

Renaissance Composition

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Understanding how one learned to write in the Renaissance has much to offer both to those studying Renaissance literature and to those learning to craft either argumentative or creative writing. Students of Renaissance literature will find that the writings of Shakespeare, Donne, or Milton can be better understood when they are analyzed as products of the Renaissance educational system. And those perfecting their own skills at writing persuasively or imaginatively will find Renaissance composition methods can provide an impressive array of practical techniques.

To understand how Renaissance students learned to write it is necessary to understand how they learned to read and evaluate literature. The role that literature once played for students learning to write is perhaps the greatest difference between composition in the Renaissance and today. So close was the relationship between analyzing and producing texts in the Renaissance that studying literature and learning to write were almost identical activities.

We may think that reading and writing are still taught closely together. After all, students of literature are routinely assigned to write about the works they read, and writing students are often given selections of literature to study within their writing courses. However, in the Renaissance students did not so much write “about” the literature they read as they actually tried to imitate that literature. To Renaissance students, literature was presented not simply as a source of ideas to write about (though it certainly was that), but as a source of strategies for expression. They were taught to observe those strategies very closely, and then to imitate them.

Indeed, imitation was the main mode of Renaissance composition: classical literature provided students the models they would copy in becoming writers themselves. Understanding Renaissance composition largely means coming to appreciate why and how reading and writing were kept in such a tightly reciprocal relationship, and just why and how imitation itself functioned.

The thoroughness and the success of imitation as a method in Renaissance reading and writing was not the result of casual preference, but was the natural consequence of their views about literacy which differ radically from our own. One cannot see or sense the value of Renaissance composition and its connection to literature through imitation unless one grasps the underlying conceptual framework about language and literature that was operating at the time.

Renaissance literacy depended on a mind set in which deference to a different, foreign language was the bottom line. This is something that modern ESL students might understand, but which monolingual students cannot easily comprehend. Learning to write in the Renaissance meant learning to write in a foreign language considered far superior to one’s native tongue.

As a consequence, the Roman writings studied in the Renaissance were more than a body of literature to be mastered; they comprised a linguistic treasure trove exemplifying the flexibility and power of the Latin tongue. Renaissance students envied the eloquence of the Latin in their literary models, and so they studied literature to observe and absorb Latin vocabulary, syntax, figurative language—its grammar and rhetoric.

Today, in contrast, we work within a familiar native tongue in learning to compose (for the most part), and consequently we are much less likely to defer to the example of literary models for their grammatical and rhetorical virtues. But such deference is exactly what students in the Renaissance were taught, and the main means provided them for using literary models as close guides in their writing and speaking was the discipline known as rhetoric.

Rhetoric offered more than just lessons in style or the figures of speech. It offered a kind of worldview for literacy that was not indebted to romantic ideas about writing which developed well after the Renaissance and still persist. For example, today we prize originality of ideas, and we cling to an inspirational model for imaginative writing. Neither notion would make much sense in the Renaissance, where imitation was prized above inventing something novel. Rhetoric offered to students a way of appreciating and appropriating both the ideas and especially the form—the linguistic strategies—of the literature which they read. The Renaissance student would not feel hindered about copying what worked well in a model by any concerns over intellectual property, for example. We must set aside some of our modern beliefs about writing in order not to misinterpret what Renaissance students were doing, and to appreciate Renaissance methods.

Largely because of the dominant role of rhetoric, Renaissance literacy meant attending to form more closely than we do today in both reading and in writing. The Renaissance student was taught to gauge very carefully how differing forms—even if embodying the same content—conveyed differing connotations and produced differing effects.

In fact, in order to train this sensitivity to forms and their effects within students, Renaissance humanists contrived methods by which students would first be able to recognize and then to manipulate the formal qualities of literary models. Some of these methods could sometimes appear to be very pedantic and potentially trivial. On the other hand, the humanists’ rhetorical exercises could be

wonderfully liberating when students began to catch on to the power and joy of language.

