​BALDASSARE CASTIGLIONE (1478-1529)
The Book of the Courtier (1516; 1528)

The Mantua-born Baldassare Castiglione's Courtier, though no masterpiece of writing, was among the most influential and representative expressions of Renaissance moral and social idealism centered on the Individual who, with-out regard to institutional or traditional restrictions, fully realizes his Intellectual and spiritual potential. in the opening of his book, published in the same year as Ludovico Ariosto's Orlando Furioso and Thomas More's Utopia, the author makes it clear that what is most admirable about man is that he can posit the ideal in full knowledge of its Impossibility. Because man alone can do this, because the limitations of his physical existence provide him with a dramatic stage upon which to act and reflect, Castiglione chooses the human over the superhuman ideal as the most truly admirable. He redefines the ideal in purely human terms, concerned not with the completed state of philosophical perfection but with the human courtier as the creature who comes nearest to it.

Castiglione's ideal courtier is not imaginary, an inaccessible platonic ideal; he is only a man aspiring to discover his own limits by daring to surpass them. Presented as a dialogue among ladies and gentlemen of Duke Guidobaldo da Montefeltro's palace in the walled city of Urbino, the book is at once a portrait of manners and a celebration of the duke's achievement of a court, the atmosphere of which is perfectly conducive to the most beautiful and noble aspirations—following in the tradition of Plato's Republic and Symposium. Urbino, as Castiglione sees it, is a utopia of gentility.

As presented here in Sir Thomas Hoby's 1561 translation, Castiglione's vision of human perfectibility—despite its male bias—is uplifting and contagious. It is the granddaddy of modern self-help books. Hoby's British rendition is a perfect reflection of the ideal gentleman's *sprezzatura*—a gracefully exuberant self-confidence, belief in self-improvement, and unshakable vitality. Human nobility, we learn from this document, lies not in man's ability to ignore death, but in his willingness to confront it, and to derive from the confrontation the inspiration to live as if immortal.

The Courtier is the most comprehensive of the Renaissance curricula, the study of the gentleman's proper role in society as defined, not by tradition or law as in the Middle Ages, but by the gentleman himself. The result is a perfect amalgamation of medieval graces and Renaissance humanism. Castiglione's requirements for the perfect courtier, summarized by St. Ignatius Loyola (founder of the Society of Jesus, known familiarly as the "Jesuits") as mens sana, in corpore sano ("a sound man in a sound body"), include:

* nobility of birth (old blood brings stability);
* adept at the profession of arms;
* physical beauty, reflecting inner beauty;
* neat and elegant attire, preferably dark or black;
* versatile at sports fencing, wrestling, jousting, swimming, tennis as well as chess and card games, but all done in moderation. He is the perfect horseman in every kind of saddle"
* well-spoken, a good conversationalist, preferring the vernacular to Latin;
* articulately literate, following classical models:
* at home with song, dance, and musical performance;
* virtues include honesty, prudence, and fortitude;
* guided always by reason in all things.

How well such a person would fare in today's personals ads! Moreover, Castiglione's perfect person wears his protean qualities lightly, concealing the effort he has undertaken to accomplish their perfection; this nonchalance is an essential characteristic. At his most successful he has made himself what we now calf "a Renaissance man"; at his least, he may be disparaged as a dabbler.

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