

## CHAPTER IV

WHAT SEEMS OLD IS REALLY NEW: INNOVATION BEHIND  
THE MASK OF TRADITIONALISM IN LATE  
FOURTEENTH-CENTURY HUMANISM

The Quarrel of the Roman de la Rose when viewed in the context of its own time appears quite different than when studied by itself, apart from this context. Apparently--on the surface--a debate over a thirteenth-century French poem, the Quarrel reveals itself to be in fact a reflection of the controversy occasioned by the rapid expansion of humanism.

The Quarrel cannot be understood in the way Charles Frederick Ward tried to understand it, by merely reading and comparing the documents of the Quarrel itself. But neither can it be understood by the commonly accepted "history of ideas" approach. For both sides in the Quarrel used "traditional" ideas. In fact, the defenders of the Roman appear to be even more "traditional" than the otherwise seemingly conservative attackers--as they no doubt intended to appear.

Yet the defenders of the Roman were part of the

humanist movement which was not fundamentally traditional at all. What appears "old," the arguments of the humanist defenders of the Roman, is really new: the phenomenon of humanism which they are defending. We shall only be able to understand the Quarrel if we stop treating it as a narrowly "literary" event, largely divorced from any other context. In fact, the Quarrel is a reflection of the spread of humanism, a phenomenon which was perhaps more significant philosophically, politically, and even socially than in the purely literary realm. The concluding chapter contains suggests for future research which would do much to clarify this context.

The questions remain: How did late medieval humanism come to be a phenomenon of one social class? Why was it the class of notary-secretaries which became involved in this unprecedented cultivation of classical Latin style? This chapter will suggest some answers to these questions. The latter part of the chapter is a critical examination of the most recent attempt to explain the Quarrel of the Roman, an attempt that fails precisely because of an incorrect understanding of the social basis of the class of notary-secretaries, and therefore of the importance of this class of advancing humanism.

In the emerging nation-states of Western Europe

there arose by the mid-thirteenth century a group of men whose functions included the casting of diplomatic letters and documents for heads of state and political figures. This function was an important one in the political relations of the time; the very word "diplomacy," we recall, is derived from the Latin term meaning "document." In Italy these men were known as notai, their guild or college as the arte notaria. There and elsewhere special schools were established to train such men. It has been suggested that even in the fourteenth century most of the students at Oxford University, for example--not degree candidates, of course--were being trained to be secretaries and notaries.<sup>1</sup>

Among the essential skills for such a profession was knowledge of Law and of legal language. Civil and Canon Law were essential weapons of the secular and the religious princes respectively in their competition with one another. Civil Law, the Justinian Code of the sixth century, was largely a "digest" of citations of earlier Latin jurists. And mastery of legal language, then as now, turned upon the precise understanding of the meaning of words.

<sup>1</sup>See Ornato, Jean Muret, p. 81.

All the humanists of the late fourteenth century in France--both those with whom we are dealing and others who emerged as humanists before the movement attained the victories and social respectability it did in the fifteenth century--were not only of the middle classes, but from the profession of notaries as well. Though other men were also interested in humanism, there were fundamental differences between the professional humanist notary-secretaries and all others.

I cannot prove in a conclusive way that it was the necessity to study Latin law and therefore classical Latin language that sparked the development of humanism among this class of men. But this seems more than probable. And a familiarity with classical Latin could only be gained by an intensive study of classical literature.

The development of a distinctive style of Latin composition was a definite asset to a notary. Every chancery tended to try to produce documents in a certain recognizable style in order to minimize the danger of forgery (among other reasons). This style was usually imposed, it seems, by forcing new notaries and secretaries to study books of formulaic documents drawn up to provide models of the kinds of documents they would be expected to draft. Judging from the remarks of modern

scholars about them, the imitation of such formularies often achieved the opposite of the intended purpose. The Latin produced as a result was often highly stilted and even difficult to understand. Not only was it an ineffective tool in conveying the subtleties of tone and meaning necessary for skilled diplomacy, but at times it could not be literally understood. The Latin works of Jean de Montreuil (for example, his earliest letter, that to Salutati of 1384)<sup>2</sup> or of Jean Lebègue<sup>3</sup> show enough of the influence of this style to illustrate how clumsy it could be.

It can scarcely be surprising, then, that by the mid-thirteenth century Italian notaries were imitating classical style in their writings. The first important group we know of to have done this is the Paduan group around Lovato Lovati. Lovati's father had been a notaio; his brother became one also. Lovati himself became a judge and legal expert in Padua. According to Petrarch

<sup>2</sup>See Giuseppe Billanovich and Gilbert Ouy, "La première correspondance échangée entre Jean de Montreuil et Coluccio Salutati," Italia Medioevale e Umanistica, 7 (1964), 337-374.

<sup>3</sup>Ouy, "Le songe et les ambitions."