Renaissance composition carried with it rewards commensurate with its risks, and if the composition methods of that age produced some tiresome grandiloquence and shoddy imitations, which it did, it also produced writers and writings we continue to prize for having succeeded in achieving literary expression that is both forceful and beautiful.

This short introduction to Renaissance composition will cover the methods of Renaissance analysis and genesis—Renaissance reading and writing. A more complete account of the cultural setting for and the history of these methods can be found in my *Imitation in Renaissance Education and Humanist Pedagogy* (Univ. of Southern California, 1994).

Analysis and Genesis

At the risk of oversimplifying Renaissance literacy, it consisted of two overarching and inter-related processes: analysis and genesis. In their reading (analysis) students learned to write (genesis) and in their writing (genesis) they learned to read (analysis). By discussing analysis and genesis separately, reading and writing, I am artificially dividing what was not so clearly divided in actual classroom practice.

Analytical Methods

Any literature read by students in the Latin schools run by Renaissance humanists was read not only to learn its content, but to analyze its structure as a model for one's own writing. To this end students were instructed to keep a copybook divided into two sections that would thus emphasize this twofold

| <u>Content</u> | <u>Form</u> |
|----------------|-------------|
| | |

approach. On one side students would pen interesting thoughts gleaned from the literature they read—subject matter, content, ideas. On the other side students would write down passages noteworthy for their form: the argumentative structure, the use of figures of speech, their style.

The numerous detailed methods for literary analysis that were described and taught by Renaissance teachers all came back to this simple division between *what* and *how* something is expressed, relying upon the assumption that meaning and effect were always largely dependent upon the form. It is important to recognize the simplicity of this principle underlying Renaissance reading because the varieties of analysis employed can appear deceptively complex due to their number and variety.

Beyond the content/form split, analysis of literary models consisted of studying their grammatical, logical, and rhetorical features. Each of these three disciplines provided a technical vocabulary that enabled differing kinds of analyses. The more that a student had learned about each of these disciplines, the more he was prepared to recognize and label features taught from these fields of discourse within texts being studied.

In this way, Renaissance reading and writing was a very scalable activity. The same general approach was used at all grade levels, with more advanced students simply adding more specific knowledge of the language arts to the same exercises, and being given more freedom in their imitative exercises. Even with the crudest rudiments of grammar, logic, or rhetoric, one was prepared to begin studying texts. Indeed, it became a recursive and reciprocal activity: as one read, one acquired a better idea of how grammar, logic, and rhetoric were functioning. In turn, as one grew in a knowledge of those disciplines, he became better able to read the literature.

Of course, any division among kinds of analysis is an arbitrary one, since these methods combined to produce effects in concert with each other. Part of the rhetorical approach to analysis was taking this more holistic view of the net effect of a text's various features upon its audience(s).

Although the fact that Renaissance literary analysis included each of the three members of the medieval trivium—grammar, rhetoric, and logic—this does not mean there was parity among those disciplines. In the Renaissance rhetoric took priority, partly because its principles helped to organize the significance of the other two.

For example, grammar could teach students to identify Latin word order, but rhetoric provided an interpretive framework for understanding why and how that grammar could be altered for effect. We will see a similar blurring between the disciplines of rhetoric and logic, below. And so, as I review the categories of textual analysis from the Renaissance, it is important to keep in mind that these

features worked together, and that rhetoric was the lens that helped to bring into focus what both grammar and logic were doing.

Analyzing Grammar

As for grammatical analysis, this was a more dominant part of Renaissance reading than it is today, simply because students were acquiring the foreign language of Latin as they went along. Grammatical analysis for the most part consisted of parsing, finding the *pars orationis*, or parts of speech, and identifying their relationships to one another within a sentence which were apparent due to case endings for nouns or conjugation for verbs, etc.

This sort of thing may be considered unremarkable at best and tedious at worst. But in the Renaissance, parsing a sentence meant more than unveiling its syntactical functionality. It was not simply an elementary or rudimentary concern, because parsing meant learning not just how *meaning* was achieved, but how *effects* were generated. This is a fundamentally rhetorical point of view, and the line between grammar and rhetoric was very thin indeed.

