IV. The Renaissance and the Reformation

Rome and the Popes

Rome, on the Tiber River in central Italy, was once the center of the Roman Empire, but it had been sacked by the Visigoths, the Vandals, overshadowed by events in other parts of Europe, and torn by internal strife. By the time of the Renaissance, however, the city was once again an important center of culture. As the seat of the Roman Catholic Church, it was not only a spiritual center but also the temporal center of the Papal States, a large area of central Italy that the papacy had acquired over time through treaties and donations of land.

Many of the popes during the Renaissance were patrons of the arts, and artists flocked to Rome to serve them. Leo X, described above, was only one of many popes who commissioned artists to beautify the city. Many of the most elegant palaces and churches in Rome date to the Renaissance. One of the most notable is St. Peter's Basilica, the central church of Roman Catholicism. The huge dome, columns, and colonnades showcase Greek and Roman influences.

Venice

Venice is located on the northeastern coast of Italy at the northern tip of the Adriatic Sea. Today, the city sits on 120 small islands in the lagoon of Venice. A causeway, or bridge, links the city to the Italian mainland and more than 150 canals connect the islands to one another. People can travel from place to place in small boats called gondolas.

In the 1400s, Venice controlled many trade routes. It established trading centers around the eastern Mediterranean, the Aegean Sea, and the Black Sea. Merchants did not own ships but rather leased them from the government. The city government also built and maintained a fleet of warships to protect its interests.

Venice contains many beautiful Renaissance palaces, and was the home of one of the most famous artists of the Renaissance, the painter Titian.

Renaissance Ideals and Values

Castiglione

Baldassare Castiglione was the author of a widely influential work of the Renaissance, The Book of the Courtier. A courtier is one who attends, or serves at, a royal court. Castiglione himself was an Italian courtier and diplomat who for a time served at the court of King Henry VII of England.

Published in 1528, Castiglione's book was a manual about how to be a successful courtier. In it, he paints a portrait of what a courtier should know and how he or she should act. Above all, a courtier, or “Renaissance man,” should be well-rounded, able to do many things, from playing a musical instrument to reciting a sonnet to competing in a sport. The ideal female courtier should also be reserved, gracious, and above all, beautiful. One word that is often associated with the court and courtiers is sprezzatura, which means the art of making everything look easy.

Machiavelli

If Castiglione's book influenced the ordinary courtier of the Renaissance, Niccolo Machiavelli's The Prince set the standard for those who wished to rule. Machiavelli was a diplomat who spent most of his life in Florence. Florentine
politics during the Renaissance were famously dangerous—not unlike the politics of the Mafia in the modern world. There were many wars and feuds. Politicians used bribery, intimidation, and even murder to get power, and leadership changed hands frequently. The Medici were only one of several powerful and ruthless families involved in Florentine politics. Machiavelli moved in this world and was several times in and out of power, and once even thrown in jail and tortured.

Based on his experiences, Machiavelli wrote a book about how a prince ought to behave if he wanted to gain power and preserve the peace in a state. (He dedicated this book to one of the Medici.) Machiavelli was one of the first to argue that being a good person is not necessarily the best way to be a good prince and to hold the state together in dangerous times. Machiavelli wrote that “it is necessary for a prince wishing to hold his own to know how to do wrong, and to make use of it or not according to necessity.”

Machiavelli asked whether it was better for a prince to be loved or feared. He answered that the best thing would be to be both loved and feared, but, if a prince had to choose one or the other, it would be better to be feared.

The following brief excerpt gives some taste of the arguments Machiavelli puts forward in *The Prince*:

> Therefore it is unnecessary for a prince to have all the good qualities I have enumerated, but it is very necessary to appear to have them. And I shall dare to say this also, that to have them and always to observe them is injurious, and that to appear to have them is useful; to appear merciful, faithful, humane, religious, upright, and to be so, but with a mind so framed that should you require not to be so, you may be able and know how to change to the opposite.

> And you have to understand this, that a prince, especially a new one, cannot observe all those things for which men are esteemed, being often forced, in order to maintain the state, to act contrary to faith, friendship, humanity, and religion. Therefore it is necessary for him to have a mind ready to turn itself accordingly as the winds and variations of fortune force it, yet, as I have said above, not to diverge from the good if he can avoid doing so, but, if compelled, then to know how to set about it.

> For this reason a prince ought to take care that he never lets anything slip from his lips that is not replete with the above-named five qualities, that he may appear to him who sees and hears him altogether merciful, faithful, humane, upright, and religious. There is nothing more necessary to appear to have than this last quality; inasmuch as men judge generally more by the eye than by the hand, because it belongs to everybody to see you, to few to come in touch with you. Every one sees what you appear to be, few really know what you are, and those few dare not oppose themselves to the opinion of the many, who have the majesty of the state to defend them; and in the actions of all men, and especially of princes, which is not prudent to challenge, one judges by the result.

> Many people over the years have taken a dim view of Machiavelli and have implied that he undermines morality by suggesting that “the ends justify the means.” It has also been asserted that Machiavelli provides a license for rulers to
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think of themselves as “above the law” and not subject to the same rules as everybody else. The word *Machiavellian* has entered our language to describe someone who is full of trickery and deceit and will do anything to get to the top. Defenders of Machiavelli say he was just being realistic about what was needed to keep order and that his advice made sense in the dangerous world of Italian Renaissance politics.

Discuss that the term *Machiavellian* has come to mean “deceitful” and “expedient.” Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* after a brief imprisonment by the Medici. The theory set forth in the book is contrary to Machiavelli’s other works and to the deeds of his own life. His purpose in writing *The Prince* has been the subject of much debate. Ask students what they think the purpose behind *The Prince* could have been and discuss the purpose for other writings from this time period.

B. The Reformation

**Gutenberg’s Printing Press and the Bible**

Prior to the 1400s in Europe, any books that were reproduced, including the Bible, were copied by hand. (In Grade 4, students in Core Knowledge schools should have learned that monks copied manuscripts of the early Greeks and Romans and in this way helped preserve the knowledge of the ancients.) One problem with this system was that it was slow; it could take years to make one copy. There was also the possibility of introducing errors into works. A monk could make an error in copying a verse of the Bible in the year 600 and that same error would continue to be made in copies in the year 1400—if some other error had not taken its place by then.

The ability to make many exact copies of the same work quickly and at a reasonable cost did not appear in Europe until the 1400s. As early as the 700s, as students should have learned in Grade 4, the Chinese had developed a system of printing with blocks of type. They did not develop movable type until the 1040s. In the 1440s, Johann Gutenberg developed a system for making individual letters out of molten metal. Once the individual letters had been cast, they were arranged in rows on a wooden frame to spell the letters of the words on an entire page, or on several pages at once. The type was then inked and a sheet of paper pressed over the letters. Once enough copies had been printed in his way, letters could be removed from the frame, and a new page or set of pages could be set from the type and printed. In this way, the type could be reused, but it also meant that many sheets could be printed from the same frame of type. It only needed to be re-inked as the ink came off on the printed sheets. While the first books printed by this process were very expensive, in time the cost was greatly reduced, so that books became affordable for middle-class Europeans. The development of printing spurred the development of literacy.

Whereas in the Middle Ages the vast majority of people were illiterate, from 1500 on the percentage of people who could read and write began to grow. During the Middle Ages most important documents were written in Latin. Although the Bible was originally written in Hebrew and Aramaic (Old Testament) and Greek (New Testament), it was generally read in Latin. During the age of printing, Latin continued to be an important language. Presses produced editions of classical works edited by humanist scholars, as well as new works written in Latin. However, printers also begin to print works in the vernacular (the language