(a judgment which Roberto Weiss confirms),<sup>4</sup> Lovati's classical studies, though not extensive by later standards, allowed him to attain a higher level of Latin style than any other Italian of his time. Significantly, he composed mainly in verse and exercised a considerable influence upon Albertino Mussato, the real "father" of Italian humanism.<sup>5</sup> Different kinds of men from differing backgrounds interested themselves in the cultivation of the Latin classics during the fourteenth century. But there was one group of men for whom this "humanist" activity was in their material self-interest. The secretaries and notaries were everywhere in the vanguard of the movement to advance the acceptability of the new Latin style over the old chancery styles.

This is not to say that only such men were interested in "humanist" activity--far from it. But it was they who were the most active in the planned campaigns to spread

<sup>4</sup> Roberto Weiss, "Lovato Lovati (1241-1309)," Italian Studies, 6 (1951), pp. 3-28, especially pp. 5, 16, 23-28.

<sup>5</sup> Ruth J. Dean, "Cultural Relations in the Middle Ages," SP, 45 (1948), 563, among others, points to the importance of men of law in early Paduan humanism. Petrarch had also been destined for the law by his father Ser Petracco.

the acceptability of the new style. Many other men were avid students of the classics during this time. However, we must recognize a fundamental distinction between such men as Richard de Bury, Pierre Bersuire, Nicolas Trivet, the higher churchmen who "patronized" classical studies such as Pietramala, and the cardinals around the Papal court at Avignon in general, or such men as Simon de Brossano, Pietro Piccolo da Monteforte, Jean Ceurtecuisse, or Jean Gerson, on the one hand; and Mussato, Petrarch, Boccaccio; Salutati, Bruni, da Fiano, Nicolas de Clamanges, Jean de Montreuil, Gontier Col, Jean Muret, and the other secretaries and notaries, on the other.

In fact, there is often a further division--that between those humanists who worked for the Papacy or in high positions (like Nicolas de Clamanges) and those who were more lowly placed and worked for secular princes (like Jean de Montreuil). The latter were the more ardent (though not necessarily the more talented) humanists.

In speaking of Petrarch's school of followers, Giuseppe Billanovich says something similar:

Il Petrarca tendeva normalmente a operare per la sua scuola e per la sua amicizia le conquiste facili e durevoli dei dettatori di cancellaria, dei maestri di scuola, dei membri più adatti del clero secolare or regolare: insomma degli intellettuali che per educazione e per professione erano più aperti alla

retorica oppure alla disciplina, o piuttosto allo stato d'animo, che questi nuovi letterati definivano filosofia morale.<sup>6</sup>

Earlier he had noted that Barbato da Sulmona, Petrarch's major proponent in southern Italy after the death (1342) of Dionigi da Borgo San Sepolcro, tried to attract to Petrarch's side "piccoli eruditi di provincia che la professione, di maestri or di notai, faceva essere cultori dell'arte retorica."<sup>7</sup> This is all as a prelude to saying that Pietro Piccolo da Monteforte, a judge, was a somewhat unusual convert. However, as we have noticed, he was also a somewhat less than total convert as well, and had to be admonished by Boccaccio.

How can our understanding of the class nature of the humanist movement in the fourteenth century alter our understanding of the Quarrel of the Roman? We can begin to answer this question by studying a recent article by Gilbert Ouy. He is one of the most talented and prolific of the team of researchers who have added so much to our knowledge of early French humanism in recent years. He is also the only one of them who has tried to use this

<sup>6</sup>Billanovich, "Pietro Piccolo da Monteforte," pp. 3-4.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 3.



knowledge to reinterpret the Quarrel of the Roman.<sup>8</sup>

Ouy begins by attempting to prove that Jean Gerson was a humanist. A critique of his argument will help to highlight how our understanding of the Quarrel must be revised. In addition, it may clarify some of the methodological failings of contemporary scholars.

Ouy considers Gerson to be every bit as much of a humanist as any secretary such as Jean de Montreuil. He argues as follows:

1. Gerson's Latin style is as good as or superior to that of the admitted "humanists of the chanceries."

Here Ouy follows André Combes' conclusion that Gerson was a humanist as well as a theologian. Gerson's earliest works, his Ep. I and "pastorium carmen" of 1381-83, are composed in a Latin style superior to Jean de Montreuil's earliest extant letter (that to Salutati, 1384). Ouy concludes:

Du point de vue littéraire . . . il semble permis d'affirmer que Gerson se situe, avec son ami Nicolas de Clamanges, au tout premier rang des humanistes de sa génération.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup>In his monograph on the French humanists Ezio Ornato forswears any study of the Quarrel; see Ornato, Jean Muret, p. 233.

<sup>9</sup>Ouy, "Gerson et l'Angleterre," p. 45.

