably the molder and maker of yourself, you may fashion yourself in whatever form you shall prefer. You shall be able to descend among the lower forms of being, which are brute beasts; you shall be able to be reborn out of the judgment of your own soul into the higher beings, which are divine.

O sublime generosity of God the Father! O highest and most wonderful felicity of man! To him it was granted to have what he chooses, to be what he will. At the moment when they are born, beasts bring with them from their mother's womb, as Lucilius says, whatever they shall possess. From the beginning, or soon afterwards, the highest spiritual beings have what they are to be for all eternity. When man came into life, the Father endowed him with all kinds of seeds and with the germs of every way of life. Whatever seeds each man cultivates will grow and bear fruit in him. If these seeds are vegetative, he will be like a plant; if they are sensual, he will become like the beasts; if they are rational he will become like a heavenly creature; if intellectual, he will be an angel and a son of God. . . .

SOURCE: Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*.

Document 3

I am of the opinion that the principal and true profession of the Courtier ought to be that of arms; which I would have him follow actively above all else, and be known among others as bold and strong, and loyal to whomsoever he serves. And he will win a reputation for these good qualities by exercising them at all times and in all places, since one may never fail in this without severest censure....

And....I would have him well built and shapely of limb, and would have him show strength and lightness and suppleness, and know all bodily exercises that befit a man of war: whereof I think the first should be to handle every sort of weapon well on foot and on horse, to understand the advantages of each, and especially to be familiar with those weapons that are ordinarily used among gentlemen....

[The Courtier should] avoid affectation to the uttermost....and, to use possible a new word, to practice in everything a certain non-challance that shall conceal design and show that what is done and said is done without effort and almost without thought....

Our Courtier then will be esteemed excellent and will attain grace in everything, particularly in speaking, if he avoids affectation; into which fault many fall, and often more than others, some of us Lombards, who, if they have been a year away from home, on their return at once begin to speak Roman, sometimes Spanish or French, and God know how. And all this comes from overzeal to appear widely informed....

I think that what is chiefly important and necessary for the Courtier in order to speak and

write well is knowledge....

Nor would I have him speak always of grave matters, but of amusing things, of games, jests, and waggery, according to the occasion; but sensibility of everything, and with readiness and lucid fullness; and in no place let him show vanity or childish folly....

I would have him more than passably accomplished in letters, at least in those studies that are called the humanities, and conversant not only with the Latin language but with the Greek, for the sake of the many different things that have been admirably written therein. Let him be well versed in the poets, and not less in the orators and historians, and also proficient in writing verse and prose, especially in this vulgar [vernacular] tongue of ours....

You must know that I am not content with the Courtier unless he be also a musician and unless, besides understanding and being able to read notes, he can play upon diverse instruments. For if we consider rightly, there is to be found no rest from toil or medicine for the troubled spirit more becoming and praiseworthy in time of leisure than this....

I wish to discuss another matter, which I deem of great importance and therefore think our Courtier ought by no means to omit: and this is to know how to draw and to have acquaintance with the very art of painting.

And do not marvel that I desire this art, which today may seem to savor of the artisan and little to befit a gentleman; for I remember having read that the ancients, especially throughout Greece, had their boys of gentle birth study painting in school as an honorable and necessary thing....

The game of tennis....is nearly always played in public, and is one of those sports to which a crown lends much distinction. Therefore I would have our Courtier practice this, and all the others except the handling of arms, as something that is not his profession, and let him show that he does not seek or expect praise for it, nor let him seem to devote much care or time to it, although he may do it admirably....

There are certain other exercises that can be practiced in public and in private, like dancing; and in this I think the Courtier ought to have a care, for when dancing in the presence of many and in a place full of people, it seems to me that he should preserve a certain dignity....

Besides daily showing everyone that he possesses the worth we have already described, I would have the Courtier strive, with all the thoughts and forces of his mind, to love and almost to adore the prince whom he serves, above every other thing, and mold his wishes, habits, and all his ways to his prince's liking....

Our Courtier....will not be a bearer of evil tidings; he will not be thoughtless in sometimes saying things that offend instead of pleasing as he intends. He will not be obstinate and disputatious, as some are who seem to delight in nothing but to be troublesome, and disagreeable like flies, and who make a point of spitefully contradicting everyone....

Let him above all take care not to weary his lord, and let him wait for favors to be offered him rather than angle for them so openly as many do, who are so greedy that it seems as if they must die if they do not get what they seek....

I would that our Courtier....might love, honor, and respect others according to their worth and merits, and always contrive to consort [mingle] more with such as are in high esteem and noble and of known virtue, than with the ignoble and those of little worth; in such ways that he may be loved and honored by them also. And he will accomplish this if he be courteous, kind, generous, affable, and mild with others, zealous and active to serve and guard his friends' welfare and honor both absent and present, enduring such of their natural defects as are endurable without breaking with them for slight cause, and correcting in himself those that are kindly pointed out....

I do not care at present to go more into detail in speaking of things that are too well know, such as that our Courtier ought not to avow himself a great eater or drinker, or given to excess in any evil habit,...because a man of this kind not only may not hope to become a good Courtier, but can be set to

no more fitting business than feeding sheep...

If our Courtier excels in anything besides arms, I would have him get profit and esteem from it in fine fashion; and I would have him so discreet and sensible as to be able with skill and address to attract men to see and hear what wherein he thinks he excels, always appearing not to do it from ostentation, but by chance and at others' request rather than by his own wish.... Then, in that of which he knows he is wholly ignorant, I would never have him make any pretense or seek to win any fame; nay if need be, let him frankly confess his ignorance....

