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History 308

17 July 2019

Renaissance: The Best Cherry Limeade Recipe

Imagine getting incredibly thirsty one summer afternoon. Think 102-degrees-boil-a-lobster-burn-your-mother-hot summer afternoon. Five fresh limes, a few fresh cherries, two generous scoops of ice, and some cherry flavored syrup later, there’s a delicious cold cherry limeade on the counter, waiting to be sipped. Throw in a little lime juice for a kick of flavor that cannot be missed.

This cherry limeade represents the Renaissance, a curious period in European history that rises and crashes against the modern consciousness like waves on a beach. On the outside of this period, darkness, bleakness, a dreary existence. On the inside, improved standards of living, art, health, and many other areas of life. The period itself is a tough thing to detangle, the headphones in the pocket of history that absolutely refuse to not tie themselves into a knot every time they’re just shoved into the pocket.

To understand why the Renaissance is such a complex period in history, the term itself must be defined. A renaissance, simply put, is a “rebirth” or “revival”.[[1]](#footnote-1) A rebirth or revival of what, *exactly*? That remains to be seen, but like periods before and after it, the Renaissance has surprises a-plenty for those who only look for them. For the purposes of this exploration into how well the term fits the period, the Renaissance will be defined as approximately from 1417 to 1527.

First in understanding the Renaissance and the use of this term for this period, one must look at the century immediately before. The main defining factor is the Black Death, which will be defined as a series of pneumonic, bubonic, and septicemic plagues that continuously ravaged Europe. These infections spread across many years in the 1300s, spanning mainly one to two years per infection with the odd one or two spanning a decade or so.

This is the first schism in history to create a period where people didn’t know if they were going to survive because they were doing what’s right or if they were going to survive purely by the luck of the draw. After all, when everyone is “either dead or sick or so hard bested for servants that they were unable to execute any office; whereby every man was free to do what was right in his own eyes,”[[2]](#footnote-2) what choice do people have but to suck it up and see how they can make limeade out of the sour limes they’ve been given? To make it simple: they have no other choice. Making limeade out of sour limes is rough, and more so when no one is sure what the recipe is, where the sugar went, or even how to juice the lime. In this case, juicing the lime would be the response of the Christians when they had no one else to blame. They blamed the Jews, “demanding that they die, that they are able to be found guilty and therefore, that they should be punished”.[[3]](#footnote-3)

This move supplied the rest of the Christian world a scapegoat and created the schism. The seeds of religious intolerance are sewn here (and this will come into play later in the Renaissance as it leads into the Reformation). Regardless of how people blame others for the death and destruction, it cannot be denied that “[d]eath went from one end of the earth to the other, on that side and this side of the sea, and *it was greater among the Saracens* ***than*** *among the Christians*”[[4]](#footnote-4) (emphasis mine), which did not help anyone’s attitude. Moving on, the Black Death continued to ravage Europe, leaving it wide open to be further changed by the Renaissance that was hot on the tails of the deadly, infectious, dreary era of the Black Death.

Knowing the history before the Renaissance, coming into the Renaissance is a running start head-first into a glass door. Life simply wasn’t moving as quickly or as happily as it had been. People were ready to change that by reviving the standards of living from ancient times (and then some). If life is a journey, then it makes sense to make it the best journey possible because “every weakness becomes more serious” the more the journey continues.[[5]](#footnote-5) In the case of the Renaissance, the weaknesses were everywhere: people weren’t caring for each other, the church devolved into a literal cesspit, peasants could not read, and work was drying up, to name a few instances. How could this be solved? How could a revival of the bygone standards of living come around?

This is when Petrarch entered, stage-left. The first major player of the humanism movement, Petrarch iced over the concerns to the best of his abilities. The humanism movement itself is the focus here; instead of snarking about people who wanted to get to know themselves and fancy themselves knowledgeable about the past, humanism encouraged this kind of learning. There was a *revival* of the ancient knowledge in this moment, and it is really Petrarch’s push for the knowledge that brings it about. A little searching through the dungeons, a little Latin translation, and bada-bing, bada-boom, Petrarch had revived some of the classic Roman literature thought to be lost to history forever. However, it isn’t Petrarch’s approach alone that leads to “good and evil reports alike [knowing] no bounds”.[[6]](#footnote-6) In a limeade, there’s more than just lime juice and ice, and Petrarch is only the first of many limes to go into this cherry limeade mess of a period.

Other “limes” in the limeade include such humanists as Laura Cereta, Isabelle d’Este, and Castiglione. This is by no means an extensive list of all the people contributing to the limeade, but it is enough for this exploration. The only one that will have in-depth focus here will be Laura Cereta, as she balances out the revival of ancient knowledge with a dash of fresh knowledge (or, the cherry syrup in the limeade). Laura Cereta, a female humanist that stood for many things, notes that “women have always been able by nature to be exceptional, but have chosen lesser goals” in their lives.[[7]](#footnote-7)

This statement is outrageous for the time, truly a scandalous affair to be involved in the penning of such a statement! That’s how the tiniest drops of the cherry syrup are created: standing up for affairs that are considered to be too scandalous, scurrilous, or otherwise unworthy of time by the majority of the population. Cereta’s words highlight an interesting addition to the entangled headphones (or the limeade): if this is a revival of the ancient ideals to better our *men*, how can we better the women of our day too? Here in lies the extent to which the term “renaissance” truly covers the entire period; it only applies to areas where one could easily and swiftly attain the education needed, much of which was entirely locked to women. This could be another topic in and of itself, so bear with the lack of detail about to come forth.