He rejects the idea of scholars like Coville or Etienne Gilson that there existed "un humanisme de théologiens," opposed to "un humanisme laïque" (p. 45).

2. Ouy notes that the humanists of the late fourteenth-century France were all secretaries of some kind. Therefore later medieval humanism has been called a "humanisme des chancelleries." Jean de Montreuil, Gontier Col, Jacques de Novvion, Jean Lebègue, and others were royal secretaries; Ambrogio dei Miglio was secretary to Louis d'Orleans; Nicolas de Clamanges, Jean Muret, Giovanni Moccio, were in the papal chancery at Avignon. He then notes that Gerson was Chancellor (literally, "head of the chancelry") of the University of Paris (admitting that, however, under the Chancellorship of Gerson's predecessor Pierre d'Ailly the functions of this important post ceased being those of a secretary) (p. 46).

3. The admitted difference in their offices, however, does not deter Ouy, for he asserts that the background of Gerson and of the secretary-humanists was similar: "Rien ne sépare Gerson de cette catégorie sociale" (p. 46). He makes the following points:

(a) Gerson was of humble origin, like most or all of the secretaries. This is simply not true. Gerson was probably born a serf, very unlike the secretaries,

who, as far as we know, were of bourgeois origin and, in terms of medieval society, relatively privileged. Rare enough in the Middle Ages at all, it was probably far more common to find important men of peasant birth in the Church, which did take in some young men from poor families, than among the middle classes.

(b) Gerson had a humanist education at the same Collège de Navarre which nourished Clamanges, D'Ailly, and others, "véritable pépinière de grands lettrés et de hauts fonctionnaires." This is not true either. Clamanges alone might be described in this way; the other secretary-humanists could hardly be called either. Again there is no real similarity here between Gerson and the humanists.

(c) Somewhat vaguely, Ouy notes that Gerson shared with the secretary-humanists "une vive conscience de ses responsabilités" along with "un profond sentiment national." Elaborating on this last point, he indicates Gerson's sermon Vivat Rex as evidence that his views were altogether similar to the royal secretaries, "serviteurs dévoués d'une monarchie en voie de centralization."

So Ouy concludes Gerson was a "humanist" in every sense that the "secretary-humanists" could be so called. In fact, he thinks Gerson differed from them only in that he was not personally "greedy."

The Chancellor was unlike the other "parvenus ambitieux et avides" who spent much energy seeking many benefices and prebends. Ouy's portrait of Gerson is, then, of a morally exceptional individual, one who scrupulously eschewed greed or careerism, the "vice majeur de la couche sociale à laquelle tout le rattache" (p. 46).

Ouy's theory that Gerson was a humanist in the same sense as the "secretary-humanists" leads to certain conclusions about the nature of the disagreements between these men in the Quarrel of the Roman de la Rose. Life at the chanceries, Ouy contends, was probably immoral. Therefore, Ouy holds that the notaries "appréciaient chez Jean de Meun un certain cynisme auquel, tres logiquement, Gerson s'opposait . . ." (p. 47)

To evaluate Ouy's argument, we must examine it more closely and draw out all its implications.

1. We note a certain contradiction at the outset. Ouy begins by assuming that the ability to write in what passed at the time as a good classical style was an indication of whether one should be considered a "humanist" or not. He then proceeds to consider social and historical matters, but only to corroborate his first judgment, since he has already defined Gerson not only as a "humanist" but as one of the foremost.

In fact these two ways of defining who was a "humanist" must be carefully distinguished from one another. Relying upon a formal or "stylistic" definition of "humanism" has given rise to the discovery of many medieval "humanisms"--the Humanism of the Twelfth Century, Carolingian Humanism, and so forth. This has tended to obscure what is clearly different about the humanism of the fourteenth century onwards. Unlike earlier medieval "humanisms," this humanism is unique in that it swept Europe. It revolutionized education, created a new sense of history, aided the establishment of a science--in the modern sense--of textual analysis, thereby impelling forward the development of a science of historical study, and so forth. Late medieval humanism is part and parcel of the Renaissance--not of earlier "renascences," but of a fundamental and revolutionary development in European society.

What is specific to this "Humanism" is that it was grasped and indeed principally advanced not by learned ecclesiastics working in a exegetical tradition but by a new class of bourgeois careerists.

2. Ouy wishes to assimilate Gerson to the secretary-humanists largely because they were of "humble" origin. This is not a scientific way of examining the different classes which existed in medieval society. Ouy no doubt

means by this that neither Gerson nor our secretary-humanists were from noble families. This is true but meaningless. Several humanists, such as the Col brothers and Nicolas de Clamanges, were from wealthy bourgeois families.<sup>10</sup> Nicolas de Gonesse was a theologian but by

<sup>10</sup> Coville, Gontier et Pierre Col, p. 60; pp. 81-82. By "bourgeois" I mean men whose antecedents were (a) urban; (b) not from the nobility; (c) not from the urban proletariat (poor craftsmen, laborers, servants) or the poor in general. This is clearly a broad social category, already in the process of becoming strongly differentiated. For our purposes here, it is basically sufficient to note that Gerson does not belong to it.

