

Lecture II: Creating Ladies and Gentlemen

In his brief history of the Renaissance, British historian J.H. Plumb argues that the new Italian urban aristocrats were actually *nouveau riche*, having attained their social position due to success in business rather than due to inherited titles, like the aristocrats of France, England, and the German-speaking states. The Medici, the Este, the Gonzagas, the Sforzas and the other powerful families of 15th and 16th century Italy created Europe's first urban upper class and sought to burnish their credentials as aristocrats by becoming patrons of the arts and literature, even while maintaining the semblance of military power. They borrowed many of their ideas on what it meant to be an aristocrat from the old feudal nobility of northern Europe, where bloodlines and "breeding" were the *sine qua non* of upper class status. To these old, feudal attributes, the Italian rulers (and their wives) attached "civilian" qualities that would have never occurred to armed nobility: education, not just military prowess qualified one for aristocratic status. It is perhaps significant that the idea conveyed by the English word "rude" is expressed in Italian as "*maleducato*."

It may also come as something of a surprise to you to learn that the word "polite" in English comes from an Italian word meaning "clean," or "polished." In fact, in modern Italian, "pulito" means just that: "clean;" "polite" in Italian is usually translated as "cortese" or "gentile." How did the concept of *clean* come to mean "polite" in English? Clearly, the idea of cleanliness being next to godliness has a very ancient lineage, but the idea that a polite person is someone who is clean can also be traced back many centuries. Cleanliness may have been particularly important in an urban setting, where human and animal waste created highly unsanitary conditions. Here again, the female influence is quite notable. Women of all social classes exerted themselves to maintain personal cleanliness and, for the lower classes who had no servants, the cleanliness of their homes. Bathing presented problems in an age when running water hardly existed. For centuries various types of perfume were used to overcome the natural body odors and, for many upper class women, the use of soap and water came to be viewed as detrimental to the skin. Still, courtly society slowly sought to improve personal hygiene and, as a result, cleanliness became synonymous with politeness. Freud, in his little book *Civilization and its Discontents*, lists cleanliness as one of the hallmarks of civilization, or "culture" as he often calls it. But he could have noted (but didn't) that we seek to be clean mainly because we do not wish to offend other people. Uncivilized people are unaware of body odor, or consider it perfectly natural. Beyond offensive odors, we civilized people also noted long ago that dirt and disease seemed to go together and slowly found ways to maintain greater personal cleanliness for reasons of health, something particularly important in crowded urban conditions.

The Renaissance gentleman, Baldesar Castiglione wrote *The Book of the Courtier* over a period of years in the early 1500s and published it in 1528, one year before his death. The book is modeled after the classical dialog, in which a group of people discuss a topic under the leadership of a respected figure (in this case a woman, the Duchess Elisabetta Gonzaga, widow of the ruler of the small city-state of Urbino). The topic chosen for discussion was the qualities of a true courtier and, to a lesser extent, those of a true lady. The discussion starts with the question of whether one has to be born into an aristocratic family to be a true courtier, or whether someone born into more humble circumstances can, through personal effort and inherent quality of character, achieve the status of a first-rate courtier. Basically, the argument was nature versus nurture. The conclusion was that, yes, being a born noble gives one a far better chance of possessing the qualities of a true courtier, but it is not impossible for someone with lower class origins to have a noble character and, with the proper instruction, for such a person to achieve true distinction at court. Given the fact that some of the participants in the discussion had, in fact, been born into modest circumstances but had managed to arrive at the court of the Duchess of Urbino, this conclusion was not surprising. Several of the courtiers at Urbino had risen through the ranks of the Catholic Church, which, at that time, provided an avenue for social and intellectual advancement to talented men from the lower classes of society.

Castiglione then has his characters dispute about the martial qualities of the perfect courtier. Bravery and ability with arms were certainly expected of the perfect courtier, but the question arose as to whether he could be justified in boasting of his bravery and military prowess. In general, the group agreed that a courtier had to have a deep-seated belief in his own abilities in order to carry out his duties, but he would gain more in the eyes of the world by remaining modest and allowing others to sing his praises. Most assuredly he should not engage in extreme self-praise, which is usually the product of one who has not actually accomplished that much but wishes to convince others (and perhaps himself) that he is indeed a valiant soldier. We will see that this same question arises in later books on manners and gentlemanly behavior: the boaster is considered a bore and cannot be esteemed as a true gentleman.

