Padua in the English Renaissance

By A. C. Krey

[Editor's Note: A distinguished historian of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, Professor A. C. Krey of the University of Minnesota has done much to emphasize the value of studying intellectual and social history with adequate recognition of its international implications. The period of the Renaissance, as he points out, represented more nearly "one world" than our studies of national literatures often suggest. The Huntington Library has emphasized the peculiarly English elements in the Renaissance because the great body of its source material lies in this field and the books and documents for the study of Continental relationships are not available in the West. Although the Huntington Library has one of the greatest collections of English books for the study of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there is in all of this region no adequate library for the study of the Latin countries which were so important to English civilization: Italy, France, and Spain. The opportunity for the development of this Continental field is very great, and discussions with colleges and universities in this area indicate that some mutual program for collecting material for the study of the Latin countries of Europe may be worked out. Meanwhile the following statement from Professor Krey, the outgrowth of a dinner conversation, is printed to illustrate an almost forgotten phase of the indebtedness of England to Italy in the Renaissance.]

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Among my many pleasant recollections of a summer as visiting professor at the University of California at Los Angeles, I count by no means least the invitation to attend a conference on the Renaissance at the Huntington Library. The period of history there considered has always been of interest to me since I first took an undergraduate course on the subject, now many years ago; and scarcely a year has passed since I began teaching when I myself have not offered a course under that title. So as I thought of attending the session in prospect, I looked forward to enjoying a renewal of my acquaintance with familiar characters, events, and achievements. Naturally, also, I hoped to hear, as I did, new research and fresh viewpoints ably presented; but at the same time I was puzzled, as the conference progressed, by the fact that I heard almost no mention of the names most familiar to me in the years under discussion. So puzzling in fact was the whole experience that I have thought about it at intervals since, and the paragraphs that follow have sprung from those reflections.

As a medievalist more or less bound by the conventional division between medieval and modern history at the arbitrary date of 1500 A.D., I have always approached this period from the south, one might say, chronologically as well as geographically. The cultural developments connoted by the name seem to me to dawn in the days of Dante and to swell, with varying tempo, to a climax in the early sixteenth century. Indeed, it is only during the past ten years that my students and I have ventured, at first timidly and then more boldly, into that century and even beyond. But this conception of the Renaissance was scarcely popular at the conference; for if there was more than a casual reference or any at all to Italy during its course, I have forgotten the fact. Session followed session; and as far as I recall, not a word was mentioned about Italy or the many old friends whom I had grown to know in the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries. Could this be a conference, I kept wondering, on the Renaissance? If so, it was not the Renaissance I knew, which may be explained in part by the circumstance that those who arranged the program and participated in it were primarily interested in English literature.

It is, of course, possible that the absence of reference to Italy at
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this gathering merely reflected the tacit assumption that everyone in the audience was already fully familiar with the course of the currents that have flowed for so many years between that country and England. In the same way, I realize the fact that every student of English literature is similarly aware of the connection between the English Renaissance of the sixteenth century and the Italian Renaissance of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. I wonder, however, whether there is equal awareness of the continuing connection between the English and Italian Renaissance throughout the sixteenth century. Perhaps it was the lack of any allusion to this connection in the sessions of the conference that led me to inquire further into this question, and such inquiry as I have been able to make at odd moments has inclined me to believe that many a doctor's dissertation might profitably be directed to this subject. I can at least offer some of my reasons for thinking so.

During the days that I spent in Pasadena after the conference, I browsed through the Huntington Library looking for information about Thomas Linacre. It was startling to discover that this scholar, tutor at the Court of Henry VII, and court physician for Henry VIII—with whose help he founded the Royal College of Physicians—still lacked an adequate biography. Friend of Latimer, Grocyn, and Colet, and teacher of both Erasmus and More, Linacre represents a direct connection between the Italian and English Renaissance at the beginning of the sixteenth century. His stay in Italy has been variously estimated at from two to ten years; and during that time he studied at Florence, Rome, and Padua—receiving his medical degree from the latter university. While at Padua he became intimately acquainted with Aldus Manutius, with whom he continued to correspond long after he returned to England. It was Aldus who published Linacre's edition of Proclus and encouraged Linacre to make translations of Aristotle and Galen's works. Aldus, indeed, urged Linacre, Latimer, and Grocyn to collaborate on the translation of Aristotle; and Linacre's own sense of indebtedness to Italy is graphically attested by the cairn of stones which he erected and dedicated, as he was leaving, to "Italy, mother of studies."