Of course the social class of a person's family does not utterly predetermine that person's opinions. A stronger factor is a person's perception of his or her own material interest. Thus, Gerson, probably a peasant by birth, shows few if any traces of this in his writing, so far as I can tell. Also, most people tend to misperceive what is in their material interest, because the ruling class in any society possesses a near monopoly of the means of mass propaganda and persuasion.

For these and other reasons we would not, for example, expect to find that every secretary-humanist supported and promoted the advancement of classical Latin style. Although we do not know the names of the opponents of humanism in Paris with whom Jean de Montreuil was confronted, for example, it would not be at all surprising if some of Jean's fellow secretary-humanists were among them.

Similarly it should not be surprising that in Avignon and in Italy (and later everywhere else) nobles and clergymen became proponents of humanism. Gerson and Christine de Pisan were incorrect in their estimation of the moral damage which humanism would cause. This must have been clear to some men even at that time.

training only, not by profession, and he appears to be the only "secretary-humanist" with this background. Only Gerson was a preacher and theologian by profession. In addition, as Chancellor of the University of Paris, the greatest university in christendom and one of the major political institutions of the French realm, Gerson stood far apart from, and far above, these secretary-humanists.

Far from agreeing with Ouy's statement, "rien ne sépare Gerson de cette catégorie social," we must conclude that he had very little in common with it at all!

Ouy's assertion that Gerson shared with the secretary-humanists a sense of "responsibility" towards his work and a certain nascent national feeling is of no consequence in attempting to prove that Gerson was a humanist.

3. Given the weaknesses of his other arguments, then, the differences which Ouy admits between Gerson and the secretary-humanists became even more significant. I believe they are crucial. Ouy's error forces him to try to explain the disagreements between Gerson and the defenders of the Roman as resulting only from inexplicable differences in attitude or behavior, whereas they are more plausibly the result of differences in economic status and class. In fact Ouy goes further than this and attributes Gerson's opposition to the Roman to a higher sense of morality on his part; the austere Chancellor is morally superior to the loose-

living denizens of the chanceries.

Responsible historians long ago abandoned the ecclesiastical notion that historical development could be explained as a struggle between good and evil with reference to a universal and timeless system of morality. To see the Quarrel as a dispute between "moral" attackers and "immoral" defenders of the Roman is simply to turn on its head the explanation of Coville, who thought the Quarrel showed the forces of "pagan" free thought battling benighted ecclesiastical authority.

What obscured Ouy's understanding of this "moral" difference between Gerson and the secretary-humanists is his misconception that Gerson is essentially a humanist himself. Ouy fails to show that this is true however, for the very good reason that it is not true.

Once the great differences between Gerson and the humanists are recognized, the reasons for their differing attitudes about their careers (insofar as these attitudes are expressed in their writings) become obvious. Gerson was a very highly-placed churchman; our secretary-humanists mostly rather lowly functionaries of princes, men whose livelihoods depended upon their ability to sell their writing skills. Those whose letters survive (e.g. Ambrogio dei Migli and Jean de Montreuil) complain incessantly



about their long hours of work, their living difficulties, lack of leisure time, etc. This was no doubt universal-- as pointed out in Appendix 2 Jean de Montreuil makes an elaborate joke out of Gontier Col's complaints about his workload.

As a result of this relative insecurity they were profoundly interested in furthering their careers. Ezio Ornato has given example after example, culled from a diligent reading of Clamanges' and Montreuil's letters, of the attempts of these secretary-humanists to gain preferment for themselves or their friends and to use these jobs in turn as a means of advancing the humanist cause. He shows that even when the interests of their different employers were in conflict the secretaries were conscious of a strong bond of mutual interest and sympathy due to their similar situations.

This careerism might very well have looked questionable to men of Gerson's position. But Professor Ouy should be reminded that we do not know what the Chancellor's opinion about it was. However, perhaps this careerism was one of the factors, along with others we have mentioned above, that led many churchmen and others to suspect the value of humanist activity.

These humanists were interested in their own

careers and in the advancement of their interests more than they were in the preservation of traditional ways of thought. Despite their frequent appeals to traditional ideas in their writings and in their defenses of poetry, their activities were something new, and were recognized as such. Valla's unmasking of the forgery of the Donation of Constantine, though it falls slightly outside our period, was just an extreme example of the inherent threat to traditional authority which humanism and its critical spirit, however weak it may appear in retrospect to have really been among these men, appeared to represent.

