

CHAPTER

1

Section 1

PRIMARY SOURCE *from The Courtier*
by Baldassare Castiglione

Baldassare Castiglione was a well-known Venetian diplomat who served under the Duke of Urbino. Sent to the courts of Henry VIII in London and Louis XII in Milan, Castiglione observed court life firsthand. His book of manners and polite society, The Courtier, was published in 1528 and was translated into several languages. A whole generation of young courtiers diligently followed his advice. As you read this excerpt from his book, consider what characteristics the perfect courtier should possess.

“To come, therefore, to the quality of the person, I say he is well if he be neither of the least nor of the greatest size. For both the one and the other hath with it a certain spiteful wonder, and such men are marveled at, almost as much as men marvel to behold monstrous things. Yet if there must needs be a default in one of the two extremities, it shall be less hurtful to be somewhat of the least than to exceed the common stature in height. For men so shot up of body, beside that many times they are of a dull wit, they are also inapt for all exercises of nimbleness, which I much desire to have in the Courtier. And therefore will I have him to be of a good shape, and well proportioned in his limbs, and to show strength, lightness, and quickness, and to have understanding in all exercises of the body that belong to a man of war. And herein I think the chief point is to handle well all kind of weapon both for footman and horseman, and to know the vantages in it. And especially to be skilful on those weapons that are used ordinarily among gentlemen, for beside the use that he shall have of them in war, where peradventure needeth no great cunning, there happen oftentimes variances between one gentleman and another, whereupon ensueth a combat. And many times it shall stand him in stead to use the weapon which he hath at that instant by his side. . . .

“There be also many other exercises, the which, though they depend not thoroughly upon arms, yet have they a great agreement with them, and have in them much manly activity. And of them methink hunting is one of the chiefest, for it hath a certain likeness with war, and truly a pastime for great men, and fit for one living in court. And it is found that it hath also been much used among them of old time. It is meet for him also to have the art of swimming, to leap, to run, to cast the stone; for besides the profit that he may receive of this in the

wars, it happeneth to him many times to make proof of himself in such things, whereby he getteth him a reputation, especially among the multitude, unto whom a man must sometime apply himself. Also it is a noble exercise and meet for one living in court to play at tennis, where the disposition of the body, the quickness and nimbleness of every member, is much perceived, and almost whatsoever a man can see in all other exercises. . . .

“But because we cannot always endure among these so painful doings, besides that the continuance goeth nigh to give a man his fill, and taketh away the admiration that men have of things seldom seen, we must continually alter our life with practising sundry matters. Therefore will I have our Courtier to descend many times to more easy and pleasant exercises. And to avoid envy and to keep company pleasantly with every man, let him do whatsoever other men do; so he decline not at any time from commendable deeds, but governeth himself with that good judgment that will not suffer him to enter into any folly; but let him laugh, dally, jest, and dance, yet in such wise that he may always declare himself to be witty and discreet, and everything that he doeth or speaketh, let him do it with a grace.”

from Baldassare Castiglione, The Courtier, Thomas Hoby, trans. (The National Alumni, 1907), 30–35.

Discussion Questions

Recognizing Facts and Details

1. According to Castiglione, what physical attributes befitted a courtier?
2. Why did a courtier need to handle different kinds of weapons skillfully?
3. **Perceiving Cause and Effect** Why did Castiglione feel a courtier should engage in such activities as hunting, swimming, and tennis?