More recently I have had occasion to write a preface for the work of a former student, Doctor Eckman, who has become greatly
interested in the history of science at the University of Padua during the sixteenth century. In seeking information on the contemporary reputation of that university, I turned, among other sources, to *The Taming of the Shrew*, where I found these lines:

To see fair Padua, nursery of the arts
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
. . . . . . . . . . . for I have Pisa left
And am to Padua come, as he that leaves
A shallow plash to plunge him in the deep
And with satiety seeks to quench his thirst.

The accuracy of this judgment of the relative merits of these two universities at the time is exemplified in the career of Galileo, Shakespeare's exact contemporary, who left the narrow confining atmosphere of Pisa, his alma mater, for the greater freedom of Padua, where he did most of his life work. A hasty search, furthermore, has failed to reveal any other university, even Oxford or Cambridge, to which Shakespeare accorded such high praise; and since he himself is not known to have been a student in Italy, his signal tribute to the University of Padua would seem to imply that the cultured world of England of his time was saturated with precise knowledge both of contemporary Italy and of Padua in particular. John Caius, court physician successively to Edward VI, Mary, and Elizabeth, was an M.D. of Padua. And William Harvey, a younger contemporary of Shakespeare, not only took his M.D. degree at Padua in 1602 but carried on the studies of his teacher, Fabricius, to the epochal discovery of the circulation of the blood. The full importance of Shakespeare's comment on the University of Padua as the leading university of the time would seem therefore to merit further inquiry; and the fact that Thomas Linacre at the beginning, John Caius in the middle, and William Harvey at the end of the sixteenth century—and perhaps the three most distinguished physicians of England—all obtained their medical training at Padua provokes the obvious inference that there must have been many other English scholars who also studied there.

The peculiar position of the University of Padua in the sixteenth century would seem therefore to merit further inquiry; and the fact that Thomas Linacre at the beginning, John Caius in the middle, and William Harvey at the end of the sixteenth century—and perhaps the three most distinguished physicians of England—all obtained their medical training at Padua provokes the obvious inference that there must have been many other English scholars who also studied there.

century has likewise failed to receive the attention it deserves. It was, of course, the city or state university of Venice, much more so than Ferrara, which was also within the orbit of Venetian metropolitan culture. Nor has the position of Venice in this century been generally recognized. From the very beginning of the century it was the chief, and after 1530, the only truly Italian state in Italy. Naples and Milan had succumbed to foreign domination by 1500, and Florence became a satellite of Spain in 1530. The Papal States, so brilliant in the first quarter of the century, suffered a sharp decline both through the political domination of Italy by the Habsburgs and through the loss of resources and prestige occasioned by the Protestant Revolt. Venice was the only autonomous Italian state left. It was the residuary legatee of the whole Italian Renaissance. This obligation to culture which circumstances had forced upon her, Venice was quick to recognize and consciously promote. Her doors were flung open to the artists, writers, scholars, and craftsmen of all Italy and indeed of all Europe. So proud was Venice of its universities, particularly of Padua, that it fought valiantly and, on the whole, successfully to maintain freedom of thought and study against the rising tide of religious intolerance. As Doctor Eckman points out, the medical faculty of Padua alone included such luminaries as Fracastoro, Vesalius, Fallopius, Eustachius, Fabricius, and Galileo. Among their students were Copernicus, Georgius Agricola, Jerome Cardan, and William Harvey—each of whom is recognized as the founder of a modern science. Protestant Englishmen of the second half of the sixteenth century were just as welcome to study at Padua as had been their Catholic forebears of the earlier period. The relations of England and Venice during this century were especially friendly; and it was at this time that so much of the Venetian commercial and maritime lore was transmitted to England, which was soon to succeed Venice as mistress of the seas.

Such facts as these suggest that the exploration of the concomitant cultural interchange between Venice and England should prove an interesting and profitable field of research. Perhaps there was a steady stream of English scholars, writers, and patrons of culture who wended their way to Italy and Padua and brought back both
inspiration and scholarship throughout the century. How else can one so well account for the circumstance that English scholars and writers were sure enough of themselves to move confidently forward in many avenues of culture beyond anything hitherto known? Certainly the persistence of the connection between the English and the Italian Renaissance does not detract from the merit of either. On the contrary, it merely helps to explain the magnificent advance which occurred in England at that time. So clear, indeed, it seems to me, are all such connections and cross-fertilizations as I have suggested above that I should like very much to be present at another conference at the Huntington Library when this particular aspect of the Renaissance might be discussed at some length.