Ouy's conclusions about the seriousness of the disagreements in the Quarrel of the Roman must therefore be firmly rejected. Having decided that Gerson and the secretary-humanist defenders of the Roman were essentially similar, differing only in certain moral attitudes, Ouy essentially concludes that there could be no profound difference between them. As we have seen, a close reading of the texts of the Quarrel do not substantiate this. Christine and Gerson are adamantly opposed to the Roman and its defenders. And Gerson voices the extremely "unhumanistic" view that Ovid, too, must be condemned.

Ouy's judgment about the "cynicism" of Jean de Meun must be rejected as well. Since modern critical

opinion is divided on the subject of the correct interpretation of the Roman, I cannot expect that this conclusion will please everyone. But there is no evidence that the Roman was other than an extremely erudite, but equally moral and religious, poem.

The documents in the debate themselves show that even Christine and Gerson consider the Roman immoral in the literal sense only. What Ouy means by "cynicism" other than this, he does not explain.

Ouy's argument is only the most recently articulated version of the theory, first clearly formulated in this context by André Combes, that there was no conflict between "humanists" and "theologians" in the fourteenth century. This theory contains a grain of truth. It was the truth in this theory which was useful in correcting the notions spread by earlier scholars such as Alfred Coville that humanism was completely confined to the middle-class secretaries, and was a sign of a new, Burckhardtian paganism. Applied in a mechanical way this theory misled Coville into greatly oversimplifying and distorting the history of the development of early French humanism.

However the critics of Coville threw out the essential truth in his idea, a truth to which a careful reading of the evidence forces us to revert. The bourgeois

notaries and secretaries were not the only men interested in the development of a classical style and its spread. But they were the earliest proponents of the classical style; they were the staunchest advocates of it; and their activities undeniably form the central core as well as the quantitative preponderance of the humanist activity of the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries.

Of course this was not at all because their humanism was unchristian or "pagan" in any modern sense of the word. It would be easy and pointless to review the writings of the fourteenth-century humanists to find evidence that they were believing Christians.

But the humanists' enthusiasm for the classics made them more receptive to some of the philosophical values expressed in classical literature. Their admiration for the many men of (as they thought) probity and virtue whom they found in the pagan world led them to cite their works as being equal in value to, or even of greater value than, Christian writings in stimulating men to virtuous action. Their study of classical Latin style slowly developed into a critical spirit and the beginnings of a scientific method in the study of language and history which was bound to be inimical to ecclesiastically-sanctioned authority sooner or later.

So we find Petrarch eulogizing the pursuit of fame, an individual fame, to be enjoyed in this life. He does not apologize for it, or remain silent about it, but praises it as a good thing. Of course this sounds rather innocuous. But it was Petrarch's fame, the reputation his writings earned him, which gave him the great degree of relative freedom from subservience to a lord, the independent means, which made possible his career. Petrarch's "fame" was his career. Through it he achieved a degree of independence unprecedented in his time, when writers were merely servants of little status.

It is precisely this "fame" which our French humanists sought through their writings, their carefully-compiled Epistolaries and collections of work (Clamanges, Montreuil, Moccia's poetry have all come to light). They wanted this "fame" basically to advance themselves in their careers. Fame for a good classical style could be translated into a good job--if a good classical style became the standard demanded in a secretary. Consequently our French humanists, like their Italian counterparts but less successfully than they, tried to promote the acceptability of a classical style wherever they could, primarily among men of influence at the Royal or ducal courts and with clerics. It appears that, because of the strong Italian

influence at Avignon, the clerics around the Papal court were the earliest in what is now called France to sponsor and patronize the study of the classics, and to promote the cultivation of classical style. There also appears to have been an early center of classical studies at the Collège de Navarre in the University of Paris, though neither its extent nor its origins are as yet understood.

The careerism of these middle-class humanists must have been disquieting to more conservative-minded intellectuals--particularly to clerics, rigorously trained in traditional concepts, products of an era when a static society seemed good largely because it existed.

Careerism at the expense of principle was, of course, common enough throughout the Middle Ages as at other times. However, the Church condemned it except when it followed certain institutionally-accepted paths. Or--to put it another way--the Church only sanctioned individual careerism, and only when it could be rationalized as in fact serving some higher principle. The phenomenon of a large, new administrative class which began to take over functions formerly the reserve of aristocratic counselors and clerical administrators must naturally have seemed something new (as it was), and therefore as something doubly threatening, both personally and historically. For a rise

in prestige of a new class of men can only occur, historically, side by side with the relative decline of others, while to a traditionally-minded person, novelty itself--and there was much change in the fourteenth century--is morally suspect. Historically speaking, the rise of a new ideology--in this case, humanist literary values--can only occur at the cost of the relative decline of existing values, as a challenge to them. (Whether or not truly "pluralist" societies have ever really existed, fourteenth-century France was not one of them.)