In the same letter where Cereta offers the above-quoted zinger, she goes on to list a lot of extraordinary women from history, including but not limited to Eriphila, Inachian Isis, Tiresias’s daughter Manto of Thebes, and Horentsia – all of whom are either Roman or Greek (or older) examples of why women ought to be given the same advantages as men. As far as a revival of knowledge of the *women* of ancient Greece and Rome, Cereta’s letter offers a glimpse into the vast depths of knowledge that have most likely been entirely lost due to a trifle of patriarchy thinking that it wasn’t worth keeping. She is part of this renaissance, whether the rest of the period wanted her involvement or not, the extra cherry syrup in this limeade being stirred by the winds of time. While she may not have had access to every avenue that the men of the time had, she certainly made do with what she could use. Her writings offer a glimpse that, perhaps, could have been lost to time forever.

If that’s not a revival of ancient knowledge, both for the Renaissance period and for the modern day, then what is?

Humanism exits stage-right (for a time) as the writers give way to scholars and political figures that have decided to look backward for help. Perhaps the biggest influence here – or the biggest cherry to be pitted for the limeade – was Machiavelli's pamphlet "The Prince". Wars have been a popular way to sort out issues through history, and the Renaissance era has its fair share of wars. However, "he who is the cause of another becoming powerful is ruined" is a novel idea that Machiavelli introduces based on his observations of political intrigue, scandals, and happenings of the day.[[8]](#footnote-8) While Machiavelli is grouped with the humanists in many understandings of his work, for this purpose, his work is more for the political arena. After all, political intrigue can have as much of an effect on the arts as the arts do on politics. To achieve this, Machiavelli puts forth, one has to look to the past.

His renaissance is more of the political environment, popping cherry pits out left and right to make the cherry as sweet and tangy as the limes added earlier. Throughout his influential pamphlet, Machiavelli ping-pongs between using ancient Roman and Greek examples and examples from his own time to make his points. For example, he uses Agathocles and then Alexander the Sixth in chapter eight, the latter being mentioned in the paragraph immediately following the mention of the former. This push-and-pull technique offers a look into how the past and the present are intertwined – two branches of the same cherry bush, so to speak. Furthermore, the examples he picked for each case are ones that show both the pros and the cons of following the advice laid out in "The Prince".

Focusing in on one set of examples, Machiavelli uses the Carthaginians to make a point about using mercenary soldiers, since “mercenary captains are either capable men or they are not; if they are, you cannot trust them… but if the captain is not skillful, you are ruined in the usual way.”[[9]](#footnote-9) What did the Carthaginians learn the hard way? Well, they had to drink a bitter, soured limeade because their mercenaries did not play by the rules, stabbing them in the backs – literally and figuratively, from the sounds of Machiavelli’s description. To summarize: they went for the sweets and got soured limeade instead, and Machiavelli doesn't want any political figure to feel *that* disappointment. The counterargument used here from contemporary sources varies as Machiavelli jumps from modern military man to modern military man (all men, mind you, leaving the revival of women’s achievements in the dust again), but he notes that “their captains did not make themselves princes, but have defended them”.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Political scandal and intrigue, meet the cool-headed approach of a man that had an infinitesimal amount of care for such things of his day. Machiavelli’s approach is an interesting one; it takes the best of the Roman and Greek approaches, in Machiavelli’s mind, and applies it to the contemporary problems that he saw. In a lot of ways, this is really the heart of the Renaissance. Look to the past for similar problems, and then adapt the solution they came up with for whatever problem is facing contemporary society. A novel approach, yet one that didn’t seem to catch on as quickly as Machiavelli may have liked. The cherries in the limeade are incredibly sweet, with the exception of a couple of bitter ones that got in by accident due to someone being careless. Perhaps Machiavelli wasn’t as careless as he was blunt, but it cannot be denied that his approach to politics brought more of the ancient classics to the forefront of politics than had ever been at the forefront before.

Finally, the new monarchies brought the ice to this cherry limeade. This intriguing mix of new powers, subversion of the past, and yet a revival of the past brought something new to the Renaissance that had not been seen in any period previous to this. The first move these new monarchs made was, of course, to reduce the power of the nobility. Perhaps nowhere is that better seen than in Spain under Isabella and Ferdinand, who decided to avoid “appointing nobles to administrative offices” and “began to rely more on clerics and lawyers”.[[11]](#footnote-11) Since killing all the lawyers was suddenly not an option for the nobles, relationships iced over (pun intended). After all, if lawyers are now giving the king and queen all the legal advice they need, then the nobles are going to end up left out of the loop, in the cold, when it comes to what’s going on in the legal arena.

