



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute

1986 Volume III: Topics in Western Civilization: Ideals of Community and the Development of Urban Life, 1250-1700

Introduction

The units gathered in this volume span several phases of European history, from the age of chivalry to the age of Louis XIV; they represent the many disciplines from which the members of the seminar were drawn, from history to the visual arts, language, and literature. The units have in common, however, the use of interdisciplinary approaches for teaching topics in western culture. In the seminar, these were developed through our common study of the growth of urban life and its impact on society and the arts between 1250 and 1700. The city is an elusive entity, and the limits of its influence are difficult to draw precisely. At the lower and upper chronological limits of this volume are two units which might seem to lie outside this influence, Benjamin A. Gorman's study of the feudal manor and Harriet Bauman's study of a play first performed at the chateau of Chambord. Yet in both these units urban life presents itself as a challenge to older, aristocratic values. It may not be a Whiggish myth but a fact that across this lengthy period the urban middle class was always rising.

In choosing to cover so many centuries it was our aim not only to accommodate a variety of interests, but also to explore the many ways in which the very slowly changing urban technology of this period reshaped social structures and fostered revolutionary achievements by individual thinkers and artists. These different kinds and rates of change were counterpointed in the topics we discussed, which ranged from the origins and types of cities, the social structure of trecento Florence, and the communal uses of festivity, to the development of humanism, linear perspective, freestanding public sculpture, and cityplanning. As the title of our seminar suggests, we were especially interested in the interplay between ideas and facts of life, though this was balanced, too, by the reciprocity between community and individual, an issue we explored in literary works by Dante, Boccaccio, Castiglione, More, and Moliere.

It is perhaps through what it has to say of the history of such apparently timeless ideas that our subject can be most useful to today's students. However alien to each other they might seem, the streets of New Haven are linked to the cities of early modern Europe by countless institutions, ideas, and technologies, as a canvass of words like "civility," "company," "virtue," and "adventure" would reveal. In a unit devoted to the use of just such words by Renaissance virtuosos and reformers, Peter Herndon develops one bond of continuity with the past, while through her study of the less articulate but no less potent traditions of festivity, Linda Powell explores another. Three of the units in the visual arts, by Sharon Mullen, Sandra Willard, and Michael Vuksta, offer striking demonstrations that the ways in which we continue to perceive and organize urban space had their origins in the Renaissance development of the piazza, of linear perspective, and of the printed map. Maryanne Basti's unit introduces students to the craft origin of several fine arts by using collaboration in the classroom to recreate the institutions in which these crafts were nurtured and then displayed, the guild and

the great hall. In every case, then, continuities are used to help students imagine a world very different from their own.

A persistent source of both frustration and delight has been our discovery of many paths left unexplored. We hope these units will be of use to others not only in what they set forth, but also in what they may only suggest.

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