I wish our Courtier to guard against getting the name of a liar or a boaster, which sometimes befalls even those who do not deserve it...

Let it suffice to say, besides the things already said, that he should be of such sort as never to be without something to say that is good and well suited to those with whom he is speaking, and that he should know how to refresh the minds of his hearers with a certain sweetness, and by his amusing witticisms and pleasantries to move them cleverly to mirth and laughter....

Many faculties of the mind are as necessary to woman as to man; likewise gentle birth, to avoid affectation, to be naturally graceful in all her doings, to be mannerly, clever, prudent, not arrogant, not envious, not slanderous, not vain, not quarrelsome, not silly, to know how to win and keep the favor of her mistress and of all others, to practice well and gracefully the exercises that befit women.... Beauty is more necessary to her than to the courtier, for in truth that woman lacks much who lacks beauty. Then, too, she ought to be more circumspect and take greater care not to give occasion for evil being said of her....

Let him obey, please and honor his lady with all reverence, and hold her dearer than himself, and prefer her convenience and pleasures to his own, and love in her not less the beauty of mind than of body. Therefore, let him take care not to leave her to fall into any kind of error, but by admonition and good advice let him always seek to lead her on to modesty, to temperance, to true chastity....

In such fashion will our courtier be most acceptable to his lady, and she will always show herself obedient, sweet and affable to him, and as desirous of pleasing him as of being loved by him.

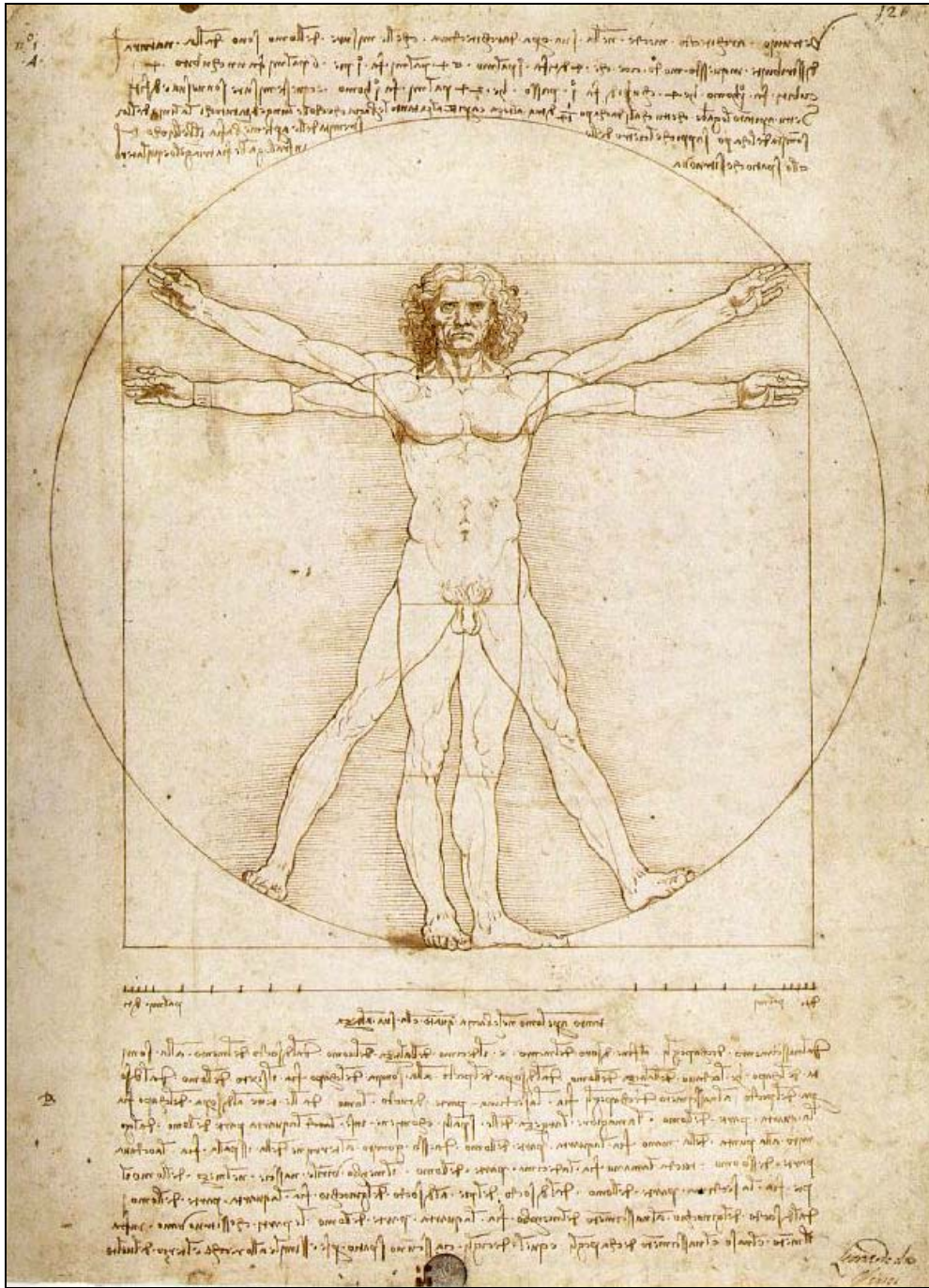
SOURCE: Baldassare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, 1528.

Document 4



SOURCE: Ballini, *Portrait of a Young Man*, late 15c (LEFT); Raphael, *Portrait of a Young Man With An Apple*, 1503-1504 (RIGHT).

Document 5



SOURCE: Leonardo DaVinci, *Vitruvian Man*, 1492.