As an example of how the humanist temperament could lead a humanist to use evidence from classical literature as even better than evidence from Christian sources we have Francesco da Fiano. Hans Baron has indicated the passage from the "Contra Oblocutores" which is relevant:

Itaque theologorum nostrorum argumenta non minus validioris rationis viribus firmarentur, si ita gentilium auctorum Christi sacerdotium innuentium, sicut sanctorum scripta catholice probationis producentur in medium. . . . Profecto mea et aliorum quoruncunque sententia, domesticis pugnare testimoniis nichil est aliud quam causam sui in ridiculam ruinam impellere.<sup>11</sup>

And Baron draws the obvious conclusions:

. . . what Francesco does say is that in a certain respect at least the testimony of a pagan such as

<sup>11</sup>Francesco da Fiano, "Il 'Contra Oblocutores'," Tau, p. 323, ll. 8-11, 15-16.

Varro must be given more weight than that of the Christian Fathers. . . . Could not the implications of this standpoint, with a very slight twist of meaning, indeed appear identical with 'preferring Varro . . . to the doctors of our faith' [the accusation of Cino Rinuccini--see Chapter II above].<sup>12</sup>

In fact, Baron takes the "Contra Oblocutores" of Francesco as the central work to demonstrate what he calls "The Dangers of Early Humanist Classicism." Francesco's work is largely a patchwork of quotations from traditional authorities. He stands directly in the fourteenth-century tradition of the humanist defense of poetry and marshals all the usual arguments. But for this very reason--his sense of security in his intellectual position--he does not hesitate to state in an unselfconscious way some of the unorthodox ideas he really holds. According to Baron he is far less cautious than his contemporary, the by then aged Salutati. He goes far beyond his predecessors Boccaccio and Petrarch as well as his contemporaries, the French humanists who had to operate in a much more traditionally-oriented atmosphere, a cultural "backwater" in comparison to Rome. But he does no more than draw certain logical conclusions from the positions of other earlier humanists.

Take, for example, his statements on style. In

<sup>12</sup>Baron, Crisis (rev. ed.), p. 309.



the "Contra Oblocutores" he hints in several instances that the ancient poets were more eloquent than the church fathers, even than Scripture itself. He does this, however, "by the way," in the process of explaining other points. In fact, he takes the stylistic superiority of the classics altogether for granted.

In Section XXVIII of his work Francesco is trying to show that the ancient poets came near to the Christian faith and that they said the same, or almost the same, things:

Unde si quis scripturas sacras cum ipsorum sensu poematum conferat, inveniet illos in plurimis locis, vel easdem dixisse sententias, vel illis, semota qualibet varietate, conformes. Atque ut ex multis pauca perstringam, legimus illus: 'Spiritus domini replevit orbem terrarum, et hoc quod continet omnem scientiam habet vocis?' Audi illud idem Virgilium, sed stilo longe politiore dicentem: Principio celum ac terram camposque liquentes, etc.<sup>13</sup>

In Section XXXI, Francesco argues that citing classical authors is licit because the Church Fathers frequently did so:

Constat itaque, pater optime, hunc et alios sanctos doctores non solum ex antiquorum poetarum, sed aliorum quoruncunque Gentilium libris innumerabiles decerpisse sententias easque suo accommodasse proposito; quibus quasi quodam sale dicta sua condiverunt, et quosdam

<sup>13</sup>Francesco da Fiano, "Il 'Contra Oblocutores'," ed. Taù, p. 319, ll. 3-9, emphasis added. The quotation is Aen. 6. 724.

verborum libasse flores; quibus non sine cultu et ornatu virentis eloquentie cernimus eorum vernare volumina, et eos non modo in robur, sed in augmentum christiane credulitatis, sepe illorum textus adducere. . . .<sup>14</sup>

In each case Francesco seems to assume that his reader would readily grant that Vergil is "more polished" in style than Moses, that citations from classical poets and prose-writers would "dress up" the writings of the Church Fathers and were quoted by them for that purpose.

In the chapter cited above Hans Baron has shown the logical conclusion of these views, which may also have been Francesco's real views which he dared express only to a fellow humanist. Late in his life (probably more than ten years after the "Contra Oblocutores") Francesco wrote to Bruni about his uninspiring duties as a clergyman:

Ut honestati clericalis mee professionis deserviam, cui ne victu vestituque caream asscriptus sum, cogor omelias et Bede, Orizenis, Johannis Crisostomi Gregorii-que in matutinis non sine insupportabili algore seculi et tremula voce legere et quandoque cantare; qui, si cum lucidissima felicitate admirabilis eloquentie priscorum vatum et oratorum in comparationem ponantur, licet earum omeliarum autores sancti fuerunt, ut Dantis Alditherij poete Florentini verbis utar, tibi