The Duchess's company all agree that the perfect courtier has to be careful not to be taken in by flatterers and to accept praise graciously, but never engage in self-praise, and, as Castiglione puts it, become one of those "who realize perfectly well that they are listening to flattery, and yet love the flatterer and detest the one who tells them the truth." The perfect courtier would not exhibit this fault, Castiglione makes clear, ending the discussion with: "Let us leave these blind fools to their errors and decide that our courtier should possess such good judgement that he will not be told that black is white or presume anything of himself unless he is certain that it is true. . . ."

While the perfect courtier has to possess military prowess, as well as scholarly knowledge – reading and writing in Latin and in the vernacular -- perhaps the key characteristic of a gentleman, in Castiglione's view, was *nonchalance*. He had to appear to do what he did well, but without apparent effort. Today we would call this "cool." Affectation and straining to achieve a particular goal, whether physical or mental, would clearly eliminate someone from the competition to be the perfect gentleman. The gentleman must appear to be at ease with himself and his surroundings. Confident without being cocky, and poised, but not effeminate. Beyond this, he had to be of the right height and weight: not too tall, and certainly not too short. Not too fat and not too thin. In other words, he had to be a paragon of manliness, but light on his feet and able to project confidence without appearing to try too hard. We can all think of people who have some of these characteristics, but it is unlikely that anyone has all of them. This perfect courtier also knows not to try to do things that he has not mastered and strictly avoids situations that might make him appear ridiculous.

Thus, although concern for other's feelings explains much of why people acquire manners, it is also clear that fear of being ridiculous or ridiculed had a lot to do with the development of the perfect courtier's profile. Consideration of others and fear that other's may judge you harshly actually complement one another. Both motives indicate an acute sense of one's dependence on how others' evaluate our behavior. Highly egotistic people are, ironically, those who most crave the praise of the crowd. The true individualist would simply ignore the feelings of others and be indifferent to how others viewed him. But Castiglione clearly portrays the courtier as someone who acts indifferent to others' view of him, but is careful to ensure that he is highly esteemed by seeking to master the various arts of social life.

The discussion at Urbino then turned to what constitutes the perfect lady. Some of the assembled courtiers believed many of the same traits either inherited or acquired by the perfect courtier also applied to the perfect lady: poise, modesty, wit, comeliness, etc. Of course the lady was not expected to excel at the martial arts, but instead should be a comforting companion for the perfect male, and, above all, should be "chaste." i.e., virtually sexless and always faithful to her husband. One participant voiced the common male view that females were the weaker sex and required a firm male hand to show them the way. But, somewhat surprisingly, one of the men spoke up in defense of women after the "male chauvinist" in the group asserted that women really seemed to want to be like men. No, he said, "The poor creatures do not wish to become men in order make themselves more perfect but to gain their freedom and shake off the tyranny that men have imposed on them by their one-sided authority." We see in this exchange the

emerging enlightened view of women that characterizes the Renaissance, especially in Italy. With the growing prestige of the arts and letters, in which educated women showed their intellectual and artistic talents to be equal to those of most males, the stereotype of a woman as either a nun or a servant starts to give way to a more modern conception of the female as an equal counterpart of the male. In the process, those martial qualities that had been so highly valued by the perfect male courtier lose much of their centrality and are replaced by attributes that women as well as men can frequently display. And, in this development, we see an important step in the coming of modern civilization. Of course it should be emphasized that for the great majority of women life as somewhat inferior beings remained the rule. Since the beginning of recorded time women, when portrayed at all, were invariably objects of life rather than subjects. They played, at best, a supporting role. As with the great mass of humanity, they came from the poor, peasant class and suffered under their domineering husbands and other older males, just as these males suffered under the authority of the lords of the manner and their assistants. What we see here, then, is the first inklings of the possibility that women could play a central role in civilized life, but as we will see when we look at modern manners and customs, the process of female liberation still has a long way to go.

