

## Renaissance Humanism and Shakespeare

Renaissance humanism refers to the ideals of the cultural, social, and educational reforms undertaken by scholars, artists, and political leaders in Europe during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Renaissance humanism developed in response to the increasingly outdated and limited ideals of medieval scholasticism that had pervaded Europe throughout the previous several centuries. Instead of merely equipping professional such as doctors, lawyers, and theologians with the strict rules of practice for their professions, humanists sought to instill within the educated a strong sense of virtue and prudence through the close study of the humanities and particularly the arts of rhetoric, history, poetry, and philosophy. Humanism originated in Florence and Naples, Italy in the fourteenth century but began to spread throughout Europe in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century due to the large-scale printing and publication of classical and modern poetic, historic, rhetorical and philosophical texts.

Renaissance humanism—which was practiced, in particular, by members of the clergy—was credited during the Renaissance with allowing for a greater emancipation of the individual (at least the educated individual) because many of the humanistic texts used within scholastic settings preached and argued on behalf of intellectual freedom and self-expression and served to expose individuals to customs and ideas from foreign cultures and past civilizations. A humanist was understood not merely as someone in possession of a great love for humanity, but rather as one who had mastered the humane arts in order to attain a superior level of knowledge, wit, written and spoken eloquence, and deeper understanding of the world and history.

While William Shakespeare probably did not have the sort extensive humanistic education afforded those of higher social and financial rank than his own family, his education was clearly grounded in the principles of Renaissance humanism. The decidedly humanistic ideals Shakespeare often represents in his plays—particularly within *Hamlet* and *Julius Caesar*—are grounded in the principles of Renaissance humanism. Throughout his plays, Shakespeare regularly demonstrates and celebrates the ideas and ideals of Renaissance humanism, often—even in his tragic plays—presenting characters who embody the principles and ideals of Renaissance humanism, or people of tremendous self-knowledge and wit that are capable of self-expression and the practice of individual freedom. Shakespeare himself can be understood as the ultimate product of Renaissance humanism; he was an artist with a deep understanding of humanity and an uncanny ability for self-expression who openly practiced and celebrated the ideals of intellectual freedom.