



Using Primary Sources: A Letter to Boccaccio: Literary Humanism

Primary sources are briefly defined and discussed in the Preface. What follows is a more specific guide to the use of primary sources, focusing on our first primary source, *A Letter to Boccaccio: Literary Humanism*, which immediately follows as an example.

1. When reading a written primary source such as the following selection from *A Letter to Boccaccio*, try to think of every line as evidence. Assume that you are a historian who knows very little about the Renaissance and that this document falls into your hands. Your job is to use this document as evidence to support some conclusions about the Renaissance.

Actually, before you read this source you already know something about the Renaissance from the chapter introduction, the time line, and the headnote preceding this source. You can use this information to place the document in a historical context better, to gain a sense of how the evidence in the source can be used.

2. Think of questions as you read a primary source. This can keep you alert to how words and lines and sections of the source can be used as evidence. A general question to keep in mind might be, "What does this tell me about this civilization, about how people behaved, how they thought,

what they believed?" Try reading each line as a piece of evidence to answer part of this general question. More specific questions can be derived from the headnote and the "consider" points just before the beginning of a source. Here the headnote and the "consider" points indicate that the source might be particularly useful for providing evidence about literary humanism, opposition to literary humanism, and connections between literary humanism and religion.

3. There are several ways you might use the material in this source as evidence. Read the first sentence. It might be argued that this line is evidence that some opposed literary humanism on religious grounds. ("Neither exhortations to virtue nor the argument of approaching death should divert us from literature.") The same line may provide evidence for how literary humanism was defended and even what helped account for its appeal ("in a good mind it excites the love of virtue, and dissipates . . . the fear of death").

Read the second sentence. It may provide additional evidence that there was opposition to the study of literature on religious grounds ("To desert our studies . . .") and that for the elite, educated members of society ("the properly constituted mind") humanistic literature ("letters") is beneficial ("facilitate our life").

Read the rest of the paragraph. Here Petrarch adds to his argument that for the right people (those with "an acute and healthy intellect"), literary humanism is good, and in the process of making this argument, he provides evidence that central to literary humanism was an admiration of Classical literature and the values expressed in Classical writings. Petrarch cites with admiration Roman figures (Cato, Varro, and Livius Drusus), Roman literature ("Latin literature"), Greek literature, and secular literature (Livius Drusus' "interpretation of the civil law").

Read the second paragraph. Here there may be evidence that literary humanism ("literature" and "secular learning") was not in opposition to Christianity ("our own religion").

Read the third paragraph. What does this paragraph tell us about how different people perceived the relationship between literary humanism and

Christianity ("no one . . . has been prevented by literature from following the path of holiness")? For whom might literary humanism have the most appeal ("one takes a lower, another a higher path")?

4. After working on various parts of the source, pull back and consider the source as a whole. Among other things, this aggressive defense of literary humanism provides evidence for what literary humanism was (a movement to revive Classical literature), what it was not (it did not reject Christian virtue or piety), and to whom it appealed (the educated elite). Further, consider the author. Here, the headnote tells us that the letter was written by Francesco Petrarch, who was important in spreading literary humanism; consider whether this colors the source or gives it greater weight as evidence.

A Letter to Boccaccio: Literary Humanism

Francesco Petrarch

Literary humanism, a movement to revive Classical literature and the values expressed in Classical writings, was central to the early Renaissance. This trend, which originated in northern Italy during the fourteenth century, represented a broadening in focus from otherworldly concerns and people as religious beings, which was typical of the Middle Ages, to include the problems of people and nature in this world. The individual most commonly associated with it and perhaps most responsible for its spread was the Florentine Francesco Petrarch (1304–1374). Best known for his love sonnets to Laura, he also collected and translated many Classical works and wrote numerous letters—often extolling the Classical authors and even writing in their style. In the following selection from a 1362 letter to his friend Boccaccio, Petrarch offered reassurance and responded to charges typically made against humanistic learning.

CONSIDER: *The nature of the charges Petrarch is refuting; how Petrarch related humanism to religion; Petrarch's perception of the benefits of literary humanism.*

Neither exhortations to virtue nor the argument of approaching death should divert us from literature; for in a good mind it excites the love of virtue, and dissipates,

SOURCE: James Harvey Robinson and Henry Winchester Rolfe, *Petrarch: The First Modern Scholar and Man of Letters* (New York: Haskell House, 1898), pp. 391–395.

or at least diminishes, the fear of death. To desert our studies shows want of self-confidence rather than wisdom, for letters do not hinder but aid the properly constituted mind which possesses them; they facilitate our life, they do not retard it. Just as many kinds of food which lie heavy on an enfeebled and nauseated stomach furnish excellent nourishment for one who is well but famishing, so in our studies many things which are deadly to the weak mind may prove most salutary to an acute and healthy intellect, especially if in our use of both food and learning we exercise proper discretion. If it were otherwise, surely the zeal of certain persons who persevered to the end could not have roused such admiration. Cato, I never forget, acquainted himself with Latin literature as he was growing old, and Greek when he had really become an old man. Varro, who reached his hundredth year still reading and writing, parted from life sooner than from his love of study. Livius Drusus, although weakened by age and afflicted with blindness, did not give up his interpretation of the civil law, which he carried on to the great advantage of the state. . . .

Besides these and innumerable others like them, have not all those of our own religion whom we should wish most to imitate devoted their whole lives to literature, and grown old and died in the same pursuit? Some, indeed, were overtaken by death while still at work reading or writing. To none of them, so far as I know, did it prove a disadvantage to be noted for secular learning. . . .

While I know that many have become famous for piety without learning, at the same time I know of no one who has been prevented by literature from following the path of holiness. The apostle Paul was, to be sure,

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accused of having his head turned by study, but the world has long ago passed its verdict upon this accusation. If I may be allowed to speak for myself, it seems to me that, although the path to virtue by the way of ignorance may be plain, it fosters sloth. The goal of all good people is the same, but the ways of reaching it are many and various. Some advance slowly, others with more spirit; some obscurely, others again conspicuously. One takes a lower, another a higher path. Although all alike are on the road to happiness, certainly the more elevated path is the more glorious. Hence ignorance, however devout, is by no means to be put on a plane with the enlightened devoutness of one familiar with literature. Nor can you pick me out from the whole array of unlettered saints, an example so holy that I cannot match it with a still holier one from the other group.