Given the male obsession with female chastity, the perfect woman was one who would sacrifice her life rather than submit to forced sex; and, if she was the victim of rape, the perfectly virtuous female would feel compelled to commit suicide, since once her virginity had been violated, no man would consider her as a bride. The largely male circle of courtiers in Urbino seemed to have a large store of tales of women who demonstrated their nobility by doing away with themselves following such an incident. The men who committed these acts, of course, remained largely free of social disapproval and went on with their lives as if nothing had happened. One participant, a young courtier who evidently had not been successful in wooing the ladies, took the view that young women, for the most part, engaged in teasing behavior that lured men on, only to slam the door in their faces when they sought to engage in more physical sexual activity. On the other hand, several of the participants, including the one cited above, defended women and upheld their right to reject objectionable suitors and to enjoy the company of men without submitting to their unwanted advances. The two ladies present – the Duchess and her chief lady in waiting – scolded the men for mischaracterizing the female mind, but seemed fascinated by the subject nonetheless. In his peroration, the future cardinal Pietro Bembo, extolled a form of “spiritual love” that could exist even between an older courtier and a younger woman, as a precious form of relations between the sexes and likened it to true Christian love as exemplified by Jesus and his apostles.

This discussion was hardly original. Since the late Middle Ages romantic balladeers had crooned about their “lady love” who was usually married to someone else and thus (theoretically) unattainable. The young knight’s ardent spirits were thus channeled into acts of gallantry – what came to be known as “chivalrous” behavior. Out of this long-ago practice, we today have little to show beyond the annual purchase of a bouquet of roses on Valentine’s Day for the lady in our life. One could argue, of course, that the transformation of the typical Western female from an object to an equal subject in daily life, at work and in the home, has lessened the need for the typical Western male to engage in acts of gallantry. Simple politeness will do. Still, we men always allow women to proceed us into and out of an elevator, and the waiter always takes the lady’s order first.

In England at about this time, the word “gentleman” came into use to describe a relatively well-to-do person who did not have noble birth, but still managed to cultivate many of the traits associated with those born into the aristocracy. Here we see the beginnings of “middle class respectability,” since this person could derive his wealth and position either as a rural land owner or a city professional or businessman. Many of the latter used their newly acquired wealth to buy country estates and then to imitate the life-style of the nobility. Recognizing their value to the realm, the English king might well confer a noble title upon such a person, raising him from the status of mere “gentleman” to that of a member of the aristocracy. The ranks of gentlemen expanded considerably in the years after about 1600

in England and during the 1700s in France. They started to set a new, more democratic standard for good manners and polite behavior. Many of them attained a more refined level of life than their titled “country cousins.” But often the newcomers to the ranks of gentlemen tended to make lavish displays of their newly acquired wealth, which made them objects of disdain by the “old money” aristocracy. The contrast between the Pitt family and that of the Duke of Newcastle in mid-17th century Britain could be cited as a good example of this sort of social distinction. Despite William Pitt the Elder’s immense influence in British politics at the time, he had to defer to the Duke and his (en)titled counterparts in the House of Lords when seeking to form a government or to conduct policy. Pitt’s flamboyant rhetoric and eccentric personality tended to ruffle the feathers of the stuffy noblemen who traditionally oversaw the nation’s governments. While his manners were unexceptionable, he still had to contend with class prejudice during a period when bloodlines counted for more than ability. Pitt was called “the Great Commoner,” with the emphasis on “commoner.” His career exemplified the difficulty of translating ability into power in a society long accustomed to deferring to “natural” rulers. A similar prejudice handicapped the great Edmund Burke, preventing him from achieving more influence in late 18th century England, where he remained for many years a sort of parliamentary agent of the much less able Lord Rockingham.

