

moon (the ‘sublunary’) was deemed to be in its primary form composed of the four elements of earth, air, fire and water, and condemned to change and decay. Those bodies existing elsewhere (in the ‘superlunary’) were thought to be composed of a perfect fifth substance of ‘essence’ (or ‘quintessence’) which was incorruptible. The experience of the material world was thus intimately bound up with considerations of hierarchy, government and theology – for a contemporary exploration of these ideals, see, for example, Sir John Davies’s poem, ‘Orchestra’ (in Brooks-Davies [A]), or John Donne’s verse.

What is clear from the most cursory appreciation of currents of thinking across Europe is that a number of theories were increasingly competing in later sixteenth-century intellectual society for attention. Occult philosophy, a belief in magical phenomena, the identification of mystical patternings at work in the universe, the ability of certain individuals to summon up demonic forces ... all these lines of thinking continued to have assured readers throughout the period. The term magic could also be broadened out to include the modern classification of bodies of knowledge such as astrology, astronomy and alchemy. The enormous expansion in the Renaissance of trade, colonisation, diplomacy and exploration meant that Europeans were increasingly being asked to conceive of their world according to alternative modes of thinking. The encounters with new species of animal, plant and with non-European races in new lands, for example, could lead to a questioning of the ‘Great Chain of Being’ theories inherited from the past and to an undermining of the belief that the universe was constructed wholly upon principles of resemblance and association. The growth of more sophisticated methods of surveying, navigation, map-making and measurement, as well as emphases in humanist scholarship (upon reassessing primary sources and searching out lost texts) meant that a greater appetite was being triggered in many intellectual circles to investigate the material world in more detail.

Literary overview

Literacy and education

Literacy levels in Renaissance Britain continue to be a source of lively debate among historians. Naturally,

Humanism

This was an intellectual movement which had its roots in fourteenth-century Italy and is particularly associated with the scholar and poet Petrarch (1304–74). After centuries of learning and philosophical debate being dominated by the Church, a new generation of intellectuals emerged in European universities and courts during the Renaissance whose ambitions and imaginations were fired by the rediscovery of texts from Greek and Roman civilisation. These figures involved themselves enthusiastically in the translation and critical commentary of these texts and, as a result, they established rigorous standards which would be adopted by succeeding generations. Their profound veneration for the cultures of antiquity frequently led them to try to imitate what they perceived as the superlative achievements of the ancients in the areas of philosophical debate, political reasoning, pedagogic practice and literary composition, for example; and many went on to have distinguished careers in this period in the worlds of secular or ecclesiastical affairs where expert advisers and administrators were in great demand.

among the poorer sections of the population, children could often not be spared from the family's labour activities. It is also difficult to assess the abilities of many because writing skills were taught at six or seven after reading skills had been acquired, and again this was exactly the age when poorer families might withdraw their children from schooling in order to enlarge the income. It can only be affirmed with certainty that by the beginning of the Early Stuart period literacy was assured 'with few exceptions' among the gentry and that it was more and more evident among those in the higher and more affluent echelons of society. If it has been estimated that by the Restoration at least 20 per cent of the male population on average could sign their names (and that the figure would be less for women), the picture of a largely illiterate society is difficult to repress.

The Church had an enormous influence upon parents in the medieval and Renaissance centuries, urging them to place children where they might gain instruction. In this instance, the instruction being promoted is most particularly of a moral and spiritual nature; however, any conception of child learning in this period frequently meant learning *by heart*. It should be remembered that until the Reformation close textual study of the Bible was reserved for those who were able to decipher Latin. As a consequence, large sections of the population were left alienated or dependent upon popular (often oral) accounts of scriptural narratives or representations of them in church art. It was in the 1520s that biblical translations in English by the humanist scholar William Tyndale started to be smuggled into Britain – and a large number of them were burned publicly at the order of the Bishop of London. However, by the second half of the sixteenth century it has been estimated that up to half a million Bibles in English were circulating among a population of some 6 million inhabitants. As the period unfolded, there also emerged another lively debate among those in intellectual and government circles about who should and should not be educated. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, for example, Francis Bacon was advising a restriction in educational opportunities; and by the Restoration, many of the upheavals associated with the effects of radical political thinking were frequently blamed by some conservative commentators upon the recent developments in the education system.

Education, of course, might take place for children in the home or in the more formal settings of a tutor's or cleric's room, a master's lodgings or, more rarely, a designated school building. Reading aloud and group reading (particularly of religious texts) continued to be common practices. Even when silent reading had become more fashionable among certain sections of the leisured classes, there often remained great emphasis upon communal reading of scripture among families, households and communities in the Great Houses, for example. It appears that reading might be undertaken while standing or indeed, like Hamlet, while walking! Educational choices (such as they were) were often dictated by the financial circumstances and geographical location