From the nobility's point of view, this shift in views came out of left field. One moment, they are the cream of the crop, trusted with pretty much everything, and living the high life. The next, they're practically dirt; what a scandal for the nobles! Insert the eye-rolling here. However, this shift, while never explicitly linked to the periods before the Renaissance in many places, does show that some of the ancient governments had it right: those with money and influence will always look for a way to increase their power, and sometimes, the lower officials suffer immensely for it. It’s the way life went with the sea changes in power, and it caused quite a ruckus as people found out what they were in for.

The most prominent link between the new monarchies and the ancient Romans is not in Spain, despite this country being the best example of how the nobles were quickly ignored and deposed. That honor goes to England and Henry VII through his Court of Star Chamber, which “grew out of the medieval king’s council as a supplement to the regular justice of the common-law courts”.[[12]](#footnote-12) The way it worked, though, more closely resembled the Justinian codes of Ancient Rome than the common-law court rules that the rest of England’s courts played by. The point of this court was to give the king a way to bypass said common-law courts, and by doing that, giving the king a way to get the nobles out of power and into a humiliating situation. After all, if common-law stated that everyone was entitled to a jury of their peers, and that meant nobility would judge nobility, who would they stick up for in a rough time? Their fellow nobles, that’s who! So, what else could King Henry VII do but create this court “to attack the feudal privileges of the nobility”?[[13]](#footnote-13)

This *revival* of the Justinian code comes from Petrarch’s search to restore the classics to contemporary knowledge. Through Petrarch's search for classics, other kinds of ancient knowledge came to light. Petrarch is not only a lime in this limeade, but he's also part of the ice cubes that come in at the end to chill the drink to perfection.

Returning to the new monarchies, this change disrupted much more than the nobility’s ability to stay in power and continue the traditional fun-loving life they had led. It essentially spelled the end of king and nobility relying on each other, of the nobility being dependable, and of the king giving the nobility an immense amount of power. Relationships now iced over and formed chasms of frozen trust, frozen power, and melting hostilities.

Henry VII of England is quite truly an interesting case study in this area. There is only so much to say about his Court of Star Chamber. However, it did lead to a rise in other new monarchs, such as Isabella and Ferdinand of England, Francis I of France, and Margaret of Denmark. In that regard, the rise of the new monarchies is also the final lid on the limeade, as it marks the transition from a revival of ancient knowledge (the Renaissance) to a time of new thoughts and new ideas exploding every which way in many countries (the Reformation).

In light of this being the lid on everything, the straw to allow everyone to enjoy this limeade is the increased ability for nobility and other higher-class people to read, write, publish, and critique the work of their contemporaries. Looking back at all the examples, the majority have been men in a higher social class standing – Machiavelli, Castiglione, and Bocaccio, for a start. The exceptions have been Laura Cereta, Isabelle d’Este, Isabella of Castile, and other women that were not mentioned in this exploration. Without the ability to gain an education – particularly in the classics that Petrarch started to revive with his humanist studies – this limeade would not have been made possible.

Before the Renaissance ended, however, there were inklings of what was to come next: a powder keg of new ideas that set off an explosion felt through the ages. It started with the new monarchies, but in particular, the failing monarchy of the Holy Roman Empire. After all, “the Holy Roman Empire was a loose confederation of over 300 virtually autonomous principalities and towns”[[14]](#footnote-14) which would not bow down to a single ruler. If the monarch cannot consolidate their power, then they are not one of the new monarchs and therefore are much more susceptible to being overthrown or losing control of their kingdom.

The failure of the Holy Roman emperor to control his kingdom brought the Renaissance to an end as the intolerance of the era took over and became a major part of the brouhaha of the Reformation.

To wit, the Renaissance only lasted about 110 years, from 1417 to 1527. During this relatively short period in history, a lot was gained. A lot was fought for. Remnants were left everywhere. Lime peels in the streets. Cherry pits in the gutters. Syrups and lime juice making sticky messes all over the place, trapping those who dared to touch them like flies to honey. A sparkling cherry limeade ready to be sipped left for those who came after 1527… if the fracas following didn’t completely undo all the work that had been accomplished.

History gained a revival of certain ancient knowledge – like the Justinian code, the architecture, and the stories of military geniuses. However, this revival was only open to the higher classes, those that could read and write, for much of the period. It wasn’t until the Reformation, the next historical period, that literacy would skyrocket, which is a shame. That said, many benefitted from the revival of ancient knowledge. As it was made more readily available, the lower classes began to benefit from it.

This cherry limeade was originally intended as the family secret of the higher classes. It didn’t stay that way. For, after all, what use is the secret to the lower classes when they cannot appreciate it? The term *renaissance* fits this time period incredibly well when speaking of the higher classes, but not so much the lower classes. What better fits them? Well, Shakespeare put it best: “What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason! / How infinite in faculty! In form and moving how / Express and admirable! In action how like an angel! / In apprehension how like a god!”[[15]](#footnote-15)

Cherry limeade for everyone, then, and a better understanding of the way the word *renaissance* fits this intense one-hundred-and-ten-year period.

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