Burke is especially remembered for his opposition to the French Revolution. Surprisingly he found lack of manners to be one of the worst aspects of the revolutionary mentality. In his *First Letter on a Regicide Peace* (1796), he wrote that “manners are more important than laws. The law touches us but here and there, and now and then. Manners are what vex or soothe, corrupt or purify, exalt or debase, barbarize or refine us . . .” Burke simply could not abide bad manners, which he seemed to associate in this letter with the frenzied revolutionaries. Burke also used the word “manners” in much the same way we would use the word “customs” today. He bemoaned the idea of the rationalist *philosophes* that every man could be the judge of his own behavior and did not need to take his cues from higher authority, especially the Church. (It should be noted that Burke was a practicing Catholic, which already put him at odds with the rationalists from Locke to Voltaire). But bad behavior, and its corrosive effects, were not limited to the left-wing regicides. Burke’s highly idealized picture of the French (and British) monarchy and aristocracy hardly accorded with the way these privileged figures lived. Their “manners” were really not very good.

In England an aristocrat, even a lowly “squire,” could get away with bad behavior that would have sunk the social aspirations of a middle class man. A literary example can be found in Henry Fielding’s novel *Tom Jones*, published in 1747. Tom’s lady love Sophie Western is the daughter of a brash, crude squire, whose bad behavior does nothing to diminish his social standing. On the other hand, Fielding portrays Tom’s patron, Squire Allworthy, as a saintly man whose virtue stands in stark contrast to that of Squire Western. Even in our own day, celebrities and the rich in general are accorded far more latitude in their personal conduct than would be allowed for the average middle class gentleman. What has come to be known as “middle class morality” has an actual historical basis and is commonly associated with the Protestant work ethic and (in the United States) with the New England Puritans, whose Yankee descendents saw themselves as morally superior to the dissolute Southern planter class and their “white trash” dependents. To many Northerners, the “gentility” of the Antebellum South masked a crude, often brutal ignorance and the South’s poverty and dirtiness seemed to arise inevitably from the region’s rural backwardness and from the lack of a hard-working middle class.

The South did give us the notion of “Southern hospitality,” meaning an open and friendly reception for guests, whether close friends or passing strangers. George Washington is often cited as a prime example of someone who practically went bankrupt feeding and lodging friends, relatives, and, at times, simple passing travelers. Mount Vernon hosted literally hundreds of visitors during Washington’s years there. Part of the reason for this practice was no doubt the lack of many towns in the South where travelers would find food and lodging. Plantation owners were obliged to offer hospitality, but this would apply only to other well-to-do people, who arrived with their retinue of enslaved servants. The occasional

Northerner who enjoyed such hospitality doubtless found it remarkable and thus the notion got started that people “to the South” were especially hospitable. Southern restaurants and hotels later commercialized this idea and advertised their old-fashioned warm Southern welcome.

Hospitable treatment of strangers is as old as Western culture, of course, dating from Biblical times. Similar concepts of hospitality can be found in Islam and Chinese and Indian religions. Native Americans were also inclined to treat the white men who arrived in their lands with generally polite hospitality, at least until it became clear that these were not transient visitors but actually people who intended to stay permanently. At that point they ceased to be guests and became occupiers, and thus a threat.

One final element of polite society which we can trace to the Renaissance is the concept of “taste,” meaning, of course, good taste. The artworks and lavish interior decoration found in upper class Italian Renaissance palaces, the table ware of gold and silver, the place settings of finest porcelain and crystal, all betokened the arrival of civility, even if sometimes dinner conversation degenerated into insults and swords or daggers were drawn. Here again the ladies had a key role in influencing the aesthetic sense of the times. The drafty, dirty castles of northern Europe, slowly gave way to more refined interiors as the Italian influence made itself felt. These new palaces and country homes, largely unfortified after the introduction of artillery in the 1400’s had pretty much made the walled fortress obsolete, became the venue for social gatherings and the first art galleries of Europe. More and more, a refined person had to exhibit good taste in his clothing and interior decorations. Soon rivalries between the various wealthy aristocrats came about as they sought the services of renowned (but poorly paid) artists. Now, the suits of armor became largely decorative in nature, with actual warfare turned over more and more to paid mercenaries. Polite European society slowly came into being and to succeed in this new environment, good taste was as important as prowess on the battlefield. Tact, refinement, and elaborate shows of courtesy now became essential to anyone aspiring to aristocratic or even upper class status. At the same time, of course, the common people continued to be defined largely by their very lack of these same attributes.