Renaissance students parsing a Latin sentence would analyze the word order of a sentence not just to make sense of subject, verb, and object, but in order to assess the rhetorical value of any variation from normal Latin word order. For example, given a sentence such as *puellam pueri vident* (“It is the girl the boys see.”), a student would at first identify grammatical accident that made clear the meaning of the sentence: *puellam* (“girl”) is the object of the verb because it is in the accusative case (ending with “m”), even though it is the first word in the sentence. But why is it the first word in the sentence? For rhetorical emphasis. In fact, there is a figure of speech that names just such a possible inversion, “hyperbaton,” or the inversion of expected word order. The use of hyperbaton gives the girl emphasis in the statement which is not there in a subject-first (normal) word order. Thus, at many points, understanding various rhetorical strategies depended upon a keen knowledge of grammar (just as various rhetorical figures coincided with argumentative strategies from the field of logic).

Grammatical analysis also went beyond parsing the parts of speech and identifying accident (gender, number, etc.) and included both orthography (spelling) and the rhythm of the prose or poetry. Renaissance humanists such as Leonardo Bruni placed a special emphasis on students training their ears to hear the musicality of the words being employed. Such analysis required being able to be very specific about the structure and order of words within sentences, and sentences within paragraphs. It was a different mentality, one that did not lend itself to speed reading, but more to reading aloud.

Analyzing Arguments

Analyzing the logic of a literary model meant assessing it as an argumentative and persuasive structure. One would ask, what point is being made here? What proofs are being put forth to support it?

To answer these questions, students learned to identify speech genres (branches of oratory) which tended to follow certain patterns of persuasion: judicial oratory, legislative oratory, and epideictic oratory. Students were also taught, from Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* or from Cicero’s *Topics*, to recognize certain recurring categories of proof (known as the “topics of invention”). These included definition, division, cause/effect, comparison, testimony, etc.

The line between the discipline of logic and that of rhetoric was blurred; figures of speech and other rhetorical strategies were in many ways continuous with these more abstract logical categories of proof. For example, “metaphor” and “simile” are figures of speech that operate on the basis of employing comparisons; “comparison” is itself a standard argumentative strategy and as such was one of the common “topics of invention.” Similarly, the figure “synecdoche” (referring to a whole by naming its part), correlates with the logical category known as “part/whole.”

This continuity with rhetoric is what has been lost today in textual analysis. We are more ready to trace ideas and their logical relations than to see how the verbal form is constantly and often unnoticeably echoing or varying those more abstract dynamics of meaning.

Analyzing Rhetorically

The most emphasis in Renaissance schooling was placed on rhetorical analysis. This took place on several levels. We have already seen how rhetoric overlapped with grammatical and with logical analysis.

First of all, students were often asked to summarize what they had read. Such an exercise in abbreviation called upon their critical thinking skills to get at the heart of *what* was said. Students were asked to get a general sense of the purpose or intent of the example text, in part by identifying its larger genre of discourse. Was this an example of judicial, deliberative, or ceremonial oratory? These three major genres, laid out by Aristotle, were a starting point, though of course much literature did not fit these oratorical categories well.

Next, students moved on to analysis of *how* the text worked rhetorically. They would identify various grammatical structures and rhetorical figures and how these were working to fulfill the author’s intentions or the genre’s expectations.

By the way, such rhetorical analysis is a point at which some Renaissance reading got mired in pedantry, since the identification of figures of speech or the precise categorization of grammatical features became a sort of linguistic fetish for many people, most notably the “Ciceronians” who so ardently wished to follow Cicero that they analyzed his linguistic structures beyond his own purposes. The bright side of Renaissance writing is also its dark side: rhetoric can become blather, as Francis Bacon would memorably remark at the dawn of the Enlightenment, an excuse to emphasize words at the expense of ideas.