<sup>14</sup> Francesco da Fiano, "Il 'Contra Oblocutores'," ed. Tau, p. 322, ll. 7-13, emphasis added.

carbones extincti viderentur.<sup>15</sup>

As Baron correctly concludes: "Suddenly, we see here the dangers inherent in the enthusiasm for antiquity; there was a threat even to Christianity and the Church. The rise of the first unbounded devotion to antiquity in the opening decades of the new century charged every sector of intellectual life with an explosiveness that is too easily underrated."<sup>16</sup>

All of this is meant to show that, however enthusiastically men such as Jean Gerson might embrace the new humanist style, and whatever individual cases of the total acceptance by such a man of humanist ideas, there is nevertheless a great difference between them and such professional humanists as our secretary-notaries. These latter were the staunchest and most persistent in furthering the cause of humanism because doing so coincided with their material interests, with their pursuit of their careers. For men like Gerson this was not true. However skilled he

<sup>15</sup>Text from Hans Baron, The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance, II (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), p. 567, n. 45. It is translated in the one-volume revised edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), p. 314.

<sup>16</sup>Baron, Crisis (rev. ed.), p. 314.

might become in classical Latin, his position was not furthered by humanist activity. At most it could be but a "hobby" or side-interest for him.

We can reconstruct the historical circumstances which permit us to see how Gerson could consider that his higher devotion to certain religious values might be threatened by the development of humanism. For the essence of the justification of humanism was the theory of allegory. In principle, this meant that any work, however unchristian and licentious on its surface, must be considered safe and even praiseworthy if it can be interpreted allegorically as reaffirming essential Christian values. This attitude was too deeply entrenched in medieval Christian thought for it to be abandoned. The Church Fathers cited the classics extensively. Famous Christian writers had written in imitation of classical modes. The teachings of Aristotle formed the basis for a whole system of Christian theology, and they were pagan. The allegorical method lay at the basis of scriptural exegesis, especially of the Old Testament. The idea of the "spirit beneath the letter," of God writing especially for Christians to read in the light of revelation, was central to medieval theology and science, and therefore to literature and art.

It was on this contradiction that men like Gerson,

women like Christine, and all those who attacked poetry in the fourteenth century--those who were opposed to, because in some way threatened by, humanism--were caught. To many who identified with traditional ideas the rise of humanism must have appeared to be a moral threat. People tend to think wrong those developments which seem to them to militate against what they perceive as their material interest, either individually or as a group. Petty aristocrats like Christine de Pisan were witnessing an attack on "traditional" values at the hands of bourgeois "upstarts," men of low (i.e. non-noble) origin, men who had even come to dominate certain aspects of royal or ducal administration, when other such "upstarts" were supplanting nobles in the councils of great lords. Highly-placed clerics like Gerson struggled vainly to re-establish a lost idea, that of a stable social and political order based on traditional values with a single Church, a single Pope, as the unifying force in Europe.

Christian philosophy asserted that social change was morally evil because subversive of the God-given order of things. All good values were eternal and (except possibly as redefined by the Church itself) traditional. Social mobility could only reflect the success of greed or envy, and was thus subversive of social justice. The

spiritual primacy of the Pope, harmonious relations among princes and between Papacy and princes, were the outward manifestations of the degree of virtue, the success with which men were won to following Christ's teachings. In this context the social and political turmoil of the late fourteenth century could only have been viewed as unmistakable signs of human depravity on the rise. Carlo Malatesta, for one, clearly thought there was a connection between a respect for classical artifacts and natural disasters, to the discomfiture of Salutati, Vergerio, and others.

To people like Gerson or Pisan the overriding danger to human society at the turn of the century must have appeared to be this dramatic upsurge in human depravity. Only such an explanation would account for the great social instability of the time, the challenge on every side to traditional institutions, social classes, and ideas.

In this context it is not hard to see how the arguments of the humanist defenders of the Roman de la Rose might have appeared as a subterfuge, a pious cloak under which to conceal the subversion of traditional values. Gerson and Christine do not openly accuse the defenders of the Roman of desiring to debauch the reading public. But they appear to have thought that, however well-intended,

the arguments of the defenders tended to justify the widespread reading of a work which, whatever morality highly-educated men might draw from it, would likely be understood by the potentially wide (because it was written in French) readership as giving license to blasphemy and scepticism, if not simply to licentiousness.

Gerson's and Christine's fears were far from groundless. The Roman is an extremely subtle and sophisticated work. Its allegory has escaped modern scholarship until the last twenty years or so and has only been recovered by laborious research. To read the notes appended to Charles Dahlberg's translation is to recognize the wealth of reading with which the thirteenth or fourteenth-century reader would have had to be familiar in order to appreciate the Roman fully.