Many Renaissance copies of literary texts contain marginalia that prove the books’ owners were dutifully following their teachers’ admonitions to discover the rhetoric at work in their reading. The names of figures such as “syllepsis” or “metaphor” are to be found next to literary examples of these figures in Virgil or Aesop. Of course, students were encouraged to keep track of stylistic and other rhetorical exemplars in their copybooks.

Methods of Genesis

Analysis and genesis were tightly linked in the Renaissance. Essentially, if a student could come to identify a linguistic or logical feature in a given model text, he or she might be able to employ something similar in their own writing and speaking. Analysis became genesis, especially by way of three major and inter-related processes: imitation, variation, and amplification.

Imitation

Renaissance composition was an imitative venture. It should be understood that imitation was not just a general concept or approach to reading and writing during the Renaissance; it also consisted of a set of very clear practices. Schoolmasters put into place curricula based on a variety of very specific imitative exercises.

The efficiency of imitation was that the quality of one’s writing could always be directly referred back to model texts that were well known and well studied. It also worked well as a scalable curriculum. Anyone could imitate *something* from a given model, and the depth and detail of that imitation depended on how advanced a student’s understanding of grammar, logic, and rhetoric had become.

Roger Ascham, the tutor of Queen Elizabeth, taught that imitation is to keep the form but to change the content of one’s model, or to change the form but retain its content. He and others devised several exercises that help students to perform such imitations, including double translation, translation among genres, paraphrasing, etc.

Variation and Amplification

Part of the process of imitation was to employ two other general principles of adaptation: variation and amplification. Essentially, methods of varying were given not just to avoid tediousness, but so students could achieve original expression based on (but not entirely depending upon) their models. Amplification was also a guiding principle, as it suggested the amplitude of possibilities for both ideas and their expression. Most prominent in this regard is the great Renaissance text by Erasmus, *De duplici copia verborum ac rerum* (“On the Twofold Abundance of Expression and Ideas”). That book was largely a reference for students, teaching them how to read literature with the goal of seeing how the same sort of ideas have been expressed differently by different authors, and showing them various kinds of changes they could make on their own writings.

De copia was set up just as the Renaissance copybooks, mentioned above, with its first half devoted to amplification of form (style, words), and the second half devoted to the amplification of ideas (content, matter). For example, in the first half of the book Erasmus takes the very plain sentence, “Your letter pleased me greatly” and writes nearly 150 variations on this to show how one can keep the same matter but change the form. There, the emphasis is on using different words, different kinds of stylistic choices, in expressing essentially the same thing. In the second half of the book he illustrates amplification and variation by taking an idea, “He is a total monster,” and amplifying it. There, the emphasis is not on altering the *form* of expression, but in altering the *content* by applying various logical categories (such as “division”) from the topics of invention:

He is a monster both in mind and in body; whatever part of mind or body you consider, you will find a monster—quivering head, rabid eyes, a dragon's gape, the visage of a Fury, distended belly, hands like talons ready to tear, feet distorted, in short, view his entire physical shape and what else does it all present but a monster? Observe that tongue, observe that wild beast's roar, and you will name it is a monstrosity; probe his mind, you will find a horror; weigh his character, scrutinize his life, you will find all monstrous...through and through he is nothing but a monster.

The dramatic flair in this passage suggests how amplification aimed for a more forceful effect. It may also illustrate how teachers of the day interested their young pupils in enjoying such linguistic play. Another amplification from Renaissance rhetorician Thomas Wilson illustrates this well. “If a gentleman and officer of the king's, being overcharged at supper with overmuch drink, and surfeiting with gorge upon gorge, should vomit the next day in the Parliament house,” says Wilson, he might amplify that brief comment as follows:

O shameful deed, not only in sight to be loathed, but also odious of all men to be heard. If thou hadst done this deed at thine own house being at supper with they wife and children, who would not have thought it a filthy deed? but now for thee to do it in the Parliament house, among so many gentlemen, and such, yea, the best in all England: being both an officer of the kings, and a man of much authority, and there to cast out gobbets (where belching were thought great shame) yea, and such gobbets as none could abide the smell, and to fill the whole house with evil savor, and thy whole bosom with much filthiness, what an abominable shame is it above all other? It had been a fowl deed of itself to vomit where no such gentlemen were: yea, where no gentlemen were: yea, where no English men were: yea, where no men were: yea, where no company were at all: or it had been evil, if had born no manner o office, or had been no public officer, or had not been the king's officer: but being not only an officer, but a public officer, and that the kings' officer: yea, and such a king's, and doing such a deed: I cannot tell in the world what to say to him.

Amplification served many purposes in the Renaissance classroom. Sometimes it was assigned as a way to lengthen and give additional rhetorical force to an established argument. Sometimes to amplify simply meant to compose—it was that central to the curriculum.

The Progymnasmata

Renaissance writing also depended upon a fairly standard set of exercises that had been brought forward from three Greek authors of late antiquity. These exercises were known as the *progymnasmata*, or those exercises that were to precede the *gymnasmata*, or full practice declamations (practice orations). The fourteen exercises that comprised the *progymnasmata* served as what we would call “units” today—each exercise teaching a separate portion of a complete speech, or building a set of skills that would be used in advanced writing and speaking. These exercises included acquiring an ability with differing discursive modes (exposition, narrative, dramatization, argumentation). All of these exercises were subject to the general principles of imitation, variation, and amplification. Students were taught to be original in their approach, not in their selection of basic ideas or models.

For example, the first of the *progymnasmata* was to amplify a myth or fable (such as a story from Aesop) by retelling the story, but adding in descriptive elements and the use of direct speech. This would train the student in the poetical element of descriptive speech, and in the dramatic element of using direct address—both of which could come in handy in a public speech.

A knowledge of these exercises is useful for understanding literature produced in this period. Consider, for example, how we might re-evaluate the meaning of Hamlet’s “To be or not to be” soliloquy in light of the probability that Shakespeare was trained in the *progymnasmata* exercises.

“To be or not to be” is a speech is typically interpreted as evidence of his brooding and introverted nature. As he explores the theme of suicide and fear of the unknown, we take this at face value as Hamlet revealing his heart-sick soul. However, one of the *progymnasmata* typically assigned to students asked them to debate between two courses of action. A typical example was “To marry or not to marry.” Death was a common topic for such exercises, and it is not unreasonable to suppose that Shakespeare himself may have been assigned “To be or not to be” as the question to be explored on a given day in his school in Stratford. Perhaps Hamlet is conscious of the artificial nature of such an exercise and is employing the whole speech rhetorically, to be overheard by Ophelia (who has not exited the stage). At the very least we ought to consider the possibility that the speech was functioning for the character the same way such speeches functioned in the Renaissance classroom—as ways not just to express an opinion but to explore a set of possibilities. Such exercises were catalysts of inquiry, not necessarily confessional vehicles.

The *progymnasmata* are being re-integrated into contemporary writing instruction by a few composition specialists familiar with the classical and Renaissance traditions (Edward Corbett, Sharon Crowley, and Frank D’Angelo have all published textbooks that incorporate the *progymnasmata*). Because of the progressive and fundamental nature of these exercises, they are still useful for students of persuasive or imaginative writing today.

Conclusion

If we are willing to look closely at the linguistic methods of Renaissance composition, including their preoccupation with grammar, rhetoric, and logic and the ways that those disciplines teach us to read texts closely and thoroughly, then we can comprehend the way Renaissance composition permeates Renaissance literature and we can begin to imitate—in true Renaissance fashion—the successes of our predecessors. But the gulf is a wide one, since it requires looking at literature as a closer companion to composition than we are accustomed to believing, and it requires becoming familiar with rhetoric in particular, whose intricacies can be quite daunting. Still, the basic division between form and content is a starting place. As we are willing to attend to form, closely and appreciatively, we come closest to the essence of Renaissance composition and the many gifts it can give us.