Undoubtedly Jean de Meun had such an educated audience in mind, the kind of sophisticated noble audience which was capable, to an extent scarcely believable today, of understanding the allegory while remaining formally "illiterate." We sense such an audience behind the works of Chrétien de Troyes eighty years before Jean. By the time of the Quarrel of the Roman, however, a great change had taken place in the reading public in France. The tremendous expansion of the bourgeoisie had led to a

substantial increase in literacy (in French), and a much wider reading audience. Most of this audience possessed a much less sophisticated education than the smaller audience of Meun's time.

Here, no doubt, lay the basis of Gerson's and Christine's fears. This new audience would be very likely to read in the "literal" sense only. And here they were urged to read a famous poem, written in French, whose "literal" sense was immoral and whose irony was too subtle to be easily recognizable. It is interesting to recall that in the last half of the fourteenth century both Chaucer and Boccaccio write "Retractions" to their major works, the Canterbury Tales and the Decameron, in which they express their fears that their works--largely subtle allegories--will be taken literally and misunderstood. Both were aiming at vernacular audiences, though only Boccaccio aimed directly at the middle classes.

We can scarcely be surprised then when Gerson and Christine suggest that only works obviously moral in the literal sense be read by such an audience. They clearly do not mean this stricture to apply to themselves, or perhaps even to the humanists they are debating. Gerson himself continued to quote the classics in his sermons.

In concluding this section I return to the central



point. The men who were really humanists in the fourteenth century constituted a class, defined by their manner of earning a living, who recognized it as in their material interest to advance the acceptability of humanist style and studies. It was due to these efforts that many others who were not of this class also became interested in humanism. However, these latter men did not wholeheartedly support humanism, and at times--such as during the Quarrel of the Roman--found themselves opposed to certain trends within it, while still supporting others.

Ironically, Gilbert Ouy voiced similar opinions in an article written earlier than the one I have criticized in this chapter. In 1962, examining a 1395 document of the young Parisian secretary-humanist Jean Lebègue, Ouy asserted that the rise of humanism was linked to the rise of new, "progressive" elements in the French economy; to Italian financiers and bankers; and thence to Roman law, and the lawyers who served the new centralized administration of the Kingdom and were necessary to it. He notes the growth of lay influence in the court, that of lawyers whose interests are tied to the strength of the King's powers. The new education in humanist studies Ouy believed was necessary for lawyers, and led to such institutions as

the Collège de Navarre. Of this new class of royal servants, he said:

Cette couche sociale montante, armée d'une ambition et d'une curiosité intellectuelle également dévorantes, paraît bien avoir été le principal véhicule des valeurs de l'humanisme en France, et un étude en profondeur des origines de la Renaissance dans notre pays devrait pouvoir s'appuyer sur de solides monographies familiales.<sup>17</sup>

Ouy does not hesitate to see in this development a part of the broader movement--the rupture of medieval society by the bourgeoisie, whose advance was eventually to bring about the Renaissance:

. . . la force principale qui a déterminé cette rupture s'y révèle sans fard: elle n'est autre que l'impetueux essor d'une couche sociale nouvelle, aussi avide d'argent que de pouvoir et de savoir. (p. 358)<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup>Ouy, "Le songe et les ambitions," pp. 359-61; quotation is on p. 361.

<sup>18</sup>It is interesting that M. Ouy retracts all this in a footnote to a more recent article. In his edition of Gerson's Pastorium Carmen Ouy states that the new facts and MSS coming to light explain ". . . pourquoi d'ailleurs il serait prématuré de prétendre proposer dès maintenant une théorie sur la genèse du mouvement humaniste en France," (Ouy, "Gerson, Emule de Pétrarque," p. 176).

In a footnote to this passage, he states: "J'avais un peu imprudemment tenté de le faire il y a cinq ans dans un article intitulé 'Le songe et les ambitions d'un jeune humaniste parisien vers 1395.' . . . Le problème, dont bien des données ne me sont apparues que depuis, me semble aujourd'hui beaucoup moins simple."

But in that article Ouy basically makes only one major assertion: that the class of administrators was the

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carrier of humanism in France. The secondary assertions that he makes--for example, that the Collège de Navarre was founded (in 1304) to further the humanist education on precisely these men--may, or may not, be correct. And Ouy does not really withdraw his argument, only stating that things are "not that simple." He does not put forward any alternate theory.

It is true that this theory contradicts one of the major ideas of the whole research effort of which Ouy is a part: That there is no opposition between "humanists" and "theologians." As I have tried to show, there is such a contradiction.

It is also true that a class analysis meets with little approbation, whether in medieval studies or elsewhere, in certain countries. This fact tends in itself to corroborate the Marxist theory of the class struggle in the realm of ideology--no doubt to the chagrin of those who would prefer to suppress that theory by declaring it "unacceptable" in scholarly circles.

Be that as it may, I believe that M. Ouy's ideas of